Dobby's Deceit

by Morrine

Summary

What if Dobby bound himself to Harry without Harry knowing about it? How would that influence the story?

Notes

EAD rules apply to this story: Wrote hard and put up wet. If you don't like it, hit the back button.

So my post on blogger.com (which I use to write my stories) got wonky around the 25k mark and that's the reason why I'm parking the first part of this story here. It's going well right now but no promises when new parts will be posted.

For the peeps waiting for news on Misfits: I'm sorry. Sincerely sorry. But the HP fandom grabs me every couple of years, hard, and then I'll just have to ride it out. As I'm having a lot of fun writing right now, it might be a while until the bug leaves me.
Chapter 1

Warnings: Gratuitous use of clichés, Weasley bashing, Dumbledore bashing and whoever-else-needs-bashing

Am I sorry? Nope, I'm not.

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Dobby's Deceit

Part 1

“Master gave Dobby a sock,” Dobby said in wonder, staring at the smelly old sock in his hand. “Dobby is free!”

“What? No-” Lucius Malfoy’s grey eyes flashed with fury as he understood what had happened. “You’ll pay for this, Potter!”

He raised his wand and started to intone a curse - and then he suddenly flew backwards through the corridor, hitting the stone wall at its end with a meaty smack and crumpling into a sorry heap, much like a fallen ragdoll.

“Wow, thank you Dobby!” Harry exclaimed after a shocked second. “That was awesome!”

Dobby’s small chest proudly puffed up. “Anything to help the great wizard Harry Potter.”

They grinned at each other, but the moment of exhilaration faded away quickly.
“Er, maybe it wouldn’t be so good to be caught out here, what with Mr. Malfoy lying there,” Harry said. “We could go up to my dorm. I have a chocolate frog, if you want it. To celebrate your freedom?”

Dobby’s large, green eyes became wet with grateful tears. “Harry Potter is too kind, wanting to celebrate with lowly Dobby!”

Uncomfortable with so much adoration, Harry shrugged. “Well, if anyone knows how much it sucks to be unappreciated, it’s probably me. So, do you want the frog? It’s really good.”

“Dobby would very much like to try it,” the little elf proclaimed. “Harry Potter sir should take my hand. Dobby can take us right to Harry Potter sir’s dorm room.”

Harry’s wide-eyed exclamation of surprise was abruptly cut off as they vanished from the corridor.

Reappearing next to his bed felt like stepping off a very fast carousel … which meant that Harry absolutely loved it.

“Awesome!” he cried. “We have to do this again, Dobby! Now, the frog …” After a moment of rummaging in his school trunk, he produced the small box with the frog and grinned. “Thank god it’s still there. Ron’ll eat anything if he finds it.”

Dobby took a few moments to coo over his present. He inspected the colourful carton and inhaled the faint chocolate aroma. Only then, very carefully, did he take the frog out of the box and watched it wriggle in his hands.

“Dobby really likes the frog,” he said. His big eyes were glued to the sweet. “Harry Potter is the greatest wizard alive for giving Dobby such a present.”

In that moment, Harry realized how bad Dobby’s life with the Malfoys must have been. Even he had been able to eat chocolate and other sweets throughout his childhood, even if these moments were rare. But to never have had anything of the sort at all … it made him feel beyond bad.

“Hey, why don’t you eat this frog and I’ll give you some money for more?” he asked, already hunting for his money bag. “Also, you’re now kind of unemployed, so here …” He emptied out the bag and counted three galleons, a handful of sickles and three knuts. “Hang it, I thought I had more
left. Do you think you’ll get by with this for a while?” He raised his eyes to gauge Dobby’s reaction, hoping that the elf wouldn’t start wailing or screeching.

Instead, he was met by a suspiciously broad smile.

“Harry Potter sir is very, very generous,” Dobby said cheerfully. “Dobby would like to shake hands with the great Harry Potter, please. This is the happiest day in all of Dobby’s life!”

“Oh, er, sure.” Nonplussed but pleased that he hadn’t insulted Dobby somehow, Harry stuck out his hand for a hearty shake.

He wasn’t disappointed; Dobby immediately latched onto him and shook his hand vigorously. So vigorously in fact, that a sharp tingle travelled along his forearm, over his shoulder and into Harry’s chest.

“Wow, wow, calm down!” Harry laughed. “I need that hand, you know. Though I’m happy that you’re happy, Dobby. What will you do now?”

Dobby looked shifty for a second before answering in a remarkably nonchalant tone, “Oh, Harry Potter sir knows, find things to clean and people to look after.”

“I hope you’ll find a good home soon. Or, er, employment, if the Malfoys have turned you off the family thing.”

Dobby beamed as he bounced on his toes. “Dobby will, Harry Potter sir!” His tennisball-sized eyes landed on Harry’s trunk and money bag. “But before Dobby goes, he will ward Harry Potter sir’s things. Too many grabby hands on Harry Potter sir’s belongings. Dobby won’t stand for thieves going through the great Harry Potter sir’s precious possessions.”

With a snap of his small fingers, the contents of the trunk neatly packed themselves before the trunk closed shut. Dobby then repeated the procedure with Harry’s money bag and even his school bag.

Bewildered and concerned about what Dobby had just said, Harry nonetheless thanked the elf.
“Dobby is happy to help Harry Potter sir,” Dobby replied. “If Dobby can somehow help the great Harry Potter, he just has to call. Dobby will hear and find him anywhere.”

He looked so eager and determined that Harry didn’t have the heart to refuse.

*Having a friend over during the holidays would be really nice, he thought to himself. Even if it’s a house elf that tried to kill me.*

“But only if you’re not busy,” he said aloud and smiled as Dobby’s bouncing began anew.

Footsteps sounded from the stairway. It was time to say goodbye.

“Stay safe, Dobby!” Harry called, and then, with another snap of his spindly fingers, the house elf was gone from Gryffindor Tower.

oOo

On the Hogwarts Express, Harry didn’t have any money for a snack, having given it all to Dobby, but as he scrounged for a few lost coins in his school bag, he suddenly had a couple of richly topped sandwiches in his hands.

*The little guy is the best,* Harry thought, happily munching on his treat. *Though he really did enough just by keeping Mr. Malfoy from killing me.*

“Why don’t you have any money, Harry?” Ron whined. He nibbled on his smuggled, dry breakfast roll in disgust. “This is the worst. I’ll starve before we reach London.”

Hermione, who had carrot sticks and something that looked a lot like clay in a bowl in her lap, looked up from her book. “Why didn’t you ask for a doggie bag, Ron? Katie Bell told me that students just have to ask for it at breakfast.”

Ron turned red. “I did.”
“Oh?” Hermione looked expectantly at him. “Well then, where is it?”

“Oh, I already ate everything,” Ron admitted. “When we were riding in the carriages, Seamus, Dean and me.”

“Oh, Ron.” Rolling her eyes, Hermione pushed her carrot sticks over. “Help yourself.”

Ron pulled a face. “Naw, thanks. I’ll hold out until I’m home.”

“Fine, suit yourself,” Hermione replied with a shrug.

“What is that brown stuff, anyway? Looks like mud or something.”

Unconcerned about Ron’s disgust, Hermione dipped a carrot stick into the bowl. “Hummus. It’s a puree made of chickpeas, sesame paste, garlic, lemon juice, salt and a few spices. It’s oriental and very good.”

“If you say so,” Ron said dismissively. He then eyed the sandwich in Harry’s hand. “Hey, you wouldn’t mind sharing, would you, mate?”

Harry minded, quite a lot in fact, but he was curious about Hermione’s exotic food choice. After she had agreed to share, Harry let Ron have the rest of his sandwich and settled into the seat next to Hermione.

The first taste of hummus was strange, but, as Hermione had said, also very good. Harry liked the slightly earthy flavour with the high points of garlic and lemon. The splash of olive oil and powdered red pepper didn’t hurt, either.

Seeing how much Harry enjoyed her food, Hermione produced a small loaf of perfectly baked and still warm pita bread.

“If you like this, you’ll love falafel and other oriental foods,” she said, smiling. “We have a bistro in the neighbourhood that has the best grilled vegetables.”
Food from abroad was something that Harry was very interested in, and since Hermione didn’t seem to mind putting her book aside, he asked her about all the different foods she had eaten so far. Italian sounded divine, but so did Thai food, Indian and even African cuisine.

“I’ll have to try all that sometime,” Harry declared. “Pity that I can’t get away during the summer. We could’ve gone together.”

Hermione’s pleased flush made her smile extra brilliant and Harry was pleased that they managed to spend time together without finding themselves in mortal peril first.

Once her carrot sticks and the hummus were gone, Harry decided to stay by her side and read along with her. He hadn’t chosen Arithmancy for next year but began to regret his choice after a few pages of Hermione’s book. He even blew Ron off when he whined about being bored.

“This is really interesting,” Harry said when they had finished the chapter. “I wish I could take Arithmancy instead of Divination.”

“Really?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I mean, warding and spell creation sound cool. I’d need to take runes, too, but then I could ward my things against the Dursleys,” Harry said. *Or people at Hogwarts*, he added silently. “It’d totally be worth it.”

“Well, if you really want to, you can write Professor McGonagall,” Hermione said. “She told me that many students change their minds during the summer, that’s why we only get our timetables at the beginning of term.”

“You really want to drop Divination?” Ron asked, aghast, and nearly dropped his pet rat. “Why? It’s an easy OWL!”

“Yes, but one without any practical application, unless you have a true gift.” Hermione handed her book to Harry and got a muggle notepad and a pencil out of her bag. “In fact, now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ll take Divination up, myself. If I had the gift, I’d have noticed by now.” She scribbled a few lines onto the notepad, ripped the page off and gave it to Harry. “Here, I’ve listed the course books for Runes and Arithmancy, if you’d like to read ahead some more. They’re not very expensive.”
“Reading ahead, what rubbish.” Ron petulantly crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s the summer, it’s when we’re finally allowed to do something fun.”

“Yeah, maybe you get to do something fun,” Harry said quietly. “I’m pretty sure my uncle has reattached the bars in front of my window and won’t let me out for a while.”

“What?” Hermione stared at him. “What are you talking about, Harry?”

“Didn’t Ron tell you?” Harry asked. “The twins and Ron came to get me last summer and had to break me out. They used a flying car.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open.

“Tore the bars right off the window,” Ron explained, pride evident in his voice. “Your muggle relatives are the worst, mate.”

“Yeah.” Harry’s shoulders slumped. “And now I have to go back to them. I wish I could stay at Hogwarts.”

“Will they hurt you?” Hermione wanted to know. “Have they hurt you in the past?”

Harry squirmed under her scrutiny. “Um, they did, sometimes. But mostly it’s my cousin, he and his friends try to catch me and beat me up.”

“And?” Hermione prodded.

“Er, my aunt makes me do the chores,” Harry admitted self-consciously. Hermione stared at him, until he added that, yes, all the chores. Self-consciousness then gave way to exasperation and Harry ground out, “And my uncle often sends me to my cupboard without a meal.”

“Cupboard?” Hermione cried.
“Well, not the cupboard anymore. They gave me a room after Hagrid came to bring me my Hogwarts letter, alright?” Harry muttered.

“No, it’s not alright, Harry! Have Fred and George told anyone about this, Ron? Or you?” Hermione asked a little shrilly.

“Sure we did,” the redhead huffed. “Right after we rescued Harry. Dad was all concerned and went to talk to Dumbledore. But I dunno what came of it.”

“Well, not much, obviously, or Harry wouldn’t have to go back there.” Hermione started scribbling onto her notepad again. “Anyway, we’re almost there. Do you want to change first, or can I?”

Harry, who felt rather off-kilter after this conversation, mumbled his excuses and went to the loo to change. Ron followed, clearly not wanting to be alone with Hermione when she was upset.

Soon after, the train slowed to a stop and students began jumping onto the platform, dragging their things with them. In their haste to meet their families, they bumped into each other and generated a huge chaos of waving arms, smarting ribs and lost luggage. Ron fearlessly entered the fray, but Harry was in no hurry to meet his relatives.

Finally it was possible to leave the train without getting trampled. Harry helped Hermione with her trunk, making use of the opportunity to recast the featherlight charm on it.

“I’ll miss magic,” he said softly, wistfully putting his wand away.

Hermione returned the favour with a decisive swish and flick of her own wand. “Me, too.” She caught Harry’s eye. “Say, wouldn’t it be possible to do a couple of spells to help you against your relatives?”

Harry sighed. “I wouldn’t know how, other than making this stuff lighter to carry and secure against theft.”

“Yes, too bad we’re not allowed to use magic over the summer,” Hermione agreed with a little huff.
They started dragging their trunks towards the passageway.

“I’m sure there’s something we can do. I’ll think about it,” Hermione said, just before they reached the portal to muggle London. “And I’ll write you, if Hedwig is willing to carry mail for me.”

“I’ll ask her,” Harry replied, visibly perking up. “Maybe I can convince her to deliver your letters to the garden shed or the cellar. No one but me ever goes in there during the summer, so it should be safe.”

“We’ll get you through the holidays,” Hermione promised. “I won’t let them get you down.”

Harry found that he believed her and smiled. “Okay.”

Unfortunately, it was then high time for Hermione to go to her parents. The Dursleys were waiting not far from the Grangers, their expressions the polar opposite from the joy Hermione’s parents showed.

“Mom, dad, this is my best friend, Harry Potter,” Hermione introduced him, after dragging Harry with her. “Harry, these are my parents. Maybe you remember that they’re both dentists?”

Her voice was bubbly and just a touch louder than she usually talked. Bewildered, Harry shook the hands of the two dentists who introduced themselves as Daniel and Emma. Hermione’s reason for this deviousness became clear very soon; the Dursleys approached cautiously as if the knowledge that Hermione’s parents were both doctors of their profession somehow negated the fact that their daughter was as magical as Harry.

“Excuse me, we couldn’t help but overhear,” Aunt Petunia simpered. “It seems your daughter is also a student at … at Hogwarts?”

“And a good one at that,” Dan said proudly. “Best of her year! I’d say that deserves your favourite ice cream sundae, princess.”

Hermione squealed and hugged him. “Thank you, daddy!” She turned to Harry’s family. “Harry’s also quite good. Seventh in our year.” She expectantly looked at Harry’s family.
“Er, congratulations,” Uncle Vernon grumbled. “Excuse us, we have to leave now. Boy, make sure you’ve not forgotten anything.”

“Maybe we can meet and have some ice cream together,” Hermione chirped.

Harry paled, stealing a glance at his purpling uncle. “Um, yeah, maybe?”

„Great. I’ll call you!“ Hermione waved, acting so unlike herself that her parents looked between her and Harry with raised eyebrows.

Then they were gone and Harry was alone with his aunt and uncle. In between hordes of people no more words were exchanged, but that changed once they were in the car and on their way to Surrey.

"You better not expect to entertain that girl while you're living under my roof," Uncle Vernon said tightly. "Your aunt and I won't have any unnatural behaviour in the house where Dudley can see."

"Well, he wouldn't if he weren't such an arse," Harry muttered.

"I meant that lovey-dovey crap your girlfriend pulled at the train," Vernon growled. "If you want to eat ice cream with her, you can damn well do it on your own time at your freakish school."

Knowing that it wouldn't do him any good if he denied Hermione being his girlfriend or, indeed, argued against anything his uncle said, Harry kept silent and glared mulishly out of the car window.

"Also, you will take special care of the garden this summer," Vernon continued. "Your aunt has a competition coming up. Do well enough and we'll let you have your freak books."

The offer sounded gruff, but Harry had, out of necessity, become very good at reading between the lines, and it was an offer, a feat almost unheard of in regards to himself. Maybe the competition had a big prize, Harry thought. Or it could be that one or more of his professors at Hogwarts had sent the Dursleys a Howler when they learned why Harry's summer work had been so shoddy; he couldn't think of any other incentive that could make his relatives relent.

There were more demands and threats but finally they reached Nr. 4, Privet Drive. Harry busied himself with his trunk and Hedwig's cage, dragging everything inside and watching despondently as his uncle locked his things in the cupboard under the stairs.

"Now, remember, no funny business for a couple of weeks and we might let you have some of this stuff." Vernon shook the key like a terrier would shake a rat. "And keep away from Dudley. He
doesn't need to get infected with your freakishness."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said dully.

Aunt Petunia chose this moment to send Harry up to his room to get cleaned up. It almost didn't surprise him to see the bars back in front of his window and he was glad to have sent Hedwig off before boarding the Hogwarts Express. Once he'd nominally settled in, he helped making dinner and snuck a bite whenever his aunt wasn't looking. It was a good thing, too, since he, as usual, got the smallest portion and no seconds.

After dealing with the dishes, Harry trudged back up to his room.

*Prison cell*, he corrected himself mentally and sighed when his gaze landed on Hedwig's empty cage. Out loud, he said, "I wish this summer wouldn't be so lonely."

A quiet popping sound made him jump and nearly kick the alarm clock from his nightstand. There, on his rickety desk, stood Dobby. The house elf no longer wore his dirty pillowcase, but new and clean children's clothes.

"Crikey, don't *do* that, Dobby," Harry panted.

"Dobby be sorry, but Dobby has heard Harry Potter sir asking for company." Dobby's large eyes watched Harry expectantly. "Dobby can clean Harry Potter sir's room." He raised his hand and made ready to snap his fingers.

"No!" Harry whisper-yelled. "Please don't. You got me into so much trouble last year! The ministry will punish me if they catch me - you - doing magic again!"

Dobby's bat-like ears drooped a little before the elf straightened up again. "Dobby be really sorry for that. Dobby only wanted to keep Harry Potter sir safe." He cocked his head. "House elves be as good as invisible to wizards."

"Really? The Ministry wouldn't know you're here?" Now that Harry's thundering heartbeat had a chance to calm down, the wonder came back. "That's so wicked! I wish I could do that."

"Ministry wizards be watching all the little wizards," Dobby said regretfully, "but Dobby likes working hard and can do many things for Harry Potter sir." He almost vibrated as he took in the drab room. "Please, may Dobby clean Harry Potter's room? Not working be bad for good house elves."

"Oh, uh. I guess it's okay, then. Are you really, really sure they won't come for me, though?" Harry asked.
"No one will know that Dobby is working for the great Harry Potter sir," Dobby said, pride filling his voice. "Dobby will be the bestest of all elves!"

With that he snapped his fingers and all the broken toys separated into piles. One pile of trash vanished while the stuff on another pile repaired itself. Discarded books straightened and flew onto a shelf, Harry's run-down wardrobe and bed suddenly looked as good as new and even the wallpapers and window washed themselves.

Mouth open in shock, Harry could only gape at his new room. The grey hue had completely vanished, as had the dust the Dursleys hadn't bothered to wipe from the furniture. There were fresh linens on his bed and even his old pillow looked fluffy and inviting.

"Wow, thanks," the boy stammered. He blinked against sudden tears which had Dobby hovering uncertainly. "Sorry, I'm fine. It's just ... you're being so nice to me."

"You be welcome, Harry Potter sir," Dobby replied earnestly. "Dobby be happy that Harry Potter sir likes Dobby's work. And now Dobby will get dinner for Harry Potter sir."

With another pop the elf was gone before Harry could tell him that he'd already eaten. Only moments later, Dobby was back with a tray. After ushering Harry to his desk, Dobby plated several small snacks for Harry to taste, most of them grilled vegetables, olives and cheeses. Harry felt reminded of his talk with Hermione and delighted in tasting it all. The vitamin potion afterwards was a surprise, but since Aunt Petunia always forced Dudley to take his multivitamin pill, Harry didn't feel very imposed upon and simply drank it down. It didn't even taste all that bad.

After he was done, there was still a bit food left. Suddenly self-conscious that he'd eaten like a pig without offering Dobby anything, Harry hurried to rectify his mistake. The elf, however, surprised him.

"Dobby knew that Harry Potter be a generous and kind wizard and thanks him very much," he squeaked. "But house elves don't eat most wizard food."

"Oh." Harry paused. "Then what do you eat? And where do you get it?"

"We eat wild magic berries and mushrooms and other things," Dobby said, obviously eager to share with Harry. "That's part of how we elves gets our magic. Wizard food be mostly dead, so no magic for house elves."

Intrigued, Harry sat next to Dobby on the bed. "And how do you get those berries? Do the families with house elves have green houses or forests or something?"

"Only very old families have planted berries for house elves," Dobby explained. "Most of the time,
we elves just pop around and collect delicious magic foods."

"Sounds like hard work," Harry said. "I wish I could help with that, since you've been helping me so much."

"Dobby doesn't need a lot of magic right now, and Dobby can pop back to Hoggywarty's forest for dinner," Dobby replied.

"And where do you sleep? Do you have somewhere to stay? Hogwarts maybe?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no, Hogwarts be no place for Dobby," the elf squeaked, sounding almost affronted. He then grinned shyly. "Dobby wondered if Harry Potter sir would allow Dobby to build a nest in his wardrobe. Dobby not be needing much space."

Feeling uncomfortably reminded of his childhood in the cupboard beneath the stairs, Harry tried to argue. Upon seeing the empty space inside the wardrobe, however, Dobby insisted that it was perfect for resting.

"Dobby be liking tight spaces," Dobby declared. "Be good for bundling magic for next day's happy work. It would be even better with second elf. Is Harry Potter sir sure that he doesn't want to stuff all of his clothes and his trunk inside?"

"Uhm, I would but my uncle locked up my things. To be honest, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to wear tomorrow." Harry blushed when Dobby looked aghast. "My relatives don't like me much."

"Dobby will get Harry Potter sir's things at once," Dobby said and snapped his fingers. All of Harry's clothes, books and writing things appeared on the bed, only to be sorted into the wardrobe and desk with another snap.

"Thanks for that, though I should warn you. My uncle might check every now and then," Harry sighed. "He can get very angry if things don't go his way."

"Dobby will put up illusion for Harry Potter sir's relatives," Dobby said. "Fat bad man and mean Aunt Petty will never know."

Overcome with sudden emotion, Harry hugged the little elf against his chest.

"You're the best," he mumbled, blinking against the wetness in his eyes.

Dobby beamed and then proceeded to pamper the stuffing out of Harry until it was time to switch off the light and go to sleep.
Waking up felt like a chore to Harry. His limbs ached slightly and he felt a little dizzy. Dobby told him that this was a side effect of the vitamin potion as it made his body heal itself. Hearing this, Harry decided to be grateful since it apparently meant that something was going right for once. After the basilisk attack a couple of weeks ago, every little bit of healing was very welcome.

After breakfast Aunt Petunia shooed him out into the garden, told him to tend to her flower beds, and slammed the door. It got first warm and then hot and Harry fervently wished for some water.

"Dobby," he whispered and only jumped a little when the elf popped up under the rose bush he was pruning into shape. "Hey. Say, do you know whether I can take a drink from the garden hose? Is the water safe?"

Dobby nodded, which made his ears flap a little. "Harry Potter sir can drink from garden snake thingy because Dobby can clean the water, but Dobby can get Harry Potter sir a glass of lemonade!"

"Really?" Harry wiped his brow. "Wow, that'd be-"

Dobby seemed to flicker for a second and suddenly had a tall glass of obviously icy cold lemonade in his hands.

"-great," Harry finished. He grinned. "Thanks. What's this? Lemon?"

"Lemon and blood orange with a dash of special berries and honey," Dobby confirmed. "It be very healthy. Dobby decided to get Harry Potter sir some elf food to try and help his magic."

"Awesome." Taking a deep swallow, Harry relished in the flavours exploding all over his tongue. There was the rich, zesty lemon, obviously, but also the faint sweetness of honey, the slight tang of the mentioned blood orange and something elusive that might have been the magic berry Dobby had mentioned. It was altogether delicious.

"Oooh," Dobby cooed when Harry set the empty glass down. "Harry Potter sir's magic be liking elf berry. Dobby will make sure to get Harry Potter sir as much as he likes!"

"Only if you and your friends don't need them more," Harry replied. "I mean it, alright? I got money, I will pay for my food." He looked around the garden. "Too bad I can't plant some berries here. That'd be at least worthwhile."

A sly looked passed over Dobby's features, much too fast for Harry to decipher its meaning. "Dobby
can take care of the garden for Harry Potter sir. It be too hot for human work, anyway, and Dobby likes hard work. Dobby also likes plants. May Dobby work in the garden?"

"I feel like I'm really taking advantage of you," Harry protested. At seeing Dobby's eager expression, however, he relented. "But I'm knackered and if it makes you happy ..."

Dobby hopped up and down excitedly.

"Alright then. Thanks, Dobby."

Harry explained what Aunt Petunia wanted and then snuck off into the shade behind the house while Dobby turned into a small tazmanian devil and whirled around, waging war on weeds and unruly rose branches. Comforted by the elf's presence, Harry soon dozed off and only woke when his aunt bellowed for him to get inside and get lunch started.

Another nearly too small portion of food later, Harry hid in his bedroom and enjoyed a hearty Indian lentil stew Dobby had brought.

"Say," he began in between bites, "don't you need money for all this food?" He set down his spoon. "I'm so stupid. You're spending the galleons I gave you on me, aren't you?"

Dobby admitted that it was so.

"Man, I'm so sorry. The money was for you, Dobby. You're a great friend, I'll get you more as soon as I can, I promise."

Dobby kneaded his small hands. "Dobby likes helping Harry Potter sir. But if Harry Potter sir could spare a few galleons, Dobby would be very happy. Bad master had Gringotts elf for money, but Dobby be a good elf. Dobby can go to Gringotts just as well as Snippy."

"You can?" Harry was astounded.

"House elves go buy things for masters all the time," Dobby said and stood tall. "Dobby would like nothing better than to prove that he be worthy elf and can do all the things bad master said he can't do because he be stupid."

"Wow, I didn't know that. And Malfoy is so wrong. You're anything but stupid, Dobby. I mean, just look at what you already managed to fix around here."

At this, Dobby’s narrow chest puffed up with pride.
“Uh, so, I'd let you go to Gringotts right now, but I don't have my key.” Harry frowned. "I actually have no idea who has it."

"Dobby can retrieve key for Harry Potter sir," Dobby said excitedly. "Dobby can retrieve anything that belongs to Harry Potter sir. And then Dobby can go to Gringotts."

"Right." Grinning, Harry took Dobby's thin hands and shook them. "Sounds like fun! If you can pull that off, you're officially the best elf ever. Just think what we could buy! Chocolate frogs and the books that Hermione recommended, and good food. Oh, and things for your nest, Dobby! Whatever you need."

Dobby's eyes grew suspiciously moist but he kept himself in check, raised his chin and vanished with a small pop.

While the elf was gone, Harry decided to make use of his good-as-new desk and get a start on his summer homework. He chose the easiest topic, Charms, and did his best to elaborate on the usefulness of household charms. He went a bit overboard as he imagined how a peeling charm could be used in a defence situation, but decided to leave it in. As Hermione had said, an essay should have a bit character. Coming from someone who took her education seriously and learned textbooks by heart, this seemed like very useful advice.

It also reminded him to write Hermione a letter, which he promptly did because there wasn't really anything else to do.

As it was still light outside, calling Hedwig was out, but Harry was confident that she'd appreciate the short trip to Crawley where Hermione lived.

After dinner, Dobby appeared on Harry’s bed and presented the polished gold key to Harry’s vault. Harry took it with a pleased smile and chuckled a little when the house elf then pressed a plate with a big portion of creamy potato casserole, green beans and a grilled chicken leg on him.

“How was it at the bank?” Harry asked and shovelled in a bite of the casserole. In a twist of cosmic hilarity, the Dursleys had ordered Indian food for dinner and left the hottest dish to Harry, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to stomach much of it. Harry had saved it for later, though, so Dobby could take the spicyness out of it. “Did the goblins give you any trouble?”

“Oh no,” Dobby replied, bouncing slightly while watching Harry eat. “Everything went well. Harry Potter sir’s account manager goblin was pleased to know that Dobby will carry Gringotts’ mail from now on. House elves are much more secure than owls.”

“Great.” Harry swallowed his food. “So, how much money do we have now?”
“It be enough for the summer,” Dobby assured him. “Dobby be planning in extra money for Harry Potter sir’s new books and clothes.”

“Oh.” Harry coloured a little. “I guess I do need some new stuff. I didn’t even think about it until you mentioned it.”

“Harry Potter sir also be needing new glasses …” Here Dobby hesitated a little. “Or a doctor to heal his eyes.”

“Wait, what? Magic can heal my eyes?” Harry asked hopefully. He pushed his plate away. “Truly, Dobby? Madam Pomfrey never said anything but that would be so awesome! Dudley always tries to break my glasses to get me in trouble with Aunt Petunia.”

Dobby nodded. “Healers can try. But going out is dangerous for Harry Potter sir. Bad former Master and his bad friends are all over magical London. But the goblins are very good healers and bad wizards don’t make trouble inside of Gringotts. They be bad, but they know what be good for them.”

“How much gold do you think the goblins would take?” Harry wondered. “Would I still get to go to Hogwarts and be able to buy a little stuff for us?”

“Dobby can ask,” the house elf promised and popped away before Harry could reply.

Harry waited for his return, but when ten minutes had passed, he decided to finish the food Dobby had prepared for him. By then, Dobby still wasn’t back, so he drank the vitamin potion as well and played with the papers on his desk.

Finally, a whole hour later, Dobby reappeared. In his arms he held a huge book, which he presented with a pleased little bow.

“What is this?” Harry wanted to know, even as he opened the cover. “A Gringotts Guide to Services? This thing is huge; I thought Gringotts is a bank?”

“Gringotts is a country,” Dobby corrected. “No good ghost teacher at Hogwarts never teaches anything important. Gringotts nation is trading goods and services with wizard nation.” He opened a
“This is cost for eye healing. Harry Potter sir’s account manager goblin told Dobby that Harry Potter sir can easily afford treatment with gold from his trust vault. Next Saturday night is good time for healing, if Harry Potter sir wants the appointment.”

“Oh, I … I have an appointment?” Harry stared at the house elf. “Just like that?”

“Goblins be very efficient,” Dobby explained. “Treatment only takes one hour, maybe. Dobby can pop Harry Potter sir there and back again without evil Muggles knowing anything.”

Feeling a little faint, Harry glanced at the cost of the treatment. Two hundred galleons were a very steep price, but never again being blind and helpless as soon as his glasses met their end had its definite appeal. “Uh, I guess after the trouble you went to I could at least go and find out if a healing is possible, right?”

“Dobby be glad. And Dobby be knowing that Harry Potter sir be anxious now, but Dobby can help with sleeping charm. Harry Potter sir shouldn’t make himself sick with worry. All will be well.”

Harry found that he believed the little elf and accepted the offer gratefully. He let himself be ushered into bed and thanked his friend sleepily before the charm pulled him under.

oOo

Over night, Hedwig had delivered Harry’s letter to Hermione and allowed herself to be fed and petted as Harry ate his first breakfast. It was just one of the small but very tasty apples Dobby had brought for snacks - an apple with a rather distinctive zing that spoke of magic. His relatives were still abed and the morning very quiet and peaceful as a result. The open window let in cool, sweet air.

“Will you go look tonight whether Hermione already has an answer?” Harry asked. Hedwig’s affirmative bark had him grinning. “Thanks, love. So, what should I do today? Start with my Potions essay, or finish the one for Charms?”

Hedwig carefully walked over his desk and tapped against his nearly completed essay for Professor Flitwick.

“Charms it is,” Harry agreed. He glanced at the closed wardrobe, where Dobby was asleep. “When
the little guy is up, I'll ask him to buy the books Hermione recommended. Arithmancy seems loads more interesting than Potions, and I've got an age to do it.”

Again Hedwig barked, her yellow eyes blinking with something like humour. She then fluttered to her perch and settled in to sleep. Harry read over his work, corrected a few things and added a couple more before deciding that he should better go down to the kitchen and start breakfast for his relatives.

As it promised to be a beautiful day, Uncle Vernon didn’t waste any time telling Harry that the family would go to the beach for the day and he wasn’t invited. His growled threats to mind the house and prepare it for Dudley's birthday party tomorrow, or else were received with the usual resignation, although having a day to himself somewhat blunted the disappointment of not getting to see the sea yet again.

Soon after breakfast, of which Dudley spitefully ate everything in reach, leaving Harry only with a boiled egg and a couple of bread slices, the Dursleys packed their things and left. Suddenly Harry was alone and didn’t quite know what to do with his freedom. Thankfully, Dobby had woken at that point and took over. He told Harry to watch a little telly, wait for his breakfast and think about what he needed Dobby to do.

After eating and asking Dobby to buy a couple of books, Harry left the house and went on a long stroll through the neighbourhood. There was a small park not too far away where all the green that wasn't allowed to sprout on Privet Drive seemed to grow with a vengeance. Harry loved the large trees and lush grass. A lot of old folks meandered along the paths and not a few younger people were lying on blankets on the grass, reading, listening to music or sleeping in the sun.

Grateful that Dobby had packed one of Dudley's rucksacks with a small blanket, one of Dudley's unread adventure novels, a bottle of lemonade and a handful of elf berries, Harry chose a secluded spot under a tree and made himself comfortable. As he munched on his berries and started on the book, he again felt bad for leaving Dobby with all the house work, even though the elf had insisted that he loved having more to do and was even happy to have Harry out of his domain.

The gentle, dappled sunshine lulled Harry to sleep after a while and he only woke when the local church started chiming the noon hour. With no nightmares to disturb him, he felt astoundingly refreshed and interested in doing more than just walking around and reading. Maybe Dobby would have some chores left over; that, or they found a way to go out more without being discovered by Voldemort's lackeys.

Despite Harry's wish for something to do, the afternoon was so lazy it bordered on the ridiculous. After lunch he napped in the half shadow of Aunt Petunia's roses, finished his Charms essay and ate an ice cream that Dobby brought from Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour. Bright sunshine finally mellowed to golden rays and the roses began spreading their fragrance in the cooling evening air. It was Harry's favourite part of the day and he enjoyed spending it in the tidy little garden in peace. The only thing even better was Hermione's letter which Hedwig delivered as Harry devoured his dinner.
up in his room.

"Thanks, love," Harry said and offered Hedwig an owl treat. Dobby took care to feed Harry a variety of dishes, many of them vegetarian, so he made sure to always have owl nibbles ready. "Did you have a good flight? I thought the evening was brilliant and I guess there'll be many mice out and about now."

Hedwig churred, gobbled down her treat and swept back out of the window to hunt.

Since his plate was still half full with grilled cheese sandwiches, vegetables and salad, Harry opened his letter and read as he chewed.

**Dear Harry,**

*Thanks for writing so quickly. After what happened last summer, I was half afraid Dobby would start again with his attempts to 'protect' you, even though the basilisk is gone. It's good to know that you're better now, and that your arm doesn't hurt anymore. Madam Pomfrey is good, I suppose, but Professor Dumbledore really should have taken you to Saint Mungo's to make sure you're alright.*

*And speaking of Dobby: This whole story is amazing, and it explains so much! You're a good person to support him after Mr. Malfoy freed him, even though he almost killed you. When my parents take me to Diagon Alley, I'll try to find a book about house elves. Maybe we'll find out how to help Dobby in the long run. Also, if you need money to feed him, please let me know. I can send some of my allowance along when Hedwig visits me next.*

*Your Charms essay sounds exciting. I'd love to read it. We can even swap, if you're interested. I already started on Transfiguration and Potions, though I must admit that the topic for Potions isn't at all interesting.*

*I told my parents that I'd like to see you over the summer, if possible more than once. Would you like that? I'm sure we can work something out. We're going to France at the beginning of July, but other than that I've got lots of time.*

*Thanks again for writing so soon - Ron is being lazy, just like last year. I'm looking forward to your answer!*

*Love,*

*Hermione*

Harry couldn't help himself, he grinned. For her to put school work second, or rather third, meant that she really liked him as a friend. It was a good feeling and he was determined not to disappoint her. Grabbing his notepad and a pencil, he set to write.
Saturday evening and with it Harry's appointment at Gringotts came sooner than the young wizard would have liked. He was nervous and wished he could have told Hermione about it, although he understood well enough why it hadn't been possible. Reading the Gringotts book, especially the back part about their most important customs, hadn't helped at all. Goblins seemed to be a fierce warrior race who apparently took honour very seriously and were easy to insult.

"Harry Potter sir need not worry," Dobby said soothingly. "Goblins do good business with wizards. Very gentle magic for healing. They be liking children more than adult wizards and be extra careful."

"Thanks, Dobby, I'll try." Harry took a shaky breath. "It's just my first major visit to a doctor, you see. I'm a little worried what they'll say about ... me. Being small and all that stuff, when they like strong warriors and such."

Dobby tilted his head and blinked at Harry. "Harry Potter sir be growing now because he has Dobby to take care of him. Harry Potter sir will be even greater wizard than he is now when he is all grown up."

Dobby's faith helped settle Harry's nerves a little, although he was grateful that the elf simply grabbed his hand and transported them when he least expected it.

"Whew!" he exclaimed as they landed in a shadowy corner of the bank's entrance hall. "What do you call this way of travelling again, Dobby? It's insane!"

"We elves just pop all over the place," Dobby replied, clearly pleased that he had pleased Harry so much. "Dobby will teach Harry Potter sir, if Harry Potter sir wants."

"Awesome." Grinning stupidly, Harry almost missed the goblin that was making his way over to them.

"Harry Potter?" the creature growled. After Harry's nod, he barked, "Follow me!" and waddled off, through a nondescript hidden door behind a pillar and into a semi-dark corridor.

Harry wasn't ashamed to admit that he was glad for Dobby's small hand in his, otherwise he might have fled on the spot. But despite being nervous, he looked curiously at the spectacular paintings and tapestries on the walls and let the warm light of the sconces soothe his agitation.

After several minutes, the goblin stopped in front of a door and gestured at it.
"You will meet Healer Spleenbash here. Mind your manners, wizard." With that, he sketched a short bow and went back, leaving Harry and Dobby standing in front of the ominous door.

"Uhm, thanks!" Harry called after him. He then carefully lifted his hand for a knock, only to have the door silently swing open. Guessing that it was okay for them to enter, Harry hesitantly went first. "Hello?"

"Harry Potter?" a gnarly yet oddly feminine sounding voice returned. Turning from the desk, a goblin of undefinable age met his gaze.

Harry swallowed. "Er, yes, I'm Harry Potter." He stepped aside so she could see Dobby. "This is Dobby, my friend. I don't know if it's allowed, but if he wants to, he can stay."

"I don't mind house elves," the goblin told him. "I'm Spleenbash, Gringotts' best healer for the eyes. Welcome to Gringotts."

"It's nice to meet you, Healer Spleenbash. Thank you for taking the time to see me," Harry said and bowed. It was clumsy but heartfelt, and he hoped that the goblin wouldn't take it as an insult.

Spleenbash's nostrils flared. "Enough with the niceties now, Mr Potter. Time is money, after all."

"Er, right."

"Your Dobby told me what you want done, but I have to tell you, just after seeing you now, that it probably won't do much good to heal your eyes tonight," Spleenbash said bluntly. "You're obviously rather small for your age, too thin, and you're also lacking colour in your skin. These are matters that should be corrected before I can attempt to heal whatever it is that ails your eyes."

Harry's face fell. "Oh. I was looking forward to seeing better."

"Yes, I can imagine." Spleenbash came closer and looked Harry over from a couple of feet away. Now fully in the light, the scarlet robes had a definite feminine look to them as they were adorned with impossibly fine stitchings, glittering precious stones and tiny pearls. "It would be Gringotts' honour to help, for the appropriate fee, of course."

"I'm very sorry, but I don't think I have that kind of money in my vault," Harry said, crestfallen. Dobby also let his ears droop in disappointment. "Especially not if you're a specialist. Truly, I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

Spleenbash snorted. "It's no matter, Mr. Potter. You're here already and I'll charge the ten galleon consultation fee regardless. Let me see what needs to be done. After that, I might help with a plan to
correct the most immediate problems. It'd take longer, of course, but not tax your ressources as much."

Checking with Dobby, who was nodding insistently, Harry said, "I, yes. Thanks. That'd be great."

Spleenbash directed him to a bed, bade him to lie still, and then waved her spindly forefinger over him. It was all rather similar to Madam Pomfrey's ministrations so Harry finally managed to relax a little - only to jump right back to his feet when the healer let out a blood-curdling scream.

"What is this? How can there be basilisk venom in your body?" she demanded and shook the arm where a puncture mark was glowing with her magic.

"I was bitten," Harry explained, exchanging another glance with Dobby. "A couple of weeks ago or so. It wasn't nice, but a phoenix helped and I didn't die."

Spleenbash sucked in a deep breath before bellowing, "Where in the Deepest Pits have you been bitten by a basilisk? A child with such a wound! Preposterous!"

Apparently alarmed by her screeches, the door slammed open and four heavily armed guards stomped in.

"What is the matter, wizard?" the leader roared. "How dare you threaten our healer?"

Helplessly, Harry tried to defend himself. "I didn't-"

"You not be threatening Harry Potter!" Dobby squeaked hotly. "Harry Potter be most honorable!"

"Lies!" another goblin growled and aimed his spear at the boy. "Kill them both!"

This was evidently a huge mistake. Chaos erupted as Spleenbash revealed an impressive set of lungs and even more impressive magic as she nearly tore the guards' heads off for daring to threaten her patient.

"This child has been harmed by the King of Snakes, you fools! Here be no danger, but somewhere is!" she yelled. "Bring me Bloodnose and Quickslit, and inform Ragnok! Go!"

Harry wondered if it would be very impolite to laugh; surely no-one had ever seen a group of goblins turn such an alarming shade of whitish grey or run away like scared children with clanking armour.

"What fools," Spleenbash muttered under her breath. She closed the door to her office with a hearty push of magic, ushered Harry back to the bed, and resumed her work. "No wonder they're only in
the guard ... no good for counting, nevermind crafting or healing. Flat-nosed, thrice-battered cave cats. Stupid, deaf dragon morsels ..."

Harry tuned her admittedly creative insults out and turned his head to Dobby. The elf sat on a little stool on the other side of the bed and swung his feet back and forth.

"That was a shock, wasn't it?" Harry asked quietly. "Thanks for trying to help."

"Bad goblins!" Dobby huffed. "They not clever; they don't know Harry Potter sir like I do."

"Well, they have no reason to trust me," Harry replied with a shrug. "I'm glad they're not after my head anymore, though."

"Speaking of your head, Mr Potter ..." Spleenbash stared in undisguised horror at Harry. "You have a really big problem with your head, and I alone won't be able to help you with it. I have to meet my colleagues. Stay here, I'll be back."

oOo

It had been an hour since Healer Spleenbash had left the office, leaving Harry and Dobby alone to stew in their worry. At least someone had seen fit to provide them with food and drink so the time wouldn't get too long. They sat on the bed and picked at the meal.

"What do you think is taking them so long?" Harry wanted to know. The tea and scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam were delicious but they couldn't hope to win against his anxiety. "And why does Healer Spleenbash need to see all these other people? Or goblins, rather. I mean, we don't have enough money anyway."

Dobby nibbled on an elf berry before saying, "Maybe goblins want to help even without money?"

"Or keep me prisoner for secret medical experiments," Harry returned glumly. "Might still be better than the Dursleys, but who knows."

Dobby's eyes widened in distress. "No, no, Dobby would never let bad goblins take Harry Potter!" He pulled at his ears. "Dobby would give his life to bring Harry Potter sir back home."

"I was kidding ... I think ... but thanks. I'd to the same for you, Dobby." Harry smiled at the house elf. "I never had a friend like you. It's really nice."

Dobby's large eyes filled with tears and his lower lip trembled. "Oh, Harry Potter sir be too kind to Dobby!" He grabbed a pillow and hit himself over the head with it. "Dobby not deserve such..."
"What? Of course you do!" Although the elf couldn't really do himself harm with a pillow, it still reminded Harry far too much of the incident with his bedside lamp. "You're sitting here in the middle of the night with me, even though you could be sleeping. I mean, it's not like you signed up to hang around Gringotts and be threatened with spears and axes and stuff."

Dobby wailed even harder now and Harry was at a loss how to comfort him. It got so bad that he was downright grateful when the door suddenly opened and a whole group of goblins filed into the office. Thankfully Dobby was so distracted that his crying stopped and he only hiccuped a little.

"Mr Potter, house elf Dobby, please rise," Healer Spleenbash intoned. As soon as both were on their feet, she called, "Behold the Goblin Nation's Leader, Chief Ragnok the Third, son of Ulquart The Destroyer and Slowkill the Sly!"

The entourage stepped neatly aside, forming a short corridor of goblins, through which a portly, mean-looking goblin in ceremonial armor stepped into the room. As he walked past them, the goblins bowed respectfully.

Not in any way prepared for this unexpected honour, Harry waited until Ragnok stopped in front of him and then offered a deep bow. Dobby by his side did the same.

"G-greetings, Chief Ragnok," Harry stammered. He wracked his brain for one of the example greetings in the Gringotts book. "May Gringotts a-always be filled with gold." After that he could only wait with bated breath.

Ragnok was silent for a long moment, and then he said, "And may your enemies quake at your feet, Heir Potter. Please rise. There's much to do and little time." He waved his clawed hand and two more goblins stepped forward. "These are Bonepick and Spinebreak. They'll assist Healer Spleenbash with your issues. Before we get to that, however, I need you to tell me where that basilisk is."

"Oh! Well, I can certainly help with that." Harry felt his confidence return as he looked into the expectant faces. "It's in the Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts."

Yet another goblin stepped forward, head slightly bowed as he talked to Ragnok. "This is no good. Dumbledore will never allow us entry."

"This is a matter between Heir Potter and Gringotts," Ragnok retorted with a dismissive sniff. "He will have no say."

Harry followed their talk with a sense of bewilderment. The nameless goblin noticed his puzzlement
and turned toward him.

"Gringotts has a special contract with the Ministry of Magic which allows the Horde access to any location where trade goods are stored. Three percent of the goods’ value is to be paid to the Ministry for the privilege."

"Seems fair," Harry replied.

"Gringotts wants to take care of the basilisk, Heir Potter," the goblin continued, "and is prepared to enter into contract with you for the information. Since you found the Basilisk it could be argued that you claimed it as yours, therefore enabling us to enter Hogwarts. Aside from the fact that it is an extremely dangerous magical creature in a school full of children, it also has a certain worth. Its hide and venom are especially sought after, but there are also many uses for its organs and meat and even bones. It will be hard to kill, but Gringotts likes to come by its wealth honestly. Goblins never mind a good fight, and this will be an enemy to be talked about in years to come."

Hearing this, Harry felt an acute disappointment on behalf of the excitedly muttering goblins. "Too bad it's already dead, then," he said sadly.

"What?" Ragnok demanded.

"What!" his entourage echoed.

"It's dead," Harry repeated. "When it tried to kill me, I managed to kill it first. It still stabbed me with a tooth, but Fawkes healed that. I already explained to Healer Spleenbash."

"Not this part!" the healer exclaimed.

"Is that true?" Ragnok demanded. "You killed the King of Snakes? How did this come about? Tell us all!"

Feeling uncomfortable about the audience but knowing that there was no way out of it, Harry tried to explain what had happened that day and how he managed to return Ginny to Hogwarts' top side in the end. The following questions as to the size of the beast baffled him even more.

"Extraordinary!" the goblin leader exclaimed once Harry was finished, his companions muttering among themselves in excitement. "Quite a feat for one so young! And to kill it in this fashion, with a goblin-forged blade ... all that skin, it is intact?"

"Er, yeah. Mostly." Harry flushed.
"And it's organs are not pierced? What about the bones?"

"Except for the eyes everything looked quite whole," Harry said. "Can I ask why?"

"You killed the King of Snakes, therefore its carcass is definitely yours," Ragnok explained. The goblins behind him, even the healers, fairly vibrated with excitement. "It's wizard law, written down in 1159 of your calendar when a dark lord bred so many basilisks that it was quite necessary for people to have an incentive to kill them before they got too big and dangerous." He stepped closer to Harry, face taking on a mien that Harry recognized from his uncle when he desperately wanted something and played very nice to get it. "Gringotts was prepared to pay a fee for your right of first refusal to the basilisk and argue the case with the Ministry, but now that we know that you've already slain it ... Gringotts wants to buy the beast. Whole. Whatever of it there is. Three weeks is not enough time for a basilisk to even begin rotting. It should be in prime condition. Do you agree?"

"Gladly," Harry replied and exhaled. "The sooner this thing is gone from Hogwarts, the better."

Ragnok offered his gnarly claw and Harry shook on the deal.

"Excellent." Ragnok turned to his advisor. "Fastclaw, meet with Heir Potter's account manager and set up a preliminary contract. Details will be ironed out at a later time. After that send an express order to our harvesters. This is a gold order. Everything else has to wait."

"Yes, Chief." The assistant bowed and hurried away. Two guards went with him, their spears raised menacingly.

Ragnok waved the healers closer. "Whatever the contractual details will be, Heir Potter's health is of utmost importance. This young wizard has brought a lot of gold and prestige to Gringotts tonight and it is Gringotts' pleasure to offer its assistance to one who it hopefully will be able to call friend in the years to come."

The other goblins sucked in their breath and Harry felt heat rise in his cheeks. Dobby poked him into the knee, prompting Harry to speak.

"Thank you," the overwhelmed boy mumbled, knowing that it was futile to downplay the generous gesture. "I appreciate it. So much."

"Ah," Spleenbash scowled when Ragnok nodded once and made for the door. "None of that now, Heir Potter. Come back to the bed, my colleagues need to investigate your health thoroughly before we can even start thinking about your treatment."

Now that the excitement was over and the healer's chamber empty except for Harry and the actual healers, a kind of leaden exhaustion settled upon Harry's body. While Spleenbash snarled at her colleagues, his eyes drooped and he fell asleep halfway through the goblins' extensive scans.
Harry awoke in his own bed, with no recollection of how he'd gotten there. Dobby was sleeping at his feet, though, so it wasn't hard to guess that his elf friend had popped them home at some point.

Squinting at the early morning sun's glare in his eyes, Harry put on his glasses and wondered why there were so many different potion vials on his bedside table. After sitting up and yawning, he also discovered a large, heavy trunk at the far side of the room. Hedwig churred softly at him and ruffled her feathers. She seemed utterly unconcerned, but Harry couldn't help but feel wary about all the strange new things.

"Dobby?" he whispered. "Could you wake up, please?"

The elf stirred but looked at least as bleary-eyed as Harry felt. It was obvious that he needed more rest. Still he sat up and squeaked, "How can Dobby serve, Harry Potter sir?"

"I don't need anything," Harry hurried to say and blushed with shame. "I just ... what happened last night? What are all those things?"

Dobby blinked and then uncurled himself. "Oh, this is just presents from the Goblin nation. Healing potions," he pointed at the vials on Harry's beside table, "and an apartment trunk, so Harry Potter sir can receive goblin visitors."

Confused, Harry asked, "Why can't they just come here?"

"It be forbidden for goblins to visit muggle dwellings," Dobby explained, visibly perking up. "It also be forbidden to meet heirs without supervision of magical guardians. But this trunk be Gringotts property, and goblins may visit their own property whenever they like. If Harry Potter sir happens to be there also, it be no crime."

Despite still feeling tired, Harry couldn't help but laugh about Dobby's pleased, sly grin. "Great idea. What else did I miss?"

"Healers told Dobby that they will visit Harry Potter sir every other night at eight o'clock, starting Tuesday to give potions time to work. They found bad, bad thing in Harry Potter sir's head, but they be knowing how to make it go away."

"Wow, okay." Harry touched Dobby's deceptively narrow shoulder and squeezed carefully. "Thank you very much, and sorry for waking you up. I was just ... freaked out, I guess. Go back to sleep, it's still early."
Dobby looked searchingly at Harry before hopping up with a little bounce. "Dobby be doing that. But Harry Potter sir will eat breakfast first."

True to his word, Dobby served a small breakfast consisting of fluffy waffles with butter and elf berries. The whole room smelled of coconut and cinnamon and when Dobby poured one of the goblin potions over the whole thing, Harry learned that, contrary to popular belief, it was indeed possible to make potions taste like hot caramel. Once the last drop was lapped from the plate, a pleasant tingle ran through his body.

Dobby munched on a couple handfuls of berries himself and squeezed himself into his cupboard as soon as Harry was finished. Harry grinned at the sight and then got up to take a shower and help his Aunt with breakfast.

The morning passed in absolute normalcy, at least as far as the Dursleys were concerned. Directly after stuffing his face, Dudley ran off to meet his friends while Harry's aunt and uncle set off to take a rare walk around the neighborhood. Uncle Vernon only warned Harry once not to do 'freakish stuff' and since Aunt Petunia didn't say anything about her garden, Harry took that as permission to spend the morning in the park.

As the heat got oppressive once the afternoon came around, Harry elected to stay inside. He and Dobby oohed and aahed over the potions, admiring their jewel-like colours and elegantly shaped vials. Each potion smelled different; there was pear and raspberry as well as chocolate and apple. The only blue potion, however, smelled like nothing Harry knew and even Dobby admitted to having no idea. Harry decided that it would make a good question for Healer Spleenbash.

At last their interest in the potions was exhausted and Harry began poking at the trunk. The richly adorned lid snapped open easily enough and the staircase it revealed gave Harry a real kick.

"Let's go see what's down there," Harry said, already stepping inside the trunk.

Dobby hurried to follow, his large ears quivering in excitement and his eyes wide with wonder.

"Wow, this is crazy!" Harry exclaimed as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "This really is a whole apartment! That fireplace is almost as large as the one in the Leaky Cauldron! And look, over there is a kitchen, and I bet behind that door is a bathroom!" He ran to peek inside and gave a triumphant cry. "Yep, a bathroom. It's got a huge tub, Dobby! I'll have to ask if we can use it."

Together, they also discovered three bedrooms, a large study with several bookshelves filled to capacity, and a room that looked like a cross between a medieval examination room and some kind of dungeon chamber. One half of the room was completely bare, except for a large, golden circle on the floor.

"No idea what they use that circle for, but maybe they'll tell us," Harry said. He crouched down and touched the golden markings on the stone floor. The metal felt cool beneath his finger tips and he
was certain that this was real gold, not just gold-coloured paint.

In a corner, Dobby opened the lid of some kind of low-walled bassinet and looked inside.

"This be magic cystern," he said when Harry joined him. "Many folks be using it to cleanse before doing ritual magic."

"Ritual magic? Never heard of it." Harry let his arm hang into the cystern and wiggled his fingers. A fine mist teased him, just out of his reach. "Do you think they'll teach it at Hogwarts?"

"Hoggywarts hasn't taught ritual magics since Dobby was young elf and running after old Master Abraxis," Dobby replied. "Not many wizards be interested in old magics. Old families still be teaching their young, of course."

"Huh. Seems kind of unfair." Harry stared a little longer into the cystern before taking his hand back out and carefully closing the lid. "I guess I could buy a book about it, or better yet, ask Hermione. She seems to know everything."

"Dobby can buy books," the elf said. "Gringotts not be taking any money for healing Harry Potter sir, therefore there be money for more books."

"Hermione will definitely love you, the way you bring me things to read," Harry admitted with a little grin. "That reminds me ... do you know if there are any good books about house elves? She is worried about you, and well, since you're my friend, I should know stuff about you, right?"

"Most wizard books about house elves not be very good," Dobby said with shining eyes. "I be bringing Harry Potter sir book written by elf friend. It be truth as elves know it."

"Thank you. I'll make sure to read it, and maybe I could let Hermione borrow it, too?"

"Harry Potter sir can give book to anyone he likes."

Dobby trotted out of the room and back into the study. Harry followed gamely, although the sheer amount of books was a little intimidating.

"Goblins told Dobby that Harry Potter sir may read any book he fancies in the library," Dobby said. "There not be books on house elves, but Healer Spleenbash said there be many books on ancient runes and warding."

"Wow, that's awesome." Harry picked out a book at random and opened it. It was a rather thick tome about the healing arts and the chapter described the birth of a child ... in detail. "Uh, gross." He
flipped the pages to a later chapter. "Healing broken bones, well, that's better. Could've done with this before Lockhart vanished the bones in my arm." He turned the book this way and that and squinted at the pictures. "The wand movement doesn't look that hard. I guess Lockhart was just incompetent."

"Vain wizard won't ever do Harry Potter sir harm again. Dobby made sure of that."

Harry stared at him. "What did you do?"

Dobby lifted his little chin defiantly. "Bad vain wizard had to drink potions against memory loss. Doctors didn't know if it be helping. Dobby exchanged potion with butterbeer. Now he be staying far away from Harry Potter sir forever."

"That's horrible, Dobby." Harry cleared his throat when the memories of Lockhart trying to obliviate him and Ron threatened to overwhelm him for a moment. He shook himself. "Thank you. He was creepy. Although maybe don't do it again anytime soon, okay?"

"Nobody hurts Harry Potter sir," Dobby said with conviction. "Besides, Dobby be protecting other wizards from bad Lockheady. He be making lots of good people forget important things."

Harry had to agree that Lockhart had, indeed, obliviated a lot of people and cheated them out of their accomplishments. Deciding that Lockhart forgetting himself was some kind of cosmic justice, Harry dropped the topic and chose another book at random.

"Oh, look, it's about medicines." He sat down on the floor, the heavy tome open in his lap, and pointed at a potions recipe. "This doesn't look like anything Snape has taught us."

Dobby actually sniffed. "Wizards only think they be knowing everything. Goblins be very good potions masters. They be using wild magic to heal their sick."

"Hm, this here is just a kind of Pepper-up Potion. Maybe Healer Spleenbash will allow me to try and brew it," Harry said. "The book says it tastes like strawberries."

"Dobby likes strawberries," the elf said. "Dobby would like to help." After a pause, his ears drooped slightly. "It be bad luck that goblins only come here Tuesday night. Dobby knows that Harry Potter sir be bored."

"It's not your fault," Harry replied. "Besides, I have a lot of homework to do. I should do that first, eben though it's boring."

And to make good on his word, Harry went back up into his room, closed the lid of the trunk so as not to tempt himself and settled at his desk. His Charms essay was due a trip to Hermione tonight, so
he picked the assignment for Transfiguration next and began to scribble notes onto a page of lined paper.

Dobby brought him his school books when asked and popped back into the goblin trunk to look for even more books at the slightest huff of frustration from Harry. Harry let him, knowing that Dobby was even more bored in his relatives' little bland house than Harry himself.

At night, Harry settled in bed with his new Arithmancy book open. Even though he had read a later chapter with Hermione on the train, the introduction and first chapter were still very interesting. He scribbled several notes in the margins before Dobby decided that he'd studied enough and needed his sleep. It was nice to be so looked after and Harry followed his friend's instruction without complaint.

oOo

Monday morning rolled around and things took a turn for the worse. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia returned from their early morning brunch in the best of moods, only to find a letter from Vernon's older sister Marge in the box. She was informing the Dursleys that she intended to come visit them for a week and would be arriving next Monday at three o'clock on the dot. Aunt Petunia didn't take this well at all; she was shrieking and moaning about the inconvenience as Marge's visit fell into the same week as the garden competition.

"Surely her dog will dig up my roses!" she cried. "Vernon, you have to tell her that she must delay her visit!"

"I can try, but you know Marge. She likely has it all planned out already." Uncle Vernon patted his wife's shoulder. "There, there. I'll tell her to keep Ripper leashed until the competition is over. And if he makes a mess, Potter will clean it up."

"He better does," Petunia sniffed bitterly. "But I have to say, I don't like it when she drops in like this. It's rude. Barely a whole week to prepare! How will the boy get the guest room and my garden ready? And we still need a new mattress to replace the one the dog chewed up. And the meal planning, and the party for the Garden Committee! I don't know how I'll manage it all."

"You can do it, Pet," Uncle Vernon consoled her. "It's only for a week, and you know how much Dudley loves Marge's visits. It'll be good to have real family around."

With that, the topic was closed and the two vanished via the terrace door into the garden, where Harry had been forced to set the small bistro table with cups of tea and strawberry cake.

"A whole week," Harry whispered in horror. He slumped against the wall of the hallway. "Just what I didn't need."
Later that evening, long after Hedwig had flown off to deliver Harry's letter to Hermione, Dobby managed to comfort Harry with assurances that he would keep bad dogs and aunts away.

"It's not so much that she hits me or anything," Harry sighed when Dobby inquired about Harry's fear of her. "But she's really mean and says evil things about my parents. Now that I know the truth about them ..." He shrugged. "I don't think I can ignore that kind of thing, even though I probably should."

Dobby handed him a small bowl with yogurt and elf fruit. "Harry Potter sir be noble and good. It be hard being good to bad people and Dobby not be disappointed if Harry Potter sir decides to be a little bad to bad people."

That made Harry laugh. "Thanks, Dobby. I'm not a saint, but I try to be better than them."

"Harry Potter sir now has Dobby to help keep the balance," Dobby replied smugly and began eating his own snack.

oOo

In anticipation of Aunt Marge's visit, Aunt Petunia took great delight in sending Harry to the garden to water, weed and prune, especially during the midday heat. There were even new flowers for Harry to plant but Dobby insisted on doing that while Harry took a break in the shadow. Without the elf's magical sunscreen the boy would've burned himself badly on the first day.

Later, Aunt Petunia sent Harry to his room, telling him to be ready for the guest room later. For food, he got a small portion of dry meatloaf, two boiled potatoes and a huge amount of mushy peas that nobody liked, not even Petunia herself.

"Muggles not know how to cook," Dobby muttered as he vanished the food with a moue of distaste. In its stead, a beautiful arrangement of roast chicken, baked apple and a handful of perfectly roasted potatoes appeared.

It smelled wonderful and Harry ate his fill, realizing with wonder that Dobby had served exactly enough to make him pleasantly full but not tax his stomach. For dessert he had a small chocolate soufflé with a distinct orange note.

"That was absolutely perfect", Harry praised. "You're the best cook I know. Wow."

Dobby flushed a little. "Dobby be glad Harry Potter sir be happy!"
"You have no idea." Harry grinned. "I'm kinda stuffed, but how about going into the trunk and snooping some more? We could play ritual circle!"

Dobby's eyes widened. "Oh no, Harry Potter sir should be careful with ritual circles. Ritual circles be property of owners and must only be used with permission and respect." He tugged on his large ears. "Dobby be sorry!"

"Oh, don't be! I just didn't know and I wouldn't want to make the goblins angry. But if they got books about that, I'd like to have a look. Would that be okay?"

Instead of answering, Dobby hopped off the bed and opened the trunk with a little snap of his fingers. "First one down be choosing ice cream!" he squeaked and vanished with a mad little giggle.

Harry scrambled to follow but of course Dobby had won the race before he'd even gotten up from his chair.

"Dobby be liking melon and vanilla ice cream," the elf said, "but for Harry Potter sir Dobby'll be getting three flavours he not be knowing yet."

"With whipped cream and sprinkles?" Harry asked hopefully.

"And with lots and lots of strawberries. Fortesque-y wizard has great strawberries, they be rich with magic so us elves like to go there and trade for little favours."

"You can buy as many strawberries as you like," Harry assured him. "Or help Mr. Fortesque out if it's nothing evil or likely to get you killed."

Dobby did a little happy dance. "Dobby be finding books for Harry Potter sir now!"

Harry smiled at the house elf's enthusiasm. He poked around the rooms, washed his hands in the truly rather luxurious bathroom so he wouldn't touch the goblins' possessions with sticky fingers and then went into the study where a little stack of books on ritual magic was already waiting for him.

He picked up the first and read the title, *Ritual Craft For The Young*. Seeing that he was, in fact, rather young, he decided that this was as good a beginning as any and opened the cover eagerly.

The first chapter quickly sucked him in, giving a short overview of the evolution of ritual magic in Great Britain. Naturally, this made Harry curious about the rest of the world, but since the book was of medium size he decided that it would have to keep for a while.
Another hour passed as Harry also devoured the second chapter. It described the basic needs for ritual craft, which didn't seem at all difficult to arrange.

"Hey Dobby, did you know that you could do all the rituals in the buff?" Harry called through the open study door.

Dobby appeared and wagged his finger. "Dobby knows, but Dobby be very grateful that wizards wear robes now. Most wizards not be very nice to look at naked."

Harry snorted with laughter. When he had calmed himself a little, he said, "Still, it's good that you don't need some sort of special robe to do magic. It would be really unfair if only rich people could afford it." Just thinking of Malfoy's arrogant behaviour made Harry that more determined to try his hand at ritual magic, if only to have something interesting to tell Hermione in his next letter.

Dobby's ears twitched and he said, "Mean Aunt Petunia be calling for Harry Potter sir. They be wanting tea in the garden."

"Because she can't bloody serve tea herself," Harry grumbled. "Fine."

He marked the page in the book, put it on the little reading table next to his chair, and trudged out of the trunk. As expected, Aunt Petunia harangued him as he stacked the tea things on a tablet. She only held back Dudley from tripping him up because it was her good china. Dudley then was allowed to bring the strawberry cake and sandwiches, of which nearly a quarter never reached the garden.

Harry wanted to go back to his trunk immediately after his aunt was satisfied with her table, but she surprised him.

"Aunt Marge will visit us next week," she hissed. "To rehearse your manners you'll sit with us now. Try not to be a bother!"

Under her watchful eye, Harry actually got a huge piece of gooseberry cake (which Aunt Petunia loved but both her husband and son abhorred) to eat and a cup of weak tea. Harry acted as put upon as he could, although he rather liked the tart taste. Uncle Vernon was so entertained by his performance that Harry was even allowed whipped cream for the cake, an almost unheard of occurrence.

Doing the dishes was Harry's job, naturally, and afterwards Uncle Vernon escorted him to his room to lock him in, gleefully telling Harry that the family had tickets for the open air cinema and he wasn't invited.
"But what about the guest room?" Harry asked. "Aunt Petunia said I should get it clean today."

"That can wait. We're having pizza afterwards, so I don't want you getting ideas to do freakish things to our house!" Before Harry could reply, Uncle Vernon closed the door and engaged all the locks.

"Bye, freak!" Dudley hollered.

Soon after, the house was silent and Harry let Dobby pop him out of his room.

"The weather be too nice for Harry Potter sir to stay inside," the elf squeaked. "Evening light be good for growing wizards! Harry Potter sir should eat dinner outside. Dobby be taking care of nosy neighbours."

It really was a beautiful evening, Harry acknowledged as he first enjoyed his food and then his ice cream. Dobby had chosen coconut, pear, and peanut butter chocolate for him, topped with apple sauce, a huge amount of whipped cream, and sparkly fairy sprinkles. The elf enjoyed his own sundae with obvious pleasure; his ears were twitching and his dangling feet kicked excitedly every few seconds.

"I'm a bit nervous about having the goblins over," Harry confided after swallowing the last bit of his treat. "Do you think getting my scar healed will hurt a lot?"

"Dobby not know," Dobby replied and put his empty bowl down. "But goblins be knowing what they be doing. Dobby be having faith."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. "Right." After a short glance at his watch, he said, "I guess it's time to go inside and find out."

oOo

Harry and Dobby hadn't waited long in the foyer of the goblin trunk when the fireplace lit up with green flames and spat out three goblins.

"Good evening, Healer Spleenbash," Harry said and bowed. "May unworthy patients quake in their boots before you, and the worthy ones fill your vault with precious treasure."
"So mote it be, Heir Potter," Healer Spleenbash returned. She gestured to her companions. "You already briefly met Bonepick and Spinebreak, although you were not up for introductions the last time."

Harry offered another greeting and received one in return.

"Now, as was determined during your consultation, you have a very dark magic clinging to you, Heir Potter, and Gringotts is interested in cleansing you from its influence."

"Uhm, not that I don't appreciate it, because I do, but ... why?" Harry asked.

Spleenbash snorted. "Because that thing in you is not merely the remnant of the Dark Lord's curse, it is literally a part of him." She ignored Harry's shocked gasp. "Gringott's did not stand with Voldemort during his war and we won't stand for his continued existence if we can help it. To speak frankly, we as a race abhor him and his foul abominations. No valued customer, much less friend, will be left to suffer from this evil as it only breeds more evil the longer it is allowed to fester. One war was quite enough, no?"

"Absolutely," Harry croaked. He pressed his fingers against the scar. "How soon can you do it?"

"Very soon," Spleenbash assured him. "Before we can get to that, however, we need to shore up your health. The procedure is taxing on the body and I don't want to risk unnecessary injury. Bonepick, you'll go over Heir Potter's health plan while Spinebreak and I inspect the ritual space."

Harry, Dobby, and Healer Bonepick went into the study while the other two goblins went on into the large ritual room and closed the door behind them.

"Now sit, and hold still for a moment," Healer Bonepick said. He swiftly waved his long fingers along Harry's body. A diagnostic sprung up next to Harry and a self-writing quill started writing things out on a scroll of parchment. "Hm, hmm, oh, that's not good ... but this is doing its job already ... very good ... oh, those Muggles ... hm, yes, interesting!" A few minutes later he was finished and let the visuals fade away. "Now, Heir Potter, let's start with a few questions. Your elf takes care of your food?"

"Uh, yes. He's been very good about feeding me healthy things. And your potions, of course!" Harry flushed. "They're way better than normal potions, so thanks for that."
"Goblins would never subject a sick child to nasty medicine," Bonepick scoffed. "The taste is meant to ensure that the potions are actually taken, you see."

"Er, I'd like to learn how to do that," Harry stuttered. "I mean, if I may."

"You do have Potions classes at Hogwarts, do you not?" Bonepick asked and raised an eyebrow. "Is Professor Snape not a certified master? Does he not stock the infirmary? It is said that his potions are among the very best."

"I guess so, but he's, er, not very good at teaching. And potions are disgusting, mostly, no matter who brews them."

Bonepick showed a few teeth as he smirked. "Well, I've never been one to hinder enquiring minds in their quest to knowledge. I'll talk to Healer Spleenbash as she's the one overseeing your treatment, but I don't see why you shouldn't try your hand at the art. Equipment can be procured easily enough - for a fee, of course - and there's room enough in the trunk for a small lab."

"Thank you!" Harry grinned. "Really, that's awesome!" He held his hand out and let Dobby low-five him.

"You're welcome, Heir Potter." Bonepick made a few notes on his parchment. "Back to your food: it seems that your elf has been feeding you elf berries and other fruit rich in wild magic?"

"Uhm, yes. Is that a problem?" Harry shared a concerned look with Dobby. "I told him to stop if I need too much. I'd never want to steal their food."

"Not, it's quite alright, Heir Potter. It's just unusual, you see. Wizards normally don't interact much with wild magic, especially not to heal themselves. They rely on their own cores and take care of themselves with their potions and whatnot."

"But wouldn't it be more clever to use what's already there?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Of course it would, and it isn't like wizards don't try to harvest wild magic." Bonepick seemed more amused than annoyed by Harry's questions. "But the ability to use magically rich food sources, for example, is not one many wizards share, and if they do have it they often unwittingly starve it with inadequate food during their childhood. Normal food might meet the body's demand for nourishment, but the magical core is left wanting. Its ability to absorb wild magic will diminish and eventually wither away."

"Wow, that's sad." Harry wrung his hands. "So, it's good that I can eat the elf berries? Will it make me better sooner?"
"A lot sooner than expected," Bonepick allowed, "but we have a long way to go regardless. Your bones need a lot of attention, especially your wand arm, as does the rest of you, frankly. You're eating often, which is good, but not very much at any one time because your stomach is a little underdeveloped. Healer Spleenbash already noted that you're small for your age and lacking several nutrients. I assume that's the doing of your Muggle relatives. Magical children need a lot of energy to build their reserves and some Muggles are not willing to expend the money."

"Harry Potter sir's relatives sometimes let him go hungry," Dobby said before Harry could think to ask him to keep it to himself. "They be starving Harry Potter sir!" His wail echoed through the room.

"Well, that needs to stop immediately," Bonepick said without inflection. "You seem to be dedicated to your master, so keep up the good work. I prescribe six to seven meals a day, and more if required. Going hungry is not an option at this stage in his recovery. My colleagues and I will take care of the rest."

Dobby sniffled but stood straight with determination. Harry was just glad that this seemed to be the end of it as he hated talking about his home life.

"My last question is in regards to your memory of the basilisk," Bonepick said. "Chief Ragnok wants to see how you managed this feat, of course, so it'd be an immense honour if you'd allow me to harvest the memory for showing."

"Er, will I lose the memory?" Harry asked cautiously. "Because our last Defence teacher tried to obliviate me and I'd rather not forget anything important."

"Don't you worry, Heir Potter. This procedure merely takes a copy out of your head. I propose that I bring a pensieve here on my next visit and show you how it works. A little practice beforehand will make the process much easier for you, and it is convenient to know whenever you need to give testimony in front of the authorities. Deal?"

Harry thought it over and finally grinned. "Deal. But it's only for Chief Ragnok. You can show the other goblins for a fee."

Healer Bonepick was startled into a hissing laugh and accepted the terms with delight. As they shook hands, a small parchment popped into existence.

"Your receipt, Heir Potter," Bonepick said. "It states the terms of the deal. See here? The fee is still to be determined, so think about it and be ready when we revisit the topic. Chief Ragnok hates indecision."

"I will," Harry promised. He handed Dobby, who was eagerly reaching up, the slip of parchment for safekeeping. "Thank you very much."
"Don't thank me yet. You better learn fast that we goblins are cut-throat in our negociations," Healer Bonepick countered. "No matter which profession, the deal comes first, Heir Potter."

"I'll remember that." Harry grinned. "So, are we done with the questions?"

"We are. Now comes the part where I tell you exactly what to do and how to do it." Healer Bonepick showed Harry a roll of parchment. "This is your treatment plan. We’ll keep up with the strengthening and nourishing potions for at least another week. See here? Some days you'll have to take more than one. As you take them, you'll document your eating habits - dates, times, the kind of food, and the amount - and also list how you feel at the end of each day. Don't be flowery, a short statement will suffice. Once we're satisfied with your progress, we'll take a closer look at your bones. After that, we'll research the interaction of basilisk venom and phoenix tears in your blood and try to determine how each might influence the procedure to get rid of the Dark Lord's stain. This might take a few weeks. During that time, you'll continue with the potions as determined by Healer Spleenbash and start a light exercise regimen."

"Exercise?" Harry groaned. "Like aerobics?"

"If you like," Bonepick smirked. "But I thought more along the lines of hiking, riding a Muggle bike, flying ... whatever gets young wizards moving."

"Uh, well, you see, I don't have much opportunity to just ... you know, be on holiday. My relatives give me chores and stuff, but they don't like me walking about the neighbourhood too much." He flushed but pressed on, "They're ashamed of me, I suppose. Because of my magic. So, if there's something I can do in my room, or maybe down here, I'd appreciate it."

Healer Bonepick mumbled something under his breath and made a note. "I see. I'll take that under consideration."

In that moment, Healer Spleenbash and her colleague Spinebreak returned.

"Ah, good, you've made it to the treatment plan already," she said. "Did you understand everything, Heir Potter?"

Harry nodded and repeated in short Healer Bonepick's instructions.

When the matter of exercise came up, Healer Spleenbash pursed her lips. She said, "Don't worry about it too much just yet, Heir Potter. You need to give yourself time to heal, and worry can only harm the process. If all goes well, we might be able to remove the dark stain before Hogwarts starts. Until then, be patient and enjoy your summer." After a quick look at Bonepick's notes, she added,
"Our next appointment is two days hence. Keep yourself available, please."

"Yes, Healer Spleenbash." Harry looked down as Dobby tugged on his trouser leg. "What is it, Dobby?"

"Harry Potter sir wanted to ask about ritual magic," Dobby squeaked.

"Ritual magic?" Healer Spleenbash inquired warily. "What is this, Heir Potter?"

"I saw the circle and became curious," Harry said sheepishly. "And I wondered whether I might use it for a bit. Just to see what it's like. The book I found made it sound really interesting."

"Which book?" she asked suspiciously.

"Ritual Craft For The Young," Harry said. "By William Damsell."

Healer Spleenbash relaxed and nodded. "Very well. It is a good book for beginners. Read as you will, but refrain from using the ritual space until you've heard from Gringotts. We're still deciding whether to work here or at Gringotts proper."

"Of course. Thank you."

"If there's nothing else to discuss, we're done here. Well met, Heir Potter. Stay in one piece, if you please."

Harry waved as the goblins activated the Floo and vanished in a swirl of bright green flames.

End of Part 1
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'll say it again: no beta has read this, and probably never will. Take it or leave it, I don't care. EAD rules all the way, baby. I park this here because my blog post hit its limit.

Also, there will be lots of bashing ... eventually. I'll probably bash characters you like. If you can't deal with it, hit the back button.

Have fun!

Dobby's Deceit

Part 2

The next days passed astonishingly quickly in Harry's mind. When he wasn't tending to Aunt Petunia's garden or Aunt Marge's guest room, he was out in the park taking walks and reading his books in the shade. Dobby dutifully supplied him with meals and snacks, going as far as outright rejecting Aunt Petunia's fare and telling Harry to just let his uncle and cousin have it.

The second goblin visit came and passed without much fanfare. Healer Bonepick made notes on Harry's progress, advised him to drink more of Dobby's lemonade and offered him a beginner's book on the goblins' art of potion making. It wasn't a lab, but it seemed like a promising overture. He also brought a pensieve and showed Harry how to watch memories and extracted one of his own to demonstrate, but left without doing more than that because of an emergency.

Meanwhile, Hedwig delivered Hermione's reply to Harry's letter. She had also enclosed his Charms essay. There were almost no corrections and she'd praised his flexible thinking more than once. For the rest of the night, Harry carried a happy glow with him and his late night snack of Florean Fortescue's strawberries tasted even sweeter.

Soon enough, the first week of treatment was over and Healer Spleenbash was set to arrive once again in the evening. As it was Monday, Aunt Marge appeared punctually on the Dursley's doorstep, her bulldog Ripper at her heel.

For the first fifteen minutes, the large woman made a lot of noise greeting Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, but especially so with Dudley. She squeezed and kissed him before finally sending him away with a twenty-pound note in his fat fist.
Then, her attention turned to Harry who, unsuccessfully, had tried to hide in the living room.

"You, Potter! Come here!" Marge imperiously waved him over. "Take my luggage upstairs, boy, and no shenanigans! I'll know! Then you can take Ripper for his walk."

Mulishly, Harry grabbed her suitcase and dragged it up, one step at a time. At least the heavy thumps of the thing against the stairs were satisfying, and not something Aunt Petunia could scold him for. Ripper yipped, obviously eager to renew the acquaintance.

Dobby was already waiting for Harry and lightened the suitcase with a snap of his fingers.

"Dobby be remembering evil Marge now. Dobby be having eye on her and evil little doggie."

"Thanks," Harry panted. "Let's get this over with. Only ... would you mind coming with me when I take Ripper for his walk? He, uh, likes to chase me. And he bites, but only me."

Dobby's nostrils flared. "Dobby will."

Ripper behaved well enough while other people were around, but as soon as Harry left Privet Drive and went towards the park, Ripper began to growl and crowd him.

"I'd let that if I were you," Harry told him sternly. "My friend is meaner than you."

Ripper was unimpressed and snapped after Harry's new trainers.

"Bad dog!" Harry jumped out of the way.

In that moment, an invisible hand swatted the dog on its head and it jumped around, looking for the source of the stinging pain. Not finding it, Ripper growled at Harry.

"No," Harry repeated. "Behave, or I'll have Dobby put you up in a tree."

He managed to drag the ill-tempered bulldog into the park where Ripper promptly peed against everything that was standing upright. It made Harry's month when he tried to piss on an old gentleman and got a sound whack with the walking cane for his trouble. Ripper was so dazed, he even forgot to growl and just whimpered pitifully.

"Your dog needs training, young man!" the old man bellowed. "During my time we'd have put such mongrels down!"
"I couldn't agree more, sir!" Harry called, laughing. "Sorry!"

For the rest of the walk, Ripper was subdued and Harry could almost pretend to walk a perfectly normal dog. He even generously stayed out ten minutes longer than he'd initially planned, just so he wouldn't have to be there when tea was served and be forced to endure Marge's diatribes.

Coming back late worked out great ... at least at first. Aunt Marge didn't even notice her darling's abnormally quiet behaviour as she was busy stuffing her mouth with cake and sandwiches. She did, however, remember Harry's existence and hollered after him, "Oh, oh, Potter! I've had your aunt put Ripper's bed in your room. Be sure not to disturb his beauty sleep tonight. The poor thing's been gassy all of last week."

Taking a deep breath, Harry counted to ten. He managed to climb up the stairs without stomping but took down Ripper's grubby dog bed from his own bed and dropped it with some force in front of the guest room.

"It's my room," he said angrily, "and I don't want him there. Dobby?"

Dobby appeared at once, eyes on the dog bed but ears turned attentively towards Harry.

"I'm sorry to ask this of you, but could you make sure that nobody can enter our room?" Harry ran both hands through his hair. "This is what I was talking about. She's so ... urgh. Always picking on me and pushing her stupid dog on me."

"Dobby be warding Harry Potter sir's room at once," Dobby said. "Should Dobby place a repelling charm?"

"Whatever gets them off our backs." Harry bit his lip. "That doesn't make me a bad person, right? It's not like I want to prank them. But there's so much going on with the goblins, and it's my holidays, and I just don't want to deal with Marge on top of all that."

"Dobby be trying to be satisfied with confounding evil muggles," Dobby retorted sullenly. "If Harry Potter sir be leaving it to Dobby, mean Marge be shipped to Timbuktu tomorrow."

That made Harry laugh and his bad mood evaporated. "Let's see how we get around her, first. I'd rather not get in trouble for making excessive sport of a muggle."

"For some muggles, there be no such thing as excessive sport." Dobby's scowl lifted and he bounced. "And now it be time for Harry Potter sir's afternoon snack. Would Harry Potter sir like afternoon tea? Dobby be making fantastic cucumber sandwiches."
Harry could never say no when Dobby offered food and he spent a great couple of hours in his blissfully silent room munching on scones and sandwiches and penning yet another letter to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

I'm a little sad that you'll be leaving for France soon, because I don't think that Hedwig can make that trip very often. Maybe Dobby will be able to deliver letters; I'll have to ask him! Still, it'll be a little lonely with you being so far away. I'm also a little envious because I've never left Britain and would love to see the ocean. Will it be very hot where you're going? What will you eat? Do you speak French?

I'm almost halfway through the Arithmancy course book. It's still super interesting, so I'll send my letter to Professor McGonagall this week and ask her to drop Divination and add Arithmancy and Runes. I also found a book about ritual magic. Have you read anything about it, yet? If not, you should do it because it's rather fascinating and very different than anything we've been studying so far.

Have you heard from Ron, yet? I haven't gotten a single letter and I really could use the company. Not that your letters aren't great, of course! But I miss him and I'm beginning to think that something might have happened.

Anyway, I hope you'll have lots and lots of fun in France! You'll have to tell me all about it as soon as you're back. And if you still want to meet for ice cream, let me know. I think I know how we can make it happen.

Love, and greetings to your parents,

Harry

Likely knowing that this would be the last chance to deliver a letter for a while, Hedwig hopped onto the table and offered her leg as Harry folded and sealed the paper.

"Thanks, my girl." Harry gently stroked her breast feathers and smiled. "You've flown around a lot lately. Why don't you take a break when you're at Hermione's and see if she wants you to take a letter back? Dobby and I will manage for a short while."

Hedwig's churr was part amused and part sceptical, but most of all her affection shone through.

"No, really," Harry continued. "You could even go with them to France, I bet Hermione would love that."
Tilting her head, Hedwig seemed to ponder the offer. She then ruffled her feathers, pecked Harry's finger reproachfully and took off in one smooth beat of her wings.

"She be back tomorrow," Dobby predicted with a grin. "And Harry Potter sir be having visitors in half an hour."

"Oh! Is it that late already?" Harry haphazardly put his writing utensils away and closed the ink bottle. Out of habit, he sniffed himself. "Eugh, I should probably shower and change, I smell like Ripper."

Dobby could have cleaned Harry up with a snap of his clever little fingers, but Harry wanted to try out the shower in the trunk apartment and thus spent a blissful ten minutes under several powerful streams of lukewarm water.

Washed and clothed in new shorts and a fitting T-shirt, he then eagerly awaited Healer Spleenbash's arrival. She wasn't alone, however. With her came a withered, rather large goblin in an old-fashioned three-piece suit. He looked fierce with his pointy teeth and shrewd, yellow eyes.

"Heir Potter, may I introduce to you the Potter account manager Sharptooth. Sharptooth has taken care of the Potter holdings and assets for nigh on two centuries," she said after the costumary greetings were out of the way. "He is eager to make your acquaintance, so I'll leave you two to talk while I consult with your elf about your progress. Did you write your diary like Healer Bonepick told you?"

"Yes, of course. Dobby has everything set up for you."

"Very well." Spleenbash and Dobby retreated into the ritual room, leaving the study to Harry and the account manager.

"Er, which seat would you like?" Harry asked.

"Behind the desk will do, as the trunk is Gringotts' property," Sharptooth replied, though not unkindly. "Take a seat, Heir Potter. There's much to discuss and little time, so don't bother with refreshments."
"Alright then." Harry took the chair in front of the desk as asked and looked expectantly at the old goblin. "How can I help you?"

Sharptooth grinned broadly. "Exactly the question I wanted to hear, young Potter. As you know there'll be a lot of gold coming your way in the near future. I am here today to discuss what to do with that gold."

"Well, I thought we'd talk about the amount and then just dump it in my vault," Harry admitted. "I don't really know what to do with money, other than spending it on school things or food, and saving it."

"Fair enough," Sharptooth allowed. "That's why I'm here. I propose opening another vault for the basilisk gold in your name, and your name only. That way, it'll be independent from your trust vault and can only be accessed by you. This will serve you well in the future, even if you can't think of a reason why right now."

"That's fine, we'll do it that way," Harry said. "Er, not to be crass, but can you tell me how much gold it'll be?"

"Goblins don't think it crass to talk about money at all," Sharptooth informed him. "And I'll answer your question in a moment, but let us get the more important things out of the way first, yes?" At Harry's agreeable nod, the goblin continued, "Gringotts sent an envoy to Hogwarts to inform Headmaster Dumbledore of our intention to harvest the beast. He wasn't best pleased and stalled us for several days, although I have no idea why. Since the law is on our side, there's nothing he can do to stop the process. However, we ran into one serious complication ..."

"You can't get into the chamber," Harry guessed. "Sorry, I should have thought of that."

"It would be unwise to bring you personally to Hogwarts, but since you're a parselmouth, I was tasked to inquire whether you'd be amenable to train a snake to act in your stead."

"A snake?" Harry was gobsmacked. "Bloody hell, that's brilliant!"

Sharptooth grinned again. "We thought so, too." He reached into his pocket and took out a small green snake. "It's a Smooth Green Snake, native to North America. This particular fellow is without any magical abilities but he is inherently magic and interacts well with the magic in his environment. He is also able to comprehend a great deal. His sort make pleasant familiars for those so inclined. He
belongs to our own breeding program and is one of our prized males."

"He's beautiful," Harry whispered. Without noticing, he slipped into parseltongue. "Hello there, I'm Harry. What's your name?"

The snake uncoiled and raised its tiny head. "Hello Speaker. I am Snake. Your eyes are pretty, like my scales."

"You're really very pretty," Harry agreed with a chuckle. "The goblins asked me to tell you a password to help them enter a hidden chamber. Will you help them?"

"I will. Tell me the word."

"Just tell the entrance to open." Harry reached out with a finger and smiled brightly when the small snake sought out the warmth of his skin. "Maybe ask for a proper way down since I don't know how fond they are of slides."

"Sounds easy enough," the snake hissed. "Well worth the mouse I'll get as a reward."

Harry stroked the glossy head. "Thank you."

"He has the password?" Sharptooth asked. At Harry's nod, he gently picked up the snake and let it glide into the inner pocket of his vest. "Thank you, Heir Potter. Now, you asked how much the basilisk is worth ... well, it largely depends on its size and the condition it's in. Since you told Chief Ragnok that it'll be in prime condition, Gringotts' first offer is a flat 1.200.000 galleons. It's not what the beast is likely worth, but we'll adjust the sum as soon as the team had a chance to assess it. I'll make sure to get you the best deal, of course. To do differently would be a stain on my honour."

Harry was stuck on the amount of gold Gringotts seemed to be prepared to dump on him. "That's a lot of gold," he said weakly.

"It is, but it is your due, Heir Potter. Never be ashamed to ask for what is yours."

"Right." Harry shook himself. "If it's really that much, can I transfer money to other people?"
"Of course. How much are we talking here?"

"The basilisk hurt a lot of my schoolmates and some of them were petrified for months and months," Harry said quietly. "I thought, maybe 10,000 galleons for each kid, and Mrs. Norris, the caretaker's cat, and another 10,000 for Hogwarts, since one of the ghosts kind of died again to protect a student. It won't give the lost time back, but maybe it helps a little."

"Yes, we can certainly do that. Do you want to open vaults for each of the children? I assume that the sum for Hogwarts can just go to their primary vault?"

"Yes, and yes. I want the kids to have full control, maybe keep it together until they're seventeen or something. I, uhm, I already wrote a list with the names." Harry fumbled the small piece of paper from his trouser pocket.

"Excellent, Heir Potter." Sharptooth looked the list over, scribbled several notes into a ledger and hummed quietly. "It will be done as soon as the details of the sale are finalized."

"Thank you." Harry fidgeted a little before gathering his courage and asking, "Er, can it maybe be done anonymously? Just give it over and leave it at that?"

Sharptooth's bushy eyebrows rose. "Certainly, but I generally don't advise it. The parents would get suspicious, and rightly so, if there were absolutely no information forthcoming. They might think of it as hush money from Hogwarts or the Ministry and really start asking questions you don't want them to ask."

"Oh!" Harry chewed on his lower lip in thought. "What would you tell them, then?"

"General information should suffice, such as the reason for the money to be paid, and that the benefactor wishes to remain anonymous. There might be questions, yes, but the appearance of openness is sometimes all that's required. Additionally, for a small fee Gringotts can certainly arrange for a secrecy oath at the time of the vault transfer. It won't affect Muggles, but at least the wizard families would honour your wish for anonymity."

"I could deal with that, I think. Let's do it that way, then." Relaxing, Harry thought of another thing. "Can I add Dobby to the basilisk vault?"
"You can give your house elf access to any vault you are able to access yourself," Sharptooth confirmed. He made another note. "Before I leave today, I have another task on my agenda. Chief Ragnok has delayed the contract signing for the memory of your fight with the basilisk because Dumbledore has stalled the proceedings, but it would give Gringotts something to do while we get the business sorted out. Would you consent to allow Healer Spleenbash to assist with that?"

"I don't mind." Harry stood. "Right now?"

"I imagine that she and your elf Dobby will be done with their consultation now." Sharptooth stood as well and let Harry precede him into the foyer. "Yes, the door to the ritual room is open. Excellent."

Healer Spleenbash showed no surprise at Sharptooth's request. She asked Dobby for the slip of parchment, made note of the date of acquisition and then said, "Have you thought of the compensation yet, Heir Potter?"

"I'd really like to give ritual magic a try," Harry admitted. "If there's a way to arrange that, I'd be happy."

"I'll send Chief Ragnok word and get back to you as soon as may be. If he's not in a position to help with that, we'll revisit the issue. Now ..." Healer Spleenbash waddled over to the shelf and took down the pensieve. "Healer Bonepick showed you how this works. Please order your thoughts and try to remember the time in the Chamber of Secrets as clearly as you possibly can. Do it several times, if necessary. When you're confident that you've got all the important details, let me know and we'll extract the copy of the memory."

She led Harry through a couple of breathing exercises and then gently jogged his memory with questions. It took a while, but at last Harry felt confident enough to offer the memory and Healer Spleenbash extracted it with skillful fingers.

"See? This is your memory," she told Harry and pointed to a silvery, whispy substance in the pensieve bowl. "Now we have two options to view it and I'm sure Healer Bonepick explained them to you. Still, it won't hurt to go over it again."

Harry quickly agreed; the whole concept of watching memories still seemed unbelievable and, if he were honest, he trusted Healer Spleenbash more than he trusted Bonepick even though it made little sense.

"The first is the projection. The memory plays out much like a Muggle movie would. This is very
practical for large crowds, especially in courts." She beckoned Harry closer. "The second option is full immersion. By putting your head right into the pensieve, you'll fall into the memory and relive it as a bystander. This is obviously a very intimate experience and should be reserved for special occasions. This feature gets a lot of use during criminal investigations because it allows the aurors to see details a witness might have subconsciously noticed but didn't mention because the information didn't have any value for them at the moment.

Fascinated, Harry followed the gentle movements of his memory. "Sounds really wicked. Can we try? I should probably check if there are mistakes before giving it to the chief, anyway."

"As your healer I have to ask: are you truly comfortable watching the memory that way? It is a vastly different experience than actually remembering it and the sights might be disturbing for you. Since you told us that neither the school nurse nor the headmaster offered you counselling, it's a concern. Setting back your recovery is not acceptable and if I have to protect you from yourself, I will."

"Then we start with the projection," Harry decided, "but I made a deal, and I want to do it right."

"Am I allowed to watch as well?" Sharptooth asked.

Harry nodded. "How do we start?"

Spleenbash cocked her head and grinned wickedly. "Do you have your wand?"

Before Harry could answer in the negative, Dobby pressed the wand into his hand and bounced a little. "Uh, I guess I do. Thanks, Dobby."

"Do you see the small rune sequence here?" Spleenbash pointed it out. "This one activates the projection. Try it."

"I'll get in trouble," Harry retorted, backing up a little. "Another black mark and they'll expel me from Hogwarts and snap my wand."

"Not in this trunk, you won't," Sharptooth replied rather smugly. "The trunk is a goblin dwelling and therefore your laws have no bearing here. Besides, it is shielded against the Ministry's little tracking charms. Do as Healer Spleenbash says. Try it."

Gulping but tempted beyond help, Harry carefully tapped the rune sequence and jerked back when a 3D projection appeared over the bowl. Apparently the healer had started pulling the memory when he and Ron had gone to get Lockhart. "Wow!" he blurted at the incredible detail of the scene. Then Harry heard indistinct talking. "It's even got sound!"

"It's a bit quiet. Tap here, twice should do it," Spleenbash instructed. Harry did and the volume went
They all settled back and watched the events unfold. Healer Spleenbash made several notes but Sharptooth watched avidly without once taking his eyes away. When the moment came to open the entrance in the girls' bathroom, he leaned forward and growled under his breath. The snake skins at the bottom of the chute certainly got a reaction, but it paled in comparison to their outrage when Lockhart tried to obliviate the two boys and claim whatever commendations might be coming his way. His self-inflicted amnesia caused the goblins to cheer gutturally while the cave-in had them suck in their breath.

Finally memory-Harry stepped into the chamber proper. The details were sometimes a little fuzzy, but the important parts, like Ginny's lifeless form at the end of the chamber and Tom Riddle's self-important monologue, stood out in stark detail. When Riddle called forth the basilisk, both goblins were close to biting their claws off. The suspense was even killing Harry, and he'd already survived the whole thing.

"That beast is huge!" Healer Spleenbash screeched as the snake flowed from Salazar Slytherin's open mouth. "Was it really that huge?!"

"I don't know. I think so. But I'm small, so maybe it just appeared to be huge," Harry said, distracted by Fawkes timely appearance and the basilisks tortured thrashing as its eyes were ruined. Seeing it the second time made the phoenix's heroics even greater in his mind. "I'm really very glad Fawkes came and helped me. I should give him money too, although I have no idea what he could use it for."

"He would think of something, I'm sure," Sharptooth snarled. "Now hush, the wretched Dark Lordling is talking again!"

It was hard for Harry to see himself first run from the huge snake and then kill it with Gryffindor's sword, getting stabbed in the elbow by a huge tooth in return. Healer Spleenbash had been exactly right to warn him, he thought, as he suddenly became lightheaded and the edge of his vision whited out a little.

Dobby caught him and lowered him into a promptly conjured chair and still Harry's gaze was glued to the projection. After the terror of seeing himself almost dying it was immeasurably satisfying to see memory-Harry stabbing the cursed diary, thereby ending the existence of Tom Riddle's shade. The following relief of having Fawkes sitting in his lap and crying onto the bite wound was the complete reverse of the horror he'd just suffered. As he'd been nearly delirious after the whole experience, the whole chamber had taken on an almost otherworldly glow. Fawkes especially seemed like an angel, shimmering with all the colours of the rainbow and sounding like the most beautiful creature imaginable.

"That basilisk venom obviously packed a punch," Sharptooth said dryly when the memory ended shortly after. He put his gnarled paw onto Harry's shoulder. "Well done, youngling."
The small green snake poked its head out of the goblin's vest and hissed, "You killed the King of Snakes?"

"I had to," Harry hissed back, a little shamed when faced with the basilisk's little relative. "I'm sorry, but it wanted to kill me first."

"You needn't be sorry, Speaker. The King was old and mad. You ended his suffering." Snake wound himself around Harry's shaking fingers and flicked his knuckles with his tongue.

"Uhm ..." Harry cleared his throat and carefully wiped his damp eyes. "I think that's more or less what happened, but I can try again if it's too ... wobbly."

"This memory will suffice," Healer Spleenbash said and sounded remarkably calm. "For today you have suffered enough. With your permission, however, I'd like to schedule weekly appointments with a mind healer. It's obvious that you need someone to talk about what happened, and other things besides if I'm guessing correctly. The next time I'm here, I'll show you several files and you can decide who you'd like to meet. If you don't like that someone, we'll try again."

Harry didn't know how he felt about that, but as he was still rather shaken he just nodded.

"That went a little sideways, eh, lad?" Sharptooth said, squeezed Harry's shoulder and then released him. "How about we finish for the day and you get a good dose of sunshine and a special treat from your Dobby?"

"Dobby be having the perfect treat!" the elf boasted. "Dobby be taking care of Harry Potter sir."

The goblins departed immediately, with Snake hissing a little goodbye out of Sharptooth's pocket, and then Dobby whisked Harry away to a sunny, secluded spot in the park where he treated him to a delicious chocolate brownie, vanilla ice cream and his favourite lemonade.

oOo

Another two days later Healer Spleenbash and two goblin warriors arrived in the trunk's fireplace. Harry was grateful because his relatives and especially Aunt Marge had been a complete nightmare.
Not satisfied to have Harry go out of his way to avoid them all, Uncle Vernon had tried to bash in his
door and even rip away the bars in front of his window. Only the curious neighbours and the team of
judges for the garden competition had kept him in check ... mostly. Harry just knew that there'd be
hell to pay if one of them ever got their hands on him.

"Greetings, Heir Potter," Healer Spleenbash said. "Chief Ragnok requests your presence in Gringotts
and asks that you not tarry. Your elf may accompany you, of course. Our business shall not take
more than two hours."

Harry exchanged a worried look with Dobby. "Is everything alright?"

"As you wizards like to say: just peachy. Please follow along, now." Spleenbash gestured for the
first guard to go back to Gringotts. "Watch closely so you won't get lost in the Floo network."

"Gringotts, The Chief's Antechamber!" the guard shouted. He stepped into the roaring flames and
vanished swiftly.

"Now you," Healer Spleenbash instructed. "Speak loudly and clearly. The guard will grab you and
pull you out, so don't panic. Ready?"

"No," Harry replied, which made the goblin grin toothily. "Gringotts, The Chief's Antechamber!"

He stepped into the oddly lukewarm fire and was sucked away with the power of a hundred vacuum
cleaners. Other fireplaces whirled by as Harry rushed through the Floo network and he could catch
glimpses of many empty Floo chambers. They all appeared to be in the same style and he guessed
that they all belonged to Gringotts.

Then, suddenly, two clawed hands shot into the green inferno, grabbed him by the ankles and pulled
him out of the next fireplace. Before Harry could even squeak, the goblin had already set him on his
feet and cleaned up the soot on his face and clothes.

"Alright, Heir Potter?" the guard asked.

"Yeah, I'm good," Harry replied. "Great ride, although not as great as your carts."
The guard's teeth showed as he grinned. "I agree."

Just then Healer Spleenbash, the second guard, and Dobby appeared in the chamber. After looking Harry over critically and letting another cleaning charm wash over him, Healer Spleenbash ordered the guards to announce them to Chief Ragnok, which they did with great acclarity.

"Welcome, Heir Potter!" Ragnok boomed as soon as the announcement was made. He hopped down from his massive, golden chair and met them halfway in his office. At least Harry supposed that it was his office, although it might have easily been the throne room, just with a huge, ornate desk between the throne and possible visitors. The decorations and pictures on the walls were breathtaking and Harry had to force himself not to stare too long. As it was, he almost missed the two dozen goblins, among them Sharptooth, and the handful of wizards and witches in festive robes that were standing at attention close to the palatial wall. "Please come, we have much to do."

Instead of retreating behind his desk, Ragnok led Harry towards an ornamental circle on the polished marble floor. He then gestured for Healer Spleenbash and Dobby to join the ranks of the guests. The guards retreated to the door but kept it open.

"Thank you for agreeing to accompany Healer Spleenbash tonight," Ragnok said. "If you haven't guessed the reason already, I'll make it short: we got into the Chamber of Secrets and have begun to harvest the remains of the basilisk." His shrewd eyes were firm on Harry's face. In the silence, a pin drop could've been heard. "As I have seen your memory, and led the team that discovered the carcass, let me be the first to congratulate you on your achievement. Not a one of my men is confident that they could've walked away from this fight without significant injury, even with the assistance Dumbledore's phoenix offered, and especially not at your age and level of training. To further honour Gringotts, it was indeed all done using one of our own greatest blades, the Sword of Gryffindor. Well done, youngling. Gringotts holds your success, and therefore you, in high esteem."

He offered his bejewelled hand and Harry shook it, not knowing what else to do. To his right, the attendees began to roar and hammered ceremonial daggers against small, richly adorned shields.

"I welcome you, Heir Potter, as a Friend To The Nation!" Ragnok shouted over the noise. "All that Gringotts has to offer is yours for the asking, as we hope to be able to ask you for assistance if the need arises."

This declaration was met with abrupt silence, but it was oddly this that kept Harry from freezing. He had read about the rare honour in the book Dobby had brought from Gringotts and remembered the traditional phrase because it had struck a chord in him.

"As Gringotts' wealth is my wealth, my wand is Gringotts' wand," he said, raising said wand. "May we always agree in matters of life and profit and may our enemies rue the day they provoked our wrath."
"So mote it be," Ragnok intoned solemnly.

A golden light streamed from the tip of Harry's wand. It heaved around the chief and himself, spreading out more and more until the whole, vast chamber was filled with it. Then it slowly receded, found an empty space on the wall and began forming colours and shapes. A seal appeared, around which a large basilisk coiled. Harry had a feeling that it was his family's seal and it made his throat close up.

"The Nation has accepted your vow of friendship, Heir Potter," Ragnok boomed. "Welcome, Friend. You and everything you hold dear will be safe in our halls."

Harry bowed deeply. "My gratitude can't be measured in gold and precious stones, Chief Ragnok."

Again, the witnesses cheered, Dobby among the loudest.

Pleased, Ragnok lightly touched Harry's shoulder. "Well done, youngling. Now that the official part is over, let's get down to business." He rubbed his hands together as he ushered Harry to the sofas and bade him to sit. Around them, the guests to the brief ceremony headed for the door, no doubt to spread the news. "I love this part. Negotiating and deciding, knowing that whatever you have in mind will happen, the flow of gold all around you ... it's the best kind of ecstasy."

"Then you'll have lots of ideas what to do with the basilisk money?" Harry asked.

Ragnok laughed loudly. "Of course, I do! But first things first: the amount still needs to be settled, and for that you'll need your account manager, youngling. _Friend To The Nation_ or no, it just won't do for the heir of a noble and ancient wizard house to negotiate without their manager. You see, they earn their fortune through you - if your wealth rises, so does theirs. Come, Sharptooth, and you also, Healer Spleenbash. Both your expertise will be required tonight."

"And Dobby?" Harry asked. "He's my friend, I don't want him to have to wait at the door for hours."

"No, of course not. Come, Dobby. Your place is next to your wizard. Guards, close the doors!"

Quivering with excitement and gratitude, the elf climbed onto the sofa and sat as close to Harry as possible.

"As I said, first things first. The basilisk!" Ragnok's roar made Harry jump a little while Sharptooth and Healer Spleenbash smirked. "Where is the contract, Sharptooth?"

Sharptooth opened a folder and unrolled a lengthy scroll on the table. "Here it is, Chief. What will you offer our _friend_ for the carcass of the beast?"
Ragnok produced his own scroll. "We made Heir Potter an offer of 1.200.000 galleons in good faith for a basilisk of approximately fifty feet in length, teeth and skin almost completely intact and nearly fresh. It remained to be determined as follows: the exact length, the exact age, the quality of skin, the presence of venom in the teeth and venom sacks, the colour of the scales, the fragrance of the beast's magic and, of course, the presence of viable eggs or sperm."

"And what is the surveyors' verdict?" Sharptooth asked.

"They were in agreement: the offer can not stand," Ragnok declared.

Harry deflated a little, but the chief's next words had him sitting straight almost immediately.

"After careful judgement, both Gringotts' and House Potter's surveyers agreed that the carcass of the basilisk is worth exactly 4.986.782 galleons, 9 sickles, and four knuts, to be paid in full as soon as possible."

"What?" Harry squeaked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "That's ... that's more than triple the amount! How?"

"Look for yourself, youngling." Ragnok offered the scroll. "Your basilisk measured in at seventy-three feet, weighing in at just shy of four tons. Not counting the tooth you used to stab the diary, its set of teeth was quite whole. There were eleven ounces of venom still in the sacks, its skin was intact just as you promised, and we found several eggs in its belly. As they're all viable, they'll bring us a very tidy sum!"

"Wait, there are eggs? And they're gonna hatch?" Harry choked on his spit. "That's crazy! The babies will kill people just by looking at them!"

"Calm yourself, youngling," Healer Spleenbash said. "It's true that basilisks belong to the most dangerous magical creatures on earth. However, a basilisk can only ever be created from an ordinary chicken egg that was hatched under a toad. Natural occuring progeny of a basilisk lacks the deadly stare, although they are both highly venomous and poisonous. They're called death adders and will only be sold to parselmouths who know what they're about. As a matter of fact, despite their name, death adders, once they bond to a wizard, are very useful for light magical craft, and highly sought after. They won't be misused, you have Gringotts' word on that."

"Huh. Wow." Harry wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans. "Sorry."

"Don't be, your worry is understandable," Sharptooth said. "The last reason for the increase in payment are the half dozen skins we found in the surrounding dungeons. Each of them is immensely
useful for the production of protective gear and that is not an exaggeration. The goblins working with
dragons will be very glad to receive new equipment. So, do you agree to Gringotts' offer, Heir
Potter?"

"Of course, yes!"

"Then please read the contract and sign here when you're done."

Everybody waited patiently while Harry read over the clauses, and his few questions were answered
clearly without any attempt at prevarication. A quarter hour later, the contract was signed in blood
and Harry felt a little dizzy with the knowledge that Dobby would never have to work for a family
like the Malfoys ever again.

"Let's celebrate!" Ragnok called, clapping his hands. A large spread of refreshments appeared and
they all toasted to their good fortune with goblin ale and lemonade.

"Now on to the much smaller matter of Heir Potter's memory of his fight with the basilisk," Ragnok
went on after they had each eaten a couple of canapés. "You asked for access to the ritual circle in
the trunk Gringotts has placed in your house. Is that still your wish?"

"Yes, please."

"Then I'll grant it, although we'll have to be ... artistic in how we accomplish this." The chief
grinned. "To that end I'd like to offer you a partial lease of the trunk, Heir Potter. Would it please you
to call the bedroom, the bathroom, and the ritual room your own for the rest of the summer, for the
tidy sum of ten galleons?"

"I do," Harry replied. "But why can't I rent the whole trunk?"

"That's where we're being artistic," Sharptooth said after Ragnok gave him permission to explain.
"As long as the trunk is nominally ours, it counts as a goblin dwelling where we may travel as we
please. Once a wizard rents the space whole, it is turned over to the Ministry of Magic's jurisdiction.
You, however, will only rent forty-five percent of the space, allowing you to use the parts you rented
as you wish while at the same time allowing us to meet you without much hassle for your healing
appointments."
"Oooh, clever!" Harry smiled. "Let's do it!"

"Remember the other beautiful perk of the trunk," Healer Spleenbash purred. "You, dear youngling, can do magic in there."

For a moment, the possibilities seemed nearly endless. A bubble of pure happiness rose from Harry's stomach to his chest where it popped and flooded him with warmth. The signing of that particular contract was a joy, despite the small sting of the bloodquill's magic on the back of his hand.

"It's good to see some colour in your cheeks," Healer Spleenbash chuckled. "However, doing magic won't help you get healthy. As Sharptooth and Bonepick said, you need a lot of sunshine, rest, good food and nutrients, and also a little exercise. To that end, Gringotts wants to make you an offer."

Ragnok cleared his throat. "As you know, Gringotts is a very rich nation, Heir Potter. Most of our ressources are tied up in businesses, though, and the amount of easily accessible gold is very limited. In fact, Gringotts won't be able to pay the sum for your basilisk in full, immediately. As that would be a breach of contract and very embarrassing besides, Healer Spleenbash came up with a solution that I hope will satisfy us both."

"Due to your status as a minor, you are currently unable to visit any of your family's estates," Sharptooth stated bluntly. "Your guardian would probably allow it, but unfortunately he is not eligible to make such decisions for you right now. Several years ago, his proxy has declared his intent to ban you from your family's holdings until you have reached the age of twenty-one. So far, he has not changed his mind."

"Why?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I don't know," Sharptooth replied. "You'll have to ask Dumbledore that yourself."

"No, I mean, why can't my guardian make those decisions? And wait, Headmaster Dumbledore is my guardian's proxy?" Harry felt as if he were riding on yet another rollercoaster without knowing how he'd gotten on in the first place. "I don't understand."

The goblins shared a long, speaking look. Sharptooth straightened himself and said, "Your actual magical guardian is a man named Sirius Black. He was your father's best friend, you see, and he is your godfather in magic. In 1981 he supposedly betrayed your parents by giving away the secret of their location, allowing the Dark Lord to find and kill them. He also supposedly killed twelve muggles and another of your father's friends, Peter Pettigrew. For that, he went to Azkaban, where he spent the last twelve years."
"What?" Harry croaked, shocked.

"I know, lad. It is a disgrace," Sharptooth growled. "Since no minor can live in the magical world without a guardian, Dumbledore took on the duty. He holds many positions in the national and international governments, as well as being the headmaster of the school you were to go to. The Wizengamot, Great Britain's body of government, therefore appointed him as Sirius Black's proxy. He's been holding the position since shortly after you survived the killing curse that fateful night and exercised his rights in a variety of ways."

"Why won't he allow me to find out more about my family?" Harry asked. "And why did he send me to live with my relatives? He knows they don't like me!"

"I don't know," Sharptooth admitted. "But we're prepared to help with that, at least." He opened a drawer and pulled out a huge, leather-bound book. "This is a catalogue with available estates. In lieu of gold, we'd like to offer you an estate or estates of your choice. Not only will this spare our liquid assets, it will allow you to live independently and safely, as we'll be protecting the land with war wards after the purchase. You will have the opportunity to pursue your recovery to the fullest. Healer Spleenbash quite insists that this is the best course of action for your health."

"I can do that?" Harry couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "I can just buy a house and Dumbledore won't be able to do something about it? Really?"

"I don't see why not," Sharptooth replied with a shrug. "You can use the trunk to come and go as you please, and it doesn't seem very probable that your relatives will call the authorities should you vanish for days at a time. And as to magical protections against the Dark Lord's people ... I certainly never felt any wards besides the one your mother cast on you, never mind live guards. I'm rather sure Dumbledore would never even know. As you'll have bought the property without your family's money, it doesn't fall under his direct purview. But even if he should notice, it would be child's play for Gringotts to appoint a steward and tie everything up in so much red tape that you'll have reached your majority before the court comes to a decision. In fact, we should set up such a contract tonight, just to be on the safe side."

"I ... that would be so, so ..." Harry took a deep breath. "Fantastic! Truly, this would be so much better than gold!"

"Then have a look, there are only estates listed you can afford, and that Healer Spleenbash has deemed beneficial to your circumstances," Ragnok said. "While you're occupied, Sharptooth and I will negotiate the details of his stewardship."

Beaming, and deliberately pushing away the horror of having a murderer for a godfather, Harry
accepted the book and opened it.

"You'll have to help me pick, Dobby," he said. "We should take a house with lots of land around it for your berries."

"Dobby will!" the elf promised.

There were a little less than two dozen estates to choose from, half of them outright ineligible due to the lack of cultivable land. When Dobby tried to press Harry into having a closer look at a beautiful seaside manor, the boy refused staunchly on the grounds that the small parcel of land wasn't even enough to plant a proper garden to feed Harry, nevermind support one busy elf. As beautiful as the stretch of beach was that came with the cottage, it definitely wouldn't do what he'd promised his friend. Also, it was expensive; too expensive in Harry's opinion.

In the end, and much sooner than all of them had anticipated, Harry had picked just four options for viewing. One of them wasn't even habitable, as it was just a huge, wild plot of land that had never even been built upon, but Harry was happy to keep living with his relatives if it meant that Dobby could work to his little heart's content.

"We will arrange for visits immediately," Sharptooth said with a pleased nod. "What time would suit you best?"

Harry mentally went over his daily chores. "The evenings would be good. I can skip dinner and there'll still be light out."

"I'll arrange for your pick-up at seven, then," Sharptooth decided. "Oh, and before I forget: during all of last year our missives to you returned unopened. Do you know why?"

"No, I'm sorry, sir." Harry swallowed. "Did I miss something important?"

"Thankfully not." Sharptooth bared his fangs. "Although we're happy that you're now sending your Dobby to pick up your mail. Next to Gringotts owls, there's no better way to send sensitive post."

"I hope it won't be too much, he's already juggling a lot of jobs and keeping track of my food and stuff," Harry said.

"Once a month would suffice," Sharptooth replied. "Ideally on the first. On that day we send out the
bank statements. If we have more pressing communications, we now know to call your elf, so don't worry about it."

"Dobby be a good elf, Dobby most certainly can do it."

"If it ever gets too much, you'll tell me, right?" Harry rubbed Dobby's narrow back. "I already feel lousy, letting you do so much around the house and garden."

"Dobby be still having lots of magic for good work," the elf said proudly. "Harry Potter sir truly not be needing to worry!"

"Well, alright then. Was there anything left?"

"Yes, the issue of keeping Dumbledore's rather large nose out of your business," Ragnok said, which startled a laugh out of Harry.

And that was what they did for the last half hour of the visit. Compared to this contract, the sale of the basilisk had been as easy as breathing. Awarding a stewardship was quite obviously a huge boon to the account manager's whole family, even if it would be kept under wraps for as long as possible to protect Harry's interests.

"I'm honoured at the trust you're showing my clan," Sharptooth said after after mutual vows and a bloody handshake, and after Harry had signed the agreement. The goblin was visibly moved and even cleared his throat. In a rare show of gentleness, Healer Spleenbash touched his forearm and patted him. "As you're the last of your whole line, and a child still, my house will be your house until you reach the age of majority. If you have concerns, whatever they may be, allow me to hear them and try to alleviate them. As your trusted steward, I can do no less. Don't make me violate my vows, youngling. It'll make us both look bad."

Harry grinned shyly and nodded. "Yeah, okay. But you too, right?"

The old goblin grumped and Healer Spleenbash tittered.

"It is settled, splendid," Ragnok said and clapped his hands. "Thank you for agreeing to our scheme, Heir Potter. Gringotts appreciates your flexibility. We will meet several more times during the summer to finalize all of our dealings, so I'd like you to keep thinking about your needs."

"Thank you, Chief Ragnok. I appreciate that very much." Harry smiled in relief. "I'll probably have a ton of questions!"
"Well, good! Being curious equals being eager to learn and that can hardly be wrong."

After all pressing matters were dealt with, Ragnok and Healer Spleenbash urged Harry to finally eat his fill. The visit was over far too soon in Harry's opinion but the day was catching up with him fast. His many questions would have to wait for next time.

oOo

Now that he knew that he could escape from Privet Drive, and possibly for good, Harry had a very different view on his relatives. Their bluster and threats didn't faze him much anymore and he only followed Aunt Petunia's orders because he didn't want to tip his hand too soon. Ignoring Marge was a lot harder but he even managed that somehow. It helped that she suffered in the summer heat and mostly stayed inside during the day.

"Beastly heat!" Harry heard her rant on his way down to the kitchen. "I'm sure the Potter boy has something to do with it!"

How, Harry couldn't fathom, but then again his relatives rarely made sense on any given day.

*I hope one of the three houses will fit us,* he thought as he watered the garden after breakfast. It was Aunt Petunia's turn being judged and she wanted everything to be perfect. *I could probably have a house built on the empty property, but that might take too long to be of much use this summer. Maybe I could rent another trunk from the goblins and live in there if it's otherwise perfect ...*

All day, his thoughts revolved around his business with Gringotts, but also his heretofore unknown godfather, Sirius Black. Right before falling asleep the night before, he had scribbled a couple of questions on his notepad, and in the morning the whole thing still seemed farfetched and weird. After a good night's rest, Sirius Black being a murderer honestly didn't seem as strange as Dumbledore not listening to Harry about his relatives and secretly forbidding others to help him explore his origins. Sirius Black being evil was easy to understand, Dumbledore's behaviour was not. Citing a need to protect him from Voldemort wasn't a good enough reason to keep him in the dark ... or with relatives that hated him, Harry decided.

Evening couldn't come soon enough, even with Hermione's letter to respond to. He'd have explained it all to her, had Dobby not cautioned him against putting his family affairs in writing for people to find.

"Some wizards be stealing mail," Dobby explained, "and Harry Potter sir earning so much gold would be very interesting. Harry Potter sir's safety be the most important thing. Also," and the elf
wagged his finger admonishingly, "such things are kept to the family regardless. It be nobody else's business."

Harry understood that, even as he didn't like keeping Hermione out of the loop (Ron hadn't earned it, he thought, what with not responding at all to his letters). "I'd love to tell her, though, after everything she went through to help me find the basilisk."

"Then you be asking goblins how to do that," Dobby returned. "You not be going off half-cocked anymore, Harry Potter sir. Miss Mione and Dobby won't be liking that."

That was certainly true, and so Harry scratched out the sensitive parts and started over, telling Hermione all about his terrible Aunt Marge and that he hoped to see her soon because he really needed that ice cream now.

"There, that's better, right?" he asked once he was finished.

Dobby nodded but snapped his finger, making the paper glow briefly. "Dobby still be securing Harry Potter sir's letters for her eyes only. Dobby be starting to do that for all the letters."

They had a light dinner before Sharptooth appeared. Even if Harry had wanted to eat more, the anticipation was making his stomach clench and his feet restless.

Finally it was seven o'clock and Sharptooth stepped out of the trunk's fireplace. He was accompanied by a much younger goblin whose nose was literally pressed to a roll of parchment as he read it.

"Greetings, Heir Potter. This is Tarok, he'll take notes for me and also see to it that you won't get lost." Tarok looked up with wide eyes and mumbled a greeting. "For our first visit I have chosen Connolly Hall. The Floo connection is active, so if you'd please call the name of the property as you follow me ..."

For the third time in two days, Harry whirled through the Floo system and was spat out in an ornate, huge entrance hall. Sharptooth smirked at his less than graceful entrance but cleaned him up without a word. As soon as Dobby and Tarok made their appearance, Sharptooth took off, showing Harry around more rooms than he could count. Connolly Hall was large and sat in the middle of a sizable property, but the overly lavish style wasn't Harry's cup of tea and Dobby confirmed that changing the things he absolutely didn't like would take quite a bit of time and money.

"It's not that it's ugly or anything, I liked the pictures well enough," Harry tried to explain his feelings when Sharptooth noticed his reluctance. "But I just can't see myself living here. I'd never feel as if it was mine. I'd always be afraid of breaking something and getting scolded for it."

"I understand, but are you willing to view the gardens before returning?" Sharptooth asked. With a toothy grin he explained, "I brought brooms. Dreadful hobby for a goblin to have, but needs must for
one's account holder."

Harry, who loved flying, wasn't about to decline and so they spent another half hour circling above the estate and taking in its structure. The scandalized Tarok remained on the ground, instead inspecting the outside of the property with great interest.

"Earth not be very good for growing things," Dobby said from his perch behind Harry and pointed to the styled gardens. "Former owners be liking flowers, not food. They be changing earth to suit their needs. Be huge effort to change it back."

That was the death knell, and everybody knew it. But despite striking Connolly Hall from the list, the excursion still was a success as far as Harry was concerned. He and Dobby had experienced yet another lovely summer evening, and flying would always be a worthwhile pastime.

OoO

The next evening, Sharptooth presented Harry with a portkey, which was an actual large key, but, according to the goblin, portkeys could be made out of almost anything. His description of being tugged along at one's navel didn't exactly endear the thing to Harry, but he was willing to try.

"Unfortunately it is the only way to access the property right now," Sharptooth said. He kept his eyes on a golden watch. "You keeping your little paw on the key? You too, Tarok? Good. The owner was a bit paranoid about his security; he has a lot of useless relatives who tried to rob him blind as he got older. Now he's decided to sell and throw away his money on a beach somewhere."

"Sounds goo-ooooood!" Harry screamed as something suddenly hooked behind his navel and pulled him off his feet and away. "I don't like thiiiiiis!" he wailed.

"You think I do?" Sharptooth cried. "Blasted things, portkeys!"

The vortex spat them out several disorienting seconds later. Harry, who absolutely loved fast rides, found that he hated travelling this way with a fiery passion and decided to never do it again if he could help it.

"Dobby can pop me back!" he declared once he'd picked himself up from the ground. "Bloody hell, never again."

"Dobby will," Dobby said as he popped up next to Harry.

"Would he mind taking me as well?" Sharptooth groaned.
Tarok didn’t even try to talk, he just heaved silently and fought down the green tinge in his face.

At least the unpleasant trip was worth it. The secluded house looked beautiful from the outside, just like a large, very well kept English cottage. It was surrounded by a big, slightly overgrown garden where vegetables and flowers were making up a pleasing whole. Beyond the garden there was a large, perfectly groomed lawn. Harry guessed that there were at least a hundred yards of space in every direction. Everything was fenced off by huge oak trees and shimmering wards.

"It looks much nicer than in the pictures," Harry said, staring at the idyllic house in wonder. "I already feel guilty just standing here."

"Guilty?" Tarok inquired. He dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Dobby wants to plant lots of elf berries and for that he’d have to dig up the lawn." Harry took a good look around and marvelled at how peaceful the whole property was. "It really is awfully nice."

"Just wait until you see the inside of the house," Sharptooth said.

He led the others through the garden to the front door and unlocked it with the same large brass key. Magic sparked as he turned the handle and then they stepped into an airy, lightly decorated foyer that would make any country lover’s heart leap.

Harry noticed at once that the inside of the house seemed larger than the outside suggested, which was a very pleasant surprise.

Sharptooth showed them the living room first. It had a whole wall dedicated to bookshelves, all full, and another to the garden. In fact, where there was supposed to be a wall, a huge windowpane offered a bewitching sight at the blooming plants and the vast, clear summer sky. A small terrace allowed for sitting outside and a fireplace in the middle of the bookshelves invited to long afternoons with a book and tea when the weather got bad.

"I might be in love already," Harry admitted a little later as Dobby cooed over the large, open country kitchen and the spacious pantry.

The three bathrooms also were a sight, two large ones with a full bath and one guest bathroom with a small shower, but Harry almost liked the master bedroom the best. It was on the top floor and, like the living room, had a full length window. The view of the garden and grounds was spectacular. There wasn’t a desk in the current set-up, which made sense if one wanted to separate work and leisure.

The four guest rooms were very adequate as well and Harry could see himself entertaining his
friends here.

"How much was this one again?" he asked when they'd explored the small attic, the cellar, and the large stillroom.

"A little over a million galleons," Sharptooth supplied. "The owner would have to strip his personal wards, however, and the implementation of a full set of goblin war wards complete with on-call security would cost around half a million galleons."

"But I could buy it if I wanted," Harry said. "What say you, Dobby? Do you like it?"

"It be great place for Harry Potter sir to rest and heal," Dobby agreed. "Everything be in very good order. There not be much work to do for Dobby, but Dobby knows how to keep busy."

"Could you plant your berries here?" Harry asked. "Because if you can't, it's no good. I promised."

"Dobby could add a few more bushes along the border, as earth be good enough, but it be ugly to do more. Pretty lawn be very good for running and games."

"I understand." Harry scrunched up his face in thought. "Can I make a reservation? Maybe I should sleep on it before deciding."

Sharptooth nodded. "Absolutely. It's a lot of money, after all, and you'll want to be happy with your very first own house. There are two more properties to see, in any case, and Gringotts is prepared to let you have first pick."

"Awesome, thanks!" Again Harry turned and took in his surroundings. "Now we just have to get back to Privet Drive ..."

The goblins first groaned and then cheered when Dobby offered to take them back - for a galleon each.

oOo
On the next day, Sharptooth had a hard time talking Harry into using another portkey. His offer to bribe Dobby with another two galleons for taking him and Tarok back was well received, however, and Harry reluctantly allowed the old boot cum portkey to stick its hook behind his navel, drag him through something that looked suspiciously like a wormhole, and slam him onto a soft patch of greenery.

Dobby appeared seconds later. His eyes were wide and his ears stood up and quivered with excitement.

"What is this place?" he squeaked.

"Gringotts has no idea," Sharptooth said, dusting off his suit. "It's been in the owner's family's possession for decades but nobody ever thought to do something with it. At one point the owner's grandfather wanted to build his bride a house, I believe, but it never happened."

"Why not? I mean, there's nothing here, but it's huge, easily several hectares. The whole family could have built houses here." Harry looked at the overgrown underbrush and out of control trees. Several of them looked suspiciously like whomping willows. "We're still in England, right?"

"We are," Sharptooth confirmed. He took out the brooms and let Harry fly a large circle along the border. "The property is almost five hectares large and will take very well to our wards as there is a large ley line running beneath it to power them. However, the ley line may also be the reason for the plant overgrowth and the owner's reluctance to develop the land." He pointed at several spots were a multitude of plants seemed to have arranged themselves into huge knots that not even a cutting curse would be able to sever. "Since the property is essentially wild land, the owner is willing to part with it for two million galleons flat, no questions asked."

"Hm, seems like an okay deal. I mean, it is huge. Dobby, could you work with this?" Harry asked the house elf. Slowly, he descended and touched down where they'd started. "It could be a huge garden just for you and your friends, and I guess you'd always have enough to do."

Dobby threw Harry an incredulous look. "This place be perfect, but to manage it and Harry Potter sir, Dobby definitely be needing help."

oOo

Late at night, Harry was lying in his newly rented bed and staring at the ceiling. Thoughts were going round and round in his head. In one moment everything seemed clear: he wanted to buy both properties and do something worthwhile with it. In fact, he could buy both properties and he'd still have enough left over to give the basilisk's, or rather Tom Riddle's, victims their share. The remaining money would probably be a little tight to help Dobby with getting the garden up and running, though.
A voice remarkably like Uncle Vernon's immediately latched onto that thought and bellowed about the dumbness of it all. The part of him that never had anything good to himself screeched that the money would do him much more good in the bank where his wealth could grow even further.

Since that wouldn't benefit the goblins at all and wasn't what Harry wanted besides, Harry would shove the unpleasant voice away and try to reason with himself that there was one more property to see before he should make his choice.

*But is that even necessary, considering both Dobby's and my feelings on both the cottage and the huge piece of land?*, he wondered.

Remembering the pictures of a small hilltop mansion, Harry decided that no, he didn't need to see it, and returned to the initial argument, only to get discouraged by the thought of spending it all at once and thus starting the vicious cycle once more.

Now he understood why people wanted to sleep on something. This decision was hard!

"I could just take one," he murmured into the darkness. But the prospect of having to choose between his own needs and Dobby's wishes didn't make him happy either. *At least I know what I don't want*, he thought morosely. It helped, but only marginally.

The sky outside the charmed bedroom window was already getting lighter as Harry finally fell into an exhausted slumber.

When he woke again the sun had long risen and he'd missed breakfast. Dobby waited on him with a tray, pampering him with fruit salad, scrambled eggs and baked beans. The two potions that came after tasted like sunshine and cherries and lifted his mood surprisingly well.

"Harry Potter sir not be sleeping well," Dobby said, wringing his little hands anxiously. "How can Dobby help?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. I calculated the cost and found out that we'd only have around 300,000 galleons left if I buy both places. How can that be enough to hire help for you and buy things for the garden? The place is huge and you'd likely have to start over completely."

"It not be very easy," Dobby replied with conviction. "But Dobby be able to do it! Dobby be planting berries first and trading for favours, and Dobby also be able to trade work for more cuttings and seeds if he can't find them in the wild. Harry Potter sir not be needing all the gold for Dobby,
Dobby promises.

"No, if I, we, do this, the gold is yours. You are the one doing all the work, taking care of me and stuff, it's only fair. I'm just afraid that it won't be enough for everything."

Dobby's eyes grew impossibly large and he trembled. "Does that mean ..."

Harry swallowed. "If you think we can manage, if you're absolutely sure, then yes. I'll buy both the house and your garden." He took a deep breath at the declaration and blinked rapidly. "Wow. That feels surprisingly good!" He started to smile. "I'll buy the house and the garden, Dobby!"

Dobby began to cry in big, heaving sobs. He burrowed into Harry's arms and clutched him so tightly that Harry could feel his little heart hammering in his chest. His effusions of happiness were embarrassing and endearing at the same time, although the relief at having made such a momentous decision were making Harry's own eyes mist over as well.

"Hey there, it's okay," he soothed, stroking the elf's back. "We'll be fine. If we can't manage both, we'll find a solution. But we'll try!"

"W-we w-w-will," Dobby hiccupped. "D-Dobby b-be doing everything f-for h-his Ha-Harry Potter sir!"

To make good on his promise, Harry immediately dashed off a note to Sharptooth and sent the ecstatic Dobby to deliver it. Even after Dobby was gone it felt good, right. Happiness made Harry literally float for a few moments - it was one of the best displays of accidental magic he'd ever suffered and he enjoyed every second of it. And to make this day absolutely perfect, Aunt Marge was finally going home!

Sharptooth's reply came just a quarter hour later. It was short and to the point: they'd be signing the contracts at seven o'clock in the evening and discuss the placing of the wards afterwards.

The rest of the day passed excruciatingly slowly. Aunt Petunia, already annoyed at Harry's absences and her third place in the garden competition, ordered him around like a slave in the wake of Marge's departure and tried to keep him working even after tea when the heat was so oppressive that an ambulance had to be called for Mrs. Burton, the elderly neighbour two houses down the road. The paramedic scolded Aunt Petunia thoroughly when he spotted Harry trudging around with his tools and even threatened to call child protection services when she wouldn't relent.
Having to spend the evening in his room behind locked doors wasn't exactly a hardship for Harry. He let Dobby pop him to Gringotts as soon as the clock struck seven and spent the whole walk from the customer hall to Sharptooth's office cheerily greeting unknown goblins who greeted him first.

Sharptooth was ready for him and asked Harry and Dobby to sit on the long settee as soon as the door closed behind them. He then joined them there and picked up the first of the four waiting contract folders.

"Welcome, Heir Potter. Gringotts is pleased to finish the transaction so soon. Shall we go over the contracts together?"

"Yes, please." Harry leaned forward eagerly.

"Then let's begin with the former Woberly Place. This contract states that the estate will come into Harry James Potter's possession in full, including the already established Gringotts wards, all furniture and kitchen utensils as well as the gardening tools. All previous claims by the owner or his family are hereby declared null and void. Not included in the price of purchase is the ministerial registration fee, land tax, and any other taxes going forward from the date of purchase."

"I didn't know that there would be taxes," Harry said worriedly. "How much will it be?"

Sharptooth hummed. "Not a lot for private residences, Heir Potter. Every landed estate in Magical Britain is taxed a hundred galleon land tax per annum, a sum you are certainly well able to afford."

"Oh, okay. Good. But it's something to keep in mind." Harry opened his backpack and pulled out a writing pad and a biro. As he wrote, he mumbled, "A hundred galleons per year for private residences ... what about my garden?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sharptooth answered. "Let's finish here first. We went over the matter of taxes, now there's ... ah. The price of purchase totals 1.112.564 galleons, plus the registration fee of 5000 galleons. The yearly land tax will be transferred for you on January first of each year, the partial sum owed for this year is to be paid immediately. As soon as you sign the contract, the deed will be drawn up and placed in your new vault. You'll get a copy to take home, of course."

"Er." Expectantly, Harry looked at his account manager. "Is that it? Aren't there more clauses? Like what I'm allowed to do with the garden and stuff? The muggles have clauses for everything, at least the deed to my relatives' house does."

Sharptooth's bemused face cleared as he understood Harry's concern. "Ah, no, buying in full means that the land and house are yours to do with as you please. There are no restrictions whatsoever. You could tear the house down. You could build two other houses next to the already existing one. You could even dig the whole place up and make another garden out of it if you wanted. Your property, your choice."
Harry beamed. "It's a good thing I like it just as it is, then."

"Indeed. Are you ready to sign? It's been many years since I did my first contract signing, but I find myself to be ... excited."

"I'm very excited," Harry confided, picking up the blood quill, "but mostly I'm happy for Dobby and me." Then he grinned and scrawled his full name on the line. "Done!"

The contract glowed, vibrated - and duplicated. The copy floated to Harry's side of the table while the original was snatched up by Sharptooth.

Next came the contract about the warding of Harry's new place. His new place! He became giddy just thinking it!

"As there are goblin wards already in place that we only have to update and tailor to you, and as you are a Friend To The Nation, the initial price of half a million galleons has dropped by half, curtesy of Chief Ragnok. Let me explain the warding service to you, youngling: your estate will be unplottable, meaning that it can't be found - by scrying or tracking devices, both stationary and placed on you. Once you enter the property, your trail goes cold and can't be restored. Then there are the anti-apparition wards. They're a standard feature, the force of which will be determined by you. I recommend the standard setting: mild non-lethal deplacement, heavy non-lethal deplacement, and for a third offence, lethal repelment."

"Uh, is that necessary?" Harry asked. "Seems a bit over the top."

"Yeah? So you don't want the Dark Lord's followers to take a hike on the antarctic continent?" Sharptooth smirked. "In case you're worried, each instance will be an unmistakable warning for the offender. It's not like they'll be landing softly in a field of daisies and feel like you invited them to play games."

"But what of my friends? I don't want them to die if they're dumb enough to try again ... once they can apparate, that is."

"May I offer some advice?" Sharptooth asked. At Harry's nod, he said, "Don't tell them. Enjoy it first by yourself. Get used to having all this space and feeling safe. Giving the secret away to a bunch of teenagers is not you staying safe. Children talk, they boast to their friends, and when they get angry they spill the beans were they have no business of being spilled. Sharing your good fortune is an admirable trait, but in this instance it won't serve you well. Trust me on this."

Harry was taken aback. "I've never thought of that."

"You never had nice things to yourself either," Sharptooth said baldly. "Get used to it in peace. Take
the time to be proud of it and enjoy it as much as you can before you allow others to trample all over it and force their opinions on you. Because people will have opinions, first of all your headmaster. He may be your guardian by proxy but that doesn't mean that he can dictate your whole life for you."


Sharptooth exhaled. "We will erect a mail redirection ward back to Gringotts to keep your location secret from post owls. An intent-based protection ward that will keep out Death Eaters, dark creatures, reporters, snoops and everybody and everything else with the least amount of unhealthy interest in you. Included in the price is also a notification ward. Whenever there is an attempted breach, Gringotts will send a squad of security guards to investigate. Their primary job will be to get you to safety if the need arises, so please don't make their job harder by trying to fight off intruders by yourself."

Harry could only nod dumbly.

"Very well. If you're satisfied, please sign here and here. I'll schedule a team of warders. This will take a day and you'll need to be present to we can key you into the wards and lock everything down."

"I'm always free, just let me know when you're ready," Harry tried to joke. Suddenly it all seemed a bit overwhelming. He had actually bought a house! A house he and Dobby could live in!

Sharptooth gave him a moment and called for refreshments. Eating a scone with clotted cream and elf berry marmalade did a lot for Harry's composure, as did Dobby's cold lemonade. Soon he was back on an even keel and eager to do it all again, this time to sign the contracts for Dobby's garden.

Again, the contract in itself was rather short and to the point. Sharptooth explained that there would be higher taxes if Harry ever decided to sell things that had grown on his land. Harry hadn't even thought of that but memorized the information and vowed to himself to read more about it. The real kicker was the contract for the ward placement and Harry leaned forward eagerly so he wouldn't miss a word of his accountant manager's explanations.

"I realize that the placing of wards on this property seems exorbitantly high," Sharptooth admitted. "A million galleons is nothing to sneeze at, and everybody who's telling you differently is surely a liar. To put the cost in perspective: the average wizarding family gets by just fine with fifty thousand galleons a year."

"Only fifty thousand!" Harry felt faint for a moment. "Oh god, I'm a rotten spendthrift!"

"Don't be silly, you merely have an eye for quality, a trait you share with all of your ancestors," Sharptooth replied, unconcerned. "Now, the first portion of money is going to be invested in the laying of the warding stones, as the property has none. They are the very necessary foundation of the
warding matrix - the anchor points to which the warders will attach their magic. As you're a high profile client for obvious reasons, Ragnok decided that only the hardiest, best material will suffice, hence the high price."

"I guess he's right," Harry agreed and shrugged. "What's the material?"

"It's a rock magical races have always called Malijar's Gift."

"Isn't he the Lord of Magic?" Harry asked. "He was mentioned in the book about ritual magic."

"Yes, he is."

"Does he really exist? Nobody ever said anything about him at Hogwarts."

"I imagine not," Sharptooth replied. "Now, religion doesn't seem like an issue in the magical world, mainly because very few people still practice the old arts and muggle holidays have slowly been replacing the more traditional wizarding holidays. But there are quite a few families out there who're certainly devout, and practicing ritual magic might influence you in that direction. After all, it is hard to deny the existence of a deity when one is confronted with the pureness and beauty of magic in ritual. Nothing compares, youngling, so be careful with yourself."

"Okay."

"But back to the ward stones: Malijar's Gift is the hardest, most durable rock on earth, only in part due to the mithril running through it in fine veins." Sharptooth opened a table drawer and took out a small, hematit-coloured rock that had shimmering and glistening silvery veins running through it. "Here it is. You may hold it, if you want."

Harry accepted the small stone and started at the brush of magic against his sense of self. "I can feel it!"

"It's highly magical," Sharptooth said, "and so very useful to us, hence its name. Always treat it with respect and magic will treat you likewise."

"It's fantastic." Harry handed the stone to Dobby who sat up straight and even raised his ears to their highest point. The sight made him grin. "Could I buy one of these? I've got a friend who'd love to see it."

"Yes, certainly. A rock of this size goes at a price of three to four hundred galleons. Sleep on it and if you still want one a week from now, I'll arrange the sale." Before Harry could rail against being told what to do, Sharptooth added, "Do not be angry at me for tempering your impulses, youngling. I understand perfectly well your desire to purchase things that please you, and which you enjoy."
However, as your steward it is my duty to teach you how to spend your money responsibly. That being said, I'm not saying no. I'm saying think about it and find out for yourself whether the price is worth the value of your planned acquisition.

Harry deflated a little. "I guess you're right. I'm sorry, sir."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Sharptooth stated evenly. "It is your money and I won't attempt to keep you from spending it as you please. All I ask for as your steward is that you give yourself a little time to think things over."

"I can do that!" Harry replied with conviction. He took the stone back from Dobby and revelled in the touch of magic against his own once more. "I'll give it a week. But," he smiled crookedly, "I don't think I'll change my mind."

Sharptooth rewarded him with a satisfied nod. "Good. After the laying of the warding stones, the warders will build the matrix. Each warding matrix is tailored to the land they're supposed to protect, so it takes time and effort to calculate its make-up. The building is magically expensive, so that's the third large item on the bill. Next is the weaving of the actual wards. Making the land unplottable comes first, then the anti-apparition wards and last the intent-based wards. Will you take Arithmancy next year?"

"Yes, and Runes."

"Very good. Then you'll learn why it is done in this order. But do you care to take a guess? Just for fun."

Harry pondered the question for a moment. "Uhm, because we likely won't change the the first two wards? I mean, I'll probably always want to keep the garden unplottable, and I also probably don't want to have people appear willy-nilly in there. But I could change what I think about people, or what I consider dangerous or undesirable. The intent wards are kind of the top layer? They'd be easiest to reach to work with like that."

"Mostly correct, and well reasoned." Sharptooth took an empty piece of parchment and a quill and drew a circle. "For the sake of this discussion, imagine this is your garden. The ward stones would be placed here, here, here, here ..." He dotted the circle until it looked like a pearl necklace. "Then comes the building of the matrix. Imagine it like a loose structure, a little like a woven basket." Again he used the quill and drew straight lines in the circle, turning the parchment by ninety degrees and repeating that action until the circle was filled with quadrants. "Now we're making it unplottable ..." Suddenly the ink changed its colour from black to bright blue as Sharptooth drew many more lines next to the black ones, until the circle looked like a loosely woven piece of fabric. "And now the anti-apparition wards." Again the ink changed its colour, this time to a light green. Instead of drawing parallel to the existing lines, Sharptooth turned the parchment again by ninety degrees before drawing the narrow lines and then crossing them orthogonally. "And at last the intent-based wards. Can you guess?"
Harry hesitated, but since this wasn't school and he liked knowing what would happen with his garden, he took the quill from Sharptooth and tapped the nib into the circle. A transparent pink hue bled out until it covered everything inside the circle. "Like this?"

"Excellent!" Sharptooth praised. "As I said, your theory is mostly correct. I say mostly because while the intent-based wards certainly are the top layer, they're also the glue that helps stabilize the lower levels of warding, making changing them not as easy as you might think. They'll depend on the other wards and interact with them dynamically once the whole set is implemented. Imagine building a house: you start with the big parts, like the fencing, the groundwork, the bricks for the wall. It's all offering a kind of protection, but what'll really keep the elements and intruders from finding weak spots is the finishing work. The mortar, the putty, the hedges around the property, and the alarm system you install. It all works together, and while you can certainly leave some parts out, you'll have the best results with every one of them in place."

The explanation was very descriptive and Harry saw no reason at all to protest the high cost when Sharptooth laid out the contract before him, not that he would have wanted to in the first place. He knew the value of hard work, having done enough of that himself during the years and also witnessing Hermione's incredible work ethic.

"As with your other property, all the warders will be obliviated afterwards and Gringotts as a Nation will make a vow to keep the location secret. As I'm your steward, the purchase and warding of your new estates will most probably go through the registration process without a hitch as Dumbledore hasn't restricted my ability to work with the Potter fortune. The acquisition of more land won't make him suspicious, even if he knows that Gringotts will have bought the basilisk from you. He'll think the money beyond your reach, and I can only repeat myself: it is best that this remains to be so."

"But what about the money I'm giving to my school mates?" Harry asked.

"Since it's essentially charity, I can't see him protest too loudly, as it would be harmful to his image. While 10,000 galleons per student is a lot of money for the individual witch or wizard, in the grand scheme of things it's just not worth the hassle. And speaking of those particular transactions, we can finalize the details right now, if you'd like. The contract is the same for every student, except the two Weasley children. The ones for Sir Nicholas de Mimsey-Porpington, Fawkes and Mrs. Norris are slightly different, but going over them won't take too much time."

"Yeah, alright. I'm glad to get this underway." Harry shifted a little. "Uh, but may I please get up and move around a little. All this sitting is hurting my ..." He indicated his butt that was admittedly becoming a bit numb.

Sharptooth chortled. "By all means, Heir Potter. Move to your heart's content and eat another scone if it pleases you! Our Gringotts elves have outdone themselves to accomodate your nutritional needs. Your Dobby was quite jealous when he learned this."
Harry grinned at the pouting elf. "There's no need to be jealous, Dobby. You'll always be the boss."

Dobby brightened immediately and bounced up. "Dobby and Harry Potter sir can play tag!" As he said it, he tapped Harry and popped away, reappearing near the door of Sharptooth's office.

Harry scrambled up and ran after him, giggling madly and lunging after Dobby when he got close. A fast game of tag developed which quickly took on qualities of gnome chucking because Dobby squealed in excitement when Harry grabbed him and egged the boy on to throw him as hard as he could. Caught up in the game, Harry did so and watched in amazement as Dobby sailed through the air and only popped to safety when a crash seemed imminent.

"You're crazy!" he laughed and ran from the elf.

"You be crazy also once Dobby has taught you how to pop!" Dobby called, jumped and tapped Harry on the head. "You be it!"

Sharptooth let them play for fifteen minutes, after which both Harry and Dobby trotted back to the seating area and ate their snacks with big grins on their faces.

The transfer of funds to Penelope Clearwater, Colin Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hermione truly was easy enough. After reading and confirming the conditions of the contract, Harry just checked that they were the same for each of them before signing. Ginny Weasley had been a more difficult case after Harry had had some time and advice from Sharptooth. While it was true that she had suffered the most at Tom Riddle's hand, she had also failed to ask for help while she still could. Harry had compromised with Sharptooth and settled five thousand galleons on her, with the stipulation that it be spent on healers both for the mind and body. Another five thousand galleons would go to Ron, who'd tried to rescue her. Whatever would be left of the money after her treatment, Ginny would be able to access once she reached her majority, the same as every other student.

The contract for Nearly Headless Nick had only one stipulation: after thinking about it for a bit, it had been important to Harry to give the ghost the right to either accept the money for himself or transfer it to Hogwarts.

"He could have living descendants," Harry had argued, "and Nick might want to give the money to them."
Fawkes got his share outright, with the express clause in the settlement that Dumbledore was not to have any say in the matter. And Mrs. Norris, at last, was assigned her galleons with the stipulation that Filch take care of her and himself to the best of his ability.

"That was good work, Heir Potter," Sharptooth said once the last signature was placed. "Your hand will stop smarting soon, don't worry. If you discover a scar tomorrow, send your elf at once and Healer Spleenbash will heal it for you. A blood quill should never leave marks, and if it does, seek help immediately. It's a class 5 dark object for a reason."

"Thanks." Harry stood and stretched. "What time is it?"

"It's way past your bedtime, so get yourself home, eat something disgustingly healthy and sleep well. I'll be in contact as soon as I know the warding schedule. Oh, and please read this pamphlet. You'll need to do your part in claiming the wards and I don't want you to be unprepared."

Harry bowed, thanked the goblin again and deftly used the fireplace in the antechamber next to Sharptooth's office to Floo home.

oOo

Monday warmed up to be the hottest day of the year so far and Harry decided to spend the morning indoors. After breakfast, Dobby surprised him with a large, empty notebook.

"It be a journal for Harry Potter sir," the elf explained shyly. "There be a lot of things happening and Dobby felt that Harry Potter sir might want to write it down."

Harry turned the leather-bound book over and admired the beautiful craftsmanship. "Thank you, it looks great. But, where should I even start?"

"There be unlimited pages, so Harry Potter sir can start wherever he likes!" Dobby let the ink bottle and a muggle calligraphy pen hover towards Harry. "Dobby would be honoured to protect Harry Potter sir's history."

"My history, huh?" Harry smiled. "Alright, why not?" He opened the book at the first page, dipped the pen into the ink and thought for a moment before he started to write.
Only an hour later he regretfully put the pen down and prepared himself for a long day on his new property. Dobby assisted him by laying out fresh, appropriate clothes and preparing a picnic basket with food.

At ten o'clock on the dot, Sharptooth arrived via the Floo and immediately cocked his head to listen to Uncle Vernon's shouting.

"Is that one of the Muggles you need to get away from?" he asked.

"Er, yeah." Harry flushed with embarrassment. "They don't much like not having their servant around."

"Well, that won't do. Your elf will put up a silencing charm, I'm sure. How can anyone be expected to relax with that ruckus going on?" Sharptooth's eyes glittered with humour and malice. "But nevermind the muggles, we have more important things to do today. Come, youngling. Let's brave the dreaded portkey one last time. After the warding is complete, you'll be able to Floo to your house like a normal, sane person, or have your elf bring you."

"I can't wait," Harry said with feeling.

He and Sharptooth gritted their teeth, activated the portkey and endured the unpleasant ride with as much grace as possible, which, sadly, wasn't a lot.

As before, Dobby popped up next to Harry a scant few seconds later.

"How are you even doing that?" Harry complained. "Why couldn't Dobby take us in the first place, sir?"

"Because the property is unplottable, even for house elves," Sharptooth explained. He breathed deeply and obviously fought his nausea down. "However, once you were here, he was able to find you. It might interest you that there are no wards that can keep a house elf away, only other house elves can accomplish that. And as to popping out of the property: the owner didn't have it warded against getting out, in case he needed to vanish quickly. We should talk about it later, see what you think best."

"Give me a couple of minutes, sir," Harry sighed. "I need to put my stomach back in its proper place first."

Despite their groaning, Harry's curiosity soon drove him on. They entered the house and went straight into the cellar. Harry had only glimpsed it during the tour, but contrary to the last time, the ward stone was now alight and pulsing with magic.
"Welcome to your new home, Heir Potter," a portly goblin in dark green robes greeted. "Welcome to you, too, Steward Sharptooth. I am Head Warder Gartuk. We can begin immediately with the claiming of the wards."

"Are you ready?" Sharptooth asked Harry. "I realize that the information package might have been a little thin on the details. If you need a moment ..."

"I've signed so many contracts with blood that I'll survive this easily," Harry joked. "Don't worry, sir. I've read the instructions and if I need help, you'll be there."

"Good, good," Gartuk said, clapping his hands. "Come to the ward stone, Heir Potter. Feel its magic, its composition. Take your time, these things cannot be rushed."

Harry obeyed and let his hand hover over the glowing stone. The magic was warm and welcoming. He fell into the feeling and began scouting out it's make-up. "It feels ... open," he said cautiously. "And there are lines going away from it." He pushed deeper and felt a flare of heat in his chest. "There are seven times seven wardstones tied to the master stone. It's like a net ... it vibrates."

"It's waiting for you," Gartuk said quietly. "Commune with it, tell it that you're the new owner. We already fed it your magical signature, but it needs more to seal the new configuration. Push as much magic into the stone as you comfortably can. Once it's got enough, you'll be accepted as the sole owner of the wards. You will feel it in your core, so don't startle."

Nodding, Harry reached out for Dobby and relaxed when he could feel the small hand in his. "We do this together, Dobby. Can you feel them?"

Dobby's breath hitched. "Dobby can."

"Then let's say hello." Smiling, Harry felt Dobby's essence with him as they both explored the energy of the ward stone and greeted each extension with a push of magic. It wasn't hard at all for Harry; he felt that his happiness could have probably powered half of Surrey for a week.

As he played with the lovely magic of the ward stone, he felt its configuration change. It danced around him, feeling along all of his metaphysical nooks and crannies. A bit rough at first, it soon became smooth and warm, kind of like slightly slick water, cradling and bathing him in its protection until he couldn't determine where he ended and the ward stone began.

"What a nice blending," Gartuk praised. "Well done, Heir Potter. What a unique idea to let your house elf participate!"

"It's his house, too," Harry grinned and Dobby grinned back so brightly that he looked years younger. "I'm sorry, but I don't have an athame for the next part."
"Allow me," Sharptooth said before Gartuk could answer. "There has been an athame in my family that hasn't been claimed for several generations. It would please me if you'd accept it as a gift. A first home is always special and there can hardly be a more rewarding moment than taking up ownership."

Harry was touched. "Thank you, sir. I'll gladly use it."

Carefully, Sharptooth took the athame out of its little case and handed it over. "May it always be sharp and aid you in your craft."

"So mote it be," Harry returned softly. He turned back to the ward stone, raised his right hand over the stone and said, "With this offering of blood, given of my own free will, I claim this house. With this offering, I claim these wards as my own." With the athame in his left hand, he cut his right palm and laid it on the stone. Magic heaved up around them and the stone glowed even brighter. A not so subtle nudge urged Harry on and he added, "May this property be known as Potter's Cottage from this day forward."

For a moment, there was a sharp pain. It started in Harry's hand, rushed through his arm, then his whole body, and finally it burst through his feet into the ground.

Then, the cellar went dark.

"That went exceedingly well," Gartuk exclaimed. He snapped his fingers and the sconces on the walls lit up. "It feels very much like you now, Heir Potter. What a happy day!"

Harry grinned, even as he rubbed his already healed hand. "Thank you. I'm truly very happy."

"Dobby be feeling it, too," Dobby said in wonder. "It be Dobby's home!"

"Of course it is. And you get first pick of the cupboards," Harry said with a broad smile. "Man, I can't believe it." His whole body hummed with satisfaction and contentment. And already he could somehow feel the going-ons on his property: the number of goblins walking around the lawn, the amount and even the kind of magic being done by them. It was astounding. "Someone in your team is in a very bad temper, Master Gartuk," he said without thinking.

Gartuk startled a little. "Er, yes. That would be my wife, Heir Potter. She and I had to resort to stone, parchment, claw to haggle out who would have the privilege of witnessing your claiming of the ward stone. She lost."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, eyes wide and worried.
"Oh, don't be. She'll have the privilege for your other property. It's unquestionably more difficult and will be quite prestigious for her." Gartuk straightened up. "Now, as this is your first home, I should mention that it will do you and your wards good if you commune regularly with them. Just do what you did just now. Feel them, let them adjust to you as you grow as a wizard. Many owners are neglectful and never enjoy the full breadth of their wards' abilities."

"I'll remember, and if I don't, I'll have Dobby remind me," Harry promised.

"Good, good. Then we'll head out, meet the team and get the fine-tuning underway. It'll take time, but it'll be worth it. After tea, you can choose the locations for the anti-apparition deplacement, Heir Potter. Wizards always have the most fun with that."

"Dobby be having fun with that, too," Dobby declared. "Dobby be voting for Mongolia."

"Who knew you were such a vicious thing?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Harry Potter sir be forgetting that Dobby be former Malfoy house elf. Dobby be renouncing the family, but Dobby not be forgetting useful teachings."

"He's a house elf after my own heart," Sharptooth told Gartuk and both goblins smirked scarily.

Harry decided not to think too much about that. Instead, he led the entourage out of his - his! - house, followed the garden path away from the cottage and onto the vast lawn. There, by the tree line, a dozen goblins were already working, digging around in the ground.

"Heir Potter! May you always enjoy wealth and happiness," a female goblin growled while balefully glaring at Gartuk.

"You as well," Harry returned. His obvious bid at defusing the tension between Gartuk and his wife, because who else could this be, made the other goblins laugh gutturally. "May I please learn your name?"

"I am Shanoo, Gringotts' second head warder," she said with raised chin. "It'll be my great honour to instruct you in the fine art of warding soon."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry admitted. "Sharptooth showed me a small piece of Malijar's Gift and I can't wait to see what it does as a ward stone."

"Then those days will be a gift to us both." Shanoo inclined her head. "For today the work is less exciting. Since the goblin war ward matrix is already established and you claimed your wards quite beautifully, all that remains for you to do is giving the ward stones around your property their final purpose. It's a bit time consuming since there are seven times seven stones to touch, but I'm confident
that we'll be finished in a few hours."

What followed could only be described as a peculiar game of tag. The goblins lined up along the border, each of them with a glowing piece of rock in their hands. Harry went to touch and smear a drop of blood onto all of them, reciting a short spell in Latin. Once he was done with a stone, the goblin would put it back in the ground and run to get ahead of the line. It was exhausting work and for the first time Harry really, truly appreciated how difficult it would be to claim his huge, overgrown garden. With no wards even in existence, they might be at it for days and days!

They paused once for lunch and again after the last stone had been touched and put back. Another short commune with the ward stone in the house showed Harry that the wards had already changed again and grown much stronger. Back on the lawn again, Harry fascinatedly watched the goblins chant in their own language. Their magic made the wards light up like an aurora borealis in the clear afternoon sky and then, suddenly, something snapped into place inside of Harry. A feeling of endless security flooded him from his toes up to his head. It surged like a needy child, streamed from his fingers and eyes and mouth and embraced him so neatly and lovingly that it was hard to breathe for a moment.

"I gather it worked," Sharptooth commented with some sympathy. "How are you feeling, youngling?"

"I'm fine," Harry whispered. "Really fine." He looked at his account manager with wide eyes. "I didn't know magic could feel like this!"

"And there's so much more you don't know yet." Sharptooth put his clawed hand on Harry's narrow shoulder. "Congratulations. Now all you have to do is choose the destinations for your anti-apparition ward and do a last communion with your ward stone for the intent-based wards. Both will be done quickly, I'm sure, and then you can spend your first night here in your new haven."

"Is it silly that I didn't even think about staying here tonight?" Harry swallowed. "Kind of stupid to buy a house and not use it."

"It's understandable. It came about rather sudden and you need to get used to owning things. I'm aware that Healer Spleenbash wants you to meet with a mind healer, but she agreed that this had to come first. It's not off the table, however. If you can spare a moment, I'd like you to think about the kind of person you'd feel comfortable telling about your life. It doesn't matter whether you think your requirements seem unreasonable. You need to be able to trust that person and that's all we need to know."

Harry felt uncomfortably put on the spot. "Uhm, have you done something like that?"

Sharptooth nodded. "Yes, when the leader of a cadet branch of my clan decided that he would like to force my grand-daughter to bond with him to establish his place in my family, rather than wait for his turn at succession as the law dictates. It's rare, you see, for goblins to revolt among themselves. My Hortha resisted the bond and injured the traitor mortally. His followers wouldn't let that stand and
killed her. When my family retaliated, it was a carnage. I needed the mind healing desperately as I couldn't function both as clan leader and account manager."

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said quietly.

"It's been many years and I've learned to deal with it. So don't think that seeing someone to talk about your problems makes you weak. To the contrary, confronting that which burdens you will make you stronger."

"Healer Spleenbash said that she has files on Gringotts' mind healers. Maybe Dobby can bring them and I'll look them over tomorrow."

"Good," Sharptooth said. "For now, just finish up here and enjoy a quiet evening."

And that was exactly what Harry did.

End of part 2
Chapter 3

Dobby's Deceit

Part 3

Despite his best effort, Harry was unable to sleep. He tossed and turned in his new bed and even contemplated asking Dobby to put him to sleep like he had done before. It was very quiet and sweet air came in through the open window. All Harry could hear was the occasional creak in the house and the rustling of small, nocturnal animals outside.

Maybe it is too good to seem true, Harry thought as he turned around yet again. Maybe I really need time to get used to this. Lots of time.

Finally, long after midnight, he gave up. Pocketing his wand, he left the master bedroom and wandered down the stairs into the living room, where Dobby had already sorted his few books into the vast, empty shelves around the fireplace. The emptiness was a sad sight in the bright moonlight and he resolved to build his own library as quickly as he could.

But it wasn't just the empty library. The kitchen looked, if not brand new, still a little abandoned, the stillroom was completely bare except for a large wooden work table, and the foyer of the house looked like something lovely and impersonal straight out of a magazine.

Harry realized that he may have claimed the house and the wards, but filling the empty shell with life - his life - was his own responsibility. It was a good thought, even an encouraging one, even if it was a little daunting at the same time.

I never really had a life before, he thought as he carefully padded down the cellar stairs. I guess I can do anything now, as long as it doesn't get me killed ... or expelled from Hogwarts. But what do I
even want? I can't just play all day, but studying all day won't work, either.

The closer he got to the ward stone, the warmer he felt from the inside out. Only a moment later he stood before the stone and touched it with both hands. Immediately that sense of peace and security washed over him again as the magic embraced him eagerly. Smiling, Harry sat crosslegged on the floor and stretched a little to reach the ward stone.

*We'll be good friends,* he promised the stone and giggled when a prickling pulse of magic danced over his skin. *We'll make a proper home out of this cottage soon, you, Dobby, and me.*

Watching the gentle aura of magic coaxed Harry first into a meditative trance and finally lulled him to a restful sleep. He didn't wake when Dobby found him a little later and returned him to bed, but the sense of purpose lingered even in his dreams.

oOo

Hedwig woke Harry late by affectionately nibbling on his ear and cheek.

"Hey girl," the boy mumbled, clumsily stroking her along the wings. "How'd you find me? Did Dobby help you come in?"

Hedwig barked quietly.

"Awesome." Sitting up, Harry reached for his glasses. There, on his nightstand, a small vase with a single flower from his garden greeted him. Suddenly, Harry's cheeks flooded with heat and he felt his eyes well up. "Oh gosh. Sorry." He wiped at his cheeks. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Not minding his wobbly feelings in the least, Hedwig hopped closer and into her wizard's lap.

"I'm good now," Harry sighed when he had composed himself. "Welcome home, Hedwig. I think there's a small owlery somewhere, but I'll put your stand wherever you like."

She churred, hobbled to the end of the bed and took a short flight to the window-wall, where her perch had already been placed.

"That works," Harry laughed. He grabbed his clock, looked at it, and gasped. "Nearly ten! I have to get up. Sleep well!"

A quick shower in the ensuite master bathroom later, he ran down to the kitchen - and stopped so he could gape at the transformation of the space.
"Bloody hell, Dobby! Did you do all of that last night?" Harry exclaimed.

The house elf bounced on his toes, obviously proud of himself. "Dobby did. Is Harry Potter sir satisfied with Dobby's changes?"

Astounded and amazed, Harry looked at the additional gleaming pots and pans high up on the walls, the bundles of dried herbs, the braided bunches of onions and garlic, the salamis and hams and especially the lovely vintage still life paintings of French landscapes and food dishes. The work tops were empty and clean and shining in the morning sun.

"It's perfect," he breathed. "And it smells so good!"

"Dobby be making fresh bread with herbs and nuts for Harry Potter sir," Dobby said, "and scrambled eggs, sausages, and juice from fresh oranges. There also be butter and marmalade. Where does Harry Potter sir want to eat?"

"Can we sit outside?" Harry asked. "It's such a great day."

"Of course, Harry Potter sir. Dobby be setting the table immediately."

With a snap of his fingers Dobby was gone, leaving Harry with nothing to do but trot into the living room and through the French patio doors onto the small terrace. A white marquee gently protected him from the already glaring sun.

"Will you sit with me?" Harry asked as he pulled a chair back.

"Dobby will," the elf replied and climbed onto the second chair. With clever fingers he prepared first a plate for Harry and then a cup of tea just as he liked it. "Dobby be liking Potter Cottage very much indeed. If Harry Potter sir not be having other plans, Dobby would like to start preparing the garden for planting this afternoon."

"Yes, of course," Harry said. He took a sip from his orange juice and sighed in satisfaction. "Have you thought about what you want to plant? You're not only wanting berries, right?"

"Elves be eating lots of fruit, mushrooms, and vegetables and even flowers," Dobby agreed. "As long as they be full of wild magic. Earth here not be perfect, but it certainly be good enough to feed a handful of elves."

"How about we divide the land, then?" Harry asked. "I mean, I honestly haven't looked out of the back windows much, yet, and I guess I'll always want to use the lawn on the front side of the house because it's honestly large enough for playing and stuff, even Quidditch. So why don't you make the back half into an elf garden?"
"Ooh, may Dobby really have the whole backside of the land?"

"Sure!"

Dobby's already large eyes got even larger. "Dobby really has found the best wizard!"

"I don't know, all I'm doing is giving you more and more work to do," Harry said with a crooked smile. "But I can help! I know how to weed and as long as nobody is screaming at me, I rather like working in the garden."

"Harry Potter sir be always welcome in Dobby's elf garden. Dobby be even planning for walkways," the house elf proclaimed generously, making Harry laugh. "Dobby be starting today, when Harry Potter sir be busy taking a nap."

"I'm taking a nap? But I've just woken up!" Harry took a bite from his buttered bread. Just like the scrambled eggs, it was delicious. "Yum!"

"Yes, you are," Dobby said sternly. "Harry Potter sir still be tired after yesterday, and Dobby be knowing that Harry Potter sir be wanting to write some more in his journal."

That was true, but Harry also wanted to explore the property and find out what he could do to entertain himself. But first, he absolutely had the duty to enjoy Dobby's cooking, which he did with great enthusiasm. While he stuffed his face, Dobby told him where he would go to get cuttings of elf berry bushes, and that he intended to plant apple seeds and wild strawberries and even plants for elf medicine.

At last, Harry's plate was nearly empty and their talk turned to Harry's agenda for the day.

"Healer Spleenbash be fire-calling this morning and asking that Harry Potter sir be in the trunk tonight at eight o'clock for his check-up. It be time for bone assessment, and she also be bringing files on mind healers," Dobby said. With a snap of his fingers he cleared the table and handed Harry his potion. "I be reminding Harry Potter sir at seven."

"Great, thank you." Harry downed the potion and smacked his lips. "Oh, it's one with honey flavour!" He leaned back and just looked at his garden for a minute. "I feel right on holiday. It's great."

"Can Dobby bring Harry Potter sir's writing things?"

"Sure, but first I'll have a walk-around the property, before it's getting too hot. You coming?"
Together they wandered along the border and admired the large oaks and rowan trees. Imagining the huge space behind the house as a garden took some effort for Harry, but he was excited nonetheless about Dobby's plans. On the front lawn, the lone weeping willow at the lefthand corner was beautiful and imposing and offered a lovely place in its shade for a set of swings. Once Harry got started, he thought of more and more things he wanted to have, among them an outdoor trampoline like the one he had seen in the Dursleys' neighbourhood, a bicycle, and, of course, a broom.

"It doesn't even have to be a new one," Harry said, gesticulating towards the sky above the property. "Just something sturdy to pass the time. Maybe I could find a second-hand Nimbus? I liked the feel of the one Professor McGonagall gave me for Quidditch."

"There be such a shop at the very end of Diagon Alley," Dobby said. "Poorer wizards be buying their things there. Flourish and Blotts also be having a used book shelf."

"I'm not exactly poor anymore, am I?" Harry frowned. "Maybe I shouldn't buy things other people need much more than I do."

"Harry Potter sir could discuss this with Steward Sharptooth," Dobby offered. "It be his job to advise you. He also be having wizards at Gringotts who can buy such things for Harry Potter sir."

"Yeah, I'll do that. Good idea." Harry looked over his large lawn. "I thought that we shouldn't change a lot about this place, but what do you think about a pond for swimming? The Weasleys have one and it's so great in the summer."

"Dobby could dig out a pond," the elf replied thoughtfully, "but Dobby be needing to learn more about how to maintain it first."

Harry grinned. "That's okay. I've got lots of time for that. I'd rather have a broom first, anyway."

After their excursion around the property, Harry felt indeed tired enough for a nap, and the afternoon went by quicker than anticipated as he wrote more into his new journal and composed his wish list. In addition to the fun things, he also wanted a potions set for the cottage and even thought about finding out what he would need to build his own ritual circle. Now that he had his own land for that, it didn't feel right to use the goblin circle anymore, even though he could.

In the early evening it was so hot that Harry felt like he would begin baking at any second. The air was very still and the sky an ominous blue-ish grey colour. A certain tension thrummed under the lassitude of both flora and fauna, making Harry both tired and nervous.

"There be a storm coming," Dobby called from his spot in the newly dug up lawn. Large chunks of earth were whirling around him like a small tornado and settling back onto the ground. "Water be good for new plants!"
"It's so humid," Harry groaned. "Look at my hair. It's a disaster in normal weather, but now I've got *curls*!"

"You be looking very endearing, Harry Potter sir," Dobby grinned. "And just think about how Miss Mione would be looking right now."

Laughing, Harry had to agree. Hermione's hair really played in its own liga of unruliness, much to her chagrin. "When do you think it'll start to rain?"

"Dobby not be sure, but it be an hour at most. There be weather ward to protect the house and grounds from the storm, but there be no ward against rain. Maybe Harry Potter sir be wanting to go inside, where the temperature be better."

"In a moment. I like this, strangely enough. It feels like ants under my skin." Harry spread his arms and looked up into the roiling clouds. Swallows were sailing over the grounds so lowly that Harry felt like he could easily snatch them right up, like dark snitches. "It's crazy but I'd love to fly in such weather. Just swoop around like the birds until the rain comes down."

"Harry Potter sir be an adventurer," Dobby groused. "Dobby knew from the first moment he saw Harry Potter sir!" He dusted his hands off and popped away, only to reappear next to Harry. "We better be going inside now. Harry Potter sir be owing Dobby a bowl of gazpacho and potato bread with herb butter."

As if on cue, Harry's stomach growled. "I guess I could eat."

They headed inside and stationed themselves right behind the living room window so Harry could watch the weather drama unfold. A little nap on the couch after that, accompanied by the rushing of heavy rain, was all he needed to be alert for his meeting with Healer Spleenbash in the evening.

"Dobby be popping Harry Potter into goblin trunk," the elf said, "because Dobby forgot to buy Floo powder. Dobby be very sorry and be punishing himself while Harry Potter sir be meeting Healer Spleenbash."

"Why would you punish yourself for that?" Harry asked incredulously. "Dobby, you don't need to punish yourself for anything! You're already doing a ton of stuff, just because you're great! I didn't even think of Floo powder, so why would you? And besides, I love going with you! Why would I use the Floo when you're offering to take me? Elf travel is, like, the greatest thing in the world! Almost better than flying, and I really love *that* a whole lot. So please just forget it, yeah?"

"Dobby can't, but Dobby be doing better." The elf sniffed wetly. Hastily, he grabbed Harry's hand and popped them away, right into the foyer of the Gringotts trunk.
"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said. "Healer Spleenbash will be by in a minute, so promise me you won't punish yourself, alright? If it helps, you can pop out and buy the Floo powder. Deal?"

"Deal," Dobby squeaked and popped away.

The fireplace lit up in green flames and Healer Spleenbash stepped out. Her very presence demanded Harry's full attention and he spent an exhausting hour in the study going over his food journal and potion intake.

"You've been getting a lot of sun lately," she remarked with a hint of praise in her voice. "Your bones will thank you, Heir Potter. Of course, a few weeks of good treatment won't undo a lifetime of neglect, but that's what the blue potions were for." She waved her spindly finger over Harry's body and a vibrant picture of his skeleton appeared between them. "See here? The density of your bones improved greatly, as did the quality of your cartilage all over your body. I want you to give it another week of potions, rest, and your elf's special food before we meet again. The warding exhausted your core, which is not surprising. Sharptooth reported your instinctual connection to the ward stone and the depth of the merger. It's something to be proud of, youngling, even if it pushes the warding of your garden back for a while."

"How long?" Harry asked worriedly. "Can we do it before school starts?"

"Certainly," Healer Spleenbash assured him. "Two to three weeks of rest and as little magic as possible should restore your core to its prime condition. You may commune with your ward stone but I'd even limit that to once a week, if it is even necessary."

"Alright. So ... Sharptooth told me that there would be files of mind healers to sort through?"

"Don't pretend to be eager," Healer Spleenbash smirked. She pulled several stacks of folders from her satchel. "Here, knock yourself out, Heir Potter. The magical signatures are embedded in the files; if you're magically compatible with someone, your magic will let you know. That person is a good candidate and you should meet them if nothing in their file disqualifies them in your eyes."

"Seems easy enough," Harry said. "Just feel the magic and toss or keep."

He touched the first file and felt exactly nothing. His questioning look made the healer snort.

"A big fat maybe," she commented.

The next one generated a vague sense of disquiet, so it went to the left on the designated no-pile. Another one joined it, and then the first spark of wow flitted over Harry's fingers.

"This is a yes," he told Healer Spleenbash. Shaking his head, he smiled. "Magic."
"Magic," she agreed.

It took less than ten minutes to weed the undesirables and blanks from the stack. Six positives remained, but even there Harry was able to establish a ranking.

"This one's the best match," he said and flipped the folder open. "Brady Williams. He looks nice. Friendly."

"He's young," Healer Spleenbash added, "and, most interestingly, another parselmouth. He works part-time in our snake breeding program when he's without a client."

She proceeded to tell Harry about the young man's qualifications, but Harry barely cared about his two university degrees in medicine and mind healing or the fact that the man apparently was some kind of prodigy among the healers. He was, however, very interested in learning that Williams hailed from Australia and was an avid surfer.

"So, would you like to meet him?" Healer Spleenbash asked slyly after she'd answered several more animated questions.

Harry shrugged, suddenly a little uncertain. "Sure, why not."

"Should you hit it off, Healer Williams will make several confidentiality vows and sign a contract before you begin to work together," she said, correctly guessing his misgivings. "Nothing you say will leave Gringotts without your express consent. How does tomorrow afternoon sound? Around four? He's a Brit at heart and will love your Dobby's tea."

Numbly, Harry nodded.

"Don't be afraid, youngling," Healer Spleenbash soothed. "Healer Williams is very good and he'll work hard to help you through your issues. Health is not only for the body, the soul needs care and healing, too. Giving it what it needs is only proper."

With that, she carefully touched his hunched shoulder and bid her farewells.

oOo

Harry slept until noon on the next day, finally feeling the full effects of the warding. Dobby periodically fed him but otherwise let him be until it was time to get up and pop over to the trunk.
To their surprise, Healers Spleenbash and Brady Williams were already there, and a lovely high tea was waiting for them all in the study. The goblin introduced them and then proceeded to ignore them both as she served herself.

"I feel honoured that you've chosen to meet me," Healer Williams said and smiled a smile that would have made Lockhart writhe with envy. He had long, dark hair, a three day's beard, tanned skin, and fascinating blue-green eyes. "It's not often that I get to meet a new parselmouth in Britain."

"You're the first after Tom Riddle for me," Harry admitted. "I didn't even know that there was someone else in the country. Everybody told me that speaking parseltongue is the mark of a dark wizard."

"Oh, nonsense," Williams replied cheerfully. "Scone?"

Harry accepted the scone, a heaping amount of clotted cream and fresh fruit. "Why is it nonsense? They all seemed quite convinced."

"Because they're children and have no idea what they're talking about." Williams fumbled through the inside of his robes. "Look who wanted to come along, Heir Potter. Your friendly neighbourhood snake."

"Snake!" Harry cried out. "How are your doing? How big was your mouse? I hope the trip to Hogwarts was worth it."

"Hello, young one. It was; I'm still digesting," Snake answered, and he indeed looked a bit thick around the middle. "The King of Snake's lair was very big, as was the King himself." Snake stretched from Williams' fingers towards Harry and flicked his little tongue over his inner elbow. "I could still taste the mortal wounds of you both. It's a miracle you're still here."

"I guess it is, yeah, but I had help." To Williams, Harry said, "Did you go as well?"

Williams shook his head. "The goblins didn't want to risk it, in case another basilisk was lurking around. While they trust their human employees, there is always an uncertain element with such things, and all the parselmouths in the bank understand that." He allowed Snake to wind himself around Harry's arm and served himself sandwiches. "But I was the one to take the eggs to the breeding facility and I will personally oversee their hatching. It's fascinating work since death adders bred from a basilisk are practically unheard of in this day and age. There is already a bidding war going on for the little ones."

They both took large bites of their food. Meanwhile, Snake climbed all over Harry, finally choosing a resting place around his neck.
"You're nice and warm," Snake hissed. "Sometimes I miss the sun."

"He's a free spirit," Williams said with laughter in his eyes. "That's why we're taking turns taking him along on trips. He doesn't even want a name for himself, just be out and about and see the world."

"Well, if everybody else has a name, Snake is good enough, I guess," Harry replied. "I like him."

"He likes you, too." Williams popped the last of his egg sandwich into his mouth. "Now, what would you like to know about me?"

"Uhm ..." Now that he could ask questions, Harry's mind went blank for a moment. "You're from Australia? Why are you working here, then? Don't you miss the beaches and kangaroos and stuff?"

Williams laughed. "Well, I certainly miss the beaches, but kangaroos can be right little blighters! I return regularly to see my family and do some work on the home farm. As to why I'm working here: I'm an employee of Gringotts, and as you may already know, Gringotts is not a bank but a country. I started in Australia but quickly learned that the British branch offers fascinating opportunities, and so I transferred here. I'll stay as long as I'm needed and feel challenged, and then I'll transfer again to another branch."

"Sounds busy," Harry said. "Why did you study medicine and this mind healing stuff?"

"Because it interested me and because I have a knack for understanding people. I also understand snakes rather well, and that's why I'm working with them if I have the time."

It all sounded too easy. "What are your hobbies? Do you fly?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Do you?" Williams challenged.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, I'm the seeker for the Gryffindor team at Hogwarts. But I don't have a broom right now. I meant to write my steward if I can get one."

"I'm sure he can arrange for one, Heir Potter," Healer Spleenbash interjected. "I'll relay the
Williams took a scone, cut it open and heaped clotted cream on the halves. "I'm sure that you'll want to meet with other healers before you make a decision, but maybe you're interested in visiting the snake houses here at Gringotts sometime. As a parselmouth, it could be a rewarding experience."

"Oh, could I? Could I also see the basilisk eggs?" Harry asked. "I feel bad for killing their mom, no matter how crazy she was."

"Personally, I don't see the harm, but I'll leave that decision to the head of the facility," Williams said. "Now, do you have more questions?"

Harry, having warmed up to the man quickly, now dared to ask about his family (mum and dad and an older brother), the home farm (which turned out to be one of Australia's most prestigious snake farms for valuable poisons and other potion ingredients), and what he liked to do with his free time besides flying and surfing. Williams had the gift of making even the interrogation seem like a spirited conversation and he never made Harry feel like a little boy or like someone in need of help.

Harry was almost disappointed when their tea ended and Healer Spleenbash nudged him to give Snake back to the older man.

"I'll keep my time free until you've chosen someone," Williams said to Harry and offered his hand for a shake. "I won't be insulted if it's going to be someone else, and I'll definitely send a note for that visit we talked about."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled. He shook the warm, strong hand and smiled shyly. "See you soon, Healer Williams."

"You too, Heir Potter." Williams winked and Flooed away with a swish of his robes.

"That went well," Healer Spleenbash remarked and made a note on a piece of parchment. "Do you feel up to meeting Healer Upton tomorrow?"

"Sure, why not," Harry replied with a shrug. "Uhm, I've got a question ... since I won't be staying in here much and I still got a ton of homework to do ... could I take some of your books to the cottage? I'll return them when I'm done, of course."

"Certainly. We have all of the books tagged, so even if you lose one, at the end of the lease we'll just recall them."
"Oh." Harry grinned. "That's neat! Then I'll just ... you know, pack a few now."

"And maybe you should occasionally show your face to your relatives," Healer Spleenbash said dryly. "Their carrying on about your absence is getting worrisome."

"You're hearing that?" Harry was mortified.

She snorted. "It's hard not to, Heir Potter. They're the worst kind of muggles."

"As I said, they probably want their servant back," Harry muttered bitterly. "I won't go back up there without Dobby. My cousin likes to chase me around and lets his friends beat me up."

"Dumbledore should be ashamed of having placed you here, but it seems like you have it well in hand." She put her parchment away and showed her pointy teeth. "Your elf is a bloodthirsty little thing: you should capitalize on that ... in a manner that won't reflect on you, of course."

"Please don't give him ideas, Healer Spleenbash," Harry groaned. "He tried to set the anti-apparition wards to the antarctic continent, the Phlegraean Fields, and as a last resort into Mount Etna. We honestly fought about it! And then he pouted for the rest of the evening."

"He knows what he's about," she shrugged. "Keeping vermin away is hard work, youngling, and you'd best just leave him to it. I bid you good night, and I'll see you here tomorrow at four."

She vanished just as quickly as Healer Williams and left Harry to his brooding thoughts. Going up into his room seemed like such a burden but he forced himself to climb the stairs.

"Dobby?" he called quietly. "Are you back yet?"

"Dobby be waiting for Harry Potter sir's call," the elf said and appeared on the desk. "How may Dobby serve?"

"Healer Spleenbash said that I should show my face upstairs every now and then, but ..." Harry
inhaled deeply. "But I'm kind of afraid what the Dursleys will do to me. She said that they're very angry."

"Dobby be protecting Harry Potter sir," Dobby assured him. "Dobby be putting perimeter ward around Harry Potter sir so no one can touch him. If dreadful muggles be mean, they be having nightmares later."

"Thank you," Harry breathed and stepped to the door. "Well then, into the fray."

oOo

The next afternoon, Harry and Dobby popped half an hour early into the trunk so Harry could pick even more books for the cottage. He was also determined to change Healer Spleenbash's mind on the matter of his relatives because last night had been terrible on many different levels. Uncle Vernon had raged all throughout dinner, his face worryingly puce-coloured and his shirt stained with sweat. Dudley hadn't been any better; egged on by his father's fury, he'd tried all evening to catch Harry and hit him. This, of course, backfired spectacularly. Every time he attempted to land a hit, he smacked himself instead, and hard. His wailing, along with Vernon's apoplectic rage, was enough to instill fear in ten grown men, nevermind one lone almost-teenager who wanted nothing more than to be left alone.

"I'm not going back there," Harry told himself over and over again. "Dumbledore has no idea ... he should just keep his long nose out of my business ..."

He startled when Healer Spleenbash rapped on the door frame of the study. "Oh, hello! Welcome, Healer Spleenbash."

The goblin stepped aside and introduced a middle-aged slender woman with blond hair and glasses. "This is Healer Marina Upton. She's specialized in mind healing for children and also mediates family conflicts."

After last evening's production, Harry was not keen on hearing that. In his opinion, no one could mediate between him and the Dursleys. "Hello," he said cautiously.

"Hello, Heir Potter." Healer Upton offered her hand for a shake, which the boy reluctantly accepted. "How do you do?"
"How do you do?" he returned.

Healer Upton smiled. "Very polite, but in this instance I am actually interested in hearing about how you are doing."

"Good, I guess. It's the holidays." Harry shrugged. "And you?"

Healer Spleenbash, perhaps sensing that an ice breaker was needed, announced that tea was being served now. As Harry was the host, he poured tea and offered food, but his heart wasn't in it. And unlike yesterday, the conversation simply wouldn't take off, no matter what Healer Upton tried. Her magic felt nice enough, but Harry was now learning that he might be magically compatible with someone and still not click on a personal level. It was a disappointment for the woman, he could tell, and he tried to be polite, but Harry honestly was just glad to have her gone.

"I didn't expect it to fail so spectacularly," Healer Spleenbash told him, her eyebrows raised and voice a little questioning. "What was it you didn't like about her?"

"I don't know," Harry said uncomfortably. "She was nice, I guess. It just didn't feel okay to talk with her like that. Like I'd be telling secrets I'd rather only tell my mom, you know?"

"Oh." Healer Spleenbash cleared her throat. "Well, in that case you might want to reject the other two female healers, or at least meet them when you're done with the males first."

"Uhm, I think ..." Harry hesitated. "I think I might want Healer Williams. I like him, and I don't want to meet any more people like that."

"Why not?" she probed, though without judgement.

"I dunno. It's just ... grown-ups. There never were a lot of good grown-ups around and it ..." Harry bit down on his lip. "It kind of stresses me out. Talking with them, I mean. They never take me seriously."

"Not all of them, I hope," Healer Spleenbash teased but sobered up immediately. "I understand, maybe better than you think. Healer Williams will be glad, and before you ask: yes, it is perfectly acceptable for him to teach you about being a parslemouth, and a wizard, of course. To own the truth, he would've been my first choice for you, as well." She made to grab a handful of Floo
"Er, before you leave, could we talk about my relatives, please?" Harry shuffled a little from one foot onto the other. "They were in a really bad mood last night. I don't want to go back there again. I can't. If Dobby hadn't been around, my uncle would've ..." He fell silent, glancing helplessly at the goblin.

Healer Spleenbash sighed. "I know, youngling. Chief Ragnok had us placing listening charms on the trunk, just to monitor the situation in your home. It's an untenable situation, which is made worse by the ward Steward Sharptooth mentioned a while back. Do you remember?"

"Yes? What about it?"

"This ward is based on your blood, Heir Potter. To be exact, it's your mother's blood keeping you safe, but only here and the near vicinity of the house."

"Professor Dumbledore told me that it was my mother's protection that helped me defeat Professor Quirrel in my first year," Harry exclaimed. "But if my mum's magic is doing that, why isn't it also helping against ... against them?"

"I can only theorize, but it probably has to do with the circumstances that night. She wanted to protect you from Voldemort, so that's what her sacrifice accomplished. Her own flesh and blood might not even have registered in that very moment, especially since you have a godfather who was supposed to take care of you." Healer Spleenbash straightened herself against the heaviness of the conversation. "Somehow, Dumbledore has managed to cast the blood ward over this house, keeping Voldemort's followers from finding you, but also trapping you here."

"I'd be safer in my cottage," Harry muttered. "I don't need the Dursleys. It's not my-"

"Don't say it!" Healer Spleenbash suddenly bellowed. "Don't say it, Heir Potter. The consequences would be dire!"

"Why?" Harry demanded. "Why can't I just leave? They never wanted me, and they're doing their best to ruin my life!"

"Because Dumbledore would know, child!" Healer Spleenbash roared back. "He's your guardian right now, and he could take all of this away! One session in the Wizengamot is all it takes to further his hold on you!" She breathed heavily. "It's unfair and Gringotts is not pleased, but those are the facts. If you want to keep this secret, you'll play his game."
"I hate it." Harry was so furious that the whole trunk rattled ominously. "I'll get him for this!"

"You and the Nation both," Spleenbash growled. "Now let's be practical. My friends in the warding division calculated how much time you'd have to spend in the Dursley residence each summer to power the wards and throw Dumbledore off the trail."

"And?"

"Around three to four weeks should do it, but you'd have to be here constantly to accomplish it. Short trips away from the house are not problematic, but days at the cottage or generally away from the neighbourhood can easily disrupt the process. They recommend getting the charging out of the way first and spending the rest of your holidays elsewhere after."

"And we can't just take the wards with me, right?" Harry asked tiredly. "Because that would be too easy."

A speculative look came over Healer Spleenbash's face before she schooled her expression. "Be that as it may, you have a few days left for this summer. Why don't you give it a full week in your room, just to be on the safe side, and after that Gringotts will help conceal the fact that you're not residing here anymore?"

"It's a deal," Harry said quickly and grabbed the healer's hand for a shake. "But I don't have to like it."

"You most certainly do not," she agreed in such an arch tone that Harry was reminded of Professor McGonagall. "Now that this is cleared up, I suggest you call your elf and get settled. Maybe get that homework out of the way I'm sure is still wanting your attention."

oOo

A whole week in the Dursleys' house seemed like hell. Harry even used the goblin trunk to use the bathroom, but the mere knowledge that he was there drove Uncle Vernon crazy. Several times a day he attempted to force the door open, alternating between his best drilling machine, a saw and, most notably, a blowtorch. It never worked, thanks to Dobby, but it was obvious that thwarting Vernon was becoming a fulltime job.

"It not be good," Dobby huffed after he'd made Vernon's tools fall apart in his meaty hands. "Big mean muggle be supposed to give up. Instead he be buying *battering ram*. Dobby thinks he be crazy."
It was true that Vernon was so obsessed with Harry that he'd wasted his whole holiday on trying to wring his neck. He neglected everything else and even refused to go back to work on Monday, which was day four of Harry's exile. Dudley, at least, had friends and spent the vast amount of his time outside, probably terrorizing smaller children in the neighbourhood and stealing their pocket money.

"Only three more days," Harry groaned. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"At least your homework be done now," Dobby tried to console him.

It still was an eternity. Books, no matter how interesting, couldn't make up for the lack of sunshine and grass and his new house. Dobby was keen on working on his garden and Harry didn't have the heart to ask him to stay with him all the time.

On day five, Harry decided that he absolutely needed a short walk and had Dobby pop him to the park. There, away from the kids his own age, Harry rambled along the paths and stopped in a spot of sunlight whenever it was safe to do so. He even found a hidden place for a small break, sat down and sipped his lemonade.

When a house elf popped up in front of him, he wasn't even surprised. He just assumed that it was Dobby. However, the shabby pillow case that hung on the creature and its slight build made him realize his error right away.

"Er, hello," he said awkwardly.

"Hello," the elf squeaked back, watching Harry with huge, blue eyes. "You be Harry Potter?"

"Uh, yes. That's me. What's your name?"

"I be Betty," she said, wringing her tiny hands. "Harry Potter sir please not be angry at Betty, but Betty be following house elf Dobby around. Dobby be harvesting many elf berries and has lots and lots of work to do. He be so strong! Betty be wanting to ask whether Harry Potter sir be maybe needing another elf. Betty's master died two weeks ago, you see, and it be hard for Betty all alone." Her eyes welled with tears. "Please give Betty a chance, Betty be a good elf."

"Er, wow." Harry exhaled, fighting against the astonishment. "Uhm, I don't know. I'll have to talk with Dobby. Could you, er, wait a minute?" He offered the miserable creature his lemonade and the rest of his apple slices and then called for his friend. "Dobby, could you please come? Like, right now?"
At once, the house elf appeared in front of Harry. His shorts and shirt were brown with dirt, as were his hands. "How may Dobby help?"

Harry just pointed at Betty. "This is Betty. She just popped in to say hello. Apparently she needs a home, but I don't know her from Eve, so ..."

Dobby's eyes narrowed. "Dobby be handling this." He snapped his fingers and he and Betty disappeared in a small burst of magic.

Harry had no idea where they'd gone, or how long he'd have to wait, but he had his novel and a sandwich in his backpack and would be able to hold out for a while.

oOo

Harry gave it more than an hour before he decided to find his own way back into the Dursleys' house. Whatever the house elves had to discuss, he didn't want to disturb them, but sneaking in the house too late would almost certainly alert his aunt and uncle. When he stepped onto Privet Drive, however, Dudley was already laying in wait.

"Hey, Potter! You're finally having the nerve to show up?" the fat boy called, alerting a couple of neighbours. His friends laughed stupidly and Dudley continued, "That's good, because Dad's been a nutjob ever since you decided to do a runner. Grab him, guys!"

And it was Harry hunting all over again. As fast as his legs would carry him, Harry sprinted away, right towards Mrs. Figg's house. He didn't like the old lady much, what with her million cats and the stink in the house, but it was a hundred times better than getting caught by his cousin and his goons.

He turned a corner, Magnolia Crescent already in sight - and was tugged away in a caroussel-like pop that had his head spinning.

"Dobby be sorry, but dealing with Betty be much more ... intense than Dobby anticipated," Dobby said and looked to the left and right. "We be safe here from mean muggle brats."

Out of breath, Harry managed to stammer his thanks. When he'd calmed down a little, he asked, "What about Betty, though? Where is she?"

Dobby shrugged shiftily. "She not be understanding certain things ... Dobby be talking to her again soon, though, because there be lots of work to do and Dobby be needing help."

"And she's rather cute," Harry teased. "But she needs to lose the pillow case."
"That be one of the problems," Dobby admitted. "Betty be scared of being free. She not be feeling all that well, but Dobby be working on it."

"Okay. Uhm, so, could you maybe pop me to my room? I'm really done with Dudley, and I guess we can forget about interacting with my relatives. Being in the house will have to be enough, because I'm not doing that again."

"It be good plan," the elf agreed. "I be placing better silencing and repelling charm. Bad uncle be so crazy, he be breaking them every day."

oOo

The last two days of Harry's imprisonment passed rather quickly, partly in thanks to Dobby who was actually able to pop over to France and deliver a letter to Hermione, and even brought one back a couple of hours later, and partly because of the mystery of the small female house elf that had decided to skulk around Privet Drive. Betty cast longing, yet somewhat horrified looks at Harry whenever he secretly went outside for a walk and took to doing odd little jobs for him, like pouring his lemonade from its bottle into a conjured glass or retying his trainers when the laces became lose. It seemed to cheer her up and so Harry let her, but he was still nonplussed about how she'd even found him.

On day eight of his stay at the Dursleys, a rap on the inside of the Gringotts trunk woke him up very early.

Dobby immediately popped down, only to reappear a moment later. "It be Mind Healer Williams. He be asking whether Harry Potter sir be wanting to leave this joint."

Boy, did Harry ever. As fast as he humanly could he got up, dressed, and practically ran down the stairs of the trunk.

"Good morning," Williams said with a chuckle. "I thought I'd spring you, now that the wards are fully charged. As I'm not added to your property wards yet, and we need to do the confidentiality vows and the contract signing first, I propose breakfast at Gringotts. After that, I've got a surprise for you."

Excited as he was, Harry allowed Dobby to clean him up and practically pulled Dobby and Williams along when the elf then popped them to Gringotts' customer hall.

Healer Spleenbash was already waiting in Sharptooth's office and explained succinctly why the old goblin was needed.

"He is your steward, your welfare is his responsibility, even if Gringotts is providing all services for free. Therefore he'll oversee both the Healer's Vow and the signing of the contract." She looked at
Harry and smirked at his still slightly rumpled appearance. "It's up to you how you want this morning to proceed, Heir Potter. Do you want breakfast first, or do you want to get the official part done and go on to your cottage?"

"I'm not hungry yet," Harry said. "And eating breakfast at home would be great. You can come, of course, if you'd like."

"We're needed here, but thank you for the invitation," Sharptooth replied. "Healer Williams, shall we begin?"

The young man drew his wand and recited a long oath. A little alarmed, Harry listened as he swore on his magic and even his life to treat Harry to the best of his abilities, to never reveal his whereabouts or that of his properties, and to also keep everything he should learn of his private affairs absolutely secret. In short, Healer Williams signed his life away so Harry could remain safe. It didn't sit well with the boy, but Williams was the first to reassure him that he wasn't the only high profile client requiring an unbreakable healer's oath, and that in the future there would probably be many more.

At last, the healing contract was signed by all four of them and a slightly celebratory mood came up.

"You'll need to add Healer Williams to your wards if you'd like to have your counselling sessions away from Gringotts," Healer Spleenbash said. "It's easy to do: your house elf can harvest his magical signature to admit him onto the property. After that you can comfortably add him."

"I'm fine with either," Williams said. "It's completely up to you."

"We can go to my place," Harry decided. "Dobby is really good at kicking arse, and I'd rather sit in my garden than in a bank. No offence."

"None taken. Then you'd best be off," Sharptooth said. "Enjoy your freedom, Heir Potter. If anything comes up at your relative's residence, Gringotts will let you know."

"Thanks, sir, ma'am, I appreciate it. May you always find profit in all your endeavors."

"So mote it be," Healer Spleenbash returned his farewell.

Dobby snapped his fingers, pulling a small amount of glittering mist from Healer Williams' skin. Then he vanished, only to reappear a second later, grab both wizards and pop them away.

oOo
Healer Williams' surprise was evident as he took his surroundings in. Maybe going for effect, Dobby had dropped them in the middle of the lawn in front of the cottage, allowing Williams a good look at the property.

"You be going to ward stone now, Harry Potter sir," Dobby said, "and Dobby be taking care of food. Breakfast be served soon."

Harry accompanied his guest to the terrace and went on to the cellar, trusting that Dobby had an eye on the situation. The ward stone already felt open to the new configuration, so all Harry had to do - and it came quite easily! - was to confirm the presence of the new person and allow them to come again as long as they didn't harbour ill intent. Remembering Healer Williams' strict vow about his safety, Harry also stipulated that visitors could only arrive on the lawn and were not allowed to enter the cottage without his permission.

It took a couple of minutes, but Harry felt very grown up and accomplished as he joined the healer at the garden table.

"You have found a great home," Williams said as he looked at the surroundings. "If you ever feel like you don't want to have our sessions here, just tell me. I'll understand if you want to keep this as your refuge."

"We haven't even started yet, but I will. Thanks." Harry smiled when suddenly the table filled with plates, cups, cutlery and breakfast dishes. It was obvious that Dobby relished in cooking for two, and he just as obviously wanted to make a good impression. "How do you like your tea?"

"Just a little milk, please." Williams sighed as he took a sip. "I must confess that I was shocked to learn that you hadn't received any counselling after the incident with the basilisk, and I suspect that there was more going on at Hogwarts before that, especially concerning what you told me about the other kids' remarks about you being a parselmouth. Unfortunately no one out of Hogwarts knows what; Dumbledore is very tight-lipped about it all."

Harry pulled a face. "He always says that Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain, but I don't think that's true. In my first year, he hid something in the school and had a three-headed dog guard it. My friend Hermione could open the door with a simple unlocking charm. I didn't think much about it at the time, but it shouldn't have been that easy, right?"

"No, certainly not." Williams' brow furrowed. "I thought Healer Spleenbash was exaggerating when she told me that you'd have a lot to work through."

"We don't have to talk about it," Harry said hopefully. "And also, what can you, or she, do about it? Voldemort will still be there, and I don't think Dumbledore will listen. He didn't listen to Professor McGonagall either when she told him to get the dog out of the school."

Williams' eyes narrowed a little. "A three-headed dog?"
"Yeah, Fluffy. He was guarding a trapdoor, but anyway, it was way too easy getting through to him. He nearly bit mine and my friends' heads off."

Healer Williams paled a little. "What? His deputy warned him and he didn't listen? He's acting outright against the other teachers' wishes?"

"I don't know about that, I only overheard him talking to Professor McGonagall," Harry mumbled, busy with his porridge. "But he's the headmaster, right? And the most powerful wizard in Britain. His chocolate frog card says so."

"That does not give him the right to decide such things," Williams countered. He set his tea cup down and snagged a piece of bread from the basket and started buttering it with agitated knife strokes. "I hope you know that the students' welfare and safety should always come first. A school is no place for a cerberus - that's the name of those three-headed dogs. I mean," and he suddenly pulled a comical face, "when and, more importantly, where did Dumbledore even take it for a walk?"

His over the top grimace had Harry giggling into his food. "Dunno. I guess that was Hagrid's job. He loved Fluffy."

Williams stopped asking Harry questions about Hogwarts at that point and instead encouraged him to talk about his favourite things. A little hesitant at first, Harry soon fairly gushed about Hedwig and Dobby and his friends from school. From there, the discussion naturally turned to sports and flying, and whether Harry had a favourite Quidditch team.

"Nah, not really. But I know that the Chudley Cannons are the worst."

"They are," Williams laughed. He cleaned his plate with the last of his bread and sighed happily. "Compliments to your elf friend, Heir Potter. That was outstanding. Now ..." He paused for effect. "I did promise you a surprise, so why don't we take a short walk and I'll show you?"

Harry was only too glad to get off his bum and do something after his house arrest. Healer Williams only led him as far as the point where they'd arrived earlier before reaching into his robe pocket and producing ...

"A broom!" Harry cried. "You really brought me a broom?"

"Better yet, I brought two brooms ... and this!" Williams fished something golden from his pocket.
Grinning from ear to ear at the sight of the snitch, Harry immediately accepted the broom and swung himself up, quickly rising a few feet. Williams followed suit, though not before leaving his robes on the lawn.

Forgotten was talk about Hogwarts, Voldemort or even nice things like hobbies and interests as they soared through the air, whirling around and trying to outdo each other with daring moves. When the snitch came into play, Harry learned just how good a flyer Healer Williams was. Not only was he able to get the absolut best out of his Nimbus, he was thinking fantastically outside the box and surprised Harry regularly with new tricks that had his mind spinning. However, it was equally obvious that the young man was also surprised by Harry's talent and so their time in the air was one of the best Harry had ever spent on a broom.

"You're a little sunburned ... let me help with that," Williams said once they'd landed and he'd regretfully told Harry that their time for the day was up. He waved his hand and a wave of magic washed over Harry's warm skin. "Better. I'll teach you the spell next time." He smiled. "I had a lot of fun, I'm looking forward to it!"

"Me too," Harry replied shyly. "When will you be back?"

"I thought Monday would be good. The goblins will likely begin warding your other property on Tuesday, July 27th. It'll take several days and I'd like to go over the specifics with you beforehand. You'll also be knackered afterwards, so, sorry in advance if you sleep through your birthday."

"It'd be worth it," Harry said.

"Make use of the weekend and spend the time sleeping, resting and flying." Williams winked. "Oh, and maybe you'll find some energy for this, too." With a little flick of his fingers, a handful of small toys flew from his robe pocket and enlarged on the lawn. "I can't believe I almost forgot about those. With compliments from Steward Sharptooth. See you Monday!"

While Harry was staring gobsmacked at all the things he'd been wanting for his garden, Williams disappeared in a cloud of black smoke.

"Dobby!" Harry called as he reverently touched the metal frame of the large outdoor trampoline. "You've got to see this!"

The elf appeared and stared at the bounty. "Dobby be installing the swings at once!"

With a few snaps of his fingers, the swings were gently swaying underneath the willow tree, the trampoline had pride of place a little left to the garden in front of the cottage, and the new bike stood red and gleaming right in front of Harry.
"The goblins are the best!" Harry cried. Eagerly, he scrambled onto the bike and began pedalling as fast as he could.

As he circled the house, Dobby bounced madly on the trampoline, giggling like a little loon and whooping every now and then. They traded later and completely exhausted themselves. It was great, easily one of the best days of Harry’s summer, and it extended over the whole weekend.

oOo

When Healer Williams arrived on Monday at ten o'clock on the dot, he met two rather lazy individuals. Instead of scolding Harry, the man praised him for enjoying himself and asked for a turn on the trampoline himself before they began to work.

As Williams bounced and flipped in the air like some kind of circus artist, Harry and Dobby watched him from the shade of a parasol, drinking lemonade.

"He's really good," Harry said to Dobby. "I'm going to ask him how he times his flips."

"Dobby be catching Harry Potter sir if he falls," the elf promised. "But now there be a lesson. Dobby be going to the garden and putting more elf berry cuttings in. Harry Potter sir be having a look later?"

"Of course!"

Dobby vanished and the meeting began. Instead of pestering Harry about Quirrel and Fluffy, Williams first patiently showed Harry how to apply the sun burn protection spell to himself.

"It's very easy," the healer explained, "as with most spells, intent is what really counts. Just imagine the magic spreading over your skin like sunscreen. Me, I like to think of it as popping an egg on my head. It tickles when it flows down. Here, watch ..." With a gentle tap of his finger on his head, a small, visible burst of magic popped into existence on Healer Williams head and rapidly flowed downwards. For a moment, all of his visible skin shimmered a light green. Then the glow faded and the wizard smiled. "And done. This will protect you all day. Just apply the spell in the morning and you won't have to think about it."

"Okay. But what about the finite spell?"
Williams was visibly taken aback for a second before answering, "Good point, and even an important one. If someone hits you with that spell, I want you to get the hell away first and worry about your sunscreen later. No one who hits other people out of the blue with finite incantatem ever has good intentions, alright?"

"Yeah, got it. Also, I won't burn just because someone ends the spell."

"Not for a good few minutes, at least, and there are easy healing spells for that kind of damage," Healer Williams agreed. "Now, let me show you the wand movement. You can try on me first, since it's hard for beginners to spell themselves."

Harry soaked up the lesson like a sponge. He loved doing magic, even if he'd not done anything as per Healer Spleenbash's instruction. After a few practice runs into the air, it fairly burst out of him when Healer Williams declared him good enough to try the spell on him.

"You don't have to tap me on the head, but if it helps, you may do that, of course."

He sat patiently in the grass as Harry collected himself, recited the spell once under his breath and then gently tapped the man on the head with his wand. "Sol praesidio."

A small bubble of magic burst on Williams' hair and covered his face and neck before fizzing out.

"Well done!" Williams called. "Very good for your first try! Again! There's quite a bit of me left to cover."

Harry cast the spell again, this time with more confidence. Imagining what he wanted to happen helped greatly and he managed to get down to Williams' forearms. Without needing to be prompted, he tried several times more until at last the spell flowed down on Williams' body as if Harry had done it for years.

"I'm impressed," the healer said sincerely. "It's not a difficult spell, but you seem to grasp the concepts of spell work rather easily. With your permission, I'd like to teach you more. There are literally dozens, nay, hundreds of spells and charms designed to make our everyday lives easier, and as a home owner you could probably do with them."

"Sure, why not." Harry grinned. "Can I try on myself now?"
Williams cast a wandless tempus charm and sighed. "I'm afraid not. We still have to do a little counselling, or Healer Spleenbash will tan my hide."

Harry grimaced, which made Williams laugh.

"Don't worry. We call it counselling, but in truth we'll just be doing a lot of talking. In order to help you deal with stuff, I first need to know what that stuff even is. Alright?"

Not really convinced but willing to try, Harry nodded. "Okay. What are we talking about, then?"

"I'd really like to hear more about your first year at Hogwarts, but I'm interested in anything you want to tell me, really."

"I don't know how to do that," Harry admitted. "Talking to adults, I mean."

"Healer Spleenbash mentioned that," Williams said evenly, "and it is fairly obvious why. Your relatives weren't a shining example of caring guardianship and Dumbledore's behaviour couldn't have helped, either. But," and Williams' frown vanished, "you realized that for yourself, which is very good. It's even better that you decided to give others a chance despite your unpleasant experiences. You found friends at Hogwarts, and a house elf liked you enough to stay with you and help you out. They're not human adults, of course, but you know already that not everybody is the same."

Harry was relieved to hear that, but felt that he had to be honest. "It's not just them or the teachers at Hogwarts, though. The teachers at my primary school didn't listen either when I told them that Dudley, my cousin, was bullying me."

"They didn't listen?" Williams asked. "Why?"

"Dunno." Shrugging, Harry picked at a few grass blades. "I guess the Dursleys convinced them that I was a trouble maker and always inventing things and that Dudley couldn't possibly bully someone."

"Did you have to go to the school nurse because of the bullying? Did your cousin hurt you?"

Squirming a little, Harry admitted it. "But only until I noticed that I was faster than him. And," he blushed, "also a bit smarter. I mean, I'd memorize when he'd be where so I could avoid him and his friends, and I got pretty good at climbing trees. Once, I kind of spelled myself on a roof at the school. The teachers were super angry and my uncle locked me in my cup-, er, room without supper for a week."

"Your uncle withheld food from you for a week?" Williams' eyebrows rose. "Because you ran from
"your cousin who wanted to beat you up?"

"Er, yeah. But it was kind of alright because Dudley couldn't get to me then, and Aunt Petunia didn't want him to hit me much anyway because the nurse asked her about it a couple of times."

"So, at least the school nurse tried to investigate?"

"Oh. Uhm, no. Not that one. The one at the doctor's office, who gave me my shots before I went to school. My arms were bruised and she had to give them to me there." Harry flushed and pointed to his bum. "Aunt Petunia was really angry after they talked."

"But nothing changed. Did someone come by the house, maybe someone from another office? Like social services?"

"Er, I don't know. I don't think so, but they could've been by while I was at school, I guess." Harry shrugged. "The nurse was nice, but Aunt Petunia didn't take me there again."

"The nurse tried to do the right thing," Healer Williams assured him. "There are procedures and guidelines for cases like yours and doctors especially are required to follow them. It's unfortunate that her intervention didn't have an effect, and I'm sorry for that."

"Well, I'm away from them now," Harry said quietly. "Next summer, I only have to go there for three weeks or so, and the goblins promised that I don't actually have to deal with them during that time. I mean, Healer Spleenbash wanted me to; I suppose it was because the wards charge quicker then, but not after the last time."

"Healer Spleenbash informed me about the blood ward," Williams admitted, "and I'm sorry that remaining there even for that long is necessary. Unfortunately, I agree that keeping Dumbledore off your trail is the best way to aid you in getting better and up to speed for your age group. After consulting your parents' files, neither of them was especially small and while you've already sprouted up an inch, there's still a little way to go until Healer Spleenbash and I will be satisfied with your development."

"But I'm feeling tons better already," Harry assured him. "Your potions work, Healer Spleenbash told me so, and I'm doing the breathing exercises she sent along a couple of weeks ago for stress management. As long as the Dursleys are leaving me alone, everything's fine."

"But that wasn't always so," Williams guessed, a little sadly.

"Yeah, maybe I wanted them to like me," Harry said roughly, scowling at the sudden sting of tears in his eyes. "But I'm not gonna try anymore. I'm not stupid. I stopped when I was six."
"It wasn't stupid hoping for that at all. It's only natural for children to want their caretakers to approve of them and show them affection. You learn life's skills from them, ideally, and if they fall short, that process is disturbed. It's frankly unforgivable, what your relatives did, Harry, and it's natural and just that you feel anger and betrayal."

"But it's not getting me anywhere," Harry snapped. "I hate them, and they don't even care!"

"I know," Williams sighed and pulled Harry against his side in a one-armed hug when the boy shuddered. "I'm sorry."

They sat for a while, just breathing and living in the moment. Harry felt open and raw, the suppressed demons of his childhood scratching and clawing at him like malicious rats. The healer's quiet presence helped, though, and he was able to rally eventually.

"Sorry," he mumbled, embarrassed.

"Don't be," Williams replied. "I want you to confront these things so you can find closure. An uncaring family is one of the worst things for someone to put behind, but I'm certain that you will be able to find peace eventually. Give yourself time. They hurt you for so long - no one expects you to be fine tomorrow, or next month, or even a year from now."

"But a year of listening to me whine about my relatives can't be fun," Harry protested.

"No, it isn't," Williams said. He smiled mischievously in an obvious bid to lighten the mood and added, "But the goblins pay me very well and I like to entertain myself by imagining all the mean things I could do to horrible people. If someone deserves it, it makes me feel like Spiderman, or Batman."

Harry laughed wetly. "Too bad muggle baiting is forbidden."

"Not in my thoughts, it isn't," Williams said cheerfully. "I can torture them to my heart's content. And you can, too, you know. Even thinking about it can release tension, just like a good cry. It's healthy every now and then."

"But I don't want to be like that," Harry mumbled. "Thinking about things like that makes my scar hurt, and I don't want to feel even more miserable because of them."

"Is that so? You feel pain when you're angry?" Healer Williams picked up his wand from the grass and pointed it at Harry's forehead. "May I cast on you while you think about something particularly horrible you'd like to do to your cousin? It's just a diagnostic spell, don't worry."

Harry shrank back a little. "I don't want to have a headache. Nothing works on those and they're
horrid."

Williams paused and then put his wand back down. "I see. You're right, we shouldn't do this before the warding, then. But would you be willing to try after it's done and you've rested?"

"Do I have to?" Harry asked quietly.

"No, of course not." Williams carefully touched Harry's tightly clenched fist. "But I think that there might be a connection between your anger issues and the piece of Voldemort in your head. Knowing as much as we can about that thing will help the healers to prepare the procedure to take it out. You'll be safer as a result. But if you don't want to, I'll respect that."

Harry was quiet for long moments. Finally, he asked, "Can I think about it?"

"Take all the time you need, and maybe talk to your elf. He might have advice for you that Gringotts hasn't considered yet. Every little bit helps, I mean that."

"Okay. Thank you."

"No, thank you, Heir Potter. You're very brave, taking on all of that by yourself. It can't be easy and we at Gringotts are very conscious of that fact."

"It's not a big deal," Harry muttered, wiping at his cheeks.

"Yes, it is," Healer Williams disagreed with a gentle smile. "Anyway, to completely throw you for a loop: let's talk about the warding tomorrow!"

At that, Dobby popped up next to Harry, a scowl on his dirty face. "You be talking too long. You be needing a lunch break before talking about horribly exhausting warding!" He pointed at Healer Williams. "No business talk during lunch, or else."

Both wizards heeded the elf's words and ate their food in near silence. Over dessert, Harry finally became curious enough to ask what was expected of him on the following day.

"It'll be horrible, there's no other way to say it," Williams said with a grimace. "You're not believing me right now, but it'll go like this: Gringotts has planned for four days full of work. Tomorrow, they'll place the main ward stone somewhere on the property. You should've heard the curses of the warders when they realized that they had to fight an nest of whomping willows for the perfect spot. They appealed to Chief Ragnok for combat pay! It was hilarious ... and sobering at the same time, because the chief actually approved their request. After the main ward stone, they'll place the first seven times seven perimeter ward stones. You already know what to do with them, so be prepared to
lose quite a bit of blood. Don't worry, though, Healers Spleenbash, Bonepick, and myself will be right beside you. Then on day two, you'll do the same for the next seven times seven perimeter ward stones."

"I have to do that twice?" Harry asked with considerable dismay. "Bloody hell."

"I know, and you should be happy to have Malijar's Gift as ward stones, because if it were lesser material, the number of stones would be much higher," Williams sighed. "Anyway, at the end of day two the goblins will cast their ward matrix over the foundation and make the property unplottable. That's a travelling nightmare right there, what with around sixty goblins having to use a portkey to find the place. Right now, because you're the owner and the configuration is open, they can use elf travel. We do have a few house elves at Gringotts, but they're mostly working in the kitchens and keep the offices tidy."

"Dobby could pop a few of them," Harry smirked, feeling a little better, "for a fee."

"You learn entirely too fast," Williams chuckled. "It's a lot of ward communion for you on day three while the goblins place the war wards, which is the truly exhausting part. For every ward placed, you'll have to do a communion to accept the setting. Then, on day four, if everything goes well, only the anti-apparition ward and the intent-based wards will be left, and of course more ward communion for you."

"I'll sleep for a week," Harry groaned.

"But you'll be done on your birthday, which'll be a pretty darn slick present, if you ask me," Williams countered and lifted his eyebrows challengingly.

"I know. It's just ... I don't like being so tired all the time. It's like, wasting time I could use for better things."

"Hmm. Tell me, are you done with your homework for the summer?" Williams asked.

"Uh, yes?"

"And have you any truly pressing tasks, other than warding your property, which you will have to complete during the next week?"

"No ... ?"
"Then please believe me when I tell you that resting after such a magically expensive venture is the absolute best way to spend your time. Your body and mind both will need the time to find their balance. In fact, it's absolutely necessary, and as we've established before, nothing should be more important to you than your own health and wellbeing. At least not right now." Healer Williams took the last sip of his coffee. "Do you have any specific questions about the warding itself?"

"If there isn't anything I don't know already, I don't." Harry hesitated. "But I forgot the spell for the perimeter ward stones. Could I maybe have it before we start?"

"Head Warder Shanoo will write everything down for you, you just have to read it off the parchment and, of course, mean it. The goblins will do the rest."

"You've no idea how much I'll mean it," Harry sighed and put his head down on the table. "I really had no idea how exhausting all of this is. Being on your own is hard!"

"But it can be very rewarding," Williams said. "You're reaping some of the rewards even now, don't you? And when you're done in a few days, you'll be right proud of your accomplishment, and deservedly so."

"I don't know," Harry mumbled into the table cloth. "Dobby'll want to work there all day, since the place is supposed to be his garden for elf food, and I'll be here alone."

"You could go with him," Williams replied. "It's not exactly luxurious, but why shouldn't you be able to pack a few things and spend time there? You could read or fly or just nap in the shade somewhere."

Harry groaned again. "I forgot that I can do that ... again. Why?"

"You'll get used to it eventually," Williams said with a little laugh. "But I'm pretty sure it'll never get boring working with you, Heir Potter. You need to get used to a lot of things, after all."

"Argh."

oOo

The first big day of the warding began promptly at eight. Harry was up by seven and ready ten minutes before Healer Williams was supposed to pick him up.
"Are you sure that you can pop us?" Harry asked Dobby. "Even Healer Williams?"

"Dobby can! Dobby be always able to find Harry Potter sir's properties."

The elf was armed to the teeth with a picnic basket, blanket and a parasol and seemed more than ready to go.

Soon after, Williams appeared in a flush of magic on the lawn and they left the house to meet him. Greetings done, Dobby immediately grabbed them both and took them right where the head warders had installed a camp in Harry's overgrown field.

"Someone's eager," Williams commented. "Good morning, head warders, Steward Sharptooth, Healers Spleenbash and Bonepick. Plenty of gold and so on!"

"Same, same," Gartuk returned distractedly and the other goblins only grunted.

It was so unexpectedly funny that Harry started giggling.

This laughter attracted Shanoo's attention. "Ah, there you are, Heir Potter. Greetings and lots of gold, et cetera. Excellent, now come forward." She grabbed his hand and dragged him along with her as she strode over the small clearing. In the middle, a half dozen goblins let a boulder of Malijar's Gift the size of Aunt Petunia's kitchen oven float with their magic.

It was a bewitching sight as it glittered and sparkled in the morning light. There even seemed to be a light hum in the air, as if the rock generated energy that wanted to make itself heard.

"Wow!" Harry gushed. "Is that really my ward stone?"

"If it accepts you," Shanoo retorted impatiently. "We have a couple more if this one's not for you, so if you'd touch it now ..."

Unsuspecting and not needing to be told twice, Harry reached out ... and nearly blacked out at the electrical current hitting him with the power of an oncoming lorry. This was vastly different than holding a small pebble of that same rock, this was like approaching a feral animal that could shoot lightning and was more than willing and able to fry a wizard on the spot if it didn't like him.

Harry attempted to reach out with his magic as well as he knew how, expecting something like the connection he had with his first ward stone, but it was no use. The stone's power did not change its shape or intensity at all and Harry tried not to feel disappointed. At least he was able to take his hand away without repercussion and told himself to be grateful for that. The few moments in the rock's thrall hadn't been all that pleasant.
"Ah, no. Far too wild for a youngling like you," Shanoo decreed and waved the rock away. A new team of goblins levitated another piece onto the clearing. "Try this one, Heir Potter. It should be gentler."

And it was. So gentle, in fact, that Harry kind of missed a bit of resistance, that little bit of extra that told him that the magic was a fit for his own temperament. Still, it was very nice, and Harry thanked it silently for its readiness to help him, even if they were not a perfect match.

"No, not that one either. Please let that last one be the one, because it'd take us at least an hour to get more onto the property." Shanoo sighed. "Give it your best, Heir Potter."

Hesitantly, Harry reached out once the last boulder was in position. To his surprise, he had the feeling as if he already knew the stone. He wanted to call out, but then the hematite-coloured parts of Malijar's Gift began shining like fiery opals in deep blues, vibrant greens, pearl, pink, even red and orange, completely catching Harry's attention and inviting him to actually touch it.

I know you, Harry thought. I held a part of you in Sharptooth's office! Hello! A grin stole onto his face as warmth spread through his body in response. Do you want to stay with me? I need a guard for my garden and you feel nice! But not too nice, which is kind of perfect.

The vibrant, ever changing colours of the stone pulsed, making Harry grin even more broadly.

Awesome. You should meet my friend Dobby, he'll work on the land and make it into a garden just for house elves. As if he knew that he was being called, Dobby appeared at Harry's side and slid his small hand into the boy's. Immediately, his presence changed the conversation between Harry and the rock, moving to include him. There he is. Please take good care of us both.

Without really knowing it, Harry pulled out his athame, cut his palm and pressed his bloody hand to the stone. It only hurt a little, and only for a moment. Then, pleasure swept through him, and a deep sense of camaraderie and satisfaction bloomed in his chest. For a little while longer, Harry and Dobby bathed in the magic and allowed it to sweep all around and through them. Far too soon, it seemed, voices called them back and the lovely cloud of magic around them faded away.

"Well, I'd say that is a match," Head Warder Shanoo said dryly and grudgingly handed a sack of galleons over to Sharptooth. "Well done, Heir Potter, it has accepted you as its master. It even healed your hand, now look at that, Healer Spleenbash. But now we've got work to do. Step back, please. Planting a ward stone is risky business when there's such a big ley line running underneath its resting place. There could be magical discharges and to be honest, we're expecting quite a ride."

Sharptooth and the goblin healers accompanied Harry away from the clearing and a little into the trees. Protective wards went up as soon as they stepped over the perimeter.

"Go!" Head Warder Shanoo shouted.
Like a conductor, she directed the goblins under her command and slowly, slowly, the large boulder sank into the hole in the ground. As predicted, strong discharges shot up whenever the magic of the ley line connected with Malijar's Gift. It was a pretty sight, actually, but not an experience Harry wanted to make firsthand. It arced out and away, all over the clearing and high up into the sky. The goblins apparently wore protective gear because not one of them so much as flinched when a bolt slammed into the ground by their feet. They never broke their guttural chant and as one they painted flaming sigils into the air when the rock was safely placed.

"This is wicked," Harry said, awed by the sight. "My hair's all standing up!"

Williams showed Harry his forearm where all of the little hairs were raised as well. "It's the magic; it's so thick in the air that we're reaching out with our cores."

"Does it do something to us?" Harry wanted to know.

"In this case no, Malijar's Gift is a benign presence on your land as you bonded with it and married it to your purpose. But other sources of magic, like artefacts for example, can and will influence us more than we like if we're not careful," Williams explained. "It's one of the reasons the goblins count among the best warders on the planet. Their skin is much thicker and their approach to magic different enough to matter a great deal. Essentially, they're hardier and can direct magic with more precision than a human because they're not so easily, ah, impressed."

"Oh." Harry's respect for the goblins went up another notch. "That must be really useful."

"It is," Sharptooth replied smugly. "We're also very good curse breakers for that reason, although Gringotts employs its fair share of wizards. It's always a good idea to diversify. What one curse breaker can't do, another can. Sometimes it will take both of them, or even a whole team, but in the end the job will get done."

"I need a lot more books," Harry decided. "Until just now, I didn't even know that there was such a thing as curse breakers!"

"Healer Williams will bring you a pamphlet of job offers," Sharptooth said, visibly amused. "Although it might be a bit early for you to be thinking about work."

"Well, I can only decide what kind of career I want to have if I know what kinds of jobs are even out there." Harry huffed and didn't care that he sounded exactly like Hermione in one of her more passionate speeches.

"Hogwarts is supposed to counsel you at the beginning of your fifth year, in preparation for your OWLs," Williams explained, "but I understand why it would seem a little late for someone muggle raised. After all, you didn't have a chance to grow up with that information, unlike your peers."
"I have lots of muggleborn friends. Can I show them your pamphlet, too?" Harry asked.

"Of course." Sharptooth smirked. "After all, they might want to work for Gringotts and we're always looking for talent."

Satisfied, Harry turned back to the chanting warders and watched as they buried the ward stone. At last, the still flaming sigils sank into the ground in a circle before winking out.

Abruptly, the humming stopped and it was eerily quiet in the area.

"It's done. We can move on to the perimeter ward stones," Williams said. "They're from the same rock as the master ward stone, so that part should be pleasant, at least."

Head Warder Shanoo came up to their group. "Two things, Heir Potter: first, here is the spell you need to recite as you bind the ward stones to you with blood. And second, take your broom so we can get this part done as quickly as possible."

Dobby handed Harry his broom. Healer Williams also took his from his robe pocket and enlarged it with barely a wave of his hand. Together, they flew where Head Warder Shanoo pointed them and began the arduous task of binding the perimeter ward stones to Harry.

As promised, the task wasn't difficult, but an unforeseen affinity between Harry and his stones prompted a communion each and every single time he picked one up and pressed a drop of blood into it. Adding to that, crossing the property every time, even by broom, took time - time that the warders obviously hadn't thought they'd need.

"Unbelievable," Shanoo muttered, not quite annoyed but certainly not happy. "Only twenty-one stones done and midday already ... we'll have to break here, Heir Potter, lest you collapse from magical exhaustion."

Healer Williams agreed and the whole group retreated into the shade and had a long lunch break. Harry got a pepper-up potion and a blood replenisher after dessert, and a cooling charm on his clothes for good measure. Due to the many plants all around them and the slowly swelling clouds in the sky, the air became humid and no one wanted to risk a heat stroke.

"We'll be done soon," Williams encouraged Harry in the late afternoon. "Don't mind Head Warder Shanoo, she just didn't anticipate your intense connection to your ward stone. It happens and the warding of your cottage should have been a clue."

Harry caressed the fist-sized rock in his fingers and placed it into the hole in the ground in front of him. "I don't mind, and I'm not really tired. I'm just sorry that this might push back the schedule."
"It won't," Head Warder Gartuk assured him. "Shanoo likes to grumble, but she became a warder because the whole process fascinates her. No ward ever is the same, and sometimes a wizard still surprises her. It's all good, Heir Potter."

Finally, around six, the last perimeter stone was placed and Harry did a commune with the master stone. It was unexpectedly short, perhaps because he had unwittingly established the connections individually instead of all at once like the warders had initially anticipated. After no more than a minute, Malijar's Gift gently pushed Harry away as if to tell him that it was time to rest now, and to let the goblins do their part.

Even though he was feeling it now, Harry insisted on staying. Healer Spleenbash fussed and forced him to take another blood-replenishing potion and eat a full meal, but she relented and let Harry and Dobby watch the goblins anchor the first part of the ward that would make the property unplottable. While it wasn't the light show the burying of the master ward stone had been, it was still interesting.

To Harry's mortification, he fell asleep halfway through and slept on until Dobby came to wake him in his own bed early in the next morning.

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Day two was more of the same, just as Healer Williams had told him, and at the end of the seven times seven ward stones, Harry was glad to finally get his fingers healed and be done with it all. Healer Williams had to spell him twice against the burning sun because the strong ley magic was bubbling all over the place due to the developing ward matrix. It would've been deeply interesting to Harry if he weren't so utterly wiped out.

"It's the damnedest thing," he heard Healer Williams quietly say to Healer Spleenbash. "He's not very exhausted magically, at least in no way I can detect, but mentally he's really done for."

Then, he slept again.

oOo

Day three of the warding dawned bright and early. Harry felt more rested and was very hungry. He nearly managed all of Dobby's breakfast offering and, even though he was full, he was already looking forward to his next snack.

As he'd fallen asleep the day before, he had missed the conclusion of the goblins' work. His property was now theoretically unplottable, but he needed to commune with the ward stones to fix the setting. Without that commune, the goblins also hadn't been able to build the war wards, though if the pleasant faces of the warding team were anything to go by, they weren't exactly angry about it.
"Almost every goblin hates portkeys," Sharptooth said, likely guessing Harry's thoughts at Shanoo and Gartuk's almost cheerful greeting. "They consider it a bonus, Heir Potter, so don't feel bad about pushing the agenda back a little. They'll still be able to complete all the tasks for today."

After a fortifying sip of Dobby's lemonade, Harry stepped onto the clearing with his ward stone. As if it had awaited him, magic surged up, ruffling his clothes and hair. Enthralled, Harry sat crosslegged onto the baked earth and put his hands flat on the ground. Information about the new ward came to him and he could almost see how it had been constructed. As there seemed to be no holes and the stone didn't offer any objections, Harry approved it and gently extricated himself from magic's embrace.

"Well done, Heir Potter." Healer Williams, now in his shirtsleeves, pointed towards the camp. "Now we've got some time on our hands as the goblins will be building their war wards. It's interesting to watch, but it'll take around two hours to finish. I could teach you how to apply the sunscreen spell to yourself in the meantime."

Harry was all for it and Dobby busied himself by offering more food and drinks. At first, Williams had Harry cast the spell on him a couple of times before moving on.

"Now, point your wand at yourself, either at the top of your head or at your chest and imagine the feel of the spell. You did it already, so you know that you can do it. The main problem for many wizards and witches is the correct wand movement, so feeling it is very important. Ready?" At Harry's nod, Williams gave the go ahead. "Yes, nice spell colour there ... give it a little more, your shins are still not covered ... good first try! Again!"

Harry took a deep breath, pointed his wand at his chest, screwed his eyes shut, and said the spell again. Warm and tingling, the magic bloomed behind his breastbone and travelled all over his body. It was weakest in his feet, but it was there and he felt like flying without a broom.

"Well done!" Healer Williams praised. "Give me one more go and then you should be just fine."

The last try had Harry feeling as if a couple hundred of butterflies were fluttering over his skin and when he opened his eyes, Healer Williams was hiding a laugh behind his hand.

"What?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Williams pointed at his arm, eyes shining brightly with mirth.

Harry was green. And he glittered!

Mortified, he sank down in his chair. "Oh no, and now?"
"You just put a bit too much juice into your spell," Williams chuckled. "It'll go away in an hour or so. Maybe."

"I look like the Hulk!" Harry cried. "I'll *finite* myself!"

"No, please." Williams sobered and his smile became soft. "Don't be ashamed. You and your magic are both growing. I'm not saying that it's exactly sentient, but it obviously wants to work with you, even please you. Be proud of your work, even if you went a little overboard. You'll learn control quickly enough."

"Ugh, fine. But if someone laughs at me, I'll have Dobby give you *herbal* tea for the rest of the day. *Only* herbal tea."

"That's a deal. And since this went so well, how about learning an anti-mosquito charm? You won't always be behind wards and keeping small, blood-sucking critters away can only be to the good."

Harry was especially eager for that spell because Dudley had thrown a hornet's nest at him when he'd been seven, and while he couldn't fault the poor hornets for their ire, he really didn't want to renew his acquaintance with their stingers.

Healer Williams patiently demonstrated the charm a few times and explained the mechanics behind the wand movement. When he was finished, however, he lowered his voice and said in a conspirative tone, "We Aussies aren't all that fussed about wand movement, so if you don't want to get in trouble with your teachers, tell me now and I'll shut my gob about how wizards can really drop that act for similar results."

"Are you *kidding* me?" Harry asked, appalled. "Of course I want to know!"

Williams smirked. "Excellent, because you're no Pedantic Peter to begin with - it must drive your teachers crazy -, so this should be fun. Remember when I told you that magic is mostly about intent?"

"Of course," Harry said just as conspiratorially.

"What would you think if I told you that *every* act of magic is based on intent? That wand movements were designed to focus the caster and make the direction of magic easier, but that they aren't necessary?"

Harry stared at him with his mouth open. "Are you for real?"
"Very real. See, I can do all of the little spells and charms without a wand, and even silently." Williams demonstrated by hitting Harry with five different spells. He only waved his fingers a little and yet every spell hit its mark perfectly. "That was anti-sunburn, anti-mosquito, a personal hygiene charm, a cleaning charm for your clothes and a small healing charm. We don't have much magical wood for wands in Australia, you see, and living in such a harsh environment makes it easy to lose a wand, in any case. We never quite got used to using magical foci like Europe and North America did."

"But, but ..." Harry was aghast. While he liked his wand, it would've been nice to know that his life as a wizard didn't have to depend on it. "Why doesn't anybody tell me these things?"

"It's deeply ingrained, especially in Britain," Williams said calmly.

"But why?" Harry felt bewildered.

"I shouldn't say more; Healer Spleenbash warned me that you'd be curious. I'm sorry I even said this much."

"No, please, you can't start and then not tell me the rest," Harry begged. When Williams continued to look unconvinced, Harry resorted to threats, "I'll have Dobby buy books about it and then I'll know anyway!"

Healer Williams grimaced even as he gave a snort of laughter. "I bet you would. Oh, boy, that was me being epically stupid. Healer Spleenbash will tan my hide!"

"I don't think so," Harry replied. "If she didn't want you to teach me, she wouldn't have given me your file. She even said that she'd have picked you for me if it had been her choice."

"I see." Williams sounded a little speculative. "Well, then. Why not make the most of it? Where were we? Ah, yes, wands and our lack of need for one. The established opinion at Gringotts is that the dependence on wands is desired by the Ministry."

"What for?" Harry asked.

"To control the citizens of wizarding Britain, of course. The Trace is placed on the kids' wands to oversee their magic use outside of school, and the Trace is still active when they're adults. It's true that this helps solve some crimes, but the other truth is that keeping magical people bound to magical foci essentially cripples their magical abilities. If you're interested, you should find books about magical theory and philosophy ... by non-British authors, of course. And secretly. But I digress. Let's go back to casting magic: do you remember how you cast on yourself? How you barely moved your wand, just pushed your magic into it to form the spell?"

"Yeah, sure. It still worked out fine." Harry looked at his wand and suddenly understood. "Oh! I see.
"I'm feeling a little blindsided."

"I imagine you do, yes."

"Wow. Then the teachers at Hogwarts do lie to us." Harry stared vacantly at his hands for a moment before collecting himself. "I've only been in school for two years, but no professor ever told us that we don't really need a wand. They don't even explain how to feel the magic, just tell us to swish and flick and see what happens. A bit paltry for the best school in Britain, isn't it? And if the Ministry is in on it ... I don't know. It kind of takes the magic away from Hogwarts."

"That wasn't my intention," Williams murmured. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright. I'd rather know the truth than stay in the dark."

"Most of the witches and wizards don't know any better, if that's any consolation. Even those in power perpetuate the lie because they're unable to do differently." Healer Williams paused, sighed, and massaged the bridge of his nose. "Listen, Heir Potter, I'm somewhat contrary and prone to do stupid and reckless things to stick it to people who deserve it. I really should stop telling you these things before I drag you down to my level."

"You really shouldn't," Harry countered somewhat cheekily. "Who knows, it might help to keep me from getting killed one day."

Williams grinned half-heartedly. "Is that so?"

"Definitely." Harry grinned back. "Also, you're enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

"Far more than it should, to be honest," Williams admitted. "It entertains me to teach you new things because I can see that you want to learn. You have a talent for it, and you deserve to know what's really happening around you. But I'd never want to encourage you to take unnecessary or stupid risks with yourself, especially with powerful people like Dumbledore in the picture. If you plan on waging war against the teachers at Hogwarts, it might be better to stop here and now, before Dumbledore catches on and takes away even more of your freedom."

Harry's eyes narrowed and even Dobby looked a little miffed. "I already told you that I'm not stupid. I can keep this to myself."

"Can you?" Williams challenged.

"Unless Dumbledore can read minds, yeah, I can," Harry replied stubbornly. When Healer Williams suddenly paled, the words dried up in his throat.
"I actually forgot ... Dumbledore is a legilimens. I have to speak with Sharptooth. Stay here, alright?"

And off he went, worrying Harry even further.

"What now?" Harry asked Dobby. "That was only half an hour, and the way he's shouting at Sharptooth and Spleenbash, he'll be gone for a while."

"Harry Potter sir could practice the mosquito-repelling charm on Dobby," the elf offered. "Dobby be hardy; if magic goes wrong, nothing bad will happen."

"But if I hurt you, we'll stop!" Harry said sternly. Picking his wand back up, he imitated Healer Williams' wand movements and spoke the words clearly. "Oh, that worked!"

"Again! Dobby be liking the tickles!" The elf clapped his hands and hopped up and down on his chair.

Grinning, Harry forgot about the warding for a while and amused himself with hitting Dobby with so many sun and mosquito-blocking spells that the elf was shimmering with magic just like Harry.

"Harry Potter sir be ready to try on himself," Dobby said, once he was done admiring his green, glittering sheen. "Healers still be talking, but Dobby be watching over Harry Potter sir."

"Okay. Here we go ..." Pointing the wand at his chest, Harry muttered the incantation. After doing it so many times for Dobby, the magic came easily and covered him from head to toe in one sweeping rush. "Awesome!"

"Harry Potter sir be good student!"

"Indeed," Healer Williams said from the far side of the marquee. "Well done, Heir Potter." He walked up to their table and slumped into a chair. "Sorry for leaving you alone like that."

"It was obviously important," Harry replied. "What is a legimens?"

"A legilimens is someone with the ability to read thoughts," Williams explained. "And Dumbledore is one. It's easy to forget, what with the way the old man behaves ... too easy."
"How does that even work? Is there a spell for that?"

"There is," Williams confirmed. "Incidentally, it's also *legilimens*, although no one who's the least bit proficient in the art will shout it at you while they attempt to read your mind. No, all someone has to do is look you right in the eyes, preferably after asking the question to which they want to obtain the answer."

"He does that!" Harry cried. "He looks at us students like that, over his glasses!" He demonstrated by lowering his head and staring right up at the healer. "Can he even do that? I don't want him to read my mind!"

"He obviously *can*," Williams said, "but that doesn't mean he's *allowed*." He raked his hand through his hair in agitation. "If he's doing it to students, that's very bad. Not only is it unethical - you kids are walking hormone bombs and have interesting thoughts about other people - it is actually a violation of the law."

"Then why don't you report him?" Harry asked, not quite believing that he was saying such a thing about *Dumbledore* of all people, but determined to not having his mind read.

"Because it's devilishly hard to prove." Williams put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "Untrained witches and wizard never even notice if it happens."

"But one *can* notice?"

Williams sighed. "Yes, thankfully. The art of hiding and protecting your thoughts is called *occlumency*. If you're not a natural at it, which is honestly rare, you have to learn and that takes time. Time that you unfortunately don't have."

"I don't want him to know what I've been up to this summer," Harry whispered. "I don't want to go back to the Dursleys."

"I know. There's a way around it, but it's not perfect, and you'll have to be very careful." Williams pulled a pendant from his trouser pocket and put it on the table. "This is a modified memory locket. They're like mini-pensieves and can hold up to five memory fragments. The magic in the locket amplifies these memories so that a casually looking legilimens will see one of those first. It won't hold up under intense scrutiny, pun intended, but hopefully it will get Dumbledore off your back for a while. Other than that you should train yourself to never look a person directly in the eyes if you suspect them to be a legilimens. There are ways to be sneaky about that, like looking at things in the environment, or focusing on your hands. Whatever helps sell your story is good."
For the remaining half hour until Harry's next ward communion Healer Williams instructed Harry in how to extract the most generic memory fragments possible. Harry chose flying with his quidditch team at school, sitting in the common room and reading the thickest book he owned, walking around the school grounds, doing homework and thinking about treacle tart, his favourite dessert at school.

"Remember to change the fragments every two to three months," Williams said. "Keep it current so he won't get suspicious."

"I will," Harry promised and slipped the necklace over his head. "Whew, I feel better already!"

"Me too," Williams confessed. "Don't think you'll get around studying occlumency, Heir Potter! Healer Spleenbash is working on a reading list as we speak." He pointed at the healer who was indeed scribbling on a piece of parchment.

"Will I even have time for school stuff?" Harry asked, dismayed. "There's so much going on!"

"It's a little crazy, but you can do it, just like all the other heirs of noble and ancient families."

"Wait, they are learning this stuff? Why not I? Dumbledore never ..." With a frustrated huff, Harry didn't complete his sentence. "I don't understand why he's doing this!"

"And maybe it's better this way," Williams said soothingly. "Knowing too much, too young can overwhelm you, and I don't want that to happen. I want you to be healthy and interested in your affairs, but that doesn't mean that you have to learn everything today."

"But it feels like I have to. Like it's really urgent."

"And I understand that. It may be your family magic pushing you, but you're new to all of this. It is important to pace yourself or you'll make yourself sick. Right now, nothing is pressing, and you're not in any more danger than you were before the holidays started. You have one of Gringotts' most ruthless goblins for a steward to fend your headmaster off, and he'll do that with great pleasure. Calm yourself, all will be well." Williams squeezed Harry's shoulder and smiled. "Besides, it is time for your next communion. I'm looking forward to your reaction to the freshly implemented war wards."

Harry was looking forward to it as well, especially after learning yet another disturbing thing about the headmaster.
Malijar's Gift welcomed him warmly just as it had done before and helped him understand the goblin wards with patient sweeps and rolls of magic. The war wards were nearly feral with their eagerness to thwart trespassers and ready to accept further instruction on how to deal with attacks. Harry reached out with his magic and almost bodily felt them pull out all of his worries. There were many but the most noteworthy ones were of course Voldemort, his henchmen and shades, and evil creatures that wanted to eat him. He couldn't help but also admit to his distress about Dumbledore and people like him. As each worrisome thought bled from his mind, the tune of the wards adjusted until Harry's head was pleasantly calm and the field of magic around him purred like a happy kitten.

"That took a while," Healer Williams remarked as he led Harry back to the marquee and checked him over for sun damage. "Is everything alright?"

"Sure, I'm great," Harry said with a shrug. "They're doing the anti-apparition ward next, right? I already chose the destinations for the deplacement."

"Let's hear them," Williams prompted. "How horrible will it be?"

"On top of the Alps, somewhere in rural China, and Tierra del Fuego in Argentina."

"Your elf's idea?" Williams fought not to laugh. "Or is that all you?"

"I'm perfectly capable of sending people to the wastelands myself if they try to do me harm," Harry informed him in a very McGonagall-like tone of voice.

The healer snorted. "I shouldn't feel pity for the poor sods, but I do. Apparating from there will be hell; the average wizard manages a couple hundred of miles easily, up to a thousand under duress. After that, he'll be toast."

"Well, good." Harry took his glass of elf lemonade and took a large sip. "What do you think, Dobby, is it time for lunch already?"

"For Harry Potter sir it's *always* time for lunch," Dobby retorted and snapped his fingers. Fat, juicy burgers appeared in front of the wizards, accompanied by piping hot French fries and mixed salads. "Dobby be making buns himself because the muggle stuff be ghastly."
"Thanks, Dobby!" Cheered by the sight, Harry grabbed his burger with both hands and took a huge bite. "Yum!"

"Yum," Williams agreed, and then they both didn't say a thing until their plates were cleared and Harry had taken his potion.

"Your Dobby is a marvel," the healer sighed, patting his distended stomach. "Can I borrow him? Just from time to time?"

"He is a good cook." Harry grinned. "I'm so lucky he's decided to be my friend."

"I think you're lucky to have each other," Williams said honestly. He waved lazily and a display of the time formed in the air in front of him. "It's two already. The goblins will be done soon and you can lock your anti-apparition wards."

Only ten minutes later, Harry was called over to the warders. Head Warder Shanoo observed him intently while he set the deplacement destinations and invited him afterward to take part in casting the ward net for the intent-based wards.

"You've done exceedingly well for one so young, so we're actually ahead of schedule," she explained her choice. "And it would be a shame to deny you this experience if the going is so good right now. I believe, and my husband concurs, that these wards can only become stronger with your direct involvement. We'll test the anti-apparition ward afterwards."

Harry looked at Sharptooth and the healers, and when all of them nodded, he gladly agreed. The goblins found a place for him in their midst and instructed him to allow their magic to take him along for the ride. Whatever the ward net needed from him, it would get, no spells or fancy ritual words needed.

True to their word, Harry felt the net being cast. The magic hooked into the perimeter ward stones and criss-crossed all over the property. Harry went along with it as it rushed and heaved around in its quest to close the last openings. When the work was done, a sense of deep satisfaction welled up in him and flowed back into the ground, completing the circle.

"This one's attached to his land," a goblin chuckled. "Good work. The communion is half done already. We might be home before the evening meal today."
Flushed with pleasure at the praise, Harry talked with the master ward stone, and then watched with bated breath as Healer Williams left the property, portkey in hand. He reappeared a couple of minutes later in the middle of the clearing.

"It works, and holy crap, that was a rough trip!" he called, shivering. To Harry, he said, "Be assured that I'll never try to stop by unannounced ever again."

"I think we can call it a day now," Head Warder Shanoo called. "Be here tomorrow by ten. If it works out like it did today, we should be done by early afternoon at the very latest."

Harry cheered with the goblins and then everybody was off, the goblins with mutterings of discontent for their portkeys, and Harry with a hearty pop, courtesy of Dobby.

Back in his cottage, he mused about the warders' unfortunate situation and wondered aloud, "Why can't we put my rented trunk in my garden and let the goblins Floo there?"

Dobby thought about it for a few moments. "Dobby not know of a reason why it shouldn't be working. Harry Potter sir might ask Steward Sharptooth."

Since they had Floo powder now, Harry fire-called the goblin and posed that exact question.

"Mmh, this is an unusual proposal, although a very generous one," Sharptooth muttered. "The trunk is yours by rental agreement, but more than half of it still belongs to Gringotts ... magic might just allow this ... I'll contact Head Warders Shanoo and Gartuk and get back to you, Heir Potter."

Figuring that it might take a while, Harry and Dobby had dinner on the terrace and simply enjoyed themselves watching the birds and insects and of course the beautiful flowers. Slowly, the sun began to descend, its light gentling bit by little bit.

"I'm getting there," Harry sighed into the silence, apropos of nothing. "Feeling at home, I mean."

"It be lovely home," Dobby agreed, just as content. "It be more work than Dobby dared hope, and Dobby's garden be coming along nicely."

"Is something growing, yet?" Harry rolled his head to the side and looked at his friend. "I'm sorry that I didn't visit these last few days."
"Dobby be knowing that Harry Potter be busy. It be alright. Dobby not be wanting to stress little plant cuttings, so there be magic to help settle, but no encouragement for growing. Elf berry bushes and trees and medicine plants be having time. Next year, Dobby's garden be beautiful!"

"I can't wait," Harry replied sincerely. "Do you really think it'll be enough to get you by?"

"It will," Dobby said with conviction. "But big garden be a problem. Plants be very strong because of ley magic. Dobby be needing a lot of magic to clean up before he be able to plant."

"We'll find a way." Harry yawned. "Wow, I'm more tired than I thought. It's not even that late."

"If you be tired, you be sleeping, Harry Potter sir. Dobby be taking fire-call from goblins."

"You're the best", Harry mumbled, already rising to drag himself to bed. "I should ask Healer Williams to teach me these personal hygiene charms next; I could just," he wiggled his fingers at himself, "and go to bed. No long bathroom production and stuff."

"Until Harry Potter sir learns, Dobby be helping."

The rush of elf magic took Harry by surprise, and he was even more startled to suddenly find himself in his bathroom. "Yeah, okay, one thing still left to do." He grinned sheepishly. "Thanks Dobby. Have a good night!"

"Dobby be having the best nights," the elf said smugly and popped away so Harry could use the loo in peace.

oOo

On the next morning, Healer Williams apparated onto Harry's lawn and prodded him back to his fireplace with a little grin.

"You just won the Best Customer Award for this year," he explained. "Your idea with the trunk was pure gold and you better believe that you made a couple new friends."

Harry smiled. "And that's why we're also using the Floo?"
"Yep. It never hurts to remind them who has rented the trunk and who they might owe a little favour. Plus, I guess that this is you christening the Floo connection of your new home, so go for it! I'll be right behind you."

Harry threw a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace, called the destination, and whirled away. It always gave him a rush to hurtle through the network, even if his landings left a lot to be desired. This time, however, a helpful warder grabbed his ankles and pulled him out, setting him on his feet and cleaning him up with a wave of his long fingers.

"Well met," Harry gasped and looked at the group of warders with a grin. "How are you?"

"Just fine," Head Warder Shanoo said and ushered Harry to the middle of the clearing, where the master ward stone's magic was already reaching out to him. "Someone is eager to see you."

"Is that normal?" Harry asked even as he sat down and patted the earth in greeting.

"Well, your ward stone is a gift from the Lord of Magic," she replied. "Who knows what he's really gifting you with?"

"Er, even if I don't believe in him?"

She looked patiently at him. "Maybe you will, going forward, but every sane being will agree that magic is a gift, regardless of faith, and that this gift may do different things for different people. It's not for us to decide what is normal and acceptable; there will always be outliers. It's what you do with the gift that counts."

That sounded reasonable and Harry felt reassured. Again, he patted the earth next to him. "Then I'll just say hello."

"You do that, and maybe think a little about the intent-based wards. We have everything in writing, but it would be annoying to forget something during the communion."

Knowing that the last part of the warding would be done quickly enough, Harry allowed himself to be drawn in by the magic of his ward stone. He learned what had been going on last night and, for
the first time, got an unhurried impression of the impact the ley magic was having on his wards. There was so much power rushing beneath him that it was disorienting. Due to the tapping via the ward stones, this power was also rising, nay, shooting up around him, dousing the ward matrix in its own lovely, if wild, brand of protection. Apparently the ley line had adopted Harry's land as hers, just as he had laid claim to the land. Getting to know each other and being on friendly terms seemed like the least Harry could do.

The meeting, if one wanted to call it that, was unexpectedly lovely and he found himself thinking all the things he wanted to do with the property: how he wanted to create a haven for Dobby and all the other house elves who needed a place to rest, and how other animals, magical or not, were welcome also, as long as they could cohabitate in peace and weren't a danger to the people that came to visit. But most of all he wanted to help create a place for himself to live in peace, together with his elf friend and right among all the magical plants and trees who were doing him so much good right now.

When Harry woke from his meditation, Dobby silently and with quivering ears handed him a glass of lemonade and popped away again.

"Have your drink, and then we'd like you to take part in the casting of the ward net," Head Warder Shanoo told him. "Your connection to the wards really is unusually deep, we should capitalize on that."

"I'd love to." Harry gulped down the lemonade and sighed at the surge of energy the elf berry juice afforded him. "I'm ready if you are."

After discussing the intent behind the wards one last time, the warders organized themselves and Harry quickly around the clearing and cast the ward net. Following that, it was Harry's turn to settle the parameters. Remembering the multitude of people and beings and things Harry didn't want on his land, it took a while to complete this task, but when it was done, the result resonated beautifully with his magical core.

"It's alright now," he announced. Just like last time, something urged him to proclaim, "From this day forward, this land shall be known as Potter's Field."

Immediately, the tension dissipated. The goblins loosened their stance and looked at each other, although quite a few of them still seemed a little dazed from the ley magic.

"Very well, that's us done, team!" Head Warder Shanoo called. Spontaneous applause broke out and a few goblins hollered their satisfaction. "Since we've finished early, use the extra time as a bonus. Heir Potter generously consented to let us use his fireplace for the travel back to Gringotts."

"I'm glad it went so well," Harry said to her, one eye on the quickly packing goblins. "Thank you for all of your hard work, Head Warder Shanoo. You and your husband have taught me a lot."
"As did you," she replied. "Every warding is unique and an opportunity to learn is always appreciated. That being said, if there are any problems, or if you have questions, don't hesitate to contact us."

"I will, thank you." Harry bowed, spoke the traditional parting words and saw her and her husband off.

Once the small horde had vanished in the trunk, it was almost too quiet in his garden.

"I don't know what to say," Harry admitted when the healers, Sharptooth and even Dobby seemed content to just stand there and enjoy the day. "It's kind of strange that this should be over already."

Healer Williams smiled. "True, but then again it took long enough." He sighed appreciatively. "I can feel the change in the air. It's sort of heady."

Healer Spleenbash stepped up to Harry and waved her hand over him. "Physically you're surprisingly fine, youngling. Still, I recommend lots of rest, your Dobby's good food, and not too many shenanigans. Give it a week or so, and then you'll be right as rain."

"Great. I could sleep." Harry smiled. "Thanks for arranging all of this. You especially, Steward Sharptooth."

"Just Sharptooth when we're in private," the old goblin growled. He took something out of his vest pocket and put it in Harry's hand. "A gift, from Gringotts to one of its good friends."

"That's Malijar's Gift! The one from your office! Thank you!" Harry didn't even engage in the fight against the desire to hug the goblin. It only was a second, in case he offended with the gesture, but it was heartfelt. In his hands, the little stone vibrated a little. "It's awesome and I love it. Thank you."

"On that pleasant note, we'll take our leave. With your consent, Healer Williams will visit tomorrow, just to see how you're doing," Healer Spleenbash said.

"Yeah, of course. And the invitation to breakfast at mine stands," Harry returned. His cheeks hurt, he was smiling so much. "Whenever you like."

"Thank you, Heir Potter."

The two goblins and Healer Williams left and then it was just Harry and Dobby, standing in the middle of an overgrown field and doing a silly happy dance to express their overflowing feelings.
End of part 3
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Wrote hard and put up wet, EAD style, yadda yadda.

I'm looking forward to comments to this chapter, about everything. But keep it friendly, yeah? And if you don't like it, there's the back button.

Have fun!

Dobby's Deceit

Part 4

On his birthday, Harry woke to a pair of huge, blue eyes staring at him.

"Wha?" he asked muzzily and groped for the glasses on his bedside table.

"Good morning, Harry Potter sir!" Betty squeaked. "I be bringing breakfast!"

"Er, what? Betty?" Bewildered and hardly awake enough to function, Harry barely flinched when the small female house elf presented him with a bed table full of his favourite breakfast foods. "Thank you, honest. But ... what are you doing here?"

Dobby popped up on the bed with a small vase of garden flowers. "Dobby be taking her along. Betty be having birthday present for Harry Potter sir." He elbowed her in the side.

"Betty not be doing well without a family," Betty began haltingly. "Betty be wanting Harry Potter sir as her new ma." Dobby elbowed her again, sharply, and she stuttered, "uh, new friend. Betty be knowing that Harry Potter sir be very kind to his friends, and that he be having lots and lots of good work to do. May Betty please become Harry Potter sir's friend?"
"Er ..." Harry glanced at Dobby, who was nodding behind Betty's back. Slowly, his faculties were returning to him and he felt more equal to the situation. "Sure. Friends are always good. But you have to promise not to tell our secrets. Not to anyone. It might be dangerous for you and I don't want you getting hurt because of me."

"Betty be a very good elf," she promised. "Betty be keeping all of Harry Potter sir's secrets, just like Dobby!"

Harry smiled at her enthusiasm. "Then I guess you're welcome!"

Eyes shining and grin nearly splitting her little face, Betty took his offered hand and shook it heartily. "Happy Birthday, Harry Potter sir!"

Just as it had happened with Dobby, his arm tingled hotly and there was a short sting in his chest. Dobby was doing a little dance, seemingly barely able to contain his excitement, so he guessed that all house elves were like that when they were excited.

"Wow, you're all really strong," Harry joked, gently stretching his fingers. "Really, you're welcome. The whole house is full with cupboards, if you want one for sleeping. But we can also get you a bed, if you prefer. Dobby handles the money, he'll take care of you."

Again, Dobby nodded until his ears flapped, but Betty only blushed shyly and squeaked, "Dobby be having the best cupboard in the kitchen. Betty be wanting to share space for more magic and learning faster."

"Is that alright with you?" Harry asked the other elf.

"Dobby be liking tight spaces very much," Dobby answered with a little stutter and a dull green flush in his cheeks. "Also, Betty not be big. It be perfect fit."

Now Betty also blushed and Harry had to hide his amused grin. "Then that's settled. And thanks again for breakfast and your amazing gift, Betty."

"Harry Potter sir be very welcome," she whispered and popped away.

"She be very happy," Dobby assured Harry when the boy looked concerned. "She be needing to do some work so happiness not be making her sick."
"Oh ... that can happen?"

"When us elves be happy, we be very powerful," Dobby explained. For a second, he tilted his head like a listening dog. "Betty be going to Potter's Field to fight with plants. Maybe she be more successful than Dobby."

"Maybe," Harry grinned. He took a sip of his tea and then started in on breakfast. Betty had gone with traditional English fare which was very welcome right now. Harry was ravenous and inhaled the baked beans, sausages and fried eggs. "She's a good cook," he commented between bites.

"Betty be needing to learn more variety," Dobby said as he floated a bowl of fresh fruit in front of Harry, "but that not be problem. She be young and learn quickly."

"If she's anything like you, she'll be awesome." Harry put his fork down and reached for Dobby's hand. "Thank you for bringing her here. She seems nice and she'll be a great help to you. It's a present for both of us!"

"Dobby be having another birthday present for Harry Potter sir." A little shyly, the elf pulled something tiny from his trouser pocket and placed it in Harry's palm.

It was a small gold pendant, most likely made from half a galleon, and coined with his family seal.

"Wow, thank you!" Harry took a closer look and felt his throat close up a little at the carefully crafted details. "It's lovely."

"It be emergency elf transport for Harry Potter sir," Dobby squeaked. "Dobby not be able to go to Hogwarts with Harry Potter sir, and Dobby and Betty not be liking leaving Harry Potter sir without a way to come home if Old Whiskers be bad wizard."

"I ... wow, I don't know what to say. Except thank you, of course." Harry dropped the pendant and pulled Dobby in for a hug. "It's really great. Thanks for always taking care of me, Dobby."

"Dobby be doing all he can to protect his Harry Potter sir." Flushing again, the elf bounced just once. "And Dobby be doing everything he can to make Harry Potter sir happy. This present be from Miss Mione. Dobby be collecting it last night from France." He presented Harry with a large, brightly wrapped box, a letter, and a birthday card.

"Sneaky," Harry grinned. "Would you mind putting your pendant on the chain with Gringotts' memory charm? That way, I'll always have it with me."
Dobby snapped his fingers and placed the pendant around Harry's neck. "It be best, Harry Potter sir."

"Yeah, you might be right." Harry looked between the letter and the gift and decided to rip into the box first. "Oh, wow! Look at what Hermione's given me!"

He pulled a broom servicing kit from the packaging and showed Dobby a jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of Tall-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass and even a book on do-it-yourself broomcare. "Isn't this fantastic? Now I can take care of my new broom properly."

"Harry Potter sir be having another broom at Hogwarts," Dobby said.

"Nah, Professor McGonagall only loaned it to me for Quidditch, although I'll take care of that, too. Okay, now the card ... uh, is that the French Riviera? Wow, the sea looks so blue!" Harry read Hermione's birthday wishes and had to smile when he saw that her parents had also signed.

The letter was last, and it smelled faintly of sun lotion and warm, salty air.

Dear Harry,

In case you're actually reading the letter first: Happy Birthday! May the next year of your life be peaceful, fun, and full of happiness.

Dobby surprised me when he suddenly showed up a few days ago and asked whether I wanted to send you a letter for your birthday. He even offered to take the present, which was really rather nifty since international owl post is kind of expensive. Hopefully you'll like what my parents and I came up with - it's a compromise between practical and nice.

Anyway, I'm really looking forward to seeing you again. Dobby mentioned that you're just fine, but after the way your horrid relatives treated you I want to make sure. Also, the ice cream will be my treat! Please let me know when it'd be good for you.

I want to tell you all about my holiday in person, so please don't be mad that I'm not writing more right now. Have a really great birthday and give Hedwig a good petting from me.

Love,

Hermione

Next, Dobby handed Harry a present from Ron. There was also a card and note stuck to it and this time Harry read both first.
Hey Harry!

Happy Birthday from me and my family! I got you a sneakoscope so you'll always know if something fishy is going on around you. You should just maybe learn a silencing spell because that thing goes off like crazy when Fred and George are close.

Also, my parents won the lottery in the Daily Prophet! And guess what? We're going to visit my oldest brother Bill in Egypt! I'm so excited, although the twins teased me that my freckles will explode in all that sun. Still, it's awesome and I wish you could come with us, because we'll only return a couple of days before school starts or so. I'll try to find a good souvenir, mate!

See you soon,

Ron

P.S.: Your relatives are the worst. I tried to call your house on the fellytone a few weeks ago, but your uncle was super rude and screamed at me. Hermione later told me that I don't have to shout, but when I tried again, they just hung up on me.

Harry groaned; that probably explained his uncle's impossibly bad mood. He almost felt pity for the man - all that stress couldn't be good for his health and as much as he disliked the Dursleys, he didn't want to be a leading factor in their demise.

"And this present be from a Mr. Hagrid," Dobby said. He dubiously handed the slightly shaking package over. "Owl ward sent it to Gringotts and goblins called Dobby to get it."

"From Hagrid!" Harry cheered. He looked for a note and found it. "He's sending me a book ... The Monster Book Of Monsters. I wonder why."

He ripped the brown paper open - and jerked back when the book sprang forward, the open covers acting like little legs and a toothy maw combined. "Bloody hell! Why is it attacking me?"

Dobby flung the thing from the bed and went between it and Harry. Whimper-snarling, the book decided that it wasn't a match for a determined house elf and scuttled away to hide under Harry's dresser.

"Dobby be putting up ward around dresser," the elf said with a huff. "This Mr. Hagrid not be knowing what be appropriate gift for young wizard!"

Heart hammering in his chest, Harry had to agree, even if it felt a little disloyal to do so. "Now I'm
"Then Harry Potter sir be drinking his potion and spend his day being lazy and pampered." Dobby bounced a little. "Harry Potter sir could have a look at the garden."

"Yeah, sure!" Harry quickly downed his potion and used the bathroom to make himself presentable. "By the way, do you know when Healer Williams will stop by?"

"In the afternoon, after three," Dobby replied. He led Harry to the back door of the cottage and proudly presented his fledgling garden. Just like he'd said, there were a lot of offshoots sticking up from the ground, looking tiny and fragile in the glaring sunlight. "Dobby be planting fruit trees next. And over there Dobby be placing dead tree trunk for mushrooms. And here in the half shade be perfect place for medicine plants."

"And what will you do with the other half of the space?" Harry asked.

"Dobby still be deciding. Dobby be needing to ask Betty if she be needing special plants."

"Oh, good thinking. I have no idea what female house elves need."

"Dobby be getting book on house elves soon," Dobby said. "Dobby not be wanting Harry Potter sir to have too much to do ..."

"But that's over now," Harry finished the thought. "Yeah, good thinking. With two house elves around I should definitely know more. By the way, how do we get Betty out of her icky pillow case?"

oOo

Just like Dobby said, Healer Williams appeared at half past three on the dot on Harry's lawn. He waved cheerfully and wished Harry a very happy birthday before allowing Dobby to seat him at the garden table.

"Thank you for having me over on your special day," the young man beamed. "I brought cake, if you're interested."

"I love cake," Harry said. "What kind is it?"

"Since it's so hot, I went with something light and with lots of strawberries. Hopefully you've not had enough of them already, I know that Dobby likes to give them to you for dessert."
"No, that's great! I'm sure Dobby can get us some whipped cream. Would you like coffee or tea?"

"Coffee, please." Williams grinned. "Honestly, this is a pretty nice gig so far. I'm getting fed great food and get to sit in a beautiful little garden. Of course I'm not coming empty-handed. Here."

Harry took the wrapped parcel from him and opened it carefully. "The Comprehensive Book on Household Charms And How To Use them! Thank you!"

"You're very welcome, Heir Potter."

Harry huffed. "Oh, could you just call me Harry, please? I feel weird when people call me that."

Williams smiled. "Then you must call me Brady. I chose that book because all the charms in there are easy to learn and, more importantly, easy to cast on yourself. Just promise me that you'll try on inanimate objects first, and have your elf nearby in case something goes wrong."

"Of course, I promise." Harry grinned impishly. "As I said, I'm not stupid. At least not after what happened to Hermione last year."

"Oh? What happened?" Brady asked, instantly curious.

"I'll tell you if you'll keep it secret," Harry challenged. "I don't want us to get into trouble."

The healer made a vow and as they ate their cake, Harry regaled him with the tale of Hermione, the unfortunate polyjuiced kitty girl.

"Wait, she brewed polyjuice potion in her second year? At thirteen? And in an abandoned toilet?"

Brady asked, mouth open in surprise.

"Well, yes. She's brilliant! Anyway, she thought that she'd nabbed hair from a Slytherin's cloak, but it turned out that she accidentally collected the hair from that girl's cat. She turned into a hybrid human-cat thing and had to go to Madam Pomfrey. Thankfully, she got back to normal soon, but the bollocking couldn't have been fun. Professor McGonagall was all disappointed in her and docked a hundred points for stupidity."

"Trust, but verify," Brady agreed. "There are spells to check whether the ingredients for your potions are the real thing or counterfeit."

"Yeah, Professor McGonagall taught her that one until she could do it in her sleep. Too bad that Snape doesn't allow her to use her wand in class. She's been a bit skittish in Potions because of that cat incident."
Brady couldn't hide his mirth. "She sounds like a grand young lady! Just think what stories you'll be able to tell your kids one day."

Harry squirmed a little. "Uh."

"So, what else is new?" Brady asked, kindly changing the topic. "Did your friends think of you?"

And off Harry went, telling the healer about his presents and the cards and letters he'd received.

"But our best present is Betty," Harry told him, beaming.

"Betty?" Brady raised his eyebrows. "Who's that?"

The elf in question popped up and looked expectantly first at Harry and then at his guest.

"I be Betty," she said. "May Betty help you, Harry Potter sir?"

"You got yourself a second house elf?" Brady asked, stunned. "When?"

"It's more like she found Dobby and me, and just yesterday," Harry explained. "She lost her family and wanted to stay around, so I told her she could. Dobby will teach her everything he knows and she'll help manage Potter's Field."

"Wow." Brady still looked gobsmacked. "That's quite a gift, Harry!"

"I know." Harry smiled at Betty. "Thanks, we don't need anything right now. Oh, before you go, this is Brady. He's my healer and will be here a couple times a week or so."

Betty stared unblinkingly at the young man for a few moments before saying, "Betty be having eye on Mr. Brady Healer." Then, she popped away.

"No one can make someone feel quite as small as a house elf who doesn't trust you," Brady joked. "She's lovely. Do you know where she comes from?"

"I know." Harry smiled at Betty. "Thanks, we don't need anything right now. Oh, before you go, this is Brady. He's my healer and will be here a couple times a week or so."

"No, I guess I'll ask her about that later. I think she's still sad about losing her family and I don't want to make her talk when she's grieving."

"That's very considerate of you." Brady sipped the last of his coffee and sighed in utter contentment. "What do you say? A little magic first and then I'll show you how to do flips on your trampoline?"
Needless to say, the health scan was the littlest portion of their afternoon, and when Healer Williams left at seven, Harry was pleasantly exhausted both from casting charms and jumping until his legs buckled.

oOo

Healer Williams called again on the next day, his mien somber and his posture stiff.

"I come with worrying news," he said, declining Harry's offer of refreshments with a shake of his head. "Sirius Black, your godfather, managed to escape from Azkaban prison last night and is at large."

Harry's mouth got dry and his eyes bulged a little. "What?"

"No one knows exactly how he did it, but the fact is that he's at large and, if the wardens are to be believed, you're his target."

"What gave them the idea?"

The healer's face became pinched. "Apparently Black mumbled the same thing over and over again in his sleep: he's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts ..."

"But I'm not at Hogwarts right now." Bewildered, Harry wrangled down his fear and tried to think clearly. "Why would he break out when he must know that I'm not there? It doesn't make sense."

"He's been in Azkaban for almost twelve years ... it might've driven him mad." Williams gently led Harry to the terrace table and bade him to sit. Himself, he parked against the table. "Besides, there's nobody else at Hogwarts, aside from a couple of teachers maybe, and I doubt that he's after one of them."

"But ..."

"Harry, please, this is important. Gringotts knows that your godfather never received a trial, else the
goblins would've known to freeze his accounts. There might be a chance that he's actually innocent of your parents' betrayal and the murders. He also might be guilty ... without trial it's impossible to tell right now."

"What happened to innocent until proven guilty?" Harry demanded. "If he's so rich, why did no one look out for him?"

"It's not my place to speculate. The problem right now is that he's a loose cannon with access to a lot of money. There's no telling what he'll do next. He could try to leave the country, or he could stay and cause a lot of trouble. And that's why the goblins want you to stay hidden until the situation has resolved itself."

"What do you mean, resolved itself?"

Brady sighed and pulled a rolled up poster out of his robe sleeve. Unrolled, it immediately became clear that it was a WANTED poster, one just like in the movies. It showed a maniacally laughing handsome wizard in his early twenties with dark, long hair. Beneath the picture, Harry read: Wanted dead or alive! If seen, contact the Ministry! Do not approach! Danger!

"That's horrible," he whispered and traced the man's face with trembling fingers. "If he's my godfather, why would he want to kill my parents and me? I thought they were best friends?"

"Maybe they were," Williams replied quietly. "But Voldemort was - is! - terrible, and good people were forced or seduced to do terrible things. Black's family was almost completely dark, therefore nobody was really surprised when the Ministry announced his guilt."

"But that's unfair." Harry scowled. "Condemning him because his family wasn't nice."

Williams' sympathetic expression made clear that he knew exactly what Harry meant. "You don't have to condemn him, Harry. All we at Gringotts ask is that you keep safe and let us handle this. Sharptooth explicitly ordered me to tell you that Gringotts won't try to detain Black, should he show up. The whole case is wizard business and they want nothing to do with it. Should he threaten you, however, he'll have made a vicious enemy."

"I understand. I'll be safe, promise." Harry pulled the poster to his chest. "Can I keep this?"

oOo

Half a week had passed without any news about Sirius Black, other than that he was still out and
about. Dobby brought Harry the Daily Prophet to keep current, but the newspaper was mostly a
disappointment if one was used to large muggle publications.

"I really want to see Hermione," Harry told Dobby as he picked out a T-shirt to wear for the day.
"Did she say when she'd be back home?"

"She be home two days now," Dobby informed him and took the rejected shirts back to the
wardrobe. "Should Dobby be visiting and asking?"

"I dunno. Meeting in Diagon Alley would be bad, but meeting at my relatives' house would be even
worse, right? And I can't bring her here, yet." Dejected, he slumped on the bed and sighed. "What
can I do?"

In lieu of an answer, Dobby brought the huge Gringotts Book of Services and flipped it open.

"Another house?" Harry asked doubtfully. "I don't think we can afford one, Dobby ..."

"It just be for renting," the elf explained patiently. "Harry Potter sir could be renting place for a day
and meet his Miss Mione there." He grinned. "And maybe Miss Mione's parents, too."

"That's a fine idea!" Harry jumped up and thundered down to the living room, crying, "I'll call
Sharptooth!" as he went.

A fistful of Floo powder later, Harry first spoke with his steward and then stepped through to the
goblin's office.

"Thank you for meeting me," Harry said, pointing his wand at himself and cleaning up the soot with
a small flick. He'd practiced that spell for a couple of days and his successes thrilled him every time.
"I'm sorry if it sounded super urgent."

"It's not a problem, youngling. A profit is a profit. Please have a seat. You too, Dobby. Now, I
understand you need a safe venue for a day with your friend from school, and possibly her muggle
parents?"
"Yes, exactly. I really want to see her. Please say I can rent a flat or something."

"I can do you one better," Sharptooth said, opening a folder and sliding it over his desk towards Harry. "This is a small lake property, pointing westward with a beautiful view. It's very remote, unplottable and fully warded, and it also comes with secure Floo access. However, if you rent a place from Gringotts, your elf will of course be able to come and go as he pleases."

Harry looked at the photos and fell a little in love. "It looks great. How much is it?"

"It doesn't come cheap, but you can certainly afford it. For a full weekend it'll be a hundred galleons, but the bungalow is fully equipped with furniture and bathroom amenities. Food will be provided per your instructions."

"A whole weekend," Harry mused. "Can I get back to you? I have to ask my friend first."

"Write your letter here and have your elf wait for an answer," Sharptooth instructed. "Meanwhile, I'd like to talk with you about your godfather."

"Again? Brady, uh, Healer Williams, already told me that he broke out of Azkaban, and I promised not to go out alone."

"That's not what I wanted to discuss, but it's good to know that you're taking his warning seriously. Please write your note."

The goblin waited until Harry had actually scribbled a short letter and sent Dobby to deliver it before he picked up the conversation again.

"Now we may talk. As there is no easy way to deliver the news, I'll just come right out and tell you: your godfather entered Gringotts exactly two days after his outbreak and swore on his life and magic that he neither betrayed your parents to Voldemort, nor killed the twelve muggles, or attempted to kill a man named Peter Pettigrew."

"So he's innocent!" Harry cried. "Where is he? Why isn't the newspaper writing about it?"

"It's not that easy," Sharptooth said gravelly. "In the eyes of the goblins, he's definitely innocent and may use his funds as he pleases. However, in the wizarding world there's still a manhunt going on and it won't stop until the Ministry learns of his vow to us."

"What's the problem?" Harry demanded. "He's innocent! They should leave him alone!"
"They should, indeed. Unfortunately, this is a deeply political issue and Gringotts doesn't believe that Sirius Black's status will change soon, if at all."

"Incredible," Harry muttered darkly and crossed his arms in front of him.

"Yes, quite. To even the odds for your godfather a little, Gringotts encouraged him to take up the lordship for the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, as the old lord, Arcturus, died while Sirius was in prison. Being head of his magical house and having the family magic on his side will be a huge boon and make the members of the Wizengamot think twice before they try to incarcerate him again."

"Where is he now?" Harry asked. "Can I help him somehow?"

"You can, in fact, but more about that in a moment. First, it is my duty and my pleasure to inform you that Lord Black officially named you his heir, both in blood and in magic, within minutes of claiming his lordship. You're now the heir to two magical houses."

"What." Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "He doesn't even know me ... and I don't know what that even means."

"He knew you as a babe and apparently loved you beyond reason. He knows what a burden he's placed on your shoulders, but he's more than willing to support you in any way he can. You won't ever want for teachers or money."

"I don't need money," Harry said angrily. "He's family! I need to know ..." His voice broke and his eyes stung a little. "I need to know that not all of my family is like the Dursleys."

"He would love to meet you, but he's not healthy ... not physically, and even more so mentally," Sharptooth said quietly. "For now, he asks for your patience and the use of your trunk at the Dursleys. If you agree, Gringotts will continue to charge one galleon a week to your account. The warders will restrict the Floo to the healers' offices, and maybe to your cottage, once you're back in school. The property would be perfect for his recuperation and your elves could keep an eye on him."

"Yes, of course," Harry agreed immediately. "Whatever he needs."

"You're very eager to help him ... do you feel magically encouraged?"

"I don't think so. It's just unfair how he's been treated, and Azkaban must be the most horrid place on earth. Hagrid had to go there during second year because Minister Fudge needed someone to put away." Harry scowled fiercely. "It was just for show, too. I'm still angry about it."
"You should probably talk to Healer Williams about this. In the meantime, I have a small token of Lord Black's affection for you." Sharptooth took a crystal from a drawer and carefully handed it to Harry. "He embedded his magical signature in this crystal so you could know him at least through his magic."

Immediately reaching for the wisp of magic, Harry said a little wistfully, "He feels nice. I hope he'll be better soon."

"We hope so, too. Now that this matter has been cleared up, there is actually one other thing I need to talk to you about: the money you gifted the victims of the basilisk attacks."

"Oh." Distracted, Harry rubbed the crystal. "What about it? Was someone angry?"

"On the contrary. All your fellow students were very grateful and willingly made the vow to keep it secret, and the muggle parents also promised not to talk about it. No, the students were not causing a small riot in the bank."

"Then who was? Mr. Filch?"

Sharptooth snorted. "That man was so damn happy about the money that he praised you to the heavens, youngling. I'm talking about Sir Nicholas the Mimsy-Porpington ... and the phoenix, Fawkes."

"What? What happened?" Harry asked, flabbergasted.

"Well, Sir Nicholas indeed decided to gift the money to his descendants who were properly surprised, of course, but also very grateful. Young families always are when they receive an unexpected windfall."

"I'm glad," Harry said softly. "But what was the problem there?"

"Apparently Dumbledore felt cheated out of the portion and tried to insist that Sir Nicholas didn't have the standing to actually receive goods, monetary or otherwise, being dead for several centuries and whatnot. Gringotts taught him differently, but he didn't like it. Not at all, and it got even worse."

"Uh, because of Fawkes?" Harry guessed. "What did he do?"

Smirking, Sharptooth shuffled his papers and plucked one out of the stack. "See for yourself."
More and more bewildered, Harry stared at the return notice, signed with a print of the phoenix's large foot. "He gave the money back? Why?"

"Look closer, youngling."

At the bottom of the note, Harry discovered a small line of text. It didn't look like any handwriting he knew, and the precise letters were faintly glittering with magic.

"Reason for return: No need for money, want to visit." Harry blinked. "He wants to visit? Me?"

"Apparently, yes. You are the owner of a rather magical piece of land now. Not much is known about phoenixes; it might be the perfect holiday spot for him." Sharptooth gently laid out a roll of parchment. "Magic formed a contract on Fawkes' behalf. You only need to sign to make everything legal."

"But he can visit whenever he likes," Harry protested. "He can keep the money!"

"He doesn't want it, he's made that perfectly clear," Sharptooth said. "He wishes to visit your properties, especially Potter's Field. To him, that is thanks enough."

Harry frown deepened. "I feel like a thief."

"But it'll make him happy," Sharptooth countered. "Maybe your elves are not the only beings in need of a quiet hiding place."

"I guess he does have quite a bit of excitement, living in a school and stuff..." Harry frowned. "I'll have to tell Dobby to find out what a phoenix even eats. If he stays longer, I don't want him to have to leave everytime he gets hungry."

"That's a plan," Sharptooth said approvingly. "Please sign here, and again here. The galleons will be transferred back to your basilisk account immediately."

"It's the Elf Fund now," Harry replied absently as he signed his name. "I more or less gave it to Dobby so he can buy all the things he needs to get Potter's Field in shape." He glanced up and grinned at Sharptooth. "Yesterday he told me that he wants to buy chickens! Isn't that cool?"
Sharptooth showed his teeth as he sort of grinned back. "Will your second elf have access also?"

"I don't think so. She's only been with us for a few days and since Dobby is the boss and he didn't say anything ..." Harry shrugged. "I've just started reading his book on house elves and don't want to insult him or anything."

"Most of the time, house elves sort themselves out," Sharptooth agreed. "They all have the basic skills, but just like humans, their interests and talents set them apart. One might be able to cook in a pinch, but their true place would be in the garden, or with the animals, or even by their master's side in a profession. House elves are versatile and creative creatures."

"They're the most magical thing I've seen so far," Harry admitted. "They can do almost anything!"

"That they can," Sharptooth agreed. "And for their friends, they'll move mountains."

Just then, Dobby popped back into the office. He looked shaken and simply stared at Harry in mute horror.

"Dobby?" Harry carefully touched the elf's shoulder.

"Oh, Harry Potter sir!" Dobby suddenly wailed. "How can Harry Potter sir be so kind when his family be so very bad!"

"Merlin's pants, what happened?" Harry asked, alarmed. "I thought you went to see Hermione?"

"Dobby was!" Howling, Dobby pulled at his ears. "But Miss Mione and her parents be trying to surprise Harry Potter sir at mean Dursley house, and bad, mad uncle got out old shotgun and screamed at them like he be a lunatic."

"Oh no," Harry whispered, horrified. "What happened then?"

"Miss Mione's parents be calling for help and neighbours be calling the police. When nobody be looking, I be popping them away." Dobby wrung his hands nervously. "I not be knowing where to go so I took them to Gringotts. Dobby be sorry, but Dobby be afraid for their lives. Bad muggle be really, really dangerous."

"It's quite alright, Dobby, that was some quick thinking on your part," Sharptooth said. "I'll arrange for their escort here. With your permission, Heir Potter, we should spin this meeting towards the basilisk fund, since the Grangers will probably have something to say about that. If it deflects from your relatives, even better. Whatever else comes up, we'll deal with then."
Harry nodded his assent, although this really, really wasn't how he'd imagined meeting Hermione again. And it was only half eleven in the morning, too! Sometimes just getting out of bed seemed to be a prelude to some drama or adventure.

Barely five minutes later, the door to Sharptooth's office opened and a little tornado with very tanned skin and bushy hair rushed through and clamped her arms around Harry in a tight grip.

"Harry!" Hermione wailed as she squeezed him with a lot more strength than any girl should reasonably possess. "I was so afraid when your uncle pointed a shotgun at us! Who even does that?" Over her shoulder, she shrilly cried, "I told you that his relatives were the worst!"

"ermione," Harry gasped. "mione! Can't ... breathe!"

"Oh! Oh, I'm so, so sorry," she cried, releasing him but promptly beginning to pat him down as she looked for bullet holes. "He didn't shoot you, right?"

"I'm fine, Hermione," Harry said and impulsively hugged her again. "I'm really fine and I'm sorry Uncle Vernon gave you such a scare."

"Well, it wasn't exactly because of the shotgun," Dan Granger offered dryly. He and his wife were just as tanned as Hermione, and looked very much like returned travellers. "That had a knot in the barrel. But he swung it around like a club and really could have hurt someone with it."

Emma Granger was still a little shaky. "He was like a charging bull ... even frothing at the mouth a little." Her wet eyes sized Harry up. "I don't know how people can leave you there! We should call social services immediately."

"No, please, Mrs. Granger, everything is fine now," Harry said into Hermione's abundant curls. She hung on tightly and he found that he didn't mind holding her a little longer. Her smell was fresh and clean and just a little sweet. "Has Hermione told you about Dobby?" When they replied that she had, Harry explained, "He's been protecting me from the Dursleys. They couldn't do anything to me this summer and I've been really well."

"But is that enough?" Mrs. Granger asked. She wiped at her smudged make-up. "We're not your parents, obviously, but I can't imagine our Hermione living like that. It's torture. If we can help, we will."

"I've been really lucky," Harry assured her. "Dobby's been looking after me, and Gringotts has been a great help, too. But thank you, I appreciate it."
Hearing that, Hermione gasped and stepped back. Her hands settled on Harry's shoulders and she gave him a little shake. "Gringotts! Gosh, Harry! How could you? Ten thousand galleons! That's crazy, you can't do that!"

"I can and I have, no take backs," Harry grinned, only too ready to drop the subject of his family. "Just think about all the books you can buy later!"

"I don't need the money," Hermione insisted, shaking him again. "I was happy to help, and I wasn't petrified that long."

"I want you to have it, and without you, Voldemort would have killed Ginny and resurrected himself." Harry shook off her grip and grabbed her hands so she couldn't start again. "You deserve much more, honestly, and I might tell my account manager to draft another transfer order if you keep refusing."

"Wha ..." Hermione gaped at him like a beached fish. "Harry James Potter!"

"So that is his full name?" Dan Granger chuckled. "She's got that from you, dear."

Mrs. Granger raised an eyebrow. "Keep it up, Daniel Marcus, and you'll walk home."

"Honestly, Hermione, I sold the basilisk for much more and you really, really need to accept this because I don't want my best friend going home with nothing when she almost died trying to help me."

"I'm your best friend?" she whispered, her fingers clenching in Harry's. "Really?"

"I thought you weren't stupid," Harry teased her. "Accept the money, please. You'll only get it when you're of age, anyway, so it's not like I did you a huge favour."

Again she was stunned, and her parents snorted with laughter.

"He's got you there, princess," Mr. Granger smirked. "You'll still have to manage your pocket money for a couple more years to expand your library."

Hermione's eyes welled up with tears and she flung herself at Harry for the second time. "Alright," she whispered. "I'll not give it back. But I'm not your friend because you gave me money!"
"Great," Harry said sincerely and returned her hug happily.

"By the way, Harry, since you're here now: us Grangers wanted to take you out for your birthday, if you'd like. Hermione insisted on doing something fun and eating ice cream," Mr. Granger said when the teens had finally separated. "How about it? Are you free today?"

Harry shared a glance with Sharptooth and nodded at the goblin to field this question.

"Heir Potter has informed me of your daughter's intention to spend some time with him. As you know, he's in an unenviable position and can't go out like other wizards his age. We were just talking about that very thing, in fact, when Mr. Potter's elf found you."

"Do you have an idea?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Yeah, I do." Harry accepted the book and showed the Grangers the bungalow he and Sharptooth had been discussing. "We could to that for the weekend! And Dobby could go get ice cream from Fortescue's easily." He smiled hopefully. "It could be my birthday party, and your parents can come, of course."

Hermione's eyes misted over and she looked beseechingly at her parents. "Can we do that, please? Please, please, please?"

Mr. and Mrs. Granger read the information on the bungalow, exchanged a glance, and then Mrs. Granger asked, "Is that really secure enough for Harry? I'd hate for him to get hurt. Also, can we really go there tomorrow already? Isn't that a little too late for preparations?"

"It's very safe," Sharptooth replied. "Rental agreements can be made confidentially as long as the lessee isn't a wanted criminal. As Mr. Potter isn't a wanted criminal, no one will even know that he rented the property. And yes, the property will be ready for your visit any time after eight in the morning. In fact, I'd recommend arriving there early, as the light will be quite beautiful."

"Well ..." Mr. Granger looked at his wife and received a nod. "Then we thank you very much for the invitation, young man!"

Hermione squealed excitedly and bounced a little, much like Dobby when he was happy. As her girly bits had developed a bit since Harry had seen her last, he first stared and then hastily looked away with flushed cheeks.
Soon after, the Grangers were ready to go home. While Hermione and her mother were talking to Sharptooth about something, Mr. Granger took Harry aside.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, lad, but would you mind letting me pay half of the rent for this weekend?" he murmured. "It's not about you not being able to afford it, it's about me making sure that my girls are safe. And also because it's your birthday and we wanted to treat you, and now you're the one treating us."

Harry looked at his shoes. "It's really not necessary, Mr. Granger. I'm happy to pay and make sure Hermione is safe. I'm really sorry she's been in so much danger because of me."

"None of that Mister stuff," Dan said mock-sternly. "Call me Dan, and my wife Emma, if you please. You're a good lad and her best friend. Please let me do this for you both. Money is not an issue in my family and I'm more than happy to do my part."

Realizing that Dan wouldn't give up, Harry accepted the offer graciously, if a little shyly, and they went to Sharptooth to finalize the deal.

"Dobby will pick you up at eight," Harry told them once everything was signed. Hermione's beaming smile made him feel very grown up. "See you then!"

"Bye, Harry!" Hermione waved and then left the office with her parents.

Back home himself, Harry stared at his trampoline and felt guilty for wanting to take the thing to the bungalow just so he could see Hermione jump some more.

oOo

He told Dobby to pack the trampoline.

And the broom, and the bike, but it felt shallow and dishonest.

"Harry Potter sir be growing," Dobby told him in utter unconcern. "And Miss Mione be handsome female ... for a human."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry groaned as he paced on his lawn. "I feel like a pervert. I should leave it here."

"You be loving that trampoline," Dobby tutted. "Dobby be taking it, no discussion. Will Harry Potter
sir be good going with Betty?"

The small elf's blue eyes shone with excitement. "Betty be knowing where to go!"

"Dobby be meeting you there!" And the elf was gone, leaving Harry alone with his misery.

"Harry Potter sir just be good boy," Betty advised him. "Looking at Miss Mione be alright, for more he be needing permission."

"I know that," Harry muttered. "It's just ... she went away and came back all ... pretty! Like, seriously! I mean, I still like her and she's my best friend but I'm an idiot and I'll mess it up. Gah!"

Betty giggled. "All men do, you not be anything special, Harry Potter sir. You be ready to meet your guests?"

Sighing, Harry took her tiny hand. "Yeah, let's go."

She took him to the deck of the bungalow where the Grangers were already admiring the view over the lake, and popped away immediately to take care of breakfast.

"Harry, good morning!" Hermione came up to him. "This place is wonderful! And did you see? There's a trampoline!"

Harry flushed. Thankfully, her father rescued him by saying, "There's also a broom, do you think you might take me up for a ride? Hermione isn't much of a flyer and I've always wanted to see how it is."

"Sure! Right now?"

"Dan," Emma protested.

"Just a small tour over the lake," Dan promised. "You'll make it good, right, Harry?"

Despite not knowing Hermione's parents well at all, Harry had a lot of fun with Dan as his passenger. After a few easy laps around the property, he gradually went higher and faster until they were zooming around at a good speed.
"Do you want to do a dive?" Harry asked.

"'course I do!" Dan shouted. "I love rollercoasters!"

It took almost fifteen minutes for the thrill to wear off and even then Harry had to promise that they'd do this again before the weekend was over.

"It's time for breakfast now, you crazy person," Emma said and sent her windblown husband off to wash his hands.

Harry followed sheepishly, but he'd honestly had too much fun to feel very chastised.

Breakfast was a drawn out affair and the Grangers made sure to tell Harry everything about their almost month-long vacation in France. He especially loved the stories about the beach and the little towns they'd visited in the country, and loved the photos of the same even more, but the drawn out descriptions about all the delicious food was also feeding his wanderlust.

"Hermione ate like a horse and never gained an ounce," Emma scowled playfully, "while I had to watch every bite of mousse au chocolat and croissant. She looks like a stick insect next to me!"

Harry looked at the picture, where Hermione was brightly smiling back at him, her arm around her mother's waist and looking more alive and carefree than Harry had ever seen her. "You look both very nice," Harry said honestly. "I don't think the croissants did any harm."

"Thank you dear," Emma replied with a smile. "And thank you for this wonderful breakfast! Your elf is a fantastic cook!"

Later, as her parents paddled out onto the lake in a small boat, Hermione went for a turn on the trampoline. And while Harry was indeed doing a bit of looking, it soon became more important to show her how to jump especially high, and of course how to do perfect flips. Not a fan of flying, Hermione nonetheless showed a surprising aptitude for this particular sport and had even more stamina than Harry.

"I wish we had space in the garden for one of those," she said breathlessly. Carefully, she climbed down and gratefully collapsed on the picnic blanket Betty hat laid out under a tree. "It's so great. My legs are burning all over."

Without thinking, Harry took his wand from the blanket and muttered a simply healing charm at Hermione's sore legs. "Better?"

"Yes, but Harry! You just used magic! Won't you get in trouble?" Worried, Hermione looked up into the sky as if she expected an owl to swoop down at any moment.
"Don't worry, this property is unplottable. The ministry won't know. If you've got your wand on you, you can do magic, too." Harry put his wand back down and reached into the basket. "Are you hungry? Dobby made tortilla with extra veggies and sausage."

Together, they demolished almost the whole pie and washed it down with Dobby's lemonade. Hermione's parents joined them then and they spent another hour together just snacking, resting, and talking. After, Hermione taught Harry how to row the boat and Dan coaxed Emma onto the trampoline.

When tea time approached, Dan demonstratively handed Dobby a few galleons and told him to get everyone their favourite sundaes. Hermione's was relatively small, only three scoops, but it came with a mountain of whipped cream, fresh fruit and apple sauce. Dan and Emma each had chosen the craziest flavours and Harry was very happy with his fruit flavours, chocolate sauce and fresh fruit.

"I swear, Fortescue's is my favourite shop on Diagon Alley," Dan moaned. "This is so good."

"And I'll definitely gain a couple of pounds this weekend," Emma laughed, "but it is absolutely worth it."

In the evening, they played a board game and talked about books. Dinner came and went, and afterwards Dan urged Harry to start the music box with his magic.

"It's even got normal music in it. How about a dance, Emma? What about you, Hermione?"

Emma was all for it and snuggled into her husband, but Hermione was suddenly shy and could hardly look at Harry.

"I don't know how to dance, really, but if you want, we can try," Harry offered bravely. "Dobby and Betty really went all out to decorate the deck."

"With fairy lights," Hermione smiled. "It's beautiful." She took Harry's offered hand and helped him into the right position for a slow sway. "I first learned in primary school, but I didn't like it very much," she confessed. "Later, my parents sent me to dancing lessons and that was pretty neat."

"You definitely know what you're doing," Harry said. "Thanks. And sorry for stepping on your toes, when it happens."
Hermione giggled leaned just a bit closer. "It hasn't happened yet. Don't worry, just enjoy the music."

The song ended and another began, this one a bit more lively. Hermione showed Harry the steps and encouraged him to hold her around the waist. It was awkward at first, but since her parents weren't even looking, Harry soon relaxed and gained a little confidence. At the end of the evening, when a calm, sweet number played and they seemed to be all alone in the world among the fairy lights and beside the dark, still lake, Harry dared touching his cheek to Hermione's and closed his eyes for a moment.

"This day has been fantastic," he murmured. "Thanks for coming to see me."

"There's nothing I'd rather do," she whispered back. "And we still have tomorrow."

"It's kind of strange, not having Ron here," Harry admitted, "but I like this, too."

"Where is he, anyway?" she asked after a short pause.

Harry told her about the lottery and the trip to Egypt. "I thought he'd have told you," he finished, "but it seems they were leaving as soon as they knew about the win. Maybe he simply didn't have time. Ron's handwriting was rather bad."

"Don't remind me of all the homework he tried to finish between classes," Hermione groaned. "It's a wonder the professors were able to read any of it."

"Speaking of which, have you received your letter already?" Harry asked. "Dobby wants to go buy the books. He loves shopping."

She put her head on his shoulder and yawned. "No, not yet, but they should be out soon."

The song ended and the two separated reluctantly.

"You're so ready for bed," Emma laughed and ran a hand over her daughter's hair. "Come, you know you'll be grouchy if you go to sleep too late, honey."

"Are you coming, Harry?" Hermione asked and yawned again.
"Sure." Harry grinned. "By the way, if any of you want to skip the bathroom routine tonight, we can ask Dobby if he'll help you out."

Dobby popped up eagerly. "Dobby will!" Before any of the Grangers could say something, the elf had snapped his fingers and cleaned all of them up, including the teeth. "Dobby be wishing good night!"

Harry laughed about the flabbergasted faces of Hermione's parents. "Yes, he's awesome."

In just a few minutes, everyone was settled and the first day of Harry's impromptu birthday weekend was over.

oOo

Even though it had been a late night, Harry awoke early and flew his broom lazily over the dawn-kissed lake, enjoying the quiet, the cool air, and the gentle sunshine. Hermione stepped onto the deck a little later, so he went down and invited her for a couple more rounds. She accepted readily enough and hugged him tightly from behind.

"I'm a little afraid of heights," she admitted. "But flying like this is alright."

To make one of her rare broom flights as memorable as possible, Harry went very slowly and let their naked toes run through the cool water, disturbing its calm only minimally. Beneath the clear surface, they could see fish and something that looked a lot like fairies with fins flitting about. Early birds' song was the only sound and the morning was still quiet and serene when Harry touched down on the deck and let Hermione dismount. In the misty, golden light she looked especially pretty, which was hard for Harry to process.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "That was nice."

"Uhm, you're welcome," Harry stuttered. "Er, tea?"

Her eyes were laughing at him, but she kindly nodded and together they went the few steps to the table and asked Betty for a pot of tea.

To Harry's regret, the mist evaporated soon after and the spell of the morning vanished with it. Hermione's parents joined them for breakfast, both of them intent on using the lake for swimming later.

"You'll join us, right?" Dan asked, shoving a piece of breakfast roll into his mouth. "A water fight is boring with just one opponent. Us against the girls, how about it, Harry?"
"Er, I'd love to ... but ..." Harry flushed. "I-I don't know how to swim. Sorry."

"Well! Then we'll just have to stay in the shallows!" Dan clapped his hands. "A water fight is a water fight!"

"Or Dobby could put a spell on you to help with that," Hermione said, practical as ever. "If he can do that, that is."

Dobby popped up, ears quivering eagerly. "Dobby can!" he announced.

Harry's flush crept from his cheeks to his neck and chest. "Er, okay."

"There probably isn't enough time to teach you this summer, but if we can make it happen at Hogwarts, I could show you," Hermione offered. "We live on a big island; everybody should know how to swim."

"Manager Sharptooth be calling Dobby. Dobby be right back," the elf squeaked and vanished. A minute later he was back, proffering two letters to the teenagers. "This be arriving yesterday. Mail wards be redirecting Hogwarts owls to Gringotts."

Hermione took hers and opened it swiftly. "Oh! They could arrange it! And Divination is off my schedule. Good!"

Her parents congratulated her, but also urged her to take the warnings seriously and not do anything stupid.

Confused, Harry decided to ignore this, and the utter lack of details, in favour of opening his own letter. Eagerly, he read the pertinent parts, only to feel something cold spread in his stomach when he saw his unaltered list of electives. "Divination is still on mine," he told the others with a frown. "And Runes and Arithmancy are missing."

"But you sent Professor McGonagall a letter!" Hermione exclaimed. "That doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't. I sent the letter with Hedwig so I know it has arrived."

"Well, send it again," she encouraged him. "And if Hedwig somehow can't do it, have it delivered by Dobby. He can put it right into Professor McGonagall's hands."

"Good idea." Harry asked Dobby for writing things and penned a quick note. "Thanks for visiting
Hogwarts for me, Dobby."

"It be just a small pop for Dobby," the elf replied, took the letter, and vanished.

When he didn't return, Harry felt his trepidation rise. "The professor is keeping him there," he said dully. "That can't be good."

"Maybe she just wants to send you your new lesson plan immediately," Emma tried to calm him. "What reason could she have not to make the change?"

"I dunno. But I know my rotten luck." Harry put his letter down, shoulders slumping a little.

"Well, as Mom said, there isn't a single good reason not to make the change," Hermione said in her best know-it-all voice. "It'll get cleared up, you'll see."

They tried to enjoy the rest of their breakfast, but Harry's worry had the adults on edge and Hermione was racking her brain for ways to cheer him up, especially since his permission slip for Hogsmeade visits would never be signed by the Dursleys, nevermind the headmaster as his magical guardian. If Dumbledore had been of a mind to allow it, the form would've already been signed. To spare the Grangers more agitation on his behalf, Harry kept that bit to himself, though.

Betty handled the dishes and laid out their swim wear. When asked how Dobby was faring, her ears twitched and she only said, "He still be hiding and waiting on answer. He be back tonight if Professor Kitty not have letter earlier."

"Alright," Harry sighed. "Thank you."

Betty beamed and popped away to arrange for lemonade and snacks while they readied themselves for their water fight.

Luckily, the good weather and even better company lightened Harry's mood considerably and with Dobby's charm against drowning they had an epic fight from which all of them emerged not as victors, but happy and exhausted survivors.

As they wouldn't be staying another night, Dan fought Betty for the privilege of manning the grill. He cooked burgers and sausages while Betty took care of the salad side of things. Harry was strictly banned from helping; Betty had been near tears when he'd offered to cut the onions.
"She's a dear," Hermione said, smiling. "Funny how she just showed up, isn't it? How did that happen?"

"She said she noticed Dobby helping me out," he replied, feeling a little guilty for not telling her the whole story. "And since she lost her family, she asked whether she could stay as well."

"Do you have room for her and Dobby at the Dursleys?"

"Sure. They share a cupboard." Harry told her everything about house elves Dobby had taught him so far and even mentioned the little book his friend had brought him. "I've got a lot to learn, but as long as they're happy, everything's alright. He said you can read the book, too."

"Truly?" Hermione bounced in her chair. "I can't wait!"

"You'll have to, I'm only on page thirty," Harry teased her. "It's only three more weeks, you can do it."

"You're a horrible boy, Harry James," Hermione pouted. "Do you think we might meet again before school starts?"

"I hope so." Harry accepted the first plate of meat from Dan and set it in the middle of the table. "I'll ask Gringotts, that'll be safest."

"But you'll come to Diagon Alley?"

"I guess so, if the Weasleys take me."

Hermione huffed. "Why the Weasleys? Harry, you can go with us if you like. It's not a big deal, and I honestly don't think anyone's going to fire a curse at you there. Too many witnesses."

"Geez, thanks, Mione." Harry rolled his eyes.

Laughing, Dan sat down next to him. "But it's true. Your Professor McGonagall explained to us how Diagon Alley is secured. Apparently the goblins have a vested interest in not having murdering and thieving people running around there willy-nilly."

"If you'll have me, I'd love to go shopping with you," Harry admitted.
"You could also come and visit Hermione at home," Emma added. "Crawley is just a muggle neighbourhood, but there's something to be said for anonymity. She told us that she wants to take you to her favourite bistro, so why not do that then?"

"That's two of the three weeks dealt with," Hermione said and offered the salad bowl. "Salad?"

A little steamrolled, but in a good way, Harry agreed to both and decided to leave the planning to the Grangers. It became clear where Hermione got her organizing skills from, because Emma was the one to get up and get her little pocket planner. While they ate, all the Saturdays were booked and Harry was informed when to appear where.

Dan smiled at him in silent commiseration and offered Harry another piece of grilled watermelon.

As if to mark the end of their weekend, the sky became cloudy and took on a distinct yellowish hue.

"There be storm coming," Betty squeaked. "You all be better going inside and leave clean-up to Betty."

"But-"

"She'll handle it," Harry said and gently steered Emma towards the door. "There are a couple games inside if you want to play."

"Nah, I like watching storms," Dan answered. "Besides, I'm way too full to curb my lovely wife's ambition at rummi."

"She's absolutely cutthroat," Hermione added.

They settled directly by the front window and watched as the sky darkened further and further and the wind picked up. The trees began to sway ominously and then, with a loud rumble, the first clap of thunder sounded. Hermione shrieked a little and then giggled when her mother ruffled her lion’s mane. Within minutes, the rain followed and hid everything behind a curtain of water.

To their great regret, the rain didn't let up until it was time to go home, but Harry enjoyed Hermione's hug just as much as if she'd given it out on the deck.

"I'm so looking forward to next week," she said and squeezed him even tighter.

"Me, too," Emma said dryly, "because you'll have to tidy up your room!"
Blushing, Hermione stepped away so her parents could say their goodbyes, and soon after, Betty first took the Grangers home and then popped Harry back to the cottage, where he rambled around on the lawn until it was time for bed.

oOo

Dobby surprised Harry with breakfast but didn't have a letter for him.

"I be spying on Professor Kitty and Old Whiskers. They be arguing about Harry Potter sir's school lessons. Professor Kitty be angry about Old Whiskers cancelling her changes. Dobby be sorry, but Headmaster Dumblydoor not be allowing Harry Potter sir to go to new classes. Harry Potter sir must take Divination class. He be saying he be knowing best as Harry Potter sir's guardian."

A hot rage burned through Harry and stole his breath for a second. Then, he calmed down. "Dumbledore will not allow me to choose my electives, will he?" he asked. "Well, we'll see about that."

Dobby cocked his head curiously. "May Dobby know what Harry Potter sir be planning?"

"Oh, you'll be involved, if you like," Harry promised. "First, I'll find out which books Hermione will need for her classes and you can buy them for me."

"Dobby will!" The elf squeaked.

"Then, I'll find out how to hide the books and ask Hermione to tutor me. Maybe I can do the tests elsewhere; I don't have to take them at Hogwarts. Hogwarts, A History says so. But if I'm too bad at it, I don't have to, which is sort of good."

"Dobby be liking this plan," Dobby said excitedly. "Dobby be looking forward to helping Harry Potter sir!"

"Thanks, Dobby." Harry took the cup of tea and sipped gratefully. "I'm angry, but since that's not gonna help me any, I'll do the next best thing and do Arithmancy and Runes anyway." They both grinned. "I hope Hermione's not gonna flip, though."

"She be understanding," Dobby replied with conviction. "And Harry Potter sir now also has Lord Black. He be great prankster in his youth, he may have ideas."

That sounded promising, and like a good conversation starter if nothing else. "Do you think I could write him a letter?"
"Steward Sharptooth not be saying anything about it, but Dobby be asking!"

"I could ask Brady and he could talk with his colleagues, I guess." Harry put the tea cup down and used his fork to snag a piece of grilled tomato. "Do we have to do anything today?"

"Dobby be working on elf garden and Betty be managing the house," Dobby told him. "Dobby now know what food and herbs Betty be needing." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "She be needing *special* herbs because she be *female*." Harry choked on his food.

"You not be laughing, Harry Potter sir," Dobby admonished and wagged his finger. "One of these days he be forced to listen to witchy complaints. They not be fun!"

"Yeah, right." Harry wiped at his watering eyes.

"Dobby be telling Healer Brady to teach Harry Potter sir *female health charms*," the elf continued, visibly enjoying seeing Harry writhe in horror. "It be good for finding a mate. It be lucky that Healer Brady be wanting to come over tomorrow."

"You're cruel, Dobby," Harry muttered. "So, so cruel."

After breakfast, Harry took *Hogwarts, A History* from his bookshelf and double-checked his information. Then he sent Dobby to get all the goblin books on Arithmancy and Runes so they could make a list and buy their own copies as soon as the need arose. As he'd be starting with Hermione, Harry figured that the school book would suffice for a while.

Dobby's reappearance didn't shock him - what did was the towering stack of books in the elf’s arms. Before he could help, however, they began to float and sorted themselves into the empty bookshelves.

"Did the goblins really had so many books?" Harry asked and gulped. That had to be at least forty books, some of them rather thick!

"Goblins did," Dobby affirmed, "but those be new copies for Harry Potter sir. Lord Black insisted. He be having healing consultation when Dobby arrived."

"Er, what? He bought all those books? When? How did he even know?"

"Dobby not be knowing, but Dobby be assuming that Lord Black be speaking with Steward"
Sharptooth."

That was at least half the wind taken out of Harry's sails. "Gosh. He's a little crazy, isn't he? Those must've cost a fortune."

"Lord Black be very rich," Dobby said nonchalantly. "And he be wanting to spoil Harry Potter sir. It be his duty and his pleasure as his godfather." He produced a clear crystal. "He be begging for a bit of magic in crystal so he be knowing his heir again. Dobby said he be asking."

Without really thinking about it, Harry took the offered crystal and held it tightly. "What do I have to do?"

"Harry Potter sir just be pushing a little magic into it," Dobby explained. "It be easy, take no time at all."

"Alright, then." Harry closed his eyes and tried to get to the warmth behind his breastbone. A feeling of intense gratitude bubbled up in him, surprising him when it streamed through him like a little river. Only a moment later, it seemed to overflow in his hand.

"Crystal be charged." Dobby snatched it up. "Dobby be delivering it!"

Alone again, Harry turned towards the bookshelves and stared at his new books. "Bloody hell. I'll never manage to read them all!"

Despite the overwhelming amount of new texts, Harry was perfectly capable of picking one with an interesting title and read until evening. Betty had to bully him out to the terrace - without his book - so he could eat his dinner in peace. As it turned out, she was very good at that; Harry decided not to get too much in the way of her handling, her worry about his health simply wasn't worth it.

oOo

Healer Williams arrived late in the morning. His normally smiling face was serious, although not as worried looking as it had been when the news of Sirius' breakout became public knowledge.

"Good morning, Harry," he said and joined Harry on his blanket beneath the willow tree. "How are you?"

"I'm not really fine," Harry replied, knowing that the man didn't want any platitudes. He poured him a glass of Dobby's lemonade and handed it over. "Headmaster Dumbledore refused my request to
change electives for next year. He says I'm not allowed to go to the Runes and Arithmancy classes and that I have to keep Divination."

"Do you know why?"

"Not really. Professor McGonagall was right brassed off, at least that's what Dobby told me. He, er, snuck the letter onto her desk and stayed to take her answer back." Harry took a deep, calming breath. "Anyway, I'm still brassed off, too. But I decided to learn that stuff anyway, and Sirius gave me half a ton of books on the subjects, so ... you know." He shrugged. "Just my life."

"It certainly doesn't make sense to withhold an education that can only benefit you," Williams said, frowning. "You should appeal to the board of governors, via your head of house. It's your right as a student, and such appeals are always taken up with the guardian of the student in question. If the guardian's decision is found to be unsound, the student will be allowed to join the class of his or her choice."

"Do you think they'll decide in my favour?"

Williams' voice was firm as he said, "Absolutely. One would have to be a moron not to know that Divination is a school subject for gifted children or those with a great personal interest. Since you display neither, and since Runes and Arithmancy are particularly useful subjects, I can't imagine a different outcome. But if there's actually a different outcome, you'll still be able to study privately. There's absolutely nothing Dumbledore can do to forbid that, so you'll have lost nothing but a little time."

"Well, Professor McGonagall's answer came this morning, but she didn't write anything about appealing." Harry pulled the letter from his pocket and unfolded it for Healer Williams to read. "Do you reckon the headmaster told her not to?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, and in truth, it's a criminal offence not to inform someone of their rights. It's clearly laid out in Hogwarts' Student Charter ... of which you've probably never received a copy." At Harry's headshake, Williams sighed. "I'll take care of that as soon as I return to Gringotts. What a mess."

"But we'll get it sorted, right?" Harry wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers, watching as Williams used magic to make a copy of his letter. "Because Dobby told me that Sirius was a prankster in school and I'm kind of worried that he'll do something that gets him caught and locked up again."

"You asked whether you could write him letters, and the consensus among his healers is that you
definitely should. Azkaban is guarded by demon-like creatures, the dementors, and their presence robs the inmates of every happy thought." Williams tapped Harry's clenching fingers and smiled. "His mental recovery will help his body heal much faster, and the way he took to your magical signature ... well. We all hope that he'll make a full recovery with your support."

"Have you met him?" Harry asked.

"Just briefly. He was very weak; being finally safe often does that to people who've experiences significant trauma. He'll need a while to get back on his feet, but Gringotts will take good care of him. What I noticed is that he was very invested in your well-being. He actually required an oath from your steward regarding your health before he allowed himself to rest easy and the healers to work on him."

Again, some warmth was blooming in Harry's chest. "I want to get to know him," he said. "If we're going to be a family, we've got to take care of each other."

"That's a very healthy way to approach this particular situation," Williams praised. "Of course you'll both have to truly earn each other's trust, but nothing I've seen so far indicates that Lord Black wants to do you harm - or you him. You've got time to get to know each other and find out what kind of relationship you'd like to have in the future."

"As long as he stays safe," Harry muttered, remembering the spark of what had suspiciously felt like mischievousness in his godfather's magic.

"Gringotts will extract a vow from him to not endanger his current position of relative safety, especially not for your sake," Healer Williams promised. "And we'll be underhanded about it and propose this while he's still recovering."

That made Harry smile, although it soon vanished. "Just don't ... don't imprison him, Brady. It's bad enough being sick, I don't want him to feel trapped again."

"Never, not after Azkaban. There are already plans being discussed where he could go to recuperate. It'll most likely be abroad, that way he'll have a lot more freedom."

"Yeah, okay. Good."

"Don't worry, Harry. He's a valued account holder and Gringotts will do everything in its considerable power to restore his health. They want the Black gold back in circulation, and since it worked so well with you, nothing is stopping them from aiding your godfather."

"Do you think they nobbled me somehow?" Harry asked, suddenly worried. "Not that I got the
feeling, but I've never had much to do with the goblins."

"They most certainly didn't nobble you," Williams replied. "They might have proposed deals that benefited them just as well as they did you, but that's hardly a crime. In fact, you did them several favours, first by selling them the basilisk, and secondly by accepting land in lieu of gold. They reward good relations, Harry, and honour is one of their most important creeds."

"What's the most important?"

"To always keep the gold flowing," Healer Williams said with a grin. "Do you know why?"

"Uh, no, I can't say that I do."

"Goblin magic is intimately tied to precious metals, especially gold. From such metals, they generate their power. However, it's not the gold itself that lends them power, it's the hand the gold goes through. Gold in motion is perfection, as every magical being handling gold gives a tiny bit of their magic to the metal. It's nothing sinister, it just happens, and goblins evolved long, long ago to be able to use that special kind of stored magic."

"Wow, that's incredible!" Harry said, astounded. "So they just move it through the economy, somehow extract the collected magic, and to get the gold recharged, they then bring it back into circulation?"

"Perfectly summed up! The collected magic is used for their everyday business, but also to sustain their realm. To keep it healthy and balanced, they need to feed it with magic. In return for the magic, they offer superior services in medicine and warding and many other fields. For millennia, this exchange of power and goods has worked well."

"But what of the goblin rebellions?"

Williams laughed. "Honestly? Every now and then the goblins have enough of our superiority complex and put us in our place with a rebellion. Afterwards, everything returns more or less to normal and both sides are satisfied. I bet that's not how it's taught at Hogwarts!"

Harry grinned. "Our teacher puts half the school to sleep when he drones on about the rebellions. I'm usually reading ahead in my book or doing homework."

"Good lad. Now hold still for me, Healer Spleenbash wants an update." Chuckling about Harry's put-upon sigh, Williams drew his wand and performed his diagnostic spell. "Ah, as expected your bones have improved further, as have most of your organs. I guess it's time to face the dreaded scar, my friend. I'm sorry."
"You really want to check it out, don't you?" Harry said, resigned.

"I really feel like I should," Williams admitted. "It'll be beastly for you, but the data could make this so much easier for the healers. There are still three weeks left until you leave for Hogwarts, but to prepare the ritual my colleagues do need some time. If you're not ready, we could always wait for next summer, although Healer Spleenbash won't like that."

"Neither do I." Harry grimaced and rubbed at the scar. "I ... alright. But just once!"

"Just once," Williams promised. He sat directly across from Harry, gently took the wand from the boy and handed it to Dobby, who'd silently popped up to watch the proceedings. "Your friend will keep it safe for you. Now, you said that you have an anger management problem ... I want you to think about the greatest injustice done to you. Imagine it vividly, and then allow yourself to get revenge in your mind. I'll put up several diagnostic spells to catch every shift in your magic. And ... go."

Harry was so used to swallowing his fury that he had trouble to get into the vision at first, even though there were many, many instances to choose from. The longer he tried to catch just one such moment however, the more he felt the anger come up. Something in his chest clenched, he balled his hands to fists, and suddenly, just like that, the image of hexing the Dursleys, Aunt Marge and Ripper to the moon ripped through his mind. It was so violent that he instinctually jerked back.

The damage was done, though. Agonizing pain shot through his head, wave after wave, making him cry out.

"Holy shit," Healer Williams cursed. He dropped his wand and caught Harry as he slumped. "Dobby, get Healer Spleenbash, please. She'll want to be here."

Dobby went, taking Harry's wand with him, and returned a mere two minutes later with the hassled goblin healer.

"It didn't go well," she stated and dropped to her knees next to Harry, already consulted the still running diagnostics. "Poor boy. The Dark Lord's shade got a good grip on him."

"At least I learned where it's originating," Williams murmured. "Ah, Harry, relax. Take a deep breath. You did well. We'll do what we can to help with the headache."

"His scar is bleeding a little," Healer Spleenbash growled. "What a beastly thing to do to a youngling." She fished a phial from her robe pocket, uncorked it, and dipped her finger in the clear liquid. Carefully, she dabbed at the scar. "Phoenix tears, they'll do the job for now."

"You'll get the shade out," Williams said. "You have to."
"And we will. Tell him to be ready on the 17th. It's a new moon, the perfect time to send Voldemort's shade where he belongs."

"I'll guide him through the preparations," Williams said.

Harry, who'd heard bits and pieces of their conversation, groaned. "Worse than falling off a broom."

"Yes," Healer Sharptooth crooned and stuffed a piece of chocolate into Harry's mouth. "You won't have to do it again, youngling."

After another diagnostic spell, she let Dobby pop her back to Gringotts.

"So we'll do it this summer?" Harry mumbled around his chocolate. It tasted warm and rich and perfect, even in his state.

"On the 17th," Healer Williams confirmed. "That gives us exactly one week to get you ready for the ritual."

"How?" Blinking, Harry fought against the sleepiness.

"A bit of fasting, a few ritual baths, that kind of thing. You better sleep now, Harry. Just sleep it off."

"Must write a letter," Harry murmured as his eyes closed.

"Write it when you're awake again." Williams combed soothingly through Harry's hair. "Get him to bed, Dobby. I'll see him tomorrow."

"Dobby will," the elf squeaked and took Harry away.

oOo

Harry felt a lot better once he'd had a good sleep, a meditative hour during which he wrote a letter to his godfather, and more of that fantastic chocolate. Dobby and Betty both pampered him shamelessly, even going so far as to draw him a raspberry scented bath and reading from the elf book as he fell asleep at night. It was lovely, and the small piece of Malijar's gift in his hand calmed him even further.

Now, after a particularly healthy breakfast, he was ready to learn what he needed to do to get rid of Voldemort's soul piece.
"Goblin ritual magic is capable of great feats," Healer Williams explained. With his wand, he drew a stylized ritual circle. Golden mist rose and swirled around it. "But to meet the magic halfway, there are some things we wizards can do. First is ritual cleansing. I was informed that you have an interest in ritual magic, so consider this a free lesson in the basics."

Harry nodded eagerly and set his pencil on his writing paper. Before his eyes, another little circle made from magic appeared, and then an even smaller stick figure wizard. "Is that supposed to be me?" he asked.

Williams smirked. "Maybe." He waved his wand and a small cover lifted from the circle. "As you may know, this is called a cystern. We use it to cleanse ourselves from our everyday stresses and taints, both mundane and magical. A cleansing should be done before larger communions, although those may also work without one. You've done it during your warding, for example."

"Why should it be done if it works anyway?" Harry couldn't help but ask. "Isn't it sort of redundant?"

"An important question," the healer agreed. "Sometimes it might indeed be redundant, but ritual magic can be a very exacting craft. Some rituals demand purity in the sense that no outside influences are tolerated, be they from artifacts, magical creatures or, in your case, a possession of some kind. You enter the circle and therefore magic demands that your attention be focused entirely on your purpose. A touch of your pet or a bespelled trinket is enough to disturb your aura and influence your magic, so it's best to avoid that hassle and do a cleansing if you're about to do an important ritual."

"The book I started reading said it's also a demonstration of respect," Harry said. A little less sure, he added, "To magic."

"It sounds like magic is sentient, and that implies a certain belief, I know," Williams said. "Healer Spleenbash told me that you've been confronted with the idea of wizarding religion during the summer. If you're worried that someone is trying to convert you or anything, don't be. You can believe in magic without believing in deities. As long as you respect and honour magic in both word and deed, everything will be fine."

"Head Warder Shanoo said something similar to me in Potter's Field," Harry admitted. "It's just ... I never heard about it at all before this year, and now it seems to be everywhere."

"If I may offer some unsolicited advice?" Williams asked. "Accept it for what it is: a part of the world you now live in. It was always there, albeit hidden, and now it's come to your notice. If you're interested in our Lord and Lady Magic, I'll help you discover more, but if you're not, that's perfectly acceptable. Religion is a deeply personal choice and thankfully wizardkind has never believed in forcing their religious beliefs on others."

"Unlike the muggles," Harry replied. "That's kind of a relief."
"Personally, I'm not a fan of muggle religion at all," Williams confessed. "The togetherness of it is not my cup of tea, or the idea to believe wholesale what another person is telling me to believe."

"Are you religious?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"I believe in Malijar and his Lady, Ethys," Williams replied easily. "My worship, such as it is, is a deeply private matter. Oftentimes, a family has their own rituals and every relationship with the Lord and Lady of Magic is different."

"So you can decide all by yourself how to, I don't know, say hello and ask for things and stuff?"

Williams laughed kindly at Harry's awkward question. "Yes, you can. It just has to feel good. Most of the time I'm actually thanking the Lord and Lady, though."

"Thank them?"

"For all the good they've done. For me, my family, my community. You see, I had a good start in life, I'm gifted magically, and I have found a profession I love. There's also a roof over my head and I never have to go hungry. That's plenty to be grateful for, right?"

"Right. But surely you have wishes sometimes," Harry pressed. "What are you doing then?"

"Okay, this is turning too theoretical for the time frame we have available, but I'll make you a deal," Healer Williams said. "We'll finish today's work and then I'll show you something cool. Alright?"

Harry tried not to pout. "Alright."

Chuckling, Williams animated his magical drawings again and prodded the little wizard to climb into the cystern. "You must have a kneazle in your lineage, Harry, as curious as you are. See how the magical mist is taking all the impurities away from little stick-you? And that's not all. A cleanse also helps to order your thoughts and feelings so you can enter the ritual circle more focused and calm."

"But it won't take any thoughts away, or will it?"

"No, of course not. Although there are spells to verify the spellwork on a cystern, and I do think it'll be a good idea to teach them to you. With your penchant for getting into trouble or hurt..." He didn't finish the sentence and instead produced a tiny well-like thing from his pocket. "This is a portable cystern. He cast an enlargement spell and the cystern landed on the lawn, looking innocent and intriguing all at once. "It's just a simple one, but it does its job," Williams said. "Have a look, you can't break it."
Harry stood, opened the cover and reached inside. "It's cool. How does the water get in there?"

"Magic, of course." Williams laughed at Harry's huff. "More specifically, rune magic. Lumos." In the shine of his wand light, he showed Harry the runic array on the inside of the cystern. "This is for water ... this prompts misting, and this cluster here is more or less the programming to start the mist when someone magical enters the cystern. There are further rune clusters to generate the special magical properties of the mist."

"Wow." Impressed, Harry traced the runes. "And the caster would need Arithmancy to calculate which runes to place where, right?"

"Exactly right." Williams stood as well, took off his light summer robes, shirt and even his trousers. "Don't be alarmed - usually you step inside naked, but for a demonstration this will do." He climbed in, spread his arms out and sighed happily. "It's bliss during the summer, if nothing else."

Harry laughed, but also watched as the mist rose up from the low basinet until it fully covered the man. It gently wound and billowed around him, obviously taking its time to find the taints Williams had described.

At last, however, the gentle mist evaporated and Williams stepped out. "That was lovely. I was in the snake house this morning and it showed."

"Oh, I completely forgot about him ... how is Snake?"

"He's just fine. Someone took him on a trip to China. I also haven't forgotten the visit, but we should get that Dark Lord thing out of you first."

Harry agreed wholeheartedly. Pointing at the cystern, he asked, "Can I try it?"

"By all means." With a wave of his hand, Williams' clothes shimmered and were suddenly back on his body.

Feeling a little shy next to the rather well-built young man, Harry only dropped his shirt before climbing into the cystern. His feet tingled a little. The sensation crept up until it enveloped his whole body. For a moment or two the mist was so thick around him that he couldn't see anything. Finally it cleared away and Harry had to admit that he actually felt a lot lighter.
"That worked, I guess. But ... what did the mist take away? There are no artifacts around here, and other than Hedwig I don't have any magical pets."

Williams smiled. "But you spent a lot of time on Potter's Field where ley magic abounds. The cystern had to work hard to scrub you clean. Who knows what plants and critters actually live there and touched your magic. And you also have a piece of Malijar's Gift, that's bound to influence you quite a bit."

"I understand; I'd better leave that at home when Healer Spleenbash does her thing."

"We shall see and decide when the time has come." Williams closed the lid of the cystern with a little wave of his hand. "I'll leave that here. You should use it at least once a day, preferably at night, to clean yourself as much as possible from Voldemort's taint. Reinforcing the message will make residing in your body more and more uncomfortable for the shade."

"But I could also use it in the morning?" Harry wanted to know.

"Always before bed, but also whenever you like," Williams confirmed. "Tomorrow we'll talk about fasting, and why it is important. Before you ask, yes, there are potions to help with that, but like everything to do with magic, the mindset is just as important as the physical aspect. Gringotts wants you to mentally deal with the fact that something monumental is going to happen to you. The shade is an immense burden on you, whether it feels like one or not. Making it uncomfortable in its home will make you notice how much strain it's been putting you under. You'll have to want to let it go."

"I do want it to disappear," Harry said, puzzled.

"People want many good things. That doesn't mean they're ready to accept them when they actually happen upon them." Williams smiled gently. "It's a normal reaction, but it's also the reason we're having this preparation phase."

"Okay," Harry murmured.

"Great! Then let's have some fun! Take your wand!"

Harry obeyed and under the healer's instruction soon managed to use the wand like a brush, calling shiny, glowing magical lines into existence.
"Now, draw a large circle around yourself. Down on the lawn would be easiest ... yes, just like that. It's no problem if it's a little wobbly." Williams grinned. "Now brace yourself. This is North. Paint this rune here."

He demonstrated and Harry copied him, doing this at all four cardinal points.

"Now repeat after me: May magic bless this circle and aid me in my magical purpose."

Harry spoke the words and wasn't at all prepared for the sudden rush of magic around him. Rising from his painted circle, it heaved upwards, reaching for him like an eager child.

Williams chortled about his flabbergasted expression. "Very well done, Harry. Now you can use the circle however you please. How about introducing yourself to ritual magic in meditation. Just sit and think about it for a while, tell it about yourself; that's what magical communion is about, after all."

"And what will you do?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I think Dobby might be persuaded to get some ice cream from Fortescue's for us both, since the hot days will be over any time now. Have fun!" And with that Healer Williams strode off, leaving Harry in his circle and unsure what to do about it.

oOo

At night, long after another dip in the cystern, Harry pondered his first foray into ritual magic. It had been lovely and easy, yet it felt somehow different from communing with his ward stones.

Maybe because it's magic, not a magical object, he mused. It's just so ... big. I wonder if Hermione would like it as well. The thought of teaching her something new was unexpectedly pleasant, and he grinned. I bet she'd be brilliant at it.

His thoughts then turned to his other friend and he sighed. He could just hear Ron bemoaning this newest pursuit and claiming that Hermione had spoiled him for fun. Thinking even further on the issue, he remembered all the instances Ron had talked down to Hermione or ridiculed her for liking school. Suddenly it appeared rather obvious that Ron tolerated her for Harry's sake, and probably vice versa as well.
Frowning, Harry rolled over. *No, I'm being stupid. He defended her against Malfoy, after all. You don't do something like that for people you're only tolerating.*

But the thought stuck, which annoyed him, and it took a long while to fall asleep.

oOo

The next few days until his meeting with Hermione passed with more little lessons about ritual magic and spells Healer Williams thought might be useful. Harry proved especially adept at the summoning spell and used it to summon practically everything, including the house elves. Betty especially loved being summoned and tossed onto the trampoline, from which she'd bounce and pop away so Harry could summon her again. It was a fun game and helped Harry to take his mind off the impending ritual at Gringotts.

The only gnat in his porridge was the fast; he'd started drinking broth for dinner and would have to limit himself to one full meal on Saturday to keep up with the fasting schedule Healer Williams had set up. He consoled himself that it could've been worse and was determined to make the best of the lunch Hermione had promised him.

Finally Saturday arrived and Harry let Dobby pop him to Crawley, right into the Grangers' living room.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed and pounced on him for an enthusiastic hug. "It's good to see you!"

"You've only seen him last week," her mother teased, but moved to give Harry a brief embrace as well.

Dan shook the boy's hand. "Well, I know that Hermione's eager to get going, so I'll just go over the rules and then we're out of your hair."

"Dad," Hermione sighed.

"You know this has to happen, princess," Dan said sternly. "A boy is taking you out-"

"I am taking *a boy* out," she interrupted.

"You're having alone time with a boy," Dan amended, "and therefore it is my privilege and duty to inform that boy that you're expected back no later than six, in one piece, and without ..." He paused dramatically, "Hickeys!"

Emma and Hermione groaned and Harry flushed fiercely.
"Er, alright," he stammered.

"Don't mind him," Hermione said, glaring at her father, "he's threatened to do that for years. You're just the first poor sod to suffer through it."

As they hastily got out the door, Hermione's hand around Harry's wrist, Dan called, "No hickeys, Harry! I'll check!"

Mortified, the two teens hurried away.

"I'm so incredibly sorry, Harry," Hermione rushed to say. Even under her tan her cheeks were flaming. "Oh my god, I can't believe he actually pulled that stunt."

"If it's any consolation, I didn't expect to get a shovel talk, either," Harry tried to joke.

"Yes, he knows it's not a date. Honestly."

Something in her voice caught Harry's attention. "Well, if it were, it'd be my first one. Ever," he admitted.

"Really?" Hermione raked a hand through her wild hair and blinked. "I'd have thought that some girl or other would've asked you at Hogwarts."

"They didn't." Harry shrugged. "I guess I don't live up to the hype."

"You're just fine, Harry," Hermione replied with conviction and smiled encouragingly. "They'll probably start dropping hints now. You look ..." She looked away, suddenly a little shy. "You look really good, Harry. I'm so glad the Dursleys have treated you better this summer."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Er, yeah. Uh, Hermione ..." He gathered all of his courage and snagged her soft hand in his. "I know that your dad was teasing us, but ... maybe it'd be nice, having a first date with a friend. If you want to."

Shyness forgotten, she stared at him.

"Only if you like," he hastened to assure her, grateful that she hadn't taken her hand away in horror. Yet. "It's just ... girls are so scary sometimes, and I never really know what to talk about with one I don't already know. Going on a date with you would be great, actually."

"Just because you know me already?" Hermione inquired softly.
"Well, no. You're also really pretty but how do guys tell that to girls without sounding like a moron?" Harry muttered. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"Harry James." Hermione's eyes were shining and she smiled. "I'd be happy to have my first date ever with you. We've already started, see?" She gave his hand a squeeze.

Squeezing back, Harry smiled. "Wow. Thank you! And now I'm nervous. Is that lame or what?"

"Only a little," Hermione giggled. "I'm a bit nervous, too."

"So ... can I ask what people actually do on dates, other than talking and kissing?"

"Holding hands is rather nice."

Harry smiled, looking at their interlaced fingers. "Yeah. It is."

After a short walk around the neighbourhood, Hermione led Harry to her favourite bistro and told him to order anything that caught his fancy.

"I'm pretty sure this should be my line, since I asked you out," Harry said, worried. "Are you sure?"

"This was always going to be my treat, Harry," she replied, "because I invited you first. And besides, we'll still be friends after our date, right? If you like, it can be your treat next time."

"Okay," he agreed, relieved. "But I got pounds from Gringotts, just in case."

Together, they ordered hummus and falafel, shawarma, and a multitude of little dishes that were called meze and seemed to be the Middle Eastern version of tapas or antipasti.

During the wait and the meal, they talked about everything that caught their fancy, most of it school-related. As expected, Hermione threw a fit of epic proportions over Dumbledore's interference in Harry's choice of electives and Harry let her rage because she was saying all the things about Dumbledore he couldn't allow himself to even fully think without provoking a monstrous headache. When that was done and over with, they were back to holding hands. It was a little awkward at first, especially since the weather was still warm and both their palms were a little sweaty, but Harry didn't mind. And since Hermione didn't complain either, he was happy to keep doing it.

"It's all delicious," Harry proclaimed near the end of their lunch. "One day, I'll have to visit the country and eat all of that right there."
"Me, too," she agreed with a bright smile. "I love travelling with my parents. For next summer, they are thinking about Morocco. People are speaking French there, so the language won't a problem, but everything else will be very different." She leaned closer and whispered, "Dobby could come over every day and get food for you."

"That would be awesome," Harry agreed, smiling back. "If he could find you in France, it might just be possible."

Since neither was keen on returning to Hermione's house just yet, they took a long stroll through the nearby park, where a few kids their age were staring at Hermione and Harry from a safe distance.

"What's up with them?" Harry asked.

"They're not old friends, if that's what you mean," she mumbled.

"Did they bother you before you went to Hogwarts?"

Hermione lifted her chin a little and stared back at a dark-haired girl with freckles that looked like she was considering getting in their way. "Before I got sent to self-defence classes and learned how to wipe the floor with them."

Harry looked at her in awe. "Is that true?"

She grinned. "I'm still going during the summers, just so I won't forget all of it. I earned my black belt before Hogwarts."

"You are so amazing," Harry said with utmost sincerity. "I wish I could have learned that, too."

"Well, nobody's really keeping you ..." Hermione hesitated. "I'm not trying to pry or anything, but you really seem much more relaxed this summer. If the Dursleys aren't giving you grief, you could start a course somewhere." She gained confidence at his considering look and added, "It's just like being able to swim when you live on an island: if there are people out for your blood, you better know how to make attacking you unappealing, and fast. If they're better magically, you can at least be better in hand-to-hand combat. Just think, you could even take away their wand, or get your own wand back from them. In a fight that's invaluable."

Harry found that he agreed completely with Hermione and made a note to himself to bring it up with Healer Williams at the next opportunity. Still, he was a little worried. "Have they tried anything with you since then?"

"Tried, yes." Hermione smiled mischievously. "Were they successful? No. I like to think that they learned their lesson during the last seven years."
"Seven ... right. Black belt." Harry squeezed her fingers. "It's a wonder you haven't decked Malfoy yet ... or Ron."

She huffed. "Well, learning a potentially deadly martial art kind of makes you responsible for other people. I try not to hold their stupidity against them, but I swear, one more idiotic word from Malfoy and I'll clock him one."

"Only one? I'd hold his arms for you until you've knocked some sense into him, 'Mione. It might take a while."

"Charming." Hermione smirked but bumped Harry's shoulder with her own. "But I mean it. Knowing how to really hurt someone is freeing, but it's also a burden. Some dumb people even take it as a challenge. So I'd appreciate it if you could keep this to yourself. Okay?"

"It's your business," Harry assured her. "But I'm still amazed! And there's a popsicle stand - my treat."

They bought a small ice cream each and meandered back to Hermione's home. There, Harry got the tour of the house and spent almost an hour in Hermione's room. She had shelves and shelves of books, most of them muggle, but the magical texts were catching up fast. A lot of the tomes seemed to be rather advanced supplemental reading and he wondered just how much money her parents truly invested in their daughter's education. On the wall, he also spied a muggle secondary school diploma.

"I knew you were smart, but those are a lot of books, even adult specialist books," Harry said, gaping a little. "You've read all of them, didn't you? And you already finished secondary school!"

"Yes," Hermione admitted. She sat on her bed and clasped her hands in her lap. "I'm ... I was tested high on the brain score as a child, and again after my first year at Hogwarts. My parents try to sponsor my development as well as they can. It's not easy for them, or cheap. I'm also almost through the local library. I've got a card for the British Library, but I don't exactly have a lot of time to borrow books from there. It's frustrating. Even worse, I've got a near eidetic memory. It's not perfect, but ... almost. That's one hell of a combination and I know it drives people batty when I know everything a professor asks. But just sometimes it'd be good to be able to forget something, or at least be able to not write everything I know for an essay. Some professors dock points if I go over their length limit."

Harry put his hand on hers and carefully leaned against her. "It's still a great gift to have and I bet your parents are really, really proud of you. If someone's teasing you about it, they're probably just jealous. And ... please don't kill me ... it's just school. Sure, it's important, but all that really counts are the OWLs and NEWTs, right? Why drive yourself crazy with things you can't really control? We didn't even have exams last year, and I bet no one will ever ask about our second year grades, anyway."

Hermione stared at him, her eyes welling with tears. "Harry ..."
Panicking, he stuttered, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to downplay your problem, or hurt your feelings."

"You didn't." She sniffed, hugged him, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "You give me perspective. Just like that! That's one of the reasons I like you so much. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Harry put his arms around her and patted her back. A book title caught his eye. "Hey, you have textbooks about judo and karate. Can I borrow one?"

"Of course," she said. Quickly wiping her eyes, Hermione went to the shelf and pulled out a large book. "Krav maga might be a good fit for you. It's rather brutal, but honestly, who cares if you knock a death eater's teeth loose?"

"Not me!" Harry retorted with feeling.

They sat there and looked at pictures and explanations until Hermione's parents called them down for tea. Upon learning that Harry couldn't partake due to health reasons, the Grangers managed to overcome their surprise quickly and graciously plied Harry with tea and good conversation. Being dentists and conscious of their family's health, their tea tray didn't hold as many sweets as it would have otherwise and Harry felt quite alright watching them munch on fruit and little sandwiches.

At last it was time for Dobby to take Harry home. He enjoyed Hermione's lingering hug and renewed their promise to meet next week. "Will that be our second date?" he asked cheekily and tugged a little at her hair.

"Harry James," Hermione said, blushing.

Her parents looked on with interest but just waved when he said goodbye and was whisked away a second later.

End of part 4
Healer Williams noticed Harry's distracted mood immediately when he came to check up on his charge the following day. It was still warm enough for the picnic blanket, but Harry had opted to wear a jumper instead of just a t-shirt, and Dobby served hot drinks and heartier snacks.

"Everything went well yesterday, then?" Williams asked as he ran his diagnostics. "You had a good time with your friend?"

"Er, yeah."

Harry's light flush prompted Williams to prod for more information. "Oh, I see. Was it a date, even?"

"Kind of. Yes. As friends. I mean ... her father gave me the shovel talk as a joke, and somehow it happened when we talked about it." Harry shrugged. "Going out with her was nice. I asked if next time could be a date, as well."

Williams' smile got wider. "She must be something special."

"She is." Harry enthusiastically told him all about Hermione's muggle school education and the fact that she actually had a black belt in martial arts. "She said I could learn this, too, and lent me a book on krav maga. The pictures look wicked. Can I try?"
"As far as I'm concerned, you can study whatever catches your fancy, especially if it's self-defence," Healer Williams replied. "I'll consult with Gringotts, maybe they'll be able to arrange for a teacher next summer. Since that's more than a year away, your Hermione might be willing to teach you the basics."

"She already said she'd teach me swimming," Harry said. "I don't want her to have to teach me everything." He picked at the hem of his sleeve. "If I could teach her something in return, I wouldn't feel so dumb."

"You're not dumb. You just told me that she's exceptionally gifted - there's no sense in comparing yourself to her, at least not in that regard. You have other strengths ... and I bet you hardly even notice." At Harry's questioning look, Williams clarified, "You pick up new spells quickly. That's a talent right there. You can help her with charms and spells and even teach her the ones you've learned over the summer. I'd say that's a fair exchange."

"Oh. Do you think so? She's usually pretty quick, though."

"Working together is always more fun," Williams said with a smile. "And considering how distracted you are today, spending more time with her won't exactly be a hardship for you."

"Er, no." Harry chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "But I shouldn't, or Ron would flip."

"Ron is your other best friend, yes? Why don't you tell me a little about him? How did you meet?"

Harry described how he'd almost missed the train in first year and went on to sketch their adventures during the two years at Hogwarts. "Ron's completely different from Hermione," he concluded, "and he doesn't like homework much. He teases her for studying a lot but wants her to help him because she's so good. I told him to knock it off, but that's not gonna change him, even if he's not saying anything to her. Still, he's a good friend. And I might need him for ... you know. Perspective."

"Do you feel that you need perspective?" Williams asked curiously. "Or rather, that you need his perspective?"

"How do you mean?" Harry frowned and took a sip of his hot elf berry cider.

"Well, you seem to be a curious kid. You like to read your books and learn new things. In short, you're motivated to move forward in life and find your place among your peers. Your friend Ron, however ... forgive me if that sounds a little callous ... from what you told me about him so far, he seems like someone who's content to get by with minimal effort and pursue his hobbies otherwise."
"Well ... maybe. But there's nothing wrong with that, Brady," Harry defended his friend.

"Of course not," Williams agreed. "To each their own. It only becomes an issue when a friend like that tries to keep you from doing what you want to achieve for yourself. Take Hermione for example: she likes to study and does very well in school, right? But since that's not on par with Ron's goals, he's teasing her and even trying to get her to help finish his own work. But he's not doing anything to help her in return, or enrich her experience as a student. At least that's my impression, so please correct me if I'm wrong." When Harry couldn't refute this claim, Williams asked, "Would you say that's fair?"

"You know I wouldn't," Harry sighed. "I know what you're trying to say. I shouldn't let others drag me down."

"More than that, you shouldn't allow others to drag you down," Williams said. "And especially not because they're your best friend. Making you feel guilty or bad because you won't spend all of your time with them is not a sign of a good friendship, Harry, and using that as leverage to make you give in is petty."

"He doesn't really do that," Harry countered. "He's got a couple of other friends he can do stuff with if I really need to do homework."

"But surely that's not always the case," Williams prodded.

"Well, no. Sometimes he just wants to do things with them because he wants to."

"And what do you do when he's busy with them?" Williams asked, gently. "Does he invite you along?"

"Dunno, not really. But that's alright, I'm doing my homework then." Harry shrugged. "It's working out okay."

"But it's not exactly healthy, to be picked up and discarded like a toy when it suits him," Williams said. "I'm not saying he's a bad kid or anything. But he is quite clearly influencing your performance at school. You're a good student and not seeing this reflected on your report card is worrying. You're capable of much more and you should give yourself permission to pursue an education you will be able to be proud of. It's quite clear to me that you're allowing him to dictate when to play and when to study. Tell me, does he listen to you when you want to decide what to do?"
"Uhm, not very often. He's whining a lot when I want to go to the library." Harry was suddenly
gripped by an intense sense of loss as the full breadth of what Healer Williams was saying hit him. "I
don't want to lose Ron as a friend," he said. His grip on the mug became so tight that his fingers
started to hurt. "Even if he's not perfect."

"None of us are," Williams soothed him."You don't have to lose him."

"But you were just telling me that he's not really good for me." Harry stiffly set the mug down.
"How is that not telling me to drop him, more or less?"

Williams smiled slightly. "I'll never tell you what to do in your personal relationships. It is, however,
my job to make you question your personal relationships from time to time. You constantly question
your relationships with adults because of your upbringing, even if you want to trust them, and that is
more than fair. However, through our talks I've discovered that you have difficulty doing the same
with kids."

"I do not! My cousin is a nightmare and some students at school aren't any better!" Harry said hotly.
"I know exactly who's a bully and who's not."

"But that is all," Williams replied evenly. "If they're not hunting or hitting you, you don't really know
how to interact with other kids. It's terrible and your relatives deserve a good bollocking for it, but
let's get it out in the open, yes? People your age are blanks for you, Harry, if they've not clearly
labelled themselves as threats. Growing up without friends damaged your interpersonal skill
development, meaning that you have difficulties sussing out the kids' characters. Strong personalities
are obviously easier for you to grasp, hence your friendship with Ron and Hermione. Both have
personalities I'd describe as rather dominant. As long as everything is seemingly out in the open, you
seem to be able to deal with it well. What you're lacking a bit is the ability to differentiate."

"That sounds really bad." Harry looked down. "I'm a right basket case, am I not? It's scary how you
seem to look right into me."

"Life has challenged you," Williams admitted, "but you're in no way a basket case. And as to me
looking right into you: that's what I've been studying several years for. I want to help, and if I ever
overstep, just let me know. It's not my intention to hurt you, ever."

"Well, it does hurt a little to be told things like that, but you're right. I don't really know how to meet
people. Or how to make a good impression. Maybe ... can you explain how to get to know people
better? And ..." Harry took a deep breath. "And can you tell me how I can have more time for
school? And, uh, Hermione?"
"Yes, of course." Williams smiled encouragingly. "We'll talk about all of that and you'll understand that you can be friends with someone without giving in to their every demand. It's about balance."

"Can I tell Hermione that she's bossy?" Harry asked hopefully. "Because she is! She's always badgering us to go to the library more often and stuff."

That made Healer Williams laugh out loud. Then, he proceeded to explain to Harry what a double standard was and how it applied to Ron's demand for fun times which Harry rarely resisted, and Hermione's demand for proper school work, which he mostly rebuffed without much regret.

When their day was done, Harry's head was so full with new information that he forgot his growling stomach, just dipped into the cystern - due to the uncertain weather now placed in the master bathroom - and then went to bed.

oOo

Monday was the second day of Harry's full fast. He was a little hungry, but the crammed feeling in his mind had lessened overnight and he finally felt up to re-reading and answering his godfather's letter.

Hello Sirius,

I'm glad that you're feeling a little better already. The blue potion is okay, but my favourite is the vitamin booster because it tastes like real strawberries. My healers gave me a book about goblin potions; as soon as I have an extra potions kit I'll try them out. My healers told me they'll test them rigorously before allowing me to use them, but I hope I'll be good enough to make my own stuff soon. Without Snape to ruin it, it's an interesting subject, don't you think?

It's good that you want to move into the cottage while I'm gone. Dobby, the house elf I wrote about in my first letter, wants to go to Hogwarts with me, but Betty will be glad to have someone to care for. Other than your own stuff for entertainment, everything should be taken care of. But if you need anything, please let Betty, Sharptooth or me know. Until then do your best to ignore the Dursleys. They're horrid, but with goblin wards around the room no one will find you in the trunk.

I had a long talk with Healer Williams yesterday. He told me that I need to watch out for myself more, so I won't slack off too much in school. He's right, I guess, since my report cards for first and second year weren't all that great. Sorry about that, by the way. I'll do better next year, I promise.

Get well soon,

Harry
Folding and sealing the missive for later delivery, Harry contemplated what he should do with the rest of his day. Healer Williams wanted to stop by in the evening and bring a snake for a visit, but other than that his only tasks were keeping up with the fast and using the cystern whenever he felt like it.

A light rain was keeping him indoors so he decided on reading more in the goblins' potions book. His shopping list for a second potions kit was complete and he knew that Dobby was holding out on buying it until Voldemort's shade was gone from Harry's scar. It was an incentive and worked surprisingly well; he hadn't moaned about not being able to eat Dobby's cooking once today.

In the late afternoon, he'd just finished tinkering with his potions things in the stillroom, there was a loud hiss coming from the open door.

"Hello?" he called.

"It's just me, Harry." Healer Williams replied and appeared in the doorway. Around his neck he carried a large boa constrictor. "He smelled you as soon as we landed here and insisted to meet you immediately. Say hello to Portos."

"Hello, Portos," Harry said, stepping close to let the snake touch his fingers with its forked tongue. "Welcome to my home."

"You smell nice, hatchling," the snake informed him, "but your garden is empty. No rats or gnomes to be found."

"I'm sorry, I hope you're not too hungry." Laughing, Harry accepted the boa's foray onto his shoulders and helped him settle comfortably around his neck. "Wow, you're a big guy. Your scales look beautiful."

"They do," Portos agreed smugly. "I have many mates in the snake house."

Harry and Williams shared a mirthful look before deciding to repair to the living room for the visit. Dobby had already prepared refreshments and even a small morsel for the snake guest.

"How are you feeling?" Williams asked when the pouring of tea and plating of sandwiches was out of the way. "Do you feel a difference after almost a week of daily cleansing and fasting?"
"I think so," Harry said. "I've got a headache most of the time and there have been a few nightmares. Since yesterday evening, I can hardly concentrate."

"So you're ready to let the Dark Lord's shade go?"

"I'm so ready," Harry promised. "I can't wait. Are we still leaving tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes, Healer Spleenbash needs to do her checks, and you'll have to donate blood for the ritual. Your steward will be on hand to oversee its use, as you'll be busy otherwise."

"I can trust Gringotts not to misuse my blood, right?" Harry asked, just because he felt he should.

"You'll sign a contract and accept a vow. Magic will punish such a breach most harshly." Williams smiled. "You were very comfortable speaking parseltongue just now. I'm glad."

"I don't even know why," Harry said. "When I tried to open the secret passage to the Chamber of Secrets in Hogwarts, I needed to see the snake carving on the sink before I could speak."

"It might be because you feel better about it now than you did then," Williams offered. "It's a good thing in any case because I planned on leaving Portos here until it's time for us tomorrow to leave for Gringotts."

"You trust me with one of Gringotts' snakes?" Harry asked.

"The snakes there aren't prisoners," Williams explained. "Portos smelled you on me last night and decided that he wanted to meet you."

"Is that true?" Harry asked the snake and gently touched the glossy, triangular head. "Why?"

"Because you feel nice," was the sleepy reply. "Feel safe and warm."

"He wasn't the only one," Williams teased. "But the head breeder put his foot down and told the others to wait their turn."

"I don't know what to say to that." Harry stroked the snake a couple of times. "But he's welcome to
stay for the night." To Portos, he said, "Would you like to visit the garden properly before coming in for the night?"

"I would," Portos hissed. "Let your elf take me out. I'll show him where plants go to attract garden gnomes."

"Do I even need gnomes?" Harry wondered and Healer Williams laughed.

"Your godfather might enjoy tossing them," Williams said and snagged another sandwich. "Right now, the property is warded against any and all pests. It's up to you to decided what sort may enter and what has to stay away."

"Really? Cool! I'll talk with Dobby and make the change. Er, if that's okay before tomorrow."

"It would not harm the ritual," Williams said. "How are you feeling, besides being a bit downtrodden from the fast? Was our talk too much yesterday?"

Harry chewed on his lower lip briefly before confessing, "It was a lot. And it's hard learning unpleasant things about yourself. I feel a bit ... I dunno. Raw."

"I'm sorry," Williams said quietly. "It wasn't my intention to upset you. It's obvious that you care a great deal about your friends."

"But you were right. I can care about them and still see their faults and call them out on it." Harry sighed. "It was just a bit much to, you know, see all at once." He then frowned, a little piqued. "Also, I can't believe I didn't notice it myself."

"That's what I mean by reflecting on your relationships." Williams set his plate down. "Sometimes we need to take a step back and just observe. It's hard because friendships engage all of us: our mind, heart, and emotions. Add being a teenager to all of that and it becomes very difficult to keep a cool head and re-orient. You remember the trick for that?"

"Set yourself goals you want to achieve and plan for time and energy accordingly. Surround yourself with people who have similar goals, but make time for friends who don't. Defend your time for your goals and only rarely allow exceptions." Harry recited dutifully. "Revise your goals periodically and see if they remain the same or have change. Adjust your schedule accordingly."

"Very good! Have you thought about it?"
"All afternoon," Harry said with a wry little grin. "I bet Hermione does this in her sleep."

"That might well be. Do you agree with it?" Williams asked.

"I guess so. It makes sense to put myself first, since it's my education. But I don't know how to deal with it if Ron gets real moody or something." Harry shrugged lightly, taking care not to upset Portos too much. "Maybe I'll need one of those weekly planner things to set up times for study and play."

"It's not a bad idea at all. You'll have to find out what time works for which endeavor. Studying might be better at night for you, or during the day. There's no need to stress yourself out right away by keeping to an arbitrary schedule. Set away hours and allot them as the opportunities present themselves. If it's not a good fit, change it around until you're comfortable with the routine."

"That doesn't sound too difficult. Er, Brady ..." Harry hesitated. "How are we doing this when I'm back at school? I, eh, didn't like this much in the beginning, but I think it does help, now. Talking to you, I mean."

"I'm glad," Williams said. "And of course I'll still be available to you. I propose letters, since meeting personally might tip off Dumbledore. Your Dobby can take your letters to Gringotts as he pops over to collect your mail."

"Hedwig would be too conspicuous, anyway." Harry frowned. "The poor girl is really put out with Dobby and I for taking away her job."

A sly look came over Healer Williams' face. "Hm, I might just have an idea to help with that. Would you be willing to invest a few galleons?"

"Sure. What is it?" Harry asked.

"Well, Gringotts has a few post owls for special deliveries and such, and they require an amulet to do their work. One of the amulets' settings is camouflage. Not merely changing her appearance, but her magical signature as well. It would require some extensive charm work to make one for Hedwig, but it might be worth it."

"Oh, could you really arrange it?" Harry asked hopefully. "I'd love to send her without being worried that someone might snatch her."
"I'll certainly try," Williams replied. "It might take a while, though, so don't be too impatient. And now on to something completely delightful: magic!" He pulled a small booklet from his pocket and handed it over. "Ever since I taught you that mosquito repelling spell, I thought about teaching you the Australian version of pest repellence. If you're doing it, why not do it right, and we Aussies do have some of the deadliest pests in the world crawling over the continent."

"What's the difference?" Harry asked, already thumbing through the pages.

"Oooh," Williams hooted, "you'll be so surprised!"

Harry was still surprised as he lay in bed, thinking about what he'd learned that evening. Portos rested on his stomach and leached warmth from him, not that Harry minded. His weight was actually comforting.

Spells that hook into your core and power themselves! he repeated silently over and over again. How neat is that?! If I can do that with the pest repellent charm, I'll never have to worry about anything biting me ever again! I could go to the jungle, or even just the Forbidden Forest! Take that, Aragog and Fluffy! Hogwarts might actually be safe for me for once.

The possibilities seemed fantastic and endless and then, when it became apparent that sleep wasn't coming, Harry's thoughts wandered. They wandered into the other direction, poking and prodding at uses for bad people. Maybe it was the unusual activity of Voldemort's shade due to the fasting and cleansings, maybe it was just Harry's natural pessimism, but the more he considered that angle, the worse his agitation became.

Finally, he couldn't stay in bed any longer and went down to the living room.

"Harry Potter sir should be sleeping," Dobby said fretfully, joining Harry in front of the dark fireplace. "It be big day tomorrow!"

"I know, but this thing about spell hooks is keeping me up really badly. I need to ..." Harry aborted twice, but on the third attempt he actually pinched some Floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace. "Gringotts, Healer Williams."

The man's voice came through only a moment later, although he'd obviously been about to go to sleep. "Harry? What is it? Is everything alright?"
"I don't know," Harry said. "I can't stop thinking about those spell hooks."

"Do you need me to come over?"

"Can you?" Harry asked.

"I'll step through, please tell your wards not to boot me to North Africa or something," Williams replied.

Harry withdrew and a second later, Healer Williams rushed out of the fireplace in a small cloud of soot. "How can I help?" he asked without bothering to brush himself off. "Come, let's sit."

Dobby lit a few lamps in the living room and popped away to bring hot chocolate.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Harry admitted, wringing his hands. "Spell hooks are pretty great, it's just ... when I started thinking about them, I began to wonder if other people can use them without someone knowing. That'd be pretty evil, right?"

"It might be the Dark Lord's shade turning your attention more than usual to the darker aspects," Williams said, "but you're right. Spell hooks can be used on other people, and without their consent or knowledge. I'm very sorry I didn't think it through before teaching you about them. Please forgive me."

Harry waved that away. "It's really cool and I'll probably use them, it's just ... how can you find out whether someone put a hook in you? Won't you notice?"

"If what you really want to know is whether you have spell hooks anchored in your core right now, then the answer is no. If you've had them, they have disintegrated after being bitten by the basilisk, as the venom is highly corrosive to magic. Otherwise you wouldn't have been able to destroy Tom Riddle's diary with that tooth. And Gringotts hasn't found anything of the sort during your first thorough check, so no one spelled you after that."

"Oh. Phew, I'm relieved." Harry took a deep breath. "Thanks."

"Maybe you shouldn't be," Williams admitted cautiously. "Magic is appallingly easy to use against other people, and spell hooks can be terrible things. I don't know if someone told you about them already, but there is one unforgivable curse that hooks into a wizard's core and makes them do everything the caster wants him to. It's called the imperious curse. There is no known defence against it."

"Everything?" Harry asked, horrified. "Even something like murder?"
"Yes, even murder. But there are worse things than killing humans can do to each other: they can make you have sexual relations with someone you hate, they can make you give them all your money, they can make you destroy all your friendships or your family. The curse is unforgivable for a reason, because it is very, very hard to fight against the compulsion, and because it always stays active, just waiting for its master to utter the next command." Williams took a breath. "The awareness of the victim can be as concrete as the caster wants it to be; a sadist can make it so the victim knows and experiences every atrocity done to them, or by them, while being unable to fight against it. The victims become prisoners in their own bodies. It's the worst kind of torture."

"Worse than the cruciatus curse?" Harry asked quietly. "I've got a friend whose parents were tortured to insanity."

"The Longbottoms, yes," Williams said just as quietly. "You may think differently, of course, but to me, being used like a puppet is a thousand times worse than experiencing pain, no matter how bad that pain is. The imperious curse is rape in many horrifying ways and I hope that you'll never be subjected to it."

Harry's chest ached. "Yeah, I hope so, too. Is it even possible to get rid of spell hooks?"

Collecting himself, Williams nodded. "Yes. The goblins can detect and remove them, and even harvest the magical signature of the caster. I wish I could tell you that everyone went to have regular checks, or even just the members of the government, but the truth is that no one really thinks about things like that."

"But they should! Voldemort is coming back, I know it!" Harry got up and paced a few steps. "I don't want people to use magic against me, especially not him."

"There are a couple of shield charms and such that can stop low level magic, but the stronger spells would still get through."

"But I'd know, right?" Harry demanded. "I'd know if someone used magic on me behind my back, even if the shield charm were too weak to stop it?"

Healer Williams looked at Harry like he was seeing some kind of apparition. "A magic detecting ward would do that, but Harry ... those spells are a bit much for someone your age. I'll scan you as often as you like, but you're riling yourself up and it isn't good for you."

"I won't feel safe until I can know when someone's hexing me," Harry retorted stubbornly. "Maybe I don't need to know how to do those spells tonight, but after that ritual tomorrow I need to learn, okay? Please teach me."
"I will," Williams promised and sighed at the boy's stubbornly set jaw. "I will, Harry. Please, allow me or Dobby to cast a sleeping charm on you so you'll be rested tomorrow."

"Dobby can do it," Harry said, impulsively grabbing the man's hand and squeezing it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Williams replied quietly. "I wish you didn't have to think about things like that, but I'll help you prepare for them."

They drank their elf berry lemonade and went their separate ways afterwards. Back in bed, Dobby put Harry in a charmed sleep and only woke him when their departure to Gringotts was imminent.

oOo

"This is super uncomfortable," Harry told the goblins in the ritual chamber and frowned. While the blood letting and signing of contracts had taken hours, it was still better than standing in a huge ritual chamber and freezing his bits off. "Do I have to be starkers?"

"For the last cleanse before the ritual, yes. We've been over this. Twice," Healer Spleenbash told him unapologetically. "Please shed the robe and step into the cystern, Heir Potter."

"Why are you all in here, anyway?" he groused. "Where's Brady?"

"It's not appropriate for a human adult male to supervise this procedure when there are other options available," Healer Spleenbash informed Harry tartly. "Now stop tarrying and get on with it, youngling. We're on a schedule."

Pouting, Harry handed his robe to Dobby and quickly did as he was told. "I still don't like it."

"You can growl about it later," she called over the sudden rush of the magical mist. "Relax and let the magic do its work."

Harry closed his eyes and tried to ignore the almost pulling sensation in his scar which was answered
by a long-lasting, stabbing pain. *Sorry, you won't be able to get this taint out*, he thought at the magic. *Nice try, though. I really felt that.*

The mist swished around him almost smugly and soon after dissipated.

"That didn't take long at all. Good! You may paint the runes," Healer Spleenbash called to her colleagues.

Half a dozen goblins swarmed around Harry and tortured him with tickling brushes until his whole body was covered in blood red magical symbols. While they were at it, they were chanting something in their language. The whole thing was so absurd that Harry quite forgot to feel ashamed.

When it was done and all of the paint had magically dried in a flash, Healer Spleenbash allowed Harry to don a robe so delicate that the fabric might as well have been woven from spider silk. *"Now come into the circle. Everything is ready."*

The goblin healers helped Harry lie down on the floor. It was cushioned with magic and felt like the softest bed imaginable. Having the goblin version of an immobilus charm then cast on him felt very uncomfortable in contrast, although Harry had known about that in advance, too.

"Relax, youngling. All will be well." Healer Spleenbash gently touched his hair once and retreated to her place in the circle.

An old goblin, the leader of the ritual, spoke in the harsh sounding goblin language. Abruptly, the torches flared and then flickered until the light became very dim. More words followed, echoing in the chamber in a seemingly endless chant.

Not being able to turn his head, Harry could nonetheless see the magic rise from the runes in golden sparks. They whirled around as if dancing in the wind and slowly collected in a pool not unlike a little sun right over his body.

*Here it comes,* he thought as the goblin chant reached a crescendo and the light above him started to writhe and pulse. *Time to go, Tom!*

The little sun shivered, went still ... and then a bright beam burst forth, right down onto Harry's forehead.
He knew himself to be screaming, but for that short moment of consciousness there was nothing but a certain sense of bewilderment, like he'd gone on without any of his body's sensations.

Then, everything went dark.

oOo

Harry awoke to the not so strange feeling of someone holding his hand and stroking it gently. He had plenty of experience with Hermione doing just that as he recovered from his adventures at Hogwarts.

"Hey kiddo," a rough voice greeted him. "Don't try to find your glasses. The healers said your eyes need a break."

From Harry's other side, Healer Williams' voice said, "Just relax, Harry. Everything went well. Voldemort's shade put up a fight, but it is gone now. All you need to do now is sleep."

The stroking thumb never lost its rhythm and Harry felt himself sink back into slumber.

oOo

When he woke again, he felt much better. Both his hands were free, and after finding his glasses, he instantly recognized the man sleeping in an armchair by his bedside.

"Sirius?" he whispered, half afraid of waking his godfather and actually having to talk to him.

"Let him sleep," Healer Williams advised. "He's still very weak."

"Why is he here?" Harry asked.

"Apparently his godparent bond with you alerted him that something magically monumental was happening. He called for Dobby until your elf went to get him." Williams sighed. "He made himself nearly sick with worry. Stupid of us not to take his connection to you into account."
Drowsy, Harry studied his godfather. Despite the exhaustion and greyness marring his face, he was uncommonly handsome. "He's young."

"Only thirty-three," Williams confirmed quietly. "The same age your parents would be, had they lived."

"Can I hold his hand?" Harry could barely take his eyes off the man to look beseechingly at Healer Williams.

"Of course. He won't mind. Here, I'll push him a little closer to the bed ..."

"Will he really be fine?" Harry asked, grasping the too-thin fingers like a lifeline.

"He'll need a lot of counselling when the work on his body is finished," Williams said kindly and a little sadly. "Losing years like that is deeply traumatic, so please don't hold it against him if he gets irrational or angry or scared. It's not his fault, okay?"

"I know that. It's alright." Harry fought against the sting of tears in his eyes. "I just wish none of this had ever happened."

"A lot of people do." Williams patted Harry's shoulder, handed him a potion to drink and then left him alone to rest some more.

oOo

Every time Harry woke, it became easier. He felt a little unbalanced and his magic was wobbly when he tried to charm his bedside lamp to shine a little more brightly. This was greatly made up by the fact that he and his godfather apparently clicked really well and talk between them came effortlessly.

"You need a new wand," Sirius told him. He sat at the end of Harry's bed and had one hand on Harry's socked foot. He never was far away, which clearly soothed his ravaged spirit. "Brother wand to the Dark Lord, only you're no longer his brother, are you?"
These words, right there, did a lot to lift Harry's somewhat maudling spirits. "I guess you're right. But if I buy a new one at Ollivander's, people will surely know." Harry frowned. "I don't want people sticking their nose in my business."

Sirius grinned. "You sound just like your mother. She disliked people questioning her. *Intensely.*"

"Where else can I get a new wand?"

"There are wand makers all over the world, kiddo," Sirius said. "France, Ireland, Spain, Italy ... it's a matter of preference, really, because they all know what they're doing. But why don't you nib down to your family vault first and have a look at your family's wands? There's quite a collection."

"I can't," Harry scowled. "Dumbledore has barred me from entering until I'm of age."

Sirius' smile vanished and his scowl was even fiercer than Harry's. "I didn't know that. But nevermind the old codger; I have a vault or two of my own and a lot of wands to choose from. There might just be a good fit among them."

"Are you strong enough for that?" Harry asked anxiously. "I don't want you to set your recovery back even more because of me."

A heartbreaking expression came over Sirius' face. "I gave up on you once, I won't do it again. I *have* to be by your side."

"Because of magic?" Harry wanted to know in a small voice.

"Yes. Because I've loved you more than even your parents ever since your father put you in my arms," Sirius replied hoarsely. "I swore an oath to always protect you and care for you and nothing, nothing at all, has changed on my end. I love you, even if I don't know you very well yet, and I need to make it right."

Harry wiped at his damp eyes and sniffed. "You're doing fine so far."

"Can I have a hug?" Sirius asked hopefully, his grey eyes just as wet as Harry's.
Instead of giving an answer, Harry scrambled over and wound his arms tightly around the man’s ribcage. Sirius was still thin, but slowly the grey tinge to his skin was vanishing and there was some strength to his embrace.

For a long while, they just sat and held each other, basking in the feel of their magic and renewing the bond that had been strained for more than a decade.

oOo

It took another half day of rest and potions but Harry was finally cleared to leave the healers’ wing. Sirius, insisting that he was fine but agreeing to Healer Williams’ presence just in case, took Harry on a long cart ride through Gringotts’ tunnel system and made a show of opening his vault door. He introduced Harry as his heir to the family magics which was a wild experience in itself, though not as harrowing as it apparently could have been.

"You've got no Black blood in you by birth, however, I kind of blood adopted you in addition to swearing the godfather oath," Sirius explained, a little shiftily, "so it's not like the family magic could actually snub you, pup. Welcome to the Dog Cave!" He gestured at the vast, overflowing vault. The goblin with them respectfully stayed by the cart, although his little eyes were lit up. "Whatever you need, I probably have it ... somewhere among all the gold. No, wait, don't talk to the portraits, those do not bring anyone any joy ..." Sirius left Healer Williams standing outside the vault and wandered to a heavy wooden chest. After looking inside, he beckoned Harry over. "Here they are. Wands from generations of cunning and bloodthirsty witches and wizards. Have fun!"

Harry tried not to look too often at Sirius harassing the mentioned portraits as he picked up one wand after the other, although their outraged squawks were very funny. Unfortunately, most wands remained disdainfully still in his hand, although a few reacted with jerks and even sparks. None of them felt completely right, however, which was disappointing.

"Hey, I just wondered whether Lord Black might visit the Potter vaults," Williams called from his spot by the door after Harry had put the last wand back. "Might be worth investigating."

"Clever and handsome," Sirius praised, carelessly throwing a tarp over the stack of complaining portraits. "We'll do that right now, if our goblin guide agrees."

The goblin saw no issue with this, but Harry, mindful of his godfather's weak constitution, decided to ask the healer among them before agreeing. "Can we, Brady? I don't mind waiting a little while if it's better for Sirius."

"The Potter vaults aren't far from here," Williams replied, "and their security won't do him any harm
if he's not permitted to enter. If it doesn't work right away, there's also the option of going through the account managers. Magic might accept him if the goblins' legal team decrees it so. There is just one thing ... the Potter family magic might interact greatly with you both. It might be overwhelming. Lord Black, are you certain that you want to do this now? There is still time before school starts."

"I won't wait," Sirius said. "My kid needs a working wand and I ... I need to say goodbye."

"Think carefully about it, Lord Black. It might hurt you badly emotionally," Williams urged.

"Maybe it will." Sirius' eyes were hard and his mouth unsmiling. "I'll deal with it. It's no less than I deserve."

"Lord Black ..."

"Save it, Healer Williams. Let's go."

Sirius wasn't well in body, but he certainly was eager to get going. Even Harry recognized the coping mechanism behind it and once more felt awful for the man. Still, he was excited and a bit apprehensive about sort of meeting his family through their magic.

"It's completely normal to feel conflicted," Healer Williams murmured as they followed Harry's godfather and their guide through the tunnel. "I think it'll be a good experience for you; Dumbledore should have allowed you to connect with your family magic much sooner."

"Here we are," Sirius called. "Our vaults are practically neighbours, Harry."

That made Harry smile.

"Go, stand by him and let him guide you," Williams said and gave Harry a gentle push. "Remember, your family loved you very much, the magic won't hurt you."

Heart hammering in his chest, Harry pressed against Sirius' side and gratefully accepted his godfather's arm around his shoulders. "What do we do now?"

"We're saying hello," Sirius said, voice sounding a little strangled. "Brace yourself."

Together, they stepped forward and put their hands flat against the massive door of the vault. Immediately, magic flared up and enveloped them both in the kind of embrace that made eyes tear up and hearts skip a beat or two. Love like nothing Harry had ever felt before flooded him, reaching into
every part of him, body, mind, and soul. It seemed to swirl around his scar for a moment before bursting and showering both him and Sirius in pretty golden sparks.

Harry began to cry in earnest, clutching his grief-stricken godfather. Both their legs gave out and they sank to the ground.

"Oh dear," Healer Williams murmured and approached carefully. "I'm sorry."

"N-not your fault," Harry stammered and tried to stem the flood of tears. "I'm not sad."

"I am," Sirius rasped. Keeping one arm tightly around Harry and stretching with the other, he touched the door again. "I'm so sorry, Prongs and Lils."

"We should go back," Healer Williams said gently. "Let's stop for today."

"No." Sirius rubbed his wet cheeks with his sleeves. "We're here, we will do this. I'm sad, not an idiot. I might not be able to do this again."

"Really?" Harry asked. "We don't have to. I'll find a wand somewhere."

"You'll find it here," Sirius countered with conviction. "After this welcome, there's no way your family won't provide for you, pup. Come, let's give it a try. I, Sirius Orion Black, godparent of Harry James Potter, ask for admittance in our heir's time of need."

The magic heaved up again, tangible against their skin and pressing on their minds. Obviously finding what it was looking for, it retreated and the heavy door clanked, signalling that Sirius was welcome to enter. He did so on unsteady legs and with the look of a beaten dog with his tail between its legs.

"It's unfair that you can't enter, but Lord Black will get what you need," Healer Williams consoled Harry. "See, he left the door open as far as it will go so you can have a look."

Carefully, Harry stepped forward. Behind the impenetrable door lay riches beyond his wildest dreams. Not just gold, although there were mountains over mountains of it, but books - journals and photo albums by the look of it - and quite a few portraits.

He was distracted from searching for his parents by Sirius' shout.

"I have about half a dozen wands here! I'll get them and your family grimoire." Moments later, Sirius was back, arms full and cheeks again a little wet. "Let's do this somewhere more comfortable, yeah?"
Harry took the wands from him, grabbed his hand and helped his distraught godfather back to the healers' wing.

"Harry, would it be alright if I stayed with Lord Black while you test the wands?" Healer Williams asked quietly. "I'd like to talk to him for a bit until his mind healer arrives."

"Yes, of course." Harry smiled bravely. "I'll stay right here."

"Thank you. I'll try to be back soon, but call for Dobby or Betty if you need company, alright?"

Once he was alone, Harry spread the seven wands out on his comforter and looked at them. Most were made from dark wood, with very little adornments. One had a crystal embedded in its tip and the only light coloured wand was a little curved and looked like the maker had found a random stick, sanded it until it was smooth, and then sold it as a wand.

Harry took it up first and waved it a little, and while there were a few sparks, there was no connection. The wand with the crystal reacted strongly - too strongly. Harry decided to keep an eye on that one and maybe try again in a couple of years or so, when he had more experience as a wizard. Two of the dark wands didn't react at all, one rolled over in defiance, but the sixth wand sprang to life with a hum and shower of multi-coloured sparks. It even grew warm in Harry's hand.

"You seem nice," Harry said with a smile. "Let's try ... lumos!" Immediately, a bright light flared from the wand's tip, illuminating the room. "Nox." Abruptly, the light vanished. "Accio pillow."

Harry tried at least two dozen of spells until he was satisfied that the wand was truly a good fit for him. Carefully, he set his holly wand next to the new one. The colour and shape weren't terribly different, but they were noticeable enough to worry him.

"What should I do now?" he wondered aloud. "I could break you, but that'd be a waste, and also unfair. It's not your fault you're not working out so well for me anymore." Carefully, he stroked along the glossy wood. "Do you have any ideas?"

Of course the wand didn't have an answer for him. His steward, however, did ... after he'd scared the bejeezus out of Harry with his knock at the door.

"Ah, I see that you've already found a new wand," Sharptooth said. He settled in the bedside chair and grinned. "Well, that's one less thing for us to worry about, especially since there's no ministry trace on the wand. You could do magic in the muggle world with it."

"Really? That's wicked!" Harry beamed, only to return to his worried frown. "But what do I do with the old wand? It doesn't like me much anymore but giving it back to Ollivander would alert Professor Dumbledore."
Sharptooth hummed in understanding. "If I may offer a suggestion?"

"Sure, sir," Harry said gratefully.

"Do not do away with your old wand, Heir Potter. Keep it and use it at school."

"I won't get good grades with it," Harry replied, a little indignantly. "I don't want Sirius to be disappointed. Or, uh, Hermione."

"Lord Black would be the first to suggest this exact thing," Sharptooth said. "Can you not guess why?"

"Uhm, well, other than being teased by Malfoy and his friends about being incompetent ... oooh." Harry brightened. "You think people should underestimate me?"

"It'd be a good layer of protection," the goblin said approvingly. "Everybody expects Harry Potter to be an above average student at the very least. Not being seen as very magically competent might take some pressure off you in the long run, and even buy you some time from the Dark Lord's machinations. The deception would have the added benefit of stimulating your magical core to grow faster. Needing more effort to do magic would vastly build up your reserve and enable you to use more magic with your true wand."

"Sounds good." Harry grinned. "People don't think much of me anyway after the Heir of Slytherin business last year. It'll be nice to be left alone."

Chuckling, Sharptooth stood. "That's a plan, then, youngling. Send your elf to buy a top of the line wand holster. He may use Ollivander's for that purchase as it is expected of wizards to get one eventually. Yours should at least be spelled against theft and summoning charms, be able to make itself invisible, and also have a quick draw mechanism. Ask Dobby to bring a catalogue and have a good look before choosing. These holsters are built to last and you'll want one to suit your needs for many years."

Harry nodded and scribbled Sharptooth's directions on his notepad. "Uhm, can I go home tomorrow? Healer Spleenbash didn't say when I saw her last."

"I'll ask. Don't move until I get back," the goblin replied, got up and left the room.

Harry spent the time he was gone with his new wand, reapplying the mosquito repelling charm and using a washing charm on himself because there was vault dust everywhere.
Finally, Sharptooth returned with a note in hand. Without preamble, he said, "You may leave tonight, youngling, but no gallivanting around the country and lots of rest." Sharptooth's beady eyes fell on the wand in Harry's hand. "Also, use as little magic as possible to overcome the magical exhaustion you suffered during the ritual. A list of potions has been sent to your house elves, they'll hand them out as directed."

"Er, what does Healer Spleenbash mean by not gallivanting around?" Harry asked.

"She means that there is to be no strenuous activity for three or four more days. Bed rest would be preferable, but she knows how unlikely that'll be. Therefore she's instructed your house elves to discourage forays away from your cottage."

"Oh no." Harry's face fell. "I wanted to meet Hermione tomorrow. I suppose I could cancel, but I was really looking forward to it."

Sharptooth sighed. "Wooing a female couldn't wait a couple more weeks, Heir Potter?"

"I'm not wooing her ... and also, it just happened," Harry retorted with a blush. "I can see her, right?"

"You may see whoever you like," Sharptooth assured him, "but in this circumstance it'll require much ... juggling. Your safety, you see. Inviting Miss Granger to your property, because that's where a meeting will happen if it happens at all, has a host of problems attached to it. Dumbledore being the largest of them, of course, but by no means the very worst right this moment."

"Yes, I know. How can we do it?"

"Hmmm." The goblin crossed his arms in front of his chest and pursed his lips. "I have an idea, but I'll have to talk it over with the rental agreement division. Wait here."

And he was off again, leaving a bewildered but hopeful Harry in his room.

Dobby's dinner had come and gone and Harry was almost finished with his Arithmancy school book when Sharptooth returned. He had Healer Williams and another goblin in tow who looked just as old as Sharptooth himself and was introduced as Kickfast. Harry offered the usual greetings, eager to know what Gringotts had come up with.
"Heir Potter, your rather unique situation has my department in an uproar," Kickfast said dryly. "My lawyers are salivating over the artistics required to make things happen for you."

"Er, that is good, I hope?"

Kickfast snorted. "Very good. They haven't been challenged like this for a while and as you are a Friend To The Nation, every effort was made to find a solution to your dilemma."

"You have found one, then?" Harry asked, cautiously hopeful.

"It'll require quite a bit of trust on your part and a lot of signatures but yes, we've found one." Kickfast conjured a bed table, hopped up onto the bedside chair and spread out two rolls of parchment that were immediately recognizable as contracts. "There were several angles to consider, of course, first of all your and your friend's safety. While Potter Cottage is very secure, the knowledge of it currently is not. Miss Granger's mind would be easy to violate, and while she wouldn't be able to provide any specifics to an interested legilimens, it's best to avoid detection altogether."

"I agree," Harry hastily agreed, feeling sick at the mention of someone going through Hermione's head. "How do we do that?"

"Well, in the end the solution is astonishingly simple, and rather elegant for that," Kickfast said with a shark-like grin. "How do you feel about renting Potter Cottage to Gringotts for a day, and us renting it to Healer Williams?"

Harry couldn't help it, he started to laugh until he was crying and his sides hurt.

"Y-you're the g-greatest," he hiccupped when he'd calmed down a bit. "I, or rather Sharptooth, I guess, will rent it out for five galleons."

"And we'll rent it to Healer Williams for ten," Kickfast countered with a sly grin. "It is a rather attractive property, after all."

Harry dried his eyes with his comforter and took a deep breath. "Yes, it is. Maybe I should charge Sirius, after all."
The goblins laughed gutturally and then, after making sure that Harry was actually okay with all of it, proceeded to go over the rental agreements with a fine tooth comb. Starting at nine o'clock that evening, Gringotts would rent the Cottage in full, subletting it to Healer Williams for twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes, who would then invite Harry and his guests over.

"I know it's cheeky to ask but ... would it be okay to sleep in one of your guest rooms tonight?" Williams asked when everything was signed and the cuts from the bloodquill healed. "It's so calm there."

"Brady ..." Harry was at a loss what to say. "You *rented* it. You actually paid ten galleons so I could see Hermione tomorrow. You can sleep in any room you like! Dobby will even make up the master bedroom if you want, and cook whatever you'd like to eat."

"That's very generous, but I wouldn't want to presume ..."

"It's yours for a day," Harry repeated. "I insist. Also, I'll stay here tonight anyway, so you have the house to yourself. Make use of it, yeah?"

Williams let out a breath. "Thank you, Harry. When will you and your guest arrive tomorrow?"

"I thought around three for tea," Harry said. "Dobby should be back with Hermione's answer any moment. We won't stay too long and I already told Dobby to pack up the trampoline and the other stuff just before we arrive. Hermione notices *everything* and I don't want her and her parents to become suspicious."

"Do you really want to return to Gringotts afterward for one more night?" Williams asked. "You could just stay behind, you know that."

"Or you could have the house for another night as my guest," Harry replied with a smile. "It's honestly okay. I'd like to spend the evening with Sirius before I go back, and you know that I can't take him with me just yet. His healers would never allow it."

"Next year, they will," Williams promised. "He's doing well, and he *wants* to get better. What he did today set him back in many ways, but in others it might have done him some good."

"He's really sad," Harry acknowledged and frowned. "I feel sorry for him."

"He'll be really sad for a while yet," Williams said. "But he's got you, and he did what he set out to do when he broke out of Azkaban."

"What's that?" Harry asked, curious. "I mean, he wasn't really after me, was he?"
Williams smiled a little. "No, he wasn't. But let's wait a while before we discuss this, alright? You've got a date tomorrow and you need your sleep." He looked at his watch. "Also, my lease just started so I'd better go and make the most of it."

Harry grinned. "Betty knows to pamper you, Brady. Don't resist, it's futile."

"I won't. Thank you, again, Harry. Sleep well."

Healer Williams left and after wishing his exhausted and still tearful godfather goodnight, Harry snuggled into his comforter and fell asleep immediately.

The Grangers met Harry at three on the dot in Sharptooth's office at Gringotts. Dobby surreptitiously harvested Hermione's magical signature before taking her and Harry to the cottage. Under the pretense of needing the loo, Harry paid the ward stone in the cellar a quick visit and told it that his guests were welcome on this occasion. Sharptooth's warning about being too free with his passes had made Harry a little sad, but he accepted that his security and his secrets had to come first.

Hermione's parents were already there, admiring his living room and the view at the garden when he came back.

"This house is also beautiful, Gringotts sure knows how to please its customers," Emma said. She enveloped Harry in a gentle hug. "Hello dear, it's nice to see you again."

Harry blushed and smiled. "Thank you Emma, you too. Hello, Dan." He shook hands with the man. Only then did he allow himself to really look at Hermione. She looked unusually pretty in a white form-fitting summer dress that stopped a good bit above her knees. Unlike his own knobbly knees, hers were shapely and fit perfectly to her well-trained but slim legs. "Hi, 'Mione. You look pretty."

"Thank you." She smiled and hugged him closely. "I like your new T-shirt. Black suits you very well. You got a good tan!"

He noticed and put his arm next to hers. "Oh, yeah. Wicked!"

Betty popped up and smiled at them all. "Hello Harry Potter sir and Harry Potter sir's Grangeys! Tea be ready for you." She led them to the already set table right in front of the garden window. "Betty
be hoping you'll be liking it. Betty be making everything today."

Dan's smile was a little bemused while Emma was openly amused about the elf's name for her family.

"Thank you, Betty," Harry said with a little flush. Minding his manners, he pulled a chair out for both Emma and Hermione before sitting down himself. "How do you like your tea?"

Off to a good start, the visit got even better when Hermione nudged Harry's foot under the table in thanks for a scone and the clotted cream and didn't take it away until they left the table again almost an hour later. He was embarrassed at how scatterbrained the little contact made him, but it also was everything he'd hoped for: another date with his best friend!

"It's a pity that Gringotts doesn't rent out a library," Emma commented, walking along the empty bookshelves. "But I suppose that someone who stays longer would bring their own books."

"Er, yeah," Harry answered awkwardly. "I mean, I could've put my school books in there but it honestly wouldn't have looked much better."

"Not even Hermione's books would fill these," Dan laughed. "Don't worry, we're just bibliophiles, Harry, and these shelves are a work of art. It just would've been nice to see them in all their glory."

"I know what you mean," Harry admitted.

"Speaking of books, I can't believe it's only one more week until we buy our books!" Hermione exclaimed. "And we're on the express only a few days later. The summer's been gone so quickly."

"I know, and I don't want you to leave already," her mother sighed. "Especially with what's been happening in that school so far."

"Well, we're bound to have a normal year at least once," Harry offered.

Hermione smacked his arm. "Shut it, Harry James. I just managed to convince them to not send me to Beauxbatons instead."

"Er, what?" Alarmed, Harry's eyes shot to Dan. "Really?"

"Well, we did think about it," he replied, his face kind but his voice stern. "We nearly lost our
daughter twice because of magical beasts in the last two years. A normal school year would be much appreciated. We told Professor McGonagall this and she swore that she and her fellow professors would do everything in their power to protect the students better. We'll see how it works out."

"Would you really leave Hogwarts?" Harry asked, heart in his throat.

"For my parents, I would," Hermione admitted. "But ... but I'd always write you letters and nag you to study, so it would be like I was still there."

"No, it wouldn't," Harry replied stubbornly and took her hand in his. "Hogwarts wouldn't be the same without you."

She smiled, obviously pleased, and shuffled closer to him. "I really don't want to leave, either."

"Then let's hope that Professor McGonagall makes good on her word and actually does something to improve the security," Emma said. Her speculative gaze rested on Harry. "On the other hand, if it gets worse, you could always leave Hogwarts and enroll in another school. Maybe all the students should do this, to bring the point home."

"Er, yeah. Maybe." Harry averted his gaze. "Uhm, do you want to see the garden? It stopped raining finally."

The Grangers were just as grateful for the opportunity to get some air as Harry and left him and Hermione alone for their little ramble.

"I'm sorry, that was some heavy stuff," Hermione said as they stood looking at the garden in front of the house. "I don't want to leave, Harry. I hope you know that." Shyly, she glanced at him, her fingers still in his hand. "It's just that I can't worry my parents. They do everything for me and I love them too much."

"That's alright," Harry replied quietly. "I understand, of course I do."

"If it ever comes to that ... you could leave as well. Maybe ... maybe even come with me?"

Harry couldn't hide his little flinch from her. "I would, if I could. I mean, who wants to be a target for Voldemort, anyway?"
"There's a but in there, somewhere," Hermione said with thoughtfully narrowed eyes. "What is it, Harry?"

He didn't want to tell her, didn't want to worry her, but she was here and she was so lovely in her concern for him, and Harry was tired of trying to keep everything to himself.

"Did you know that Professor Dumbledore is my magical guardian?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked perplexed. "What? How? Professor McGonagall is mine, she arranged it with my parents. They signed a contract and everything. She said she does that for all the muggle-born students, it's part of her job as Hogwarts' Deputy Headmistress."

"I didn't get a contract," Harry continued, not bothering to hide his bitterness about it. "You see, I could have had a godfather all this time. We could have lived together and I'd have known about ..." He gesticulated helplessly. "The wizarding world. Voldemort. Everything."

"Why couldn't you?" Hermione gripped his hand tighter.

"My godfather is Sirius Black," Harry told her, lips pressing together when she blanched. "Yeah, that's why Dumbledore appointed himself as my guardian."

"And he left you with the Dursleys?" she shrieked. "Those horrible people! Did he even check up on you?"

"Not that I know of. Even if he did, obviously nothing changed," Harry mumbled. "He says I'm safest there, what with Voldemort around, so he would never let me leave Hogwarts. I'd have to run, but I don't want to do that. I like having friends."

Hermione gave up Harry's hand to embrace him. "This is terrible. I can't believe Dumbledore of all people left you to rot with your relatives! There must be something you can do about it!"

"I'll try." Harry snaked his arms around her shoulders in a bid to calm her down. "Until then, I'll just have to make sure that Hogwarts is safe for you."

"It's not your job," Hermione fumed. Her hair was especially fluffy in her fury and smelled faintly of
"Someone's got to do it, and we know already that we can't always rely on the grown-ups," Harry said with a wry little grin. "I'll do extra work in Defence against the Dark Arts, and if you want, you can teach me how to fight muggle style. Then we're already two against whatever will be after us this year."

"I'll teach you so hard, Harry James," she huffed into his neck. "Under one condition, though: you have to punch Dumbledore in the throat! That terrible old git deserves it! The Dursleys, urgh!"

The image was so funny that Harry couldn't help but laugh, causing Hermione to relax a little. "As soon as the opportunity presents itself," he promised.

"Then it's a deal." The tension left her shoulders and she leaned fully against Harry, tucking her face into his neck even though she was a bit taller than him.

Harry couldn't believe how good she felt. It wasn't just her body, although what little of it he was allowed to touch certainly felt great. No, it was her whole presence that made him giddy and ridiculously happy, unfortunate conversation topic aside.

_And she smells so good_, Harry thought, guiltily inhaling the sweet scent of her hair and skin. _I wonder if she'd let me buy her an ice cream next week._

Figuring that he had little to lose, Harry wrapped her more tightly in his arms. As a light rain started to fall, it seemed like the right thing to do ... and her slight curves against his chest were certainly a fantastic reward. What looking at her in a bikini hadn't quite managed, her closeness did effortlessly. His heart thumped in his chest and he was almost certain that hers was beating a little faster, too.

"I'd like to go out with you, on a real date," he said quietly. Her soft gasp encouraged him enough to add, "We could eat ice cream at Fortescue's, or have lunch somewhere."

"Yes," she whispered. "That would be nice."

Blinking, Harry couldn't believe his luck. "Wow. I'm, uh, rather happy right now." Said happiness was surging all through him, in fact, and choking him up a little.

Hermione laughed quietly. "Me, too. I feel a little silly."

A little later, when Dobby had brought them all back to Gringotts, Emma and Dan were smiling when Hermione informed them that she wanted to spend an hour or so alone with Harry on
"We'll find something to do," Dan said. "Just be careful and don't run off too far."

"Dobby will watch over us," Harry said, earning an excited little dance from his friend. "He's the best."

"Yes, he is," Emma agreed and smiled at the elf. "He'll also know when to remind you of your surroundings, right?"

"Mom!" Hermione blushed fiercely. "We won't snog in Diagon Alley."

"I'm sorry, lad," Dan said with a deep sigh and a pat on Harry's back, which had both his wife and daughter exclaiming in indignation.

Harry could only smile, and even though he was sad to have to let the Grangers go so soon, he had plenty to look forward to.

"Bye, Harry," Hermione said under the watchful eyes of her parents and one curious goblin manager and bravely kissed Harry's cheek. "See you next week!"

"See you, 'Mione," Harry replied stupidly.

Then, Dobby took the Grangers home and Harry trotted after his guide, right into his godfather's room, where he burrowed into welcoming arms and just wallowed in his overwhelming feelings.

oOo

Being home alone wasn't much fun anymore. Having done all of his homework and with the weather taking a rather brisk turn towards autumn, even his trampoline and broom couldn't capture his attention during the last week of the holidays. At least Dobby's garden was coming along nicely. The little plants valiantly fought for height and spread their small leaves to capture every available sunray. Harry enjoyed it a lot to walk along the narrow paths and check on them, greeting each new growth with enthusiasm.

"They be wanting to be good for Harry Potter sir," Dobby said. "They be liking the soil and the space."

Betty, who was working on the mushroom tree trunk, called, "Elf berry bushes be grown by Yule. Then they be sleeping until Beltane. After that, they be growing lots and lots of berries."
"That's great! I didn't know it would happen so fast. I'll have to come home for Easter to allow the garden gnomes in so they can loosen the soil." With new excitement, Harry petted the little plant in front of him. "Once the big garden is ready, your offshoots will have plenty of room to grow."

Underneath his fingers, the small leaves shivered a little.

"Harry Potter sir be looking at apple trees now," Dobby urged and tugged him across the garden. "There be one apple. It be blessing from magic."

The small, pretty fruit high up on a slender branch was innocent looking, but to Harry it symbolized everything they had worked for this summer. Dobby and Betty would be cared for, as would Sirius. This was his home now, and it would provide for all of them. He was certain of that.

"So, when will you get the chickens?" Harry wanted to know.

"Dobby still be looking for good hens," the elf said. "Dobby be thinking that five or six be enough for now."

"Maybe you could find rescue chickens," Harry said thoughtfully. "There must be chickens that aren't wanted anymore. There was an article in the newspaper once about how badly animals are treated."

"Muggles not be knowing how to do it right," Dobby muttered. A bit louder, he said, "Dobby could find chickens. They probably not be laying many eggs."

"I know." Harry shrugged. "My relatives think I'm worthless, too. Doesn't mean it's true, right? Also, we don't need many eggs, but we could offer them a nice home."

"Like Harry Potter sir did for poor Dobby and Betty," Betty said, popping up next to Harry. "Betty be liking the idea."

"See? I bet they'd be cheaper, too, or even free." Harry was distracted by Hedwig's majestic glide over the property. "Hey, where are you coming from, girl?"

Hedwig landed on a low-hanging branch and offered her leg to Harry. A small parcel had been tied to it and the magic surrounding it told them that Sirius had sent it. Dobby checked for dark spells anyway, just because he could, and then enlarged the package for Harry.

"A journal," he said a bit bemused after removing the wrapping paper. "He does know that my last experience with one wasn't very good, right?"
There was a letter to go with the journal, tucked into the pages.

Hey Pup,

Yes, I know, journals aren't really your thing, but this one is special. It's a two-way journal, meaning that we can write messages and receive them instantly. Its pages won't run out and I slapped a dozen or so security spells on it to keep nosy old men and their little spies out. I added instructions for a blood ward, so you'd best do that before we start writing in it.

I'm looking forward to hearing about your school year, hopefully a quiet one for once!

I love you, take care,

Sirius

The easy admission of his godfather's regard made Harry a little fumbly. Thankfully Betty was there to catch the precious journal for him.

"Harry Potter sir be wanting to write in new journal," she squeaked and handed it back. "Dogfather be very good to Harry Potter sir."

"Yes, he is." Harry smiled, the warmth in his chest tingling and writhing like a little happy snake. "Thanks for showing me your apple, it's lovely. I'll have to tell Sirius about it."

Both elves flushed with pleasure before popping back to their tasks. Harry went into the house, settled at the table by the garden window and read the instructions for the blood ward. It was easy enough: prick the thumb, press the blood drop into the family seal on the leather binding, and recite the incantation. Harry was done ten minutes later, proud as punch to have managed on his first try.

Opening the journal, he set the tip of his biro onto the page, only briefly wondering whether he should be using a quill and ink. In the end, he decided that it was his journal, and if he wanted to use muggle writing utensils, he could.

August 26th, 1993

Hello Sirius,

Thanks for the awesome gift! It arrived when I was visiting the garden. Dobby and Betty showed me the first apple on our new trees; I didn't think anything would grow for at least a year. It's small, but it's completely red and looks like it will taste delicious when it's ripe. Maybe I should buy a camera. It seems like a good moment to capture.
I just realized yesterday that Dobby and Betty call you my dogfather. And you called your vault the Dog Cave. What's that all about? Are you secretly a superhero? Are you Dog Man or Super Dog or something like that?

I'm looking forward to telling you about Hogwarts as well. Maybe we'll get a good teacher for Defence this year, that would be nice. I guess it would be too much to ask for Professor Binns to retire, although we're all bored to tears in his class. I wish I could take Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, but Dumbledore won't let me. Brady - Healer Williams - said that I can appeal his decision and I'll do that as soon as I have a chance to speak with Professor McGonagall. Wish me luck!

How are you doing? Are you ready to move into the cottage next week, or will you stay a little longer at Gringotts, after all? Whatever you decide, let me know so I can come and visit you before I leave for school.

Love,

Harry

Harry tried not to think too much about signing his entry that way. It seemed early to feel that way about his godfather, but if Sirius could love him as a baby, he was sure he could love him after only knowing him for a week or two.

To distract himself from these confusing thoughts, he called for Dobby and asked about buying a camera. To his immense surprise, the former owner had actually left an old model in the attic. Dobby got it for him, cleaned it up with a snap of his fingers, and helped Harry figure out how to use it. Now being stalked by Colin Creevey actually came in handy.

"Let's take a picture of the house," Harry said eagerly. "I want to show Sirius when I see him on Sunday."

Harry snapped his picture, but he also asked Dobby and Betty to pose with him for a family snapshot. At last, he photographed the small apple.

"Now we only have to find out how to develop the pictures," Harry said.

"Betty be knowing," Betty said, bouncing a little. "Betty be doing that now!"

With a flash of magic, the camera vanished from Harry's hands.
"Er, thank you!" Harry called after her.

Dobby took his hand and led him to the sofa in the living room. "Harry Potter sir be needing his rest now. It be cool outside, Dobby be starting a fire."

Snuggled in a blanket and plied with tea and biscuits, Harry flipped through the Ancient Runes textbook. It was interesting to learn about the runes that had been used in the cystem and on Healer Spleenbash's pensieve, but that was immediately forgotten when his journal flashed once, indicating a new message within.

August 26th, 1993

Hey pup,

I'm glad you like it. Your father, two other friends, and I developed the charms, so it is one of a kind. With all the security spells in place, it's hopefully a safe way to communicate. Your owl is lovely and very competent, but she could get hurt if somebody found out that you're writing to me.

I'm fine, much better than the healers thought I'd be, truth be told, so I'll move as planned. I guess it did help to meet your family again, if only in magic. I'll still miss them terribly, and be sad often, but knowing that they don't hate me for my failure ... it's everything.

What's this about the headmaster not approving your electives? I've never heard of such a thing, even if he is your magical guardian; it's good of you to appeal to the board of govenors. Tell me how it went, and raise a proper stink about it while you're at it. Involve the goblins if you must; your education is a matter of your parents' will, and as it hasn't been executed, yet, I'm sure that certain responsible people will withdraw their objections quickly, or risk having it read after all.

Anyway, such things are for me to worry about, and I'll get to the bottom of it sooner or later. You just take care to have a great day on Saturday. I wish I could come with you, Diagon Alley is always worth a trip. It's a wonder you even held out that long.

I know you asked me not to ask too many questions about your date with your Hermione, but I'd love to hear how it went. However it goes, it's an important event in your life and I'd be honoured if you shared a little of it with me.

Love,

Sirius
P.S.: Your elf friends are very observant. I'll answer that particular question in person the next time I see you.

Harry scribbled a quick acknowledgement, promising to actually answer the message in full later and vowing to get Sirius a little something from the alley to cheer him up. The little drawn picture of a black doggie wagging its tail made him smile and believe that the man was actually on the mend.

Outside, it was already getting dark, time for Dobby to serve dinner. Eating on the sofa, still huddled in his blanket, was cozy and comfortable, almost decadent. A little music would have been nice, so a radio or some kind of record player went onto Harry's shopping list. Even if he couldn't use it while he was away at school, Sirius would surely appreciate it.

oOo

Saturday dawned bright and beautiful, the temperature a little higher than on the previous days. The Grangers had cajoled him into meeting them at their home, insisting on taking him out to brunch, something Emma had to explain to him, before going on to Diagon Alley.

Dobby's pop into the Granger residence was swift and the elf remained invisible as Harry greeted Hermione and her parents.

"He's in full bodyguard mode," Harry explained when Hermione asked about his absence. "I told him that he'd be welcome to visit with you, but he doesn't want to get distracted."

"He's a terribly good friend," Dan remarked. To the invisible elf he said, "Thanks, Dobby. We appreciate your help."

The trip took a while since Dan had booked a table in a restaurant in Wimbledon. The place was nice and the buffet-style served breakfast and lunch food very good, leaving everyone full to bursting when they left a good hour later.

"No lunch for me," Hermione moaned. "It'll have to be ice cream or cake, Harry."

"Fortesque's has both," he replied, patting his stomach. "I don't think I'll need dinner, either. Thanks for the invitation, Dan."
"You're welcome, Harry," Dan chuckled.

"It's always better to shop with a full stomach," Emma said and winked at the teens in the backseat. "Although that hasn't stopped Hermione from buying her weight in books before."

She grinned. "And it won't stop me today, mum." A little shyly, she opened her hand in invitation and smiled even wider when Harry took it. "Uhm, how do we do this in the alley, Harry?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, we most likely will meet people from Hogwarts, and people might stare, so if it's kind of strange to hold hands for you, we could just not do it."

Harry frowned. "But that's stupid. We're on a date, and I like holding your hand. I don't care if someone from Hogwarts knows, and I care even less about other people. Unless you don't want to?"

"No. It's alright." She smiled, her eyes bright.

The last fifteen minutes of the drive they discussed choices for supplemental texts and which sweets to stockpile for the year. Or rather, Harry knew that he'd have to stockpile, since he wouldn't be able to visit Hogsmeade.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get you everything you want from the sweet store. It's called Honeydukes and is said to have a great selection of sweets," Hermione said. "The chocolate is supposed to especially good, and I've already looked up all the tooth care charms, so don't fuss, mum."

Emma raised both hands in supplication. "A deal is a deal, but don't come crying when you gain weight."

"I won't," Hermione informed her primly. "I'll teach Harry krav maga and whatever else is good in a sticky situation. That'll keep me fit."

"Me too, I hope," Harry said. "You look amazing."
Hermione flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, Harry."

Soon after, they parked and ventured toward the Leaky Cauldron. Harry stayed by Emma's side and Hermione with her father so both wouldn't have difficulty entering the old pub.

As they went through, Harry waved at the bartender but otherwise kept his head down so people wouldn't recognize him.

Hermione tapped the appropriate bricks of the wall with her wand. "It feels so good to be finally able to do magic again."

"Where do you want to go first?" Dan asked. "Should we get the robes and stuff out of the way?"

"Good idea," Hermione said. "Do you need anything, or did Dobby take care of that for you already, Harry?"

"Dobby took care of that, but I'll have a look at their gloves and scarves," Harry replied. "Maybe new boots, too. I think the expansion charms reached their limit."

"You did grow a lot this summer," Hermione agreed. "So, Gringotts first, then Madam Malkin's and the shoe shop ... and then Flourish and Blott's?"

"Sounds like a plan," Emma said, sounding almost more excited than her daughter.

Holding hands with Hermione, Harry led the Grangers through the alley. As Hermione had predicted, a lot of people stared at him and some started whispering before he had even passed them.

"I bet you a chocolate frog that this makes the headline tomorrow," Hermione muttered. "This is why I asked you, you know."

"I know, and I still don't care. And also, that's a sucker's bet, 'Mione," Harry retorted dryly. "There's Gringotts ... finally someone normal!"
The guards showed their sharp teeth as they grinned about his comment and bowed slightly. "Welcome, friend."

"Hello, nice day today!" Harry bowed back, letting Hermione and Emma enter first. "We're lucky, there's not much of a queue."

They stood in line, waiting patiently for a teller to serve them. When it was their turn, the goblin tutted at Harry.

"It's admirable that you're waiting, but it would please us if you would take your business directly to your manager, Mr. Potter. I'll inform Manager Sharptooth of your presence."

"Er, but-"

"Next!" the goblin called, leaving them no choice but to step aside and wait awkwardly.

"Someone's enjoying special treatment," Dan remarked. "Why's that?"

"The basilisk," Harry said quietly.

"Aah."

A guard came up to them and bade them to follow him. Sharptooth seemed to be only mildly surprised to see them.

"What can I help you with?" the goblin asked. "Is the money bag we sent not to your satisfaction, Mr. Potter?"

"No, everything is fine, Sharptooth. I was just accompanying the Grangers. The teller apparently thought I had business today and sent us here before we could tell him."

"Well, in that case there's no sense in wasting time. How can I help you, Mr. and Mrs. Granger?"
"We just need to make our annual exchange for our daughter's school things," Dan explained. "Two thousand pounds should do it."

Sharptooth hummed. "Your daughter has a vault with Gringotts now. If it pleases you, Mr. Potter, I could change the designation of the vault from trust vault to semi-active account. That way, Miss Granger's parents could deposit money in the vault and get a money bag for withdrawals. Your trust of 10,000 galleons would still be untouchable, of course, but Miss Granger would be able to use the interest."

"That's a great idea," Harry said. "Would you like me to do that for you? A money bag is like a debit card in the muggle world, and it's also secured against theft."

Dan nodded. "Yes, please. It'd save us some hassle. Although we'll still have to deposit cash, won't we?"

"Not necessarily. We're connected to a muggle bank and can set up a virtual account for your daughter. You would be able to transfer money through your own bank ... for a small fee, of course."

"What kind of fee?" Harry asked.

"For the amount Mr. Granger wants to deposit, no more than four percent," Sharptooth said smoothly.

"One," Harry countered.

"Three," Sharptooth growled.

"Two," Harry pressed. "And no more, with the money bag and bank account included, or I'll exchange their money for free."

Sharptooth gasped as if mortally wounded, but relented. "Two percent, with a complimentary bank account and the money bag at half price. Is that agreeable to you, Mr. and Mrs. Granger?"
"We'll take the deal," Dan said, after getting a small nod from Harry. "Thank you."

"The youngling drives a hard bargain," Sharptooth complained, "but he gained me another patron, so I'll forgive him."

Harry smiled cheekily.

Writing up the new contract took a little while as it was tailored to the Grangers' specific needs, but the signatures were done and over with soon enough. Not a moment later, the goblin messaging service spat out a piece of parchment with the banking information which Emma pocketed it with a grateful smile.

"Thank you for your help," she said. "It's a pleasure to do business with you."

Sharptooth looked decidedly smug. "Gringotts prides itself on its service. Just one more little thing before you leave ... are you, by any chance, related to a Hector Dagworth-Granger?"

Dan frowned thoughtfully. "I can't say that I've ever heard of him, but I know that there are a lot of people in my family I've never met. Why?"

"I cannot say much due to my confidentiality vows," Sharptooth replied. "Though a small inheritance test might not be amiss. The name Granger isn't very common in magical Britain."

"That's a surprise," Dan admitted. "I thought we were as muggle as can be."

"Will it take long?" Emma asked with a glance at her watch. "We have quite a few things to do today."

"Not at all. It's just a drop of blood in a potion. Shall I call for the test kit?"

Dan and Emma exchanged a look, Dan then turning to Harry. "Would you do such a test, Harry?"
Harry shrugged. "Sure, why not? I had no idea at all about my family before someone told me about the wizarding world, so I'd definitely want to know. In fact ... Sharptooth, can I also do the test? Will I get a family tree out of this?"

"Yes, of course. It's ten galleons apiece," the goblin said, "if you're willing to pay for it."

"You know I am. I'll also pay for Hermione's test."

"Harry, no," she protested. "You don't have to."

"I know." Harry grinned. "But it's exciting, and I kinda like doing stuff like this with you. It's rather cloak and dagger, almost like at school, only not so dangerous. Consider it my treat for our date."

"You impossible boy," she huffed but smiled back reluctantly. "That better be the last treat for today, or I'll have a really hard time returning the favour."

Harry gripped her hand tightly. "I'll like whatever we do together. It doesn't have to cost any money, you know."

"That boy has more game than you do," Emma smirked at her husband. The messenger system spat out two phials and two rolls of parchment. "Is that the potion? It shimmers like moonstone."

"That's one of the ingredients," Sharptooth said. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, please come here. Prick your finger with these sanitized knives. Allow one drop to fall into your phial and then clean your knife thoroughly. Your blood should never remain behind as it could be used in ritual or other nefarious purposes."

Not a fan of pricking his skin, Harry quickly did as told, using his new wand to clean up the small smear of blood on the blade immediately. His finger, he healed with barely a thought, as the healing charm Healer Williams had taught him was so easy.

"Harry," Hermione breathed, blood running along her left index finger. "How did you do that?"

"You're still bleeding," Harry admonished and used his wand to help her. "It's just something I picked up this summer. It's not a big deal, honestly. I'll show you the book on the train ride."
Unnoticed by them both, Sharptooth gave both phials a good shake until the contents turned lilac and then poured each over a parchment.

"Listing your inheritance will take a bit," the goblin told them. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Emma and Dan sat and accepted a cup of tea, but Hermione was barely able to suppress her curiosity.

"When did you have the opportunity to practice that spell? And how did you even get the idea to learn it? The Dursleys didn't hurt you, did they?" she demanded.

"Princess, let the poor boy breathe," Dan said gently. "I take it not saying the words while using your wand is a big deal?"

"Not for adults," Sharptooth explained. "With familiarity comes ease. Mr. Potter is merely talented in this regard."

"Still, when did you manage this? I didn't do magic all summer," Hermione insisted, her voice almost begging.

"I ... I can't tell you. Yet," Harry said. "I need to figure out how to protect us both first."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all." Hermione scowled.

"Don't push, dear," her mother warned. "It's very unattractive, and it's not your place to demand answers to begin with."

"It's alright, Emma," Harry said, giving Hermione an encouraging smile. "I'd love to tell her, and you. I just shouldn't."

"I can wait," Hermione declared with a stubborn pout.

Sharptooth, who had watched the small dispute with some amusement, cleared his throat. "The potion has finished its work. Mr. Potter, I propose discussing your results later, as there is quite a bit to go over. Miss Granger, if you'd like privacy, say so now."

"Harry can stay," she said, gripping the boy's hand tightly.

"Very well. Then please have a look at this family tree. You're indeed related to Hector Dagworth-Granger through your paternal line. Your father and his siblings are what you call squibs, as were both his father and mother, interestingly enough, although your grandmother's family is of no
consequence. As none of your family have magic, aside from yourself, of course, the inheritance of Hector Dagworth-Granger falls to you, Miss Granger. Congratulations."

"Er, what?" Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock. "We have a wizard in our family?"

"Your father's great-grandfather," Sharptooth confirmed. "We at Gringotts will have to read the will to find out the specifics, of course, but it's safe to say that some money will be coming your way."

"Great, then you'll have your own book budget," Dan joked. "Jesus, princess, we didn't see that coming."

"Me neither," Hermione mumbled, still in shock. "Uhm, do we read the will right now, or can we come back later?"

"Let's do it now," Emma said. "I'm so curious right now, it's killing me."

"Yes, let's," Dan agreed. "I know nothing about the man; I barely knew my grandfather. He had several mistresses and wasn't popular with any of his children."

"If you want to leave, you can," Hermione said to Harry. "I really didn't think the day would turn out like this."

"I don't think it was an accident," Harry replied, unconcerned. "Sharptooth has been in your company a few times now, I think he might've just waited for an opportunity. Goblins are clever like that."

"Thank you, youngling," Sharptooth said smugly. "It's a gift."

"You just want the gold in that vault back in circulation." Harry grinned. "Chances are good that all of it will be going through Flourish and Blott's."

"I sincerely doubt that, as there are far superior bookstores in the world." Sharptooth caught yet another roll of parchment from his messenger system. "Are you ready?" Getting the affirmation from the Grangers, he broke the seal on the scroll. "Herewith the reading of the will of Hector Dagworth-Granger begins:

January 13th, 1934

I, Hector Dagworth-Granger, sound in mind but not in body, leave all my worldly goods in equal parts to my magical progeny, irrespective of blood status or sex. As I wasn't blessed with magical children of my own, it is my hope that my grandchildren or their children will give new life to my
To support their education, I have sold everything bar my most precious books, which are entailed to the Dagworth-Granger estate. If the sprogs are anything like myself, they'll need to be challenged continuously, as I was told all my life that my brain is bigger than any other part of me. To ensure such, the money is strictly bound to the magical heirs. Non-magical relatives shall have no access to the funds.

To my living squib descendants, I leave a thousand galleons each to do with as they please. I never was a good father or grandfather to them and won't pretend to be better in death, but this little gift will hopefully help them over any lingering resentment.

The opening of vaults for my heirs and the distribution of the bequeathments in the muggle world have already been arranged with Gringotts. All that remains to be said is adieu, and always be curious about this magical world we live in."

"Hermione is the sole heir?" Dan asked doubtfully. "I have two brothers, one of which I'm not talking to, and one sister, so surely that's not possible. Nevermind all the cousins."

Sharptooth answered patiently, "The potion is never wrong. Your daughter inherits all."

Dan swallowed, sitting back with slumped shoulders. "Holy crap. How much money has old Hector left her?"

"It's not a huge bequeathment," Sharptooth said delicately, "but as of today her worth has increased to 748.385 galleons, 8 sickles and 3 knuts. 10.000 of those galleons of course being a gift from Mr. Potter here."

"Oh my." Emma looked gobsmacked. "That translates to a lot of books."

"And tutors, and tutoring holidays abroad," Dan whispered. "She can have it all."

"Can I really not give my parents some of the money?" Hermione asked sadly. "They spent so much money on me, it doesn't seem right."

"No, darling, you musn't think like that." Emma knelt next to Hermione's chair and grabbed her free hand. "It's our privilege to see you flourish. Will it be easier on us, now that you've got money to burn for studying? Of course it will be. But that doesn't mean that we want or need the money back we've already invested in you. What we don't spend on books, we can spend on holidays together."

"Or on yourself," Hermione said in a small voice. "I know that you've held back for my sake."
"Of course, sweetie." Emma rose and kissed her daughter's forehead. "Let's finish here so we can get your things."

Sharptooth efficiently coached Hermione through claiming her inheritance, explained how Gringotts was able to know that she spent the money according to Hector Dagworth-Granger's wishes, and recommended tutoring in financial management. Her insistence on paying for Hogwarts going forward was well received by the goblin, and Harry spied her parents sharing a pleased smile. All in all, the whole thing took a little more than an hour from their day.

"Your inheritance is a matter of public record," Sharptooth told them once everything was dealt with. "There will be a small notation in all magical newspapers that the Dagworth-Granger family line is once more active. I say this so you'll be prepared for letters of supplication or even outright demands. There will be those who'll want to contest the will; send those individuals to Gringotts. Applications for the funding of business ventures should be summarily dismissed as the money can only ever be used for your own educational pursuits."

"Thank you, we'll keep that in mind," Emma said.

"I feel like my head is about to explode," Hermione confessed as they finally left the bank. With a little distance between her and Harry and her parents, she added, "I knew that we have a rather large family, but learning that we're actually a family of squibs ... it's so strange. I can't imagine how my dad must be feeling right now."

"Maybe he's a little sad that he didn't know about this sooner, but he doesn't seem the sort to suddenly want what he never had anyway," Harry consoled her. "Except he's got a thousand galleons extra. That's pretty great!"

"It is," Hermione agreed, frown easing a little. "I hope they'll go and have a fancy dinner somewhere, or go away for a couple of days. They deserve it so much."

"They'll save a whole lot of money just from not paying the tuition for Hogwarts." Harry bumped her shoulder with his. "They're happy for you."

"I should've taken Hector's journals at least," she murmured. "I've never heard of him, but he had a lot of money and that probably means he was of some consequence."

"Don't worry about it. You can get them anytime," Harry steered them to Madam Malkin's, as Hermione was still far too befuddled to notice much of her environment. "Let's get our shopping out of the way. If you want them, we can get them before you go home. Is that a deal?"
"That's a very thoughtful deal." Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry for being such a ninny."

"Nah, it's alright. I still have to find out about my inheritance test, so who knows what kind of wreck I'll be." They reached Madam Malkin's shop and Harry held the door for her. "Here we are."

He browsed the selection of gloves and hats while Hermione was being measured behind a privacy screen. Emma chose a pretty silk scarf and Dan found a bowtie for their outing to the opera. The shop assistant watched them all with shrewd eyes but rang up their purchases without saying anything, not even to Harry.

Finding a pair of sturdy boots in the shoe shop led to buying another pair of half shoes for the warmer months at half price because the owner wanted to do The-Boy-Who-Lived a favour. He wouldn't be swayed no matter how much Harry protested, and in the end Dan decided to accept the kind offer in his stead so they could move along.

"Before we go to Flourish and Blotts, I'd like to go to the trunk store," Harry said, pointing at said store. "I need a new book bag."

"Good idea," Hermione agreed. "Maybe one that's a lot larger on the inside, and nearly weightless."

They entered the store and peppered the amused owner with questions. Only ten minutes later, they were both proud owners of new leather carrier bags that had been spelled to capacity for storage, order, and weightlessness.

"I can put a small library in there," Hermione gushed, showing her mother the pretty turquoise lining inside her bag. "And all of my homework! Isn't it great?"

"Very great," Emma laughed. "One like that would make a fantastic birthday present for your favourite mother."

"I know."

"I know." Grinning, Hermione kissed her on the cheek. "Too bad your birthday is still five months away."

"It's not nice to tease," Dan said, kissing his wife on the other cheek. "Now, I know that you wanted to go to Flourish and Blott's next, but let's make a small detour."

Hermione's parents led the way to the Magical Menagerie, where they told their daughter that it was
time to get a pet.

"Maybe it'll be an owl, but whatever animal catches your fancy will be fine," Emma promised. "It's our birthday present to you, if you want it."

Hermione, who was already pressing her face to the show window, squeaked, "I want!"

Dashing inside, she made a straight line to the counter, where a huge orange ball of fluff was sitting and staring at her intently.

"Oh, careful, young lady," the lady behind the counter said. "He's a half-kneazle, a magical type of cat, and doesn't suffer us humans easily."

"I've seen him last summer but couldn't buy him. He's gorgeous," Hermione cooed, holding out her hand for the kneazle to sniff. "What's his name?"

"He hasn't got one, yet," the lady replied. "Do you want him?"

"I'd rather know whether he wants me."
"Hermione, not having been bitten or scratched, stepped a little closer. "Can I pet you, cat?"

The thing purred and closed his yellow eyes.

Hermione buried her fingers in the fluffy fur, causing the purr to become louder and louder with each rumble. "You're lovely. Do you want to come with me to Hogwarts? There's a lot of land for you to roam. You look like you need your alone time."

The cat practically head-butted Hermione with pleasure.

Dan smiled crookedly as he paid for the kneazle, a carrier and a bit of food. "You sure know how to pick them, princess."

"Yeah, that's a lot of cat to carry around," Harry remarked, watching the kneazle through the bars of its carrier.

"I'm strong," she answered, unconcerned.

"And I'll spell the carrier weightless for her," the sales lady laughed. "It should hold up until well after your train ride to Hogwarts, dear."
"Good idea." Harry grinned. "He seems to like you a lot. What will you call him?"

"His name is Crookshanks, because he has adorable bow legs." Hermione beamed. "He's got so much character! I can't wait to show him off."

"I can already see Lavender and Parvati putting little bows in his tail." Harry snickered. "Poor little guy."

Crookshanks hissed loudly.

"Don't scare him, Harry James," Hermione scolded him. "Parvati and Lavender aren't so bad."

Bickering, they slowly made their way to Flourish and Blott's. Mr. Blott was behind the counter, breaking out in a huge smile when he saw Hermione.

"Miss Granger! Long time no see. Is that your new pet? O-ho! That's an impressive kneazle tom you have here! Such a handsome boy."

"Isn't he just great?" Hermione asked. "May I please leave him here while we're looking around?"

"Of course, my dear." Mr. Blott put the carrier onto the counter so Crookshanks could watch his new mistress as she wandered through the store. "I've got your third year books already here."

"Er, about that ... what do I have to do to read the Monster Book Of Monsters?" Harry asked. "Mine tried to eat me and then hid under my dresser. It's still there, but, well, we're leaving for Hogwarts soon."

"Not an uncommon problem," Mr. Blott sighed. "That book is something else. To open it, you'll have to pet it first. Just a few pats to the cover or a little rub of its spine should do it. Look, like this." And he produced the bound book from Hermione's stack, demonstrating with a couple of pats. "Other than this foolishness, it's actually a good book about the subject and well worth the money. By the way, we finally got the third volume of Transfiguration For Apprentices."
"Oh, just go," Emma sighed and Hermione darted off, eyes aglow with happiness and one hand firmly on her new money bag.

Harry wondered if Hermione would see herself surrounded by books in the Mirror of Erised, maybe with Crookshanks on her lap. The thought made him smile.

"What about you, Harry?" Dan asked. "Do you need any books?"

"Dobby got them for me already," Harry admitted. "And he'll pop over and get more if I need them. But it's always great to just look."

"Then don't let me stop you. Let's meet here in an hour, that should be enough time for the ladies to go crazy."

Harry agreed and meandered off to look for books about defence and wizarding fighting. To his surprise and joy there was a book about hit wizards and their training in the bargain bin, and another about martial broom fighting of all things in the specialized section for obscure topics. To round out his selection, he picked up several more books about healing charms, personal hygiene, and *Magical Herbst and Funghi, Vol. 2*, so he could help his elf friends identify the stranger plants on Potter's Field, and possibly even find out how to clear them away. The last but perhaps most interesting find was a book named *The Art Of Secrecy*.

An hour later, he met the Grangers at the counter and goggled at the amount of books Hermione had chosen.

"Yes, I know, but a year is long and those are all topics I'm interested in," Hermione said defensively.

"Even magical law?" Harry asked. He thumbed through one of the books. "It's brutally dry reading, 'Mione."

"Muggle law is just as uninspiring. That doesn't mean it's not useful to know how it works. What have you found, Harry?"

Harry showed her his selections and earned an incredulous look for the martial broom fight book.

"That's one of the most insane things I've ever seen," Hermione said after flipping through the pages.
"Those moving pictures are crazy! You'll break your neck."

"Yeah, I should do this with an instructor, but some of the beginner moves are easy enough to try by myself," Harry replied, looking at a man that was shooting along just above the ground, only to jump off, grab the broom and use it like a fighting staff against an attacker. After disabling him, the man jumped back on the broom and raced away. The whole thing was over in five or six seconds. "Isn't this epically cool?"

"It's epically easy to get yourself killed," Hermione countered, with reluctant amazement tingeing her voice. "Where did you even find this?"

"Specialized section. There's a lot of crazy stuff in there."

Mr. Blott politely interrupted them so Hermione could pay for her purchases. The amount of galleons would have been staggering just an hour earlier, but neither Hermione nor Mr. Blott even batted an eyelid as Hermione withdrew the small mountain of gold from her bag.

"It's always a pleasure to have you come visit," Mr. Blott said sincerely. "And please remember our owl order service. I've included our catalogue, but feel free to ask if you're looking for something that's not listed."

"I will, thank you, Mr. Blott." Hermione smiled sweetly.

Harry quickly paid, stuffed his books into his new bag and helped push Hermione out of the shop.

"It's always the same ... a dagger through my heart," Dan lamented. "Once in there, I, her own father, cease to exist. Mr. Flourish and Mr. Blott become her heroes, and her poor mother! Not a thought is left for her."

"It's not that bad," Hermione mumbled, cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "Look, there's Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. Believe it or not, but I could actually eat."

Harry didn't have the heart to tease her, unlike her parents. Throwing both adults a speaking look, he followed Hermione through the store and to a little table in the prettily decorated backyard seating area. A little chastised, Dan and Emma chose the furthest table from them to give them some space.
"They're terrible. I take back every nice thing I have said about them today," Hermione groaned, hiding her face in her hands.

"No, you don't." Harry grinned.

Mr. Fortescue personally approached and handed them menus. "How may I help you?" he asked, eyes wandering from Harry to Hermione and back. "Or, if I may be so bold and recommend our Couple Cup to you?"

"The Couple Cup?" Harry blushed. "Er, what's in it?"

Mr. Fortescue explained that each of them could choose six half scoops of ice cream, several toppings and different sauces.

"That doesn't sound very lovey-dovey," Hermione remarked. "Don't couples usually do everything together?"

"Hm, I can't say they do," Mr. Fortescue replied with a wink. "You see, sharing something doesn't mean that you have to compromise ... at least not in my parlour! I have sixty kinds of ice cream to choose from, how boring would it be to share only two or three? No, you young people pick out whatever you like and let the other experience what you like about your choices."

"I think it's great. Should we take the Couple Cup, 'Mione?" Harry asked hopefully.

Hermione blushed and looked searchingly at him. "If you're sure?"

Harry knew that he was somewhat socially unaware, but he still knew that something was changing between them right there, and that his answer meant a lot to the girl across from him. If he interpreted her reaction right, she really wanted ...

"Yes," he said in as firm a voice as he could manage. "Very sure."
Mr. Fortescue beamed and took their order.

Harry, not beaming any less, took Hermione's slightly sweaty hand in his as soon as he was gone. "This summer has been so awesome."

"You think so?" she asked, shy but radiant.

"I like you a lot," Harry said honestly. "I just hope I won't mess this up."

"You'd have to do a Ronald to manage that," Hermione informed him with a raised eyebrow and they both laughed a little. "No, really. I like you, too, and, and ..." She paused, a little flustered. "I am your girlfriend now, right?"

"Yes. As long as you'll have me, really, because I can't imagine liking anyone as much as I like you."

"Oh."

They stared at each other in wonder, barely noticing Mr. Fortescue's return with their ice cream and two complimentary cups of white coffee.

"Enjoy," the older gentleman said with an indulgent smile, and that was exactly what Harry and Hermione did.

End of part 5
Dear readers, I feel that I should make a few things clear:

First, according to Pottermore, Fleamont Potter is Harry's paternal grandfather, not Charlus, and Euphemia (no maiden name recorded) is his paternal grandmother, not Dorea (or any other) Black. It has bearing on the story, and also, it comes right from J.K. Rowling, so her canon trumps your fanon. Harry might be distantly related to the Blacks (as all old families appear to be related to each other, more or less), but not enough for the Black family magic to accept him as the heir with any kind of grace without Sirius' blood adoption.

Secondly, while I generally enjoy your reviews immensely, commenting with a mere "update" after I've literally just posted a shit ton of words is not going to endear you to me. I'll thank you to keep your entitlement to yourself if you don't have anything nice or constructive to say.

To all the rest of my readers: thank you for your kind comments and helpful information. I won't go into detail, but some of it plays nicely right into my story, and I also love learning new things.

For those who think the story is too slow-paced, or who don't like my way of telling the story: you know where the back button is.

Dobby's Deceit

Part 6

The first of September usually couldn't come soon enough, but this year Harry dreaded stepping onto Platform 9 3/4. Not only would he be leaving his wonderful new home behind, he finally had found family that cared for him and wanted to be close.

"It'll be all fine," Sirius' slightly rough voice crooned. He held Harry tightly in his arms and kissed his hair. "We have the journals, and your cottage is so well-hidden that no one will ever find me there."

"Promise me you'll stay safe," Harry whispered into the man's chest. "No coming to Hogwarts, and no going after whoever it is you were after."

Sirius chuckled darkly. "That has already been dealt with, pup, don't worry." He loosened the embrace so he could look Harry in the eyes. "You go on and have a wonderful year. Your Hermione
"will probably take up a good portion of your time, but don't forget to have fun with your other friends."

"Balance," Harry said solemnly.

"Balance," Sirius agreed, his grey eyes soft with affection.

Someone cleared their throat. "Heir Potter, it is time for you to go to King's Cross. You have only thirty minutes left."

Harry sighed. It had been generous of Sharptooth to make his office available for their goodbyes and he was grateful, but waiting until the last minute to actually leave was also making it much harder than he had anticipated.

"I'll see you at Yule," Harry said. "And Easter."

"Yes." Sirius pulled him into his arms again and rather obviously scented Harry's neck like some kind of animal. It was one of his stranger quirks, but one Harry could live with. "I could still kidnap you. Homeschooling is far superior to Hogwarts' current education."

Harry grinned, even as his eyes stung a little. "If this year's Defence professor is as bad as the last two, we can do that."

"That's a promise." Sirius finally let go of Harry. "I love you, Harry."

"You, too," Harry mumbled, heart skipping a beat in his chest.

Sirius' kind gaze went to Dobby, who had patiently waited for them. "Please take him to the train and watch over him."

"Yes, Lord Black," the elf said solemnly. "Dobby be taking good care of Harry Potter sir."

After one last hug and a slightly stubbly kiss to his forehead, Harry took Dobby's small hand in his and allowed himself to be taken away.

Reappearing in a dark niche at King's Cross, Dobby first enlarged all of Harry's luggage, weightless to make getting on the train easier, and then made himself invisible so Harry could cross the barrier like certain people expected him to.

To his great relief, Hermione and her parents were already there, all of them visibly lighting up as they saw him coming.
"Harry!" Hermione flew into his arms and kissed his cheek. "Are you ready for Hogwarts?" From his carrier, Crookshanks gave a content little rumble.

"Uhm, yeah." He returned the kiss before embracing Emma and even getting pulled into a loose man hug by Dan. "You're obviously looking forward to it."

"Yes. I've set myself several goals this year," she replied ominously, not elaborating at his questioningly raised eyebrows.

"We have a little time yet," Emma said with a smile. "You can get on the train now, or we could sit for a bit before the train leaves."

Choosing to sit, Harry pulled four small bottles of Dobby's lemonade from his book bag and passed them around. "With compliments from my friend."

Dan took a long pull. "Man, I love this stuff. What's in there, anyway? It's some kind of energy drink, isn't it?"

"Er, maybe a little. Dobby uses special ingredients, but they're healthy, I promise."

"Well, I'm not complaining," Emma said with a smile. "We're both fit for our hike in Dartmoor next weekend."

"I'm a little envious, but we've got so many new classes that it almost counts as a hike." Hermione took a drink from her lemonade. "You'll send pictures, right?"

"Of course we will." Dan ruffled her hair, causing her to squeak in horror.

"Dad! I spent hours trying to make it behave!"

Harry felt her pain and patted her shoulder. "It's a lost cause, 'Mione. I gave up ages ago."

"But I wanted to be pretty," she mumbled, trying to make her hair lie at least a little flat.

"You're pretty no matter what," Harry said loyally. "And I like your hair all wild."

"So much more game than you," Emma whispered to Dan, smirking. She then glanced at her watch and sighed. "Only five more minutes. You should board the train and find seats."
"Yes, let's." Hermione sighed. "I'm not looking forward to Malfoy's annual harassment."

"Well, you do know the strike points exceptionally well," Dan said, asking, "What?" when Emma elbowed him.

Hermione's parents helped them maneuver their school trunks and Crookshank's carrier onto the train and hugged both teens. As Hedwig disliked her cage intensely, Harry had decided to donate it to the second hand shop on Diagon Alley. It freed up his hands nicely and had the added bonus of him being able to help Hermione with her things, which, as Sirius had assured him, was still looked upon favorably by witches who were perfectly capable of casting their own featherlight charm.

"Chivalry will never die," Sirius had advised him, followed by handing Harry a small book on wizarding etiquette. "Having the ladies on your side may very well swing things in your favour, and I'm not talking about being an outrageous flirt."

"Stay safe," Emma said. The engine driver gave a warning whistle. Only two more minutes. "We really don't want to take Hermione out of school, so be smart, alright?"

"*Smart* is not the problem," Harry replied.

"We're not the ones to start it. Usually," Hermione added. She grinned cheekily. "Bye, mum, dad. Love you!"

The train whistle blew again and they withdrew from the car door. From afar, Harry spied a horde of Weasleys running through the barrier and after the moving train.

"The Weasleys never make it on time," he commented.

Hermione snorted, floating her trunk into the corridor. Crookshanks, who was balanced on top, meowed disdainfully. "One would think that they knew how to organize on this day after so many years." She glanced into the nearest compartment. "This one is full."

Harry shrugged the Weasleys' plight off - it was easy to Floo or apparate to Hogsmeade, after all - and turned his full attention to Hermione. "Why don't we ask Dobby to help us?"

"Dobby will!" the elf squeaked, becoming visible. "Harry Potter sir be waiting here. Dobby be back in a moment!" He was back almost immediately, ears a little drooped. "There be only one compartment, but it not be completely empty. Dobby be sorry."

"It's not your fault," Hermione said gently. "Please show us."
With a snap of his fingers, they lost the grip on their luggage. With nothing left to do but follow the little creature, they made their way through the train. Close to the rear end, Dobby opened a compartment door.

"This be it," he said. "Wolf man be sleeping, but Dobby can put up silencing ward."

"Hm, better not," Hermione said, looking regretful but resolved. "See the luggage up there? If he's on the way to Hogwarts today, he might be a new professor, and if there's trouble, he should be able to react."

Harry couldn't fault her for her logic. "Yeah, maybe he was told to take the train with us because of Sirius Black."

"Remus J. Lupin," Hermione muttered, reading the plaque on the somewhat shabby suitcase. "Lupin means wolf. Huh. Dobby, you called him wolf man, didn't you?"

"He be wolfy man," Dobby confirmed. "He be dangerous, but only one night a month."

Suddenly blanching, Hermione stepped back, frantically pulling at Harry's arm. "He's a werewolf! And the full moon was last night!"

"So?" Harry entered the compartment and sat down across from Lupin. "You heard Dobby, he's only dangerous once a month, and that was yesterday." A sly grin tugged at his lips and before he could stop himself, he added, "Not unlike a girl, right?"

Hermione was so scandalized that she forgot her fear. "Harry!" She quickly got into the apartment and closed the door behind her. "That was uncalled for!"

"Sorry, sorry, but it's ridiculous to be afraid of him just because he's sprouting a little fur once a month. We don't know anything about him, yet. He could be a good guy! As you said, he might even be a new teacher. Can you imagine Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick allowing someone dangerous into the school?"

Huffing, Hermione plopped down into the seat next to him. "I suppose that's true. And now? Do we just stay here?"

"Why not? We're as alone as we're gonna get," Harry replied with a shrug. "At least for now. I think I hear the twins trampling; seems like they made the train after all."

A few moments later, their compartment door was ripped open and a panting Ron stumbled in.
"Here you are!" he cried. "Why didn't you wait for me? I saw you walking away when the train set off! You could've helped me with my trunk."

"Mind your voice!" Hermione hissed, pointing at Lupin's slumbering form. Crookshanks in her lap hissed as well. "How is it our fault that your family was late? Again?"

Ron flushed angrily. "You still could've helped me."

Harry, who had no desire to sit with Ron while he was in a temper, sighed, drew his wand, and set the trunk onto the shelf above the seats with a muttered levitating spell.

"Honestly, it's like you regularly forget that you are a wizard," Hermione said bitingly.

Even Harry's ears rang with the severity of it.

"Just in case you didn't know, I haven't really missed you," Ron shot back. "Bloody hell. And what is that monster on your lap? A lion?"

"Crookshanks is a half kneazle. If you could finally lower your voice so the sleeping passenger can remain asleep ..." Hermione dismissed Ron with a last glare and started rummaging in her carrier bag.

"What's wrong with her?" Ron demanded, eyes narrowed. "Did she start her girl stuff over the summer?"

"One more word, Ronald, and I'll put you in a full body-bind," Hermione threatened.

Harry sighed again. "Maybe you should shut it, Ron. You were too late, just like we were too late last year."

"That barmy house elf stopped us," Ron argued. "It's not our fault."

"We arrived at the barrier three minutes before the train left!" Harry retorted, fed up with the discussion. "Dobby didn't help, but we were late! Blame your parents, if you want, but leave Hermione and me out of it."

"Fine, take her side!" Ron got up and slammed out of the compartment, making sure to be as loud as humanly possible.

"He's a horrible boy," Hermione growled, closing the door again with her wand and casting a locking spell. Glancing at the still sleeping man across from her, she deflated. "I'm sorry, Harry. I
told myself to be good."

"He insulted you and acted like a prat," Harry said with a shrug. "You could've been nicer about it, but I don't think that would've helped much."

Hermione leaned against his side and sniffed. "He'll be back."

"Yeah, probably around lunch time." To cheer her up, Harry carefully took the potions book from her hands and replaced it with Dobby's book about house elf lore. "Here, let's read that one together."

"Won't that be boring for you?" she asked, glancing at him.

"Nah. House elves are fantastic, and I'm sure I missed something the first time," Harry smiled, pecked her on the temple and opened the cover. "It'll be fun."

For the next hour, they were engrossed in the book, quietly talking about the things Hermione discovered. Having a live house elf on hand to answer questions certainly helped Hermione a lot to come to terms with the bond house elves had with wizards.

"I'll never get over how unequal that bond can be," she said a little sadly. "But I understand why they need it."

"We be strong, and many wizards be kind," Dobby assured her. He snapped his fingers and two bottles of water and a bowl of cut up fruit appeared. "It be time for Harry Potter sir's snack."

With the snack came a potion, which of course aroused Hermione's suspicion.

"I'll try not to pry, but ... are you okay?" Hermione asked. "I mean, you look okay. Even your scar is a lot fainter than it was last year. But drinking a potion usually means that something's not okay, so ..."

"Hold on." Harry used a privacy spell, in case their sleeping compartment mate wasn't as asleep as he let on. "It's a nutrient potion," he admitted and drank it down, leaving a bit for Hermione to try. She did and made a sound of delighted surprise. "It's from Gringotts. They taste tons better than Snape's vile stuff."

"Oh." Hermione's eyes raked over Harry in obvious appreciation, making him blush a little. "Well, good for you! I'm glad you thought of it."

"Yeah, me too," he said softly. Taking her hand, he whispered, "Can you keep it quiet, please?"
Nobody cared about that before and I don't want the headmaster sticking his nose in it. It's bad enough that he'll send me back to the Dursleys next summer."

"He can go hang," Hermione grumbled, and wasn't that a stunning comment from someone who relied and believed in authority to an almost unhealthy degree. "By the way, the police told my parents that the Dursleys have to go to counselling to get over their unreasonable hate of you. Apparently your uncle is quite, uhm, unhinged. How the Ministry of Magic didn't get wind of it, I'll never know. Wizarding Child Protection Services would've taken other children into protective custody by now."

Harry just shrugged. "Dumbledore thinks he knows best. I got by okay this summer, so I don't have a reason to alert him. As long as they leave me be, I'll be fine."

"Maybe you're right," Hermione muttered, although she was still visibly unhappy. "But you'll tell me if that changes. My parents and I can help without Dumbledore knowing about it."

"I will." Harry offered her the bowl. "Here, have some. Lunch is still an hour away."

"Thanks. What was that spell you just used?"

Harry pulled his book The Art Of Secrecy from his bag and showed her the page he'd marked. "It's called Muffliato and makes it very hard for listeners to understand what we're saying. There are a lot more spells and charms in there, but Muffliato is the one I got right after a few tries."

"Impressive." Hermione read over the instructions. "Can you teach me?"

"Sure," Harry replied. "Now?"

She grinned and drew her wand from her bag. "No time like the present."

Outside, fat raindrops began to fall. Not five minutes later, the rain came down so heavily that it was impossible to see the passing scenery though the window. Lupin slept through their impromptu training, his lap serving as Crookshank's pillow, and didn't even stir when Ron returned and threw himself into the furthest seat from the man.

"I'm hungry," the redheaded boy declared. After spying their books and wands, he spluttered, "Have you really worked on spells? You're both mental."

"Welcome back," Hermione said dryly, accepting Harry's elbow in her side as her due.

"The trolley lady hasn't been by, yet," Harry informed Ron. "Maybe we should wake Lupin so he
"Why would you do that? He's an adult, he can wake himself." Ron scrunched up his nose. "By the way, why didn't you write to me after I returned from Egypt, Harry? My mum wanted to take you shopping and everything."

"I didn't know when you'd be back. You didn't say in your letter on my birthday," Harry replied. "You also didn't answer to my reply. At least, I didn't get a letter."

Ron opened his mouth, thought it over, and then slumped a little. "Oh. Crikey, you're right. I wrote a letter on the day we got back, but then Scabbers got really sick and I forgot about it. Mum and Dad forgot about it too."

"What happened?" Hermione asked. "Is Scabbers alright?"

"No. He, er, died a couple of days ago." Ron shifted uncomfortably. "He just went to sleep, no big deal. Everyone was saying how old he was for a normal garden rat, anyway."

"Still, losing a pet is hard," Hermione said compassionately. "I wanted Crooks, but I'm not looking forward to ... you know. Even if it's many years in the future, hopefully."

"Me neither," Harry offered. "Hedwig is my girl. I'd be devastated if something happened to her."

Ron's eyes were suspiciously bright, but he put on a brave front. "Yeah, well, it is what it is. My dad promised me a new pet if I do well this year. It's something to look forward to, I guess."

"It is," Hermione said firmly. "What pet would you like? I mean, you will be able to choose, won't you?"

This prompted a rather animated discussion about the merits of various animals, especially since Ron wouldn't be constrained by the first year restrictions.

"Obviously I don't want a toad," Ron said. "They're slimy and really useless. Cats are fine, I suppose, if one just wants to pet them every now and then, but they can't deliver letters and won't play with you whenever you like."

"That sounds like you'd do well with a dog," Hermione said. "They seem to be uncommon, though. Why is that?"

"There are not many magical dog breeds," Ron said, staring at Crookshanks who was lazily staring back. "Most live in Asia, and they're stupidly expensive."
"Why?" Harry asked. "Do they have some kind of special ability?"

"They can be super special," Ron replied, gesticulating animatedly. "Some breeds are really fast and can fetch mail, and some are good in ritual magic, or for channeling innate magical gifts. My brother Charlie knows a lot about them, they have a few at the dragon reservation in Romania."

"I didn't know that." Hermione fished her snarling Monster Book Of Monsters out of her back and petted it absently. "I read a little ahead, but I guess those dogs are class XXX or up magical creatures, so we won't study them until our seventh year."

"All of them are class XXXX, except the grim," Ron said, obviously proud of knowing something the others didn't. "That one's a class XXXXXX, and the only magical dog breed native to Britain."

"It's a pity that we won't study one in class, though. I think they're fascinating," Hermione mused. She found the page in her book and showed them the picture of a huge, black dog with fearfully long teeth and impressive claws on his feet.

Ron shuddered. "Yeah, that's the one. No one in their right mind wants to meet one - they're harbingers of death. Like, you see one and you keel over soon after."

"Yes, but why?" she insisted. "What attracts them? Are they just smelling that someone will die? Do they want to let someone know they'll die so that they can get their affairs in order? What about the shock value? What if the whole thing is a self-fulfilling prophecy and people die because they get spooked?"

"What? Ron asked, gaping at her flood of questions. "How should I know? No one's ever returned from studying them."

A knock interrupted them.

"Sweets, dears?" the trolley lady asked with a kind smile. "Might cheer you up on this dreary day."

Hermione chose a piece of cauldron cake and two chocolate frogs. "My parents will kill me if I eat more," she said sheepishly. "Even with the teeth cleaning charm I looked up over the summer."

Harry picked out more chocolate and a pack of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and invited Ron to pick a couple of things as well.

While his friend was busy, Harry nudged Lupin. "Sir? Excuse me, sir, but the food trolley is here."
"Mmh, what?" Bleary-eyed, Lupin shifted. "The trolley?"

"Yeah, we thought you might want something."

Rallying, the man sat up, careful not to dislodge Crookshanks from his lap. "Thank you. Hm, two sandwiches, please. One with ham, the other with chicken."

"Coming right up, dearie," the trolley lady chirped and a moment later two plates filled to overflowing with huge sandwiches and crisps floated towards Lupin. "That'll be seven sickles, please."

Lupin counted out the silver and immediately went to town on his lunch. He made Ron look like an amateur and even had time to feed Crookshanks a piece of chicken while he was at it. He also kept his mouth closed while he chewed, setting a good example and endearing him to Hermione, who had bemoaned Ron's atrocious table manners since they'd started at Hogwarts.

Dobby, being the wonderful friend he was, had packed a hot lunch for both Harry and Hermione, consisting of roast chicken and a rich side salad with lots of avocado, walnuts, pear and raspberry dressing.

"Where did you get that?" Ron asked enviously. "My mum's only packed sandwiches for us."

The sandwiches did look rather pitiful, Harry had to admit. As wonderful as Mrs. Weasley's cooking was, her talent apparently didn't include making food for the train ride. Thankfully, Dobby had cooked a lot and so Harry was able to let Ron have a full meal, as well.

"Thanks, mate," Ron said and inhaled the fragrance of the chicken. "I dunno what that green stuff is, but the meat sure looks good."

Next to them, clearly trying not to disturb them, Lupin finished off his food and pulled a flask from his coat. The scent of coffee permeated the air and he sighed happily.

"Still tired, sir?" Harry asked, watching the man gulp down two cups of the brew in quick succession.

"I had a long night," Lupin replied. "Third year at Hogwarts?" He pointed at The Monster Book Of Monsters sticking out of Hermione's bag.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it," Hermione beamed and chewed on her avocado. "We finally got to choose our electives."
"At least you did," Harry grumbled. "I'll have to corner Professor McGonagall and appeal Dumbledore's stupid decision."

"I thought you sent a letter?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "Harry, what happened?"

"I never got a reply," Harry said, trying hard not to let his anger show. "I asked Dobby to watch out for it, but apparently my letter is still lying unopened in her inbox."

Lupin cleared his throat. "I'm, ah, the new professor for Defence Against The Dark Arts, Remus Lupin's the name, and obviously I couldn't help but overhear. Harry - may I call you Harry? - did I understand correctly that you have a problem with your choice of electives?"

"I didn't have a problem with my choices," Harry said. "The headmaster did. He's apparently my magical guardian and decided that I'm not to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes this year."

"What?" Lupin looked aghast. "What is his reason?"

"He didn't give one." Harry decided to go all in. "Professor McGonagall didn't mention in her reply that I could appeal this decision, even though it's the law to make that known to me."

"Yes, it is. Do you still have that letter?"

"Yes, I saved it for the board of governors." Harry frowned. "Maybe I should contact them directly, seeing how Professor McGonagall doesn't do anything to help me."

"That's very unusual," Lupin said softly. "If you want, I'll support your appeal, and ask Professors Vector and Babbling to do so as well. I'm sure they'd be glad to have you in their class."

"Thanks, professor," Harry said, feeling better already.

"This will be resolved quickly," Lupin assured him. "Give it two weeks, a month at most if people prove to be stubborn."

"And in the meantime?" Hermione asked. "Does Harry have to go to Divination?"

"He shouldn't," Lupin replied, a thoughtful look on his face. His amber eyes glinted a little, even in the dull afternoon light. "It could be taken as an admission that he's not as opposed to the class as he's made it known."
"Independent study, then." Hermione pulled a notepad from her bag and started writing. "I'll do it with him, we can work with the beginner material of Runes or Arithmancy."

"That's very generous of you, Miss ..."

"Granger. Hermione Granger." Decisively, Hermione stuck out her hand for Lupin to shake. "Nice to meet you. My friends are Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley."

"Hello," Lupin replied with a smile, not showing the least bit of surprise at learning either Harry or Ron's last name. "The professors will support you, of course, and hand out little assignments to keep you busy and cement your case."

Ron huffed. "I still don't get why you won't just take Divination, Harry. It's such an easy OWL! Don't you want a break from You-Know-Who being after you?"

Lupin shook his head before Harry could answer. "A break is all well and good in the short term, Ronald-"

"No, Ron, please! My mum calls me Ron when I'm in trouble!"

That made Lupin laugh a little. "Ron, then. In the short term, breaks might be advisable, but hopefully there's a whole life for Harry to live once school is over. For that, he needs to be prepared."

"But Runes are hard," Ron moaned. "And Arithmancy is a horror! My brother Bill studied both like crazy - he's a ward breaker at Gringotts - and talked of nothing else! Barmy, he was."

"And now?" Hermione needled. "You went to visit him; how is he doing now? Is he resting on his laurels, or is he still educating himself?"

Ron looked as if he'd bitten into a particularly sour lemon. "He's still at it, but at least he took time off to show us the sights and stuff. I don't get why he needs to work so much, or be the best ward breaker on his team. It's not like he even shares his money with us!"

"Ron ..." Hermione glanced at Harry. "If he's worked for it, it's his money. That's the whole point!
People work so they can have enough money for a comfortable life. Bill being team leader at his age ... and I assume he's in his early twenties ... is fantastic. It speaks of an incredible work ethic, and of course talent and dedication to his chosen profession. The goblins must be very happy to have him work for them."

"You sound like a friggin' grown up," Ron groused.

"I'm just very interested in making the most out of my opportunities," Hermione said evenly. "You should do the same. Hogwarts isn't cheap, you know. Getting all of you through seven years of education must be really hard on your parents. They're sacrificing a lot for you."

"Whatever," Ron mumbled, cheeks flushing a dull red. "I still think doing both Runes and Arithmancy is mental."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe, but I want to give it a try."

"You won't regret it," Lupin said encouragingly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I still have a bit of sleep to catch up on ..."

Awed, the three teens looked on as Lupin buried himself back under his cloak, Crookshanks resuming his position on his lap, and fell asleep in three seconds flat.

"Incredible," Harry said. "I wish I could do that."

"Or maybe not," Hermione added, delicately pointing out the dark circles under Lupin's eyes and the pallor of his skin. "The price would be too high."

"What is she talking about?" Ron asked, bewildered.

Thankfully, Malfoy and his cronies chose that moment to make their appearance.

"Well, well, well, the scarhead, the know-it-all, and the weasel," the blond boy said with a haughty sneer. "Still sticking to each other in an attempt to rise from mediocrity, I see."

"What does that even mean?" Hermione demanded. "If I remember correctly, I beat out everyone from your house. In fact, you weren't even among the top ten of our year group, Malfoy. I wonder what your father had to say about that."

Malfoy's eyes gleamed wickedly. "He wasn't thrilled, of course, but really, competing against a Dagworth-Granger? He didn't hold it against me."
"Is that so?" Hermione narrowed her eyes. "That still doesn’t explain your underperformance. You should’ve come second, then, not twelfth."

Apparently running out of arguments, Malfoy took notice of Lupin’s sleeping form. "Whatever, Granger. Who is that? The new caretaker for Hogwarts? It’s about time, Filch was a disgrace."

"He’s our new DADA professor," Ron said angrily.

"Shove off, Malfoy. Or would you like us to wake him up?" Harry asked threateningly.

"Hiding behind a professor, are you, Potter?" Malfoy sneered. "Come, Crabbe, Goyle, this is getting boring. Let’s see how many chocolate frogs Parkinson has left."

They marched off, leaving the compartment door open as a last insult.

"He’s such a smug little bastard," Hermione hissed as she closed the door with a little swish of her wand.

"What did he mean, you being a Dagworth-Granger?" Ron stared at her.

"It means that my ancestor was Hector Dagworth-Granger," Hermione replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "So what if he was clever? Many people are. It’s no excuse for laziness and entitlement."

"He was rich, though, wasn’t he?"

"Ron-"

"I can’t believe you didn’t tell me," Ron huffed. "Honestly, Hermione, I’m gone for like three weeks and it’s like I don’t even exist anymore!"

"You didn’t even tell me you were going to Egypt!" Hermione cried, exasperated.

Ron glowered. "It’s not the same thing."

Harry could feel the next huge argument coming and sighed to himself. He liked Ron, most of the time, but this was too much.

"She only learned of it on Saturday," he said quietly. "Leave her alone, Ron."
"Why should I?" Ron gesticulated wildly. "She's probably adopted the family name, too, just because it will make her more famous! She'll be rubbing elbows with Malfoy next, just you wait!"

Hermione's mouth dropped open in indignant shock. "The whole thing is very new for me, and maybe I wanted to come to terms with it by myself first. And no, I haven't even considered taking up Hector's name - I didn't even know I could!"

"Well, now you know!"

Hermione began stuffing her things into her bag. "I've had enough of the stupid things that come out of your mouth, Ronald. I'm going to find Neville and Ginny. At least they won't hold things I don't have any control over against me. Sorry, Harry. I'll see you later."

Furious with Ron, Harry watched her go. "You're the worst, Ron."

"Why me?" the redhead cried. "She's got secrets! You don't do that among friends!"

"Everybody's got secrets," Harry said angrily. "So what if her inheritance is a matter of public record? It's still her decision whom to tell what, and when. Besides, she literally has known since Saturday, and today is Wednesday, you great git! Doesn't she deserve even a couple of days to make sense of it all? I needed a month to really understand what it all means, and I still don't really get it!"

Ron, of course, went right for the jugular. "So you've known from the beginning, haven't you?"

"It was hard not to, we went to Diagon Alley together to buy our stuff. It just came up at Gringotts." Harry scowled. "It's got nothing to do with you, Ron, so let it go already. I mean it."

"Or what?" Ron challenged.

"Or you can look for a new best friend," Harry snapped, suddenly fed up with the other boy's hostile attitude. "If you can't be happy for her, what use is it to hang out together? It'll only make both of you mad."

"And of course you'll take her side, again," Ron sneered.

"She didn't do anything to you!" Harry breathed hard to calm his rapidly rising temper. "Get that into your thick head! You are the one badgering and insulting her, not the other way around!" Confronted with Ron's mulish scowl, Harry reached the end of his rope. "You know what? I'll go sit with Hermione. I'm so done with your jealousy or whatever."
He quickly stuffed his things into his bag and stepped out of the compartment. Standing behind the closed door, it felt like he could finally breathe again.

"Dobby?" he whispered, only jumping a little when the elf appeared silently before him. "Do you know where Hermione went?"

"Dobby be showing Harry Potter sir," Dobby squeaked and skipped ahead until they reached the compartment. Hermione had put half the train between her and Ron, not that Harry could blame her. "She be here. Miss Mione be very angry with the Wheezy boy."

"Yeah, I know." Harry smiled crookedly. "I'll try to make it better. Thank you."

"Dobby be going and looking after Harry Potter sir's things," Dobby declared and vanished with a little pop.

Despite seeing through the open curtain who was sitting in the compartment, Harry still knocked and waited to be called in.

"Hey," he said, waving at Neville, Ginny, Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones. "Can I sit with you for a while?"

"Weasley chased you off, as well?" Susan asked with a little bit of bite in her tone. When Harry nodded, she rolled her eyes. "I don't get him."

Harry squeezed in between Hermione and Ginny and put his arm around his girlfriend's shoulders. It galled him to notice the smudged tear tracks on her cheeks. "He's being a git so I left him to it."

"Good choice," Ginny said with a huff. "I'll tell mum so she can send him a howler. He deserves it."

Neville cringed. "The rest of us don't, though."

That made them all chuckle, even Hermione. With a sigh, she snuggled against Harry. "Thanks for looking after me."

"We'll have to go back at one point. I've got tea and cake," he joked. "It's safe from Ron, but, well."

The others laughed again and soon they forgot about Ron's temper tantrum, choosing to play Exploding Snap and solve the crossword riddle in the *Daily Prophet*.

When four o'clock came and went, Harry led Hermione back to their compartment. Outside, it had gotten very dark, and the rain was pounding against the side of the train.
"It's scary, isn't it?" Hermione said, biting her lip. "I've never seen a storm like this."

Seamus Finnigan, who was taking a break outside his compartment to stretch his legs, agreed. "It's gotten mighty cold, too. Dunno what's up with the weather."

"I'll put my robes on," Hermione said. "That should do it."

At their compartment, Harry looked inside carefully and was relieved to notice that Ron was gone. They entered, locked the door and then Harry played host and pulled delicate china cups full of steaming tea and two plates with strawberry cake and whipped cream from his bag.

"Dobby will have to show me how he's doing that," Hermione grinned. She inhaled the aroma of her tea and hummed happily. "Magic can be so wonderful. Where is he, by the way?"

"He's popped out for a moment," Harry said, thinking of the little elf's toils on Potter's Field. "But he'll be back soon, I think."

Enjoying the cake was easy and the tea warmed them pleasantly from the inside. However, it soon seemed to get colder and colder, no matter how hot the tea was. It was bad enough for ice crystals to begin growing on their window.

"Harry, something's not right," Hermione said, setting her plate aside. Her teeth chattered violently. "It's so silent!"

She was right. Harry tilted his head, trying to catch the murmur of conversation or the sound of wandering feet, but there was nothing. "And it's icy in here all of a sudden," he said in a low voice. Shivering, Hermione came to his side when he stretched out his arm. In the other, he held his wand. "Can you wake Lupin?"

"Yes." Hermione flicked her wand. "Enervate!"

As the spell hit the professor, the window of the compartment door began freezing over. Crunching quietly, the ice spread further and further over the window pane, and the sound of someone breathing deeply, unevenly, raised all of Harry's hair, even the ones on his arms and shins.

Lupin sputtered awake, sending Crookshanks flying as he flailed. "What!"

"Something's wrong, Professor!" Hermione cried. "Look at the door!"

The knob rattled insistently, but the locking charm held.
"Something's trying to get in!" Harry said. "I don't know many protective spells ..."

The whole door shook and the temperature dropped a further few degrees. Something pulled at Harry, pulled insistently at his memories, and dredged the scum to the surface. In front of his eyes, the tall, willowy shadow behind the door formed into Uncle Vernon, and his smug laughter rang in his ears.

"No," he said through gritted teeth. "Stay away ...

In his embrace, Hermione began to sob. "What is that thing?"

"Get behind me," Lupin ordered. He went to the door, yanked it open to Harry and Hermione's horror, and raised his wand. "Sirius Black is not on this train! Search elsewhere for him!"

The large, dark presence, some kind of demon in a dark, ragged robe, didn't move. It hovered in the air like a cloud of foul air, waiting, waiting ...

"I said, leave!" Lupin said sharply, sounding remarkably in control.

The thing drew a rattling breath and something green flashed up at the edge of Harry's vision. He gasped for breath as Aunt Petunia and Dudley joined Vernon in his maniacal laughter. It got louder and louder and the vision in front of his eyes grew larger and larger.

"You leave me no choice ... Expecto Patronum!" Some kind of large and silver shape burst from Lupin's wand and immediately attacked the looming thing, going straight for the neck. Unnoticed by the man, Dobby suddenly popped in and gave the dementor a mighty push with his magic.

Shrieking, the foul creature jerked back, turned, and fled to the back of the train, where it threw itself from the open rear door.

Stunned and as cold as they were, Harry and Hermione still crowded around Lupin and looked to the other compartments. More silver lights erupted, and ghastly screams made their ears hurt. Dobby made himself invisible, but knowing that he was near was a great comfort to Harry.

"Thanks," he whispered, certain that Dobby would hear him.

"What are those things?" Hermione cried over the noise. "Demons?"

"Close enough," Lupin replied grimly. "That was a dementor. Foul beings that are neither alive, nor dead. They're very, very dangerous."
"I read about them." Hermione took a shaky breath. "They guard Azkaban, and they eat souls."

"Yes, they do." Lupin relaxed a little and turned to the teens. "I'm sorry that one got so close to you. Here, take some chocolate. It works wonders against dementor exposure."

Gratefully, Harry and Hermione each accepted a thick piece of milk chocolate and nibbled on it.

"What about you, Professor?" Harry asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'll help the aurors on the train chase the last of these monsters away. You stay here, alright?"

Neither Harry nor Hermione had any desire to get between the adults and the demon guardians of Azkaban. Reapplying his locking charm, and having Hermione layer a different charm on top of that, helped a little to calm Harry down.

The best thing, though, was Hermione's return to his side. Still wet-eyed and shivery, she buried back into his embrace as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Her trust in him was even better than the chocolate; it almost made him feel like he could fly without a broom.

Finally, when they were settled, Crookshanks climbed onto both their laps and pressed his head against his mistress' stomach.

"What did you see?" Hermione whispered.

Her nose was clogged so Harry offered his handkerchief before he answered, "My uncle. All of my relatives, really. They've always belittled me. They were laughing really loudly at me, like I've royally messed up." He sighed. "I guess I've got really bad issues, if a demon could pull that stuff up and essentially freeze me."

"I saw my Aunt Karen threatening me ... she was about to hit me when Professor Lupin chased the dementor away," Hermione confessed. She blew her nose. "All throughout my childhood, she was jealous that her daughter wasn't as smart as me. She was always picking on me and trying to tear me down. She did hit me, once or twice."

"You probably got that a lot from other kids, too." Harry pressed his cheek against her hair. "I'm sorry."

"She's the wife of my dad's brother, the one we're not talking to anymore," Hermione explained. "She didn't just try to ruin my childhood - she did it to her own daughter, too. She was busier with trying to make us miserable than making sure that Sharon could have fun with her mom. Now my
cousin resents me, too, and we haven't seen each other in almost three years."

"That sucks," Harry said with feeling. "At least, my cousin only ever chased me and threatened to beat me up. One could never accuse him of leading me on or stuff like that. The only advantage of not having a lot of complicated family, really."

Hermione laughed quietly, although she caught herself almost immediately. "Gosh, I'm so sorry. That must be terrible. I can't even imagine ..." Her arms tightened around Harry's ribs. "I hope you know that you don't deserve any of that. They're just horrible people."

"I'm working on it," Harry murmured. "Thanks, 'Mione."

Their quiet haven unfortunately was soon invaded by Ron, Seamus, and Dean, who were all deathly pale and looked uncomfortable at their hug. At least they were clever enough to keep their mouths shut about it.

"You look like one of those things came close," Dean said quietly and stuffed the last of his chocolate into his mouth. "Dementors, really. My mum'll go spare when she hears about this."

"I hope everyone goes spare about this," Hermione replied. "Dementors searching the Hogwarts express? Really? All of their children could've died today!"

Even Ron admitted that she had the right of it. "Not much's gonna happen as long as Black is on the run, though," he said. "They want him badly; my dad told me so."

"But, dementors?" Seamus asked in dismay. "Are those things gonna come to Hogwarts, too?"

"They better not." Hermione looked up as a knock rattled the compartment door. "Yes?"

Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil entered and squeezed themselves in between the boys and next to Hermione, respectively.

"This will make the paper," Lavender announced. "I wonder if they'll take pictures of us."

This set off a heated debate, which Harry wished he could tune out. However, the others speculated that the Prophet would probably want Harry and a few other known students to pose for them, to make the most of the news.

"I don't like people taking my picture-" Harry began, only to be interrupted by Seamus snickering and muttering, "Colin Creevey" under his breath. "Okay, yes, because of Colin, but this could be a good thing." Harry shrugged. "I wonder who even ordered those monsters to search the train. Why
not have the aurors do it? They were here anyway."

"Well, the DMLE usually issues search warrants for fugitives," Dean said. "That's the Department for Magical Law Enforcement. But this one must've come from the Minister himself. There was an article in the Prophet about how he authorized the dementors to hunt for Black."

Harry remembered that one quite clearly - the goblins had been in an uproar at the unwarranted threat to one of their oldest family clients, unknowingly teaching Harry a few rather impressive insults in both English and their own language. Not to mention that the fallout of that ill-considered action would amuse all of Gringotts and Sirius for months, if not years ... not that anyone would notice until it was too late.

Setting these things on the Hogwarts Express, however, came as a nasty surprise to all of them, obviously including the aurors who could now be heard shouting expletives at each other.

"Fudge obviously is an idiot," Parvati sniffed when the screaming had died down a little. "My father will have the Indian ambassador write a letter."

Harry hoped that it was a very scathing letter, and that the ambassador would make Minister Fudge's life a misery for a good while after that.

"And the pureblood wizards wonder why we muggleborns find the society ... lacking," Hermione muttered. When Ron, Parvati and Lavender stared at her accusingly, she raised her chin defiantly. "What? It's true! It's like setting a horde of psychopathic madmen loose to catch another wanted psychopathic madman. It doesn't make any sense! Who's even controlling them? Who checks that they don't harm innocent bystanders? I don't see anyone; the aurors on the train obviously are protection detail for the students from Black and didn't know those things would harass us."

"I'm with her on that one," Harry said into the uncomfortable silence.

It was Lavender who caught herself first. She flipped her long hair over her shoulder and said, "Those might be good points, but you can't deny that Black is dangerous and should be caught, Hermione. The Ministry for Magic might go about it all wrong, but at least they're doing something."

Hermione scoffed. "Doing something is not good enough. Just look how that worked out for poor Hagrid last year. And actually, I can deny that Black should be caught. I got all the editions of the Prophet since Black's break-out and read up on his case. Did you notice that there was no mention of a trial anywhere? Sure, they said he was a convicted felon, and dangerous, but usually there has to be a case number for people who want to look up the court proceedings."

"And you tried to look it up?" Ron asked, clearly disbelieving. "Whatever for?"
"Because it's suspicious!" Hermione answered. "If he's such a dangerous criminal, why can't I read up on what he's actually been convicted for? And no, mere hearsay and claims of his guilt are not enough to convince me! That's not how it works in the muggle world."

Her words discomfited the others, and even Harry was surprised at the hollow pang in his chest at her conclusion. Obviously he already knew that his godfather was innocent, but he'd never even thought of actually checking things out for himself. It was something to correct, and he resolved to work on that personal flaw right away.

"That's very clever, actually," he said quietly into the stunned silence. "How do you know to do that?"

"I read a lot," Hermione reminded him and arched an eyebrow. "I even owled the Ministry about it on Sunday. There hasn't been an answer yet, but do any of you want to bet that they'll tell me not to worry my pretty little head and not answer the question at all?"

Dean was the first to catch himself. "Er, no, better not, Hermione." He exchanged a glance with Seamus. "But your argument is interesting. Maybe I'll ask about the transcripts as well. Just to punish the Ministry for their stupidity today."

"I will, as well," Lavender decided, with Parvati promptly agreeing to do the same.

"Should we take this to the others? They might want to vent their spleen, too," Dean asked.

Hermione scowled. "We so should."

As there was little else to do until the train reached the platform on Hogsmeade, they got out paper and pens and began composing their letters to the Ministry. Each of them was slightly different, and to make the impact even larger, they decided against sending them all at once.

"They'd probably set up a form letter if we did that," Lavender explained. "My mum works at the Prophet, that's what they do when readers flood them with angry letters. Ours should be individual enough to make them answer each on its own. Just a small question here, or an accusation there."

"Can you coordinate that?" Hermione asked. "Of all of us, you know the most people in all Hogwarts houses."

"Sure." Lavender smiled smugly. "I know you don't like me talking so much, but I bet you're glad now."

Hermione agreed with good grace. "I sure am. Thanks, Lavender."
"I'm not convinced that Black is actually innocent, mind, but it might be suspicious enough for my mum to start digging. With any luck, she'll get the story out before Rita Skeeter does," Lavender said. "It's about time that she found something worthwhile to write about, anyway."

"Oh, that horrible Skeeter woman," Parvati huffed. "A couple of years ago, she wrote a terrible article about my father's flying carpet business in India. Of course he's lobbying to get the ban in Britain lifted, but that's because the carpets are safe! Skeeter made it sound as if they were death traps, and my family out to kill the good citizens of Wizarding Britains so the Indian people can move in and take over."

"Not to mention her atrocious style of writing," Hermione added. "It's like she's trying to be as sensationalist as possible. Half of what she writes are obvious lies!"

"Me mum loves her," Seamus said with a shudder. "Quotes her like she's some kind of wise woman."

"My mum likes her as well, and she's a pretty good judge of character," Ron scoffed. "Also, you can't prove that she's lying."

"I bet you your chocolate frog," Hermione challenged, and of course Ron accepted. "Pick any article you want, I bet I can find a lie in it."

"Yeah, you're on!" Ron said.

To Harry, this was a stupid thing to do, especially since Ron picked up the follow-up article on Hermione's inheritance, one Harry hadn't even known existed because Sirius had declared an unofficial feud with the paper for printing outrageous garbage and had instead subscribed to the Wizarding International Times, WIT for short.

Gleefully, Ron read, "Unlikely Heiress Discovered! To everyone's surprise, Gringotts yesterday announced the emergence of a heiress to the nearly dormant Dagworth-Granger family. The last member, one Hector Dagworth-Granger, was one of the most famous potioneers of his time and lauded for his groundbreaking work (for more information on Hector Dagworth-Granger, see page 7). The young heiress, one Hermione Granger, is currently a student at Hogwarts School Of Witchcraft and Wizardry and will begin her third year come September. Any lies so far?"

"Not yet," Hermione replied, unconcerned.

Ron continued, "Miss Granger is said by many to be one of the brightest students to grace Hogwarts' hallowed halls of learning in recent history, although it is highly doubtful that she'll be able to match her ancestor's brilliance. Despite her unknown origins, sources revealed that Miss Granger is set to entertain betrothal contracts as soon as she reaches the appropriate age to give her
newly discovered family the magical heirs it so very much needs and deserves, and to return the family to its former respectability. There are also speculations that the ambitious muggleborn Miss Granger is aiming to improve the standing of her family to at least nobility. Whether this will happen on merit or by marriage can not be predicted by this humble reporter.

"And here is the lie, or rather, lies," Hermione said, mouth twisting in disgust. "Exactly no one will have told her that I'll entertain betrothal contracts as soon as I turn fifteen, because my parents and I didn't talk about that shite at all. She made that source up out of whole cloth."

"You can't prove that," Ron countered. "Your parents might have talked about it without you where Skeeter could hear, or the goblins at Gringotts could have told her. Skeeter does interviews with them sometimes."

Parvati glared at him, while the others gasped quietly. "You better take that back, Weasley. Accusing the goblins of tattling on their clients' private affairs is a surefire way of getting banned from Gringotts for life."

"Not to mention get yourself arrested and tried in their court for slander, if you hurt their business prospects badly enough," Dean agreed, shifting uncomfortably.

"Also," Hermione said, voice vibrating with fury, "my parents won't ever expect me to marry so young, especially not when the suitor is clearly only interested in money or fame or whatever they're after. And raising my unknown magical family to nobility? It's so ridiculous. My mum's grandmum was a suffragette, for Pete's sake. My parents signed a contract with Gringotts, the goblins will reject any and all offers as soon as they arrive." She glared at Ron, stretching out her hand. "The frog, please."

"It's your word against Skeeter's," Ron retorted stubbornly.

"Well, then why don't you send a betrothal contract to Gringotts?" Hermione dared him, withdrawing her hand. "Of course, if I were you I wouldn't do that. My new account manager assured me that the replies will be as vitriolic as he can make them without sending a howler. You see, goblins apparently find considerable joy in telling entitled wizards where to stick their delusions."

"Give her the frog, mate," Seamus said, awed. When Ron didn't budge, he shrugged and pulled one of his own from his pocket and handed it over. "Well deserved, Hermione. Cheers."

"Thank you, Seamus." Hermione smiled, finally relaxing a little. "I really could've done without all that nonsense, but Gringotts said that it was kind of a big deal when a seemingly lost family line is being reactivated, and that useless gold diggers crawling out of the woodwork is only to be expected."

"It is a big deal," Parvati confirmed. "All the old families are interrelated. New blood is important,
especially to the purists."

"*Those* families will probably leave me alone. There are three generations of squibs to contend with, after all," Hermione said with a shrug. Carefully, she began to unwrap her squirming chocolate frog. "I'm looking forward to learn more about the family, though. Hector left a lot of journals, and a grimoire. I already learned that he was the founder of the *Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers*, and that he wrote an interesting essay about love potions, and how they're not really creating love, merely a very strong compulsion. That doesn't make those potions any less vile, of course, but it helps to understand them better."

"Why don't you discuss that with Snape," Ron huffed. "Should be right up the slimy git's alley."

"Maybe I will," Hermione countered in her best don't-mess-with-me-voice and bit the frog's head off.

Happy to head the coming squabble off, Lavender pointed out that the train was slowing down. "We're finally there!"

"I still have to change," Parvati said, already getting up. "We'll see you at the carriages!"

She and Lavender left, Seamus and Dean following behind them. Hermione sent Ron and Harry out for a few minutes to get changed into her school uniform and then waited for them to do the same.

"I like Crookshanks, but he's one hairy mister," Harry said as she stepped back into the compartment. "Look at my trouser legs."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry. Here ..." She flicked her wand and muttered a cleaning charm at Harry's trousers. "All better."

"I didn't know you knew such charms," Harry said, admiring her work.

Hermione blushed. "I saw that one book in your pile at Flourish and Blotts and owl-ordered it when I got home. What?" she squeaked when Ron snorted. "They're useful!"

Head shaking, Ron dragged his trunk out of the compartment first. Hermione followed, with Harry bringing up the rear. Many of the other children were still rather pale, and the aurors in their scarlet uniforms grimly watched over the crowd. Their wands were lit to provide more light, though it obviously wasn't enough to ease everyone's discomposure.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron managed to get into a coach with Neville and Ginny. Crookshanks took up the sixth seat, glaring at them all through the barred door of his carrier.
"How'd you hold up?" Harry asked Neville. "You got any chocolate after the dementors' visit?"

Neville shrugged. "I had a couple of chocolate frogs from the lunch trolley."

"The aurors were rather stingy with their rations," Ginny complained. "One of those beasts tore our door open. Luna Lovegood fainted. We're still shivering, right, Neville?"

"I'll probably have nightmares for a while," the boy admitted, a little shame-faced.

Hermione rummaged in her bag and pulled out the two chocolate frogs she'd bought earlier. "Here, if you need more. I'm so sorry. We at least had the new DADA professor to help us."

"Was he any good?" Ginny asked, tearing into the package of her frog. "What's his name?"

"Remus Lupin," Harry supplied. "He was pretty awesome with that spell of his ... Expecto Patronum, wasn't it? He didn't look afraid at all."

"He could be a really good teacher," Hermione agreed. "Finally!"

Her enthusiasm teased a small smile from Neville and when they reached the castle, the high-strung alertness had already receded a little, making room for the more normal pre-sorting jitters.

"Bloody good first impression of going to school for the first years, wasn't it?" Ron mumbled as they entered though the portal and got in line to settle at their house table. "I suppose being nervous about the Sorting is the least of their problems right now."

"Small mercies." Hermione spied Fred and George further down the table and narrowed her eyes. "As long as no one told them they'd have to wrestle a troll to be sorted."

"Mum ripped them a new one for that," Ron said with satisfaction. His smile was blissful. "I remember every word of that howler."

"If only you could remember what the professors tell you in class," Hermione muttered, just quietly enough for Neville and Harry to hear. She sat and put her bag between her feet. "I wonder how anyone can be expected to eat after that nasty surprise on the train."

"I'll at least try," Neville said. "Gran's always going on about how expensive the tuition has gotten during the last decade. Wasting food would really set her off."

Harry privately thought that high tuition wasn't a good enough reason to risk an upset stomach later,
not with classes starting the next day, but he didn't say anything. Ron, at least, didn't seem to have any problem at all grumbling about the wait until the food would be served.

At long last, Professor McGonagall led the terrified first years into the hall and the Sorting Hat sang its yearly song. It seemed to take an age to send the children to their respective houses, and the applause for each was rather subdued. After, the school choir - Harry hadn't even known Hogwarts had a choir - performed a rather ominous sounding song.

"Something wicked this way comes? Seriously?" Seamus asked sarcastically.

Then, the headmaster spoke.

"It is my great pleasure to introduce to you the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus J. Lupin," Dumbledore said. He waited for the polite applause to die down, before announcing the retirement of Professor Kettleburn, the teacher for Care for Magical Creatures. "He will be replaced by our very own Rubeus Hagrid!"

Naturally, Gryffindor cheered the loudest for the giant groundskeeper. Blushing with pleasure, Hagrid nearly upset the teacher's table as he tried to bow.

The usual warnings about the Forbidden Forest being strictly forbidden followed, and which toys and joke shop products were banned at Hogwart.

"And last but certainly not least it is my duty to inform you that, for the foreseeable future, Hogwarts will play host to the dementors of Azkaban," Dumbledore said. Silence fell like an oppressive veil. "They will be stationed at every entrance to the grounds, looking for Sirius Black. Let me warn you now that they do not differentiate between the one they hunt, and the ones who don't know to stay away from them. If you value your life and your magical soul, you'll remain at a safe distance at all times. Failure to do so, or worse, endangering other students, will be punished most severely."

Harry shared a meaningful look with all of his friends.

"Just great," Hermione groused under her breath. "The Ministry, in its infinite wisdom, has just done the single most stupid thing they could've come up with." She glared at the head table, debated with herself for a second, and then raised her hand.

Again, the whole hall fell silent.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked warily.

"Is the school warded against the dementors?" Hermione asked, staring straight at her head of house.
"Er, no," Professor McGonagall replied.

"Why not, if they're so dangerous?" Hermione demanded. "What's keeping them from getting onto the grounds and sucking out souls willy-nilly?"

"Good question!" Fred and George hollered as one and at all four tables mutters could be heard.

Dumbledore looked at Hermione and very slightly inclined his head. "Sadly, it cannot be ruled out that Sirius Black hasn't already found his way onto the grounds. Therefore, the Ministry has declined to add a dementor ward to Hogwarts at this time."

"And he can't be found with magic?" Hermione asked dubiously, very obviously saying out loud what everybody else was thinking, even Malfoy and his entourage.

A half-smile formed on the headmaster's face. "Apparently not, Miss Granger. Please feel free - all of you - to take your concerns to the appropriate offices. I'm sure the minister is eager to hear from tomorrow's voters."

It was as petty a dig as Harry had ever heard Dumbledore dish out, and it helped settle his misgivings about the man's behaviour all summer a little.

Finally, the feast was over and it was time to retire to their dormitories. The sixth year prefects helped everyone get through the portrait of the Fat Lady and pointed out the list of passwords hanging on the notice board, though not with the dire warning not to share them around.

"I'm knackered," Ron yawned. "I'll see you in the dorm."

Harry, who was not inclined to let Ron off the hook so easily for his argument with Hermione earlier, merely nodded and turned his attention to his girlfriend, who was just scooping Crookshanks into her arms.

"You're a big boy, I know," she cooed and kissed his furry head. "Just give it a few days in the castle before you venture out, alright? With those horrible demon things around, I don't want you to get lost."

Crookshanks butted his head against her cheek and purred.

"Can we talk for a moment?" Harry asked, giving the cat a pat before it ambled off. "It's about your special training."
"Oh, yes, of course." Hermione pulled Harry into a quiet corner and quite proudly used the Muffliatus spell to ensure their privacy. "Since we don't have our timetables yet, and with you having to appeal to the board of governors, I'd do our training in the mornings. Classes only start at nine, that's plenty of time to get up at seven, work for half an hour, and then go to breakfast. Would that be alright? Did you want to start tomorrow?"

Harry sighed. "Maybe not tomorrow, but how about the weekend? The mornings are fine. Much better than after class, and people won't notice as quickly."

She smiled. "Then we just have to find a room where we're not disturbed. That shouldn't be too hard. Do you have exercise clothes? If not, now's the time to send your little friend to get some."

"I've got enough stuff," Harry assured her. "Thanks for doing this, I really appreciate it."

Instead of giving an answer, Hermione pecked him on the cheek, wished him a good night, and went up the stairs to her dormitory.

Harry stood there a little stupidly before catching himself and climbing the stairs to his own dorm room. Everyone else was already settled in, clothes, books and parchments strewn over beds and spilling out of trunks. Only his trunk stood closed and undisturbed at the foot of his bed, waiting for him to unpack.

"Oy, Harry, why did you lock up your stuff so tightly?" Ron asked, poking his head out between the curtains of his bed as soon as he heard Harry opening the latch. "I wanted to borrow a quill."

"How about asking first?" Harry retorted, his suppressed ire flaring up again. "Excuse me, I need a shower." He took the necessary things from his trunk and deliberately locked it again without giving Ron a quill. He hadn't asked for it, after all.

When he returned fifteen minutes later, Dean was throwing him a speaking look and tilted his head towards Ron's bed. The curtains were drawn tight, and not a sound escaped.

"I hit that with a two-way silencing spell, might spare us from his snoring. My mum taught me over the summer," Dean explained. "So you finally decided to tell him what's what?"

"Yeah." Harry pressed his lips together. "I honestly have no idea what's up with him."

Seamus snorted and dumped half of his clothes on his bed. "I do. He's pissed that you won't let him use your stuff anymore. Makes me wonder whether you really allowed him to borrow those three galleons last year before the hols started. I caught him taking them, you see."

"I didn't," Harry informed him. The scowl on his face nearly hurt, it was so intense. So that was
where his money had gone - and what Dobby had meant as he'd warded the trunk. "Well, he won't get any more of my things. I got my stuff secured over the summer."

Seamus and Dean nodded. Dean said, "We'll do that, too. If you want, we can tell his brothers about the money he stole. I mean, two whole galleons! That's no joke."

"They'll deal with him to your satisfaction," Seamus snickered.

Dean glared at Ron's bed. "Provided that you don't want to involve McGonagall. Because you could, and he'd deserve it."

"Uhm, no, the twins will do, I think. At least for now. Thanks."

Dean waved it off. "He needs a good talking-to, and you've been really good about his stupid arse behaviour. He wouldn't dare take my stuff because he knows I'd rip him a new one."

"I'll too, from now on," Harry muttered.

Neville hadn't said anything during their discussion, but he smiled encouragingly at Harry before drawing the curtains around his bed shut and settling in for the night.

The others bade him goodnight as well, allowing Harry to write a long entry into his journal. If he learned a couple of new expletives that night, it was between him and Sirius.

oOo

Harry woke early. He'd had a few nightmares, but nothing of real substance. Pouring his worries out on paper had helped, as had Sirius' assurance that the goblins would raise holy hell over the dementor incident. Still, Uncle Vernon had featured, which was never pleasant, along with a shrieking Aunt Petunia and a Dudley that was more than twice the size of his real counterpart. All had threatened him with violence, but they never quite managed to catch him. Far worse was the demonic shadow standing behind them, rattling breath thundering in Harry's ears and whispy, tattered robe reaching for his limbs.

After a quick wash, he headed to the common room, where he found Crookshanks lounging on the sofa in front of the roaring fireplace.

"Hey," he said. "Are you still up? How was your first night at Hogwarts?"

Crookshanks rumbled and pressed his fluffy head into Harry's palm.
Sitting down beside him, Harry was content to just stare into the fire for a few moments. His thoughts wandered from the new timetable to his summer homework and then to the appeal Professor Lupin would file on his behalf.

*It has to work out,* Harry thought, a little desperately. *It must. I'm so over people telling me what to do.*

A weight plopped down next to him and a head with lots of bushy hair leaned against his.

"Hey," Hermione said softly, reaching over to pet her cat. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not really. You?"

She smiled. "It was okay. I always do a few exercises in the morning; it's good to fight off my demons."

"You also like to read, so you can do that, if you like," Harry said, meaning it. "I don't want to disrupt your morning."

"Maybe later," Hermione replied with a nudge and a smile. "To be honest, I wanted to ask how we want to do ... us ... at Hogwarts. I mean, all the students are basically living on top of each other, and I can already hear the gossips flapping their mouths." She took a deep breath. "It's one of the less attractive realities of a boarding school."

"What are you asking?" Harry wanted to know. "Because I'm fine with anything you want. It'll be fine if you want to play it cool, and I'll be fine if you want to let people know."

"You're so much better at this than I am," Hermione complained with a little huff.

Harry shrugged. "I just want you to feel okay about whatever we decide. So, how do you want to do this?"

"I just want to be with you," Hermione said honestly, turning a little so she could look at Harry. "I want to hold your hand sometimes, and kiss you when I feel like it. Like we were, I suppose. But I do not want people pointing fingers at us and judge us like they have any right to."

"So ... ?" Harry prompted.

Hermione was silent for a moment, biting her lower lip. "I don't really know. I never thought about being ... famous. Now there's Hector's legacy. Combine that with being your girlfriend ..." She shuddered and Harry laughed.
"Yeah," he agreed. "It might be a bit much. Heck, even I am not used to all that stuff, and I've had two years of it already." Harry took Hermione's hand and squeezed it gently. "How about this: we do continue as we were, but we're not saying anything about it. If people ask, fine, but if they don't, we're not volunteering anything."

"Mysterious, I like it." Hermione smirked. "I can just see the smoke pouring out of their ears."

"All good, then?"

She smiled, snuggling closer. So close, in fact, that her lips were very nearly touching his. "Very good," she whispered and closed the gap for their very first kiss.

oOo

Harry felt an indescribable glow all throughout breakfast, which was made even better by Hedwig's visit. Nothing anyone said could faze him. Only the arrival of the dreaded timetable put a damper on his mood.

"Professor, you know that I'll appeal this," he told his head of house and pointed at the slot for Divination, his very first class of the day. "I won't take this elective."

Professor McGonagall's face looked as if she had sucked on a lemon. "You'd best speak to the headmaster about that, Mr. Potter."

"I tried over the summer, as you know," Harry replied, a little testily, and stared at her unblinkingly. "Twice."

"Yes, be that as it may, until your appeal has been granted, you'll have to sit with the Divination class."

"Excuse me, Professor," Hermione said, "but that's not true. The *Hogwarts Student Guide*, latest edition, of course, clearly states that a student with a pending appeal doesn't have to sit the class he doesn't wish to take, as it would create a precedent. As Professor Lupin will begin the process today, Harry does not have to go to class."

McGonagall looked even more pinched for a moment. "Study hall, then," she said curtly and moved on, fingers whitening a little around the stack of timetables she was carrying.

"What in Merlin's name is wrong with her?" Dean asked with raised eyebrows. "McGonagall is the biggest stickler for the rules I know. How can she forget something like that?"
"Who knows," Hermione said dismissively, making a note onto her writing pad before shoving it and her pen into her bag. "I'd say come with me to Ancient Runes, Harry, I'm sure Professor Babbling would welcome you, but ..."

"But I'd better not," Harry completed her sentence and vaguely pointed at the head table where Dumbledore was watching them intently. "Seems like the headmaster knows exactly what's going on."

"I don't get it," Seamus said, looking a little vexed, but mostly puzzled. "Care to explain what the problem even is?"

Since there was no reason to keep it to himself, Harry told his friends what had happened with his choice of electives, and how incredibly unhelpful both Dumbledore and McGonagall had been during the holidays. He didn't even keep the headmaster as Harry's magical guardian by proxy to himself, although he didn't tell them who the actual guardian was. Ron remained quiet, but the other boys were angry on his behalf and voiced their displeasure quite loudly.

"My gran's on the board of govenors," Neville said. He was barely audible over the noise. "I could write her. She doesn't like nonsense ... or Professor Dumbledore ... and will probably sort it out quickly."

"Thanks, Neville," Harry smiled gratefully. "That'd be great."

Soon after, it was time to go to class. Harry waved his friends off, even Hermione, only to find himself face to face with Colin Creevey.

"Hey, Harry," the boy said a little nervously, looking around for eavesdroppers. "I didn't have a chance to get you alone for a minute yesterday, and I don't want to keep you from study hall ... I just, thanks. For the gold. My parents cried, they were so happy."

"Uhm, you're welcome." Harry shifted uncomfortably. "Please don't say anything, yeah?"

"I won't. I promised the goblins, and so did my family." Colin grinned. "I just wanted to thank you in person because that was a really kind thing to do. Bye!"

He dashed off, leaving Harry to slowly make his way towards the library. Madam Pince didn't even bat an eyelash when Harry searched out a table and took out his Ancient Runes textbook for a re-read of the first few chapters. As Hermione had promised to get any work sheets or assignments from Professor Babbling, he wasn't very worried about missing too much.

The time passed quickly, though that wasn't a surprise, as Harry spent the second half of the period scribbling the runes Healer Williams had shown him for magical communion on parchment, creating
a little circle with them and feeling the playful zing in his index finger when he let it stood inside like a small person.

Afterwards he joined the class at greenhouse two, where Madam Sprout was ready to dig into this year's lesson plan.

"You didn't miss much, mate," Ron whispered as the teacher began to talk about the different kinds of funghi they'd be growing for Potions. "Professor Trelawney merely predicted your death - by grim. Not really an accident that we just talked about it yesterday, is it?"

"Yeah, sure, if you believe in that kind of rubbish," Harry muttered and rolled his eyes at Ron's barely veiled glee. A few paces away, Hermione smirked, while Lavender and Parvati eyed him a little fearfully. "I had more fun in the library, apparently."

"Please watch out," Parvati murmured. "A grim is serious business. As soon as you see one, you've got to get help."

"There hasn't been a true grim sighting in over a century," Hermione said exasperatedly. "Why should they only come calling now? The last two years were plenty dangerous enough for Harry, weren't they?"

Parvati appeared somewhat comforted by that, but Lavender shook her head.

"Not really," she said. "A grim only comes when death is imminent. If it knows that someone will probably pull through, it won't bother."

"How can you know that if no one ever returned from studying them?" Hermione blushed when Professor Sprout levelled a severe look at her. "Sorry, Professor."

"As I'm reasonably certain that grims do not eat mushrooms, or any other kind of magical plant, in large quantities, you'd better save your little discussion for Professor Hagrid's class," Professor Sprout said. "And I'll have words with Professor Trelawney about her class. Every year she spouts the same nonsense and disturbs the students."

Until lunch, Harry and Hermione kept their heads down, exactly following the teacher's instruction on preparing the soil for the growth of their mushrooms. Neville was completely in his element, which helped a little to tune out Ron's little huffs and complaints.
"I wonder what Hagrid will be like as a professor," Hermione said as they trudged up to the castle. "Knowing what we know about him, it'll probably be interesting."

"Hopefully it won't be Fluffy-levels of interesting," Harry answered with a grin. "I'll go and wash my hands. Save me a seat?"

"You know I will." Hermione winked and followed Neville into the Great Hall.

Harry did wash his hands in the bathroom right next to the hall, but he also gulped down the potion Dobby handed him. "Thanks, Dobby. How was your first day at the castle? Are you finding enough things to do?"

"Dobby be secretly sorting Miss Mione's books," Dobby said smugly. "Miss Mione be making huge mess of them every night. Dobby be also helping in the kitchen and watching out for Harry Potter sir's food. Other elves be good cooks, but Harry Potter sir deserves the best. Harry Potter sir be used to Dobby's special meals now."

"I really am," Harry said gratefully.

"Dobby be getting good at being sneaky," the elf said proudly. "Now Harry Potter sir be needing to eat. His Miss Mione be waiting."

Dobby popped away and Harry went into the Great Hall, where a plate of lamb chops, roast vegetables and salad was already waiting for him. It was almost the same as the other students' food, but the berries in the salad and the even more colourful vegetables set it apart enough for Hermione to notice.

"Dobby?" she asked quietly.

"Mmh. Smells fantastic." Harry and Hermione's goblets filled up with lemonade. "I hope yours is good as well."

They tucked in, Hermione stealing a couple of elf berries from Harry's plate. After lunch, they were going outside again, this time towards Hagrid's hut. A bit away, the newly minted professor had built a paddock where half a dozen large, strange creatures were staring at the students. They looked like a majestic cross between eagle and horse, the eagle being prominent on the first half of the animal, and the horse on the second half. They even had huge wings and deadly looking talons on the feet of their forelegs.

"What are those?" Harry asked, openly staring at them.
"Hippogriffs," Hermione muttered. "Hagrid must be mad."

Class started and the hippogriffs were indeed Hagrid's choice of creature to show them.

"Now, hippogriffs are beautiful, but they're also very proud animals," Hagrid boomed. "If yer approach one, yer need ta bow nice and deep. But keep eye contact, or they'll think yer' weak and attack yer. Respect is everythin' with hippogriffs. Who wants ter go first?" When no one came forward, Hagrid turned to Harry and asked a bit pleadingly, "How 'bout you, Harry?"

"Er, okay." Warily, Harry stepped away from his classmates. He was all too aware of the Slytherins whispering at his back while Hagrid was busy selecting a hippogriff from the herd. All too soon, Hagrid was back, a handsome specimen in tow.

"This is Buckbeak, a price stallion. Remember, look at him and don't blink. Now bow, nice and deep. Keep lookin' ... he should bow back any second now ... Aaah, nicely done!" Hagrid laughed and fed Buckbeak a ferret. "Yer can pet him now."

Releasing a deep breath, Harry straightened himself and approached the hippogriff carefully. Buckbeak seemed to have no objection and even pressed his sharp beak against Harry's hand. Soon, Harry felt bold enough to scratch the head and cheeks of the animal, receiving a pleased rumbling chirp in response.

"Very well done, Harry!" Hagrid called. "Yer can ride him now!"

"What? No-"

But Hagrid snatched Harry around the middle like a child, set him onto Buckbeak's back in one swift motion, and slapped the hippogriff's rump. "Off yer go! Take a lap around the lake, then bring him back down! Oh, an' remember not ter pull his feathers, he hates that."

With a shriek and a jump, Buckbeak galloped off, thundering over the lawn and moving his gigantic wings. Not a moment later, they were already airborne and rising fast, quickly leaving Harry's shocked classmates behind.

"Holy crap!" Harry cried as they fast approached the lake. He desperately looked for something to hold onto, but there were feathers everywhere. Resolving not to plummet to his death, he leaned forward and more or less hugged Buckbeak's neck, which the hippogriff tolerated without issue. "Okay, okay ... great. We can do this, buddy."

Fully over the lake, Buckbeak settled into an easy, beautiful glide. In the mild sunlight, he descended until he could drag his claw though the calm surface of the water. Harry was breathless with the wonder of it and even dared taking his hands away from the hippogriff's neck and spreading them
out as if they were wings as well.

"Whoooo, this is awesome!" he shouted, Buckbeak echoing him with a loud screech. "You wanna go a bit faster, Buckbeak?"

Buckbeak screeched again and took off, working his powerful wings to capacity and catapulting them through the air like a bullet. Not being able to steer him much, Harry simply enjoyed their flight over the Forbidden Forest and only leaned close to the hippogriff's body when it descended and finally landed at breakneck speed near Hagrid and the class.

"Great flight," Hagrid said, delighted. "Beaky here sure loves his adventures. Good boy, have a ferret ... and another one. Yes, tha' was great, wasn't it?" He patted the animal. "Who else wants ter try?"

"I want to," Malfoy said with a sneer and swaggered forward. "If Potter of all people can do it, everybody can."

"Oh no," Hermione muttered.

Malfoy stood before Buckbeak and turned his back, saying loudly, "But bowing? Hah, what rubbish. You just have to show it who's the boss."

Crabbe and Goyle snickered while Pansy Parkinson simpered tat Malfoy.

Hagrid had difficulty keeping the hippogriff under control. "Malfoy, yer shouldn't-"

"Shut it, you oaf," Malfoy said imperiously and got closer to Buckbeak. "It's just a dumb animal. Saint Potter is not the only one who can touch it. See?" he reached out to Buckbeak's neck.

"Malfoy!" Hagrid cried, trying to push the boy back.

But it was too late. Buckbeak reared up, ripping the leading rope from Hagrid's massive hand, and brought his claws down on Malfoy with prejudice. It was a scary sight, and even though Hagrid quickly managed to drag the blond, howling boy away, the damage was done.

"My father will hear about that!" Malfoy screamed, cradling his injured arm.

"Keep that still," Hagrid said roughly, already pulling out a huge handkerchief to stop the bleeding.

"No, you keep that beast away from me!" Malfoy imperiously waved his friends over. "We're going to the infirmary. Come, Crabbe, Goyle. I need someone to lean on. Pansy, you can carry my bag."
The four Slytherins left and Hagrid was beside himself with worry.

"What do I do now? It's only my third class, and it's a disaster," the man wailed.

"It wasn't you fault," Lavender said, surprising everybody. "We all saw Malfoy taunt Buckbeak, and directly after you told us how to deal with him, too."

"We'll stick up for you," Harry promised. Despite Buckbeak's obvious resentment, he gave a bow and received one in return after a long, tense moment. "I'll take him back to the paddock. You go on to Professor Dumbledore and tell him what happened."

"Good idea. I'll come with you," Hermione said.

All the other Gryffindors except Ron agreed, and even Blaise Zabini, a dark-skinned, quiet boy from Slytherin, followed the group. Whether to spy or to support them was anyone's guess, but nobody had a mind to send him away.

As the others were slowly walking up the hill, a defeated Hagrid in their midst, Harry coaxed Buckbeak towards the paddock. "Sorry about Malfoy," he murmured, gently tugging on the leading rope. "He's an idiot. We'll sort it out for Hagrid and you."

"He'll whine to his father anyway, and get away with it," Ron said darkly. He maintained a healthy distance from the hippogriff. "You'll see."

"You're probably right." Opening the paddock, it took a little bit of persuasion and the lucky find of a dead ferret to convince Buckbeak to join his friends. Closing the gate again and locking it with a spell, Harry said, "Still, Hermione and the others are on his case, so that's something."

"As if she can do anything," Ron scoffed and fell into step next to Harry.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that she's a muggleborn." Ron scrunched up his nose. "I've got nothing against them, you know that, but others? That stuff is still important in the Ministry, and you know that's where Malfoy's father will go. He's had it out for Hagrid last year, too."

That was unfortunately true. "Hermione's not alone, though. Parvati is a pureblood, and so's Lavender. You should help them, too," Harry said.

But Ron shook his head. "Me and Malfoy? It was no joke when I told you that there was a blood-
feud. Nothing either of us says against the other can be used as evidence anywhere because we're feuding. Bloody nightmare, but that's how it is."

"I didn't know that," Harry said, a little stunned about that revelation. "Is that why Professor McGonagall rarely talks to you when you and Malfoy fight?"

"Yeah." Ron scratched his nose. "She's writing home all the time, but Mum is doing everything she can to keep Malfoy's dad from suing us. Every little thing could land us in court."

"But you wanted to curse him to vomit slugs!" Sometimes Harry didn't understand Ron at all. "Wasn't that kind of dumb?"

"Maybe, but Malfoy is an insufferable tosser and would've deserved it." Ron's glower was impressive. "He will become a Death Eater, just like his dad."

That was probably true as well, but Harry couldn't find a good enough reason for Ron to throw his family under the bus, and certainly not for a bit of petty revenge.

"It's not worth it," he said quietly, thinking about the misery getting sued by the Malfoys would surely cause the Weasleys. "Nothing you can do will keep him from becoming one, if he wants to go that way."

"The headmaster always tells us to do what we can to make the world a better place," Ron replied, sounding quite righteous. "I'm sure that includes clocking Malfoy one every now and then."

Despite himself, Harry had to laugh. "As long as you can stand the echo ... your mum would flip."

Ron lost his self-satisfied expression and slumped a little. "Boy, would she. It's not fair."

"You know what else is not fair?" Harry asked, deciding to change the topic. "Potions with Snape next. We should never have it early in the morning, or as a last class."

"Yeah, he always dismisses class late if it's the last one of the day." Ron sighed dramatically. "I'd almost forgotten. And I think the twins stole my powdered beetle legs for one of their experiments. If we need them, can I borrow some from you?"

Shuddering at the thought of some twin-concocted brew, Harry quickly agreed. "But you'll find out what they've done with them - and keep the stuff away from me."

"You have a deal," Ron agreed just as quickly, and together they trotted through the portal and went to get their things for class.
Of course Malfoy was missing during Potions, and he also wasn't at dinner that night. Hermione, who had, a bit surprisingly, found supporters in a lot of the girls of their house, was huddled over a piece of parchment and whispering strategies, which left the boys to themselves.

"It's rather early to rally the forces," Dean commented and shoved a piece of mince pie into his mouth, "but looking at Hagrid, I can kind of understand their enthusiasm. The poor guy looks like his dog died."

Harry's heart went out to Hagrid. "It really wasn't his fault. If the girls need help with anything, I'll be there.”

"Looks like they have allies in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff as well," Seamus said, eyeing the corresponding groups at the other tables. "News sure travel fast here."

"Well, Malfoy did make himself heard," Dean smirked. "It's almost like he wanted people to know how dumb he is."

"I still say that Malfoy's father will pull something," Ron said. "No matter what we do."

"We'll see," Harry replied, trying not to let Ron's pessimism get to him, even if it was probably warranted.

Thankfully, the depressing topic was dropped at the appearance of pudding and a discussion about the other electives started. Everybody but Lavender and Parvati disliked Divination - and the teacher - with Dean and even Seamus loudly contemplating dropping the class in favour of Arithmancy.

"Me mum would kill me if I just dropped it," Seamus explained after Ron's dismayed squawk. "Arithmancy is like math, and I was good at that in muggle school."

"It's loads easier than Ancient Runes, in any case," Dean agreed.

"You're deserting me," Ron groaned.
"Sorry, mate, but the smell in that classroom alone makes me bonkers." Seamus pushed his empty plate away and patted his stomach. "If Dean goes, I go."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Seriously?"

Grinning unrepentantly, Seamus said, "Seriously. Me mum told me over the summer to be more like you at school. Didn't like me grades too much. I'm surprised you didn't hear her screeching."

"I did hear her screeching," Dean taunted and laughed when Sean threw a grape at him. "Let's talk to McGonagall after dinner."

"And let's hope she doesn't treat us like Harry," Seamus added, giving Harry a commiserating look.

After dinner, Hermione sat next to Harry on a sofa and read a thick book about magical law. She was close enough for him to smell her light fragrance but he wished they had more privacy for a bit of a cuddle.

*Only one more day,* Harry thought, resolved to not be a needy git.

Suddenly, Hermione marked the page of her book with a scrap of parchment and turned her body towards Harry.

"Do you think Dobby might bring us breakfast on Saturday?" she asked quietly, apropos of nothing, and blushed a little. When Harry stared at her, the blush intensified. "Sorry, I was just thinking about how little actual alone time we've had so far. We don't have to."

"But I want to," Harry murmured. "Truly. It's a great idea; I was thinking the same thing, to be honest. I'll ask him later."

Hermione beamed at him. "Thank you!"

Harry pointed at the dusty brick of a book in her lap. "What are you reading that for? Is it because of
"Yes. Ron might not like studying, but he's usually right with his predictions regarding the behaviour of wizards in any given scenario. Maybe it's his talent; he's good at chess, after all." Hermione traced the faded gold-embossed title with her finger. "Anyway, if he says Lucius Malfoy will try to get Hagrid sacked, again, I believe that."

"It's not hard," Harry agreed. "Mr. Malfoy is a dick."

"Harry James." Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Grinning, Harry put is arm along the back of the sofa and Hermione accepted the invitation to lean against him. It wasn't a real cuddle, but it was loads better than sitting seperately until the prefects sent them up to the dorms.

_Only one more day_, Harry reminded himself. _We've got Defence first thing tomorrow, and the rest of my classes aren't so bad, either. Maybe Professor Lupin will even have news of my appeal._

That train of thought reminded him that he hadn't really told Sirius yet about Lupin, other than his fantastic spell against dementors. He hadn't even mentioned his name, which suddenly seemed ridiculous, considering how much Harry admired the man for his casual display of power. Then again, there had been so much going on already that things always seemed to get pushed back.

_I'll tell Sirius about him tonight. Who knows what he or the goblins will have to say about a werewolf at Hogwarts? I don't think he's very dangerous, but maybe Hermione is right after all. She usually is._

And that brought him back to the girl by his side, and how good it felt to just be with her. Hermione kept her book closed and looked at the fire in the fireplace; a rare occurence for her and one Harry enjoyed very much because it felt like she truly wanted to just be close with no distractions.

A bit later, when it was time to say goodnight, she gently squeezed his fingers and tilted her head to the clock in the corner. As far as hints went, it was a rather unspecific one, but Harry got it at once. Nodding slightly, he smiled, gave her fingers a little tug, and tried not to feel too ridiculously forlorn as he trudged up the stairs to the dorm.
He was only partially successful, but he somehow knew that Hermione felt the same way, and that was a rather grand consolation.

End of part 6
They met at half past seven in the common room, grinned shyly at each other and settled on the sofa in front of the fireplace. Crookshanks joined them, meowing quietly as if telling them about his night before plonking down on Hermione's lap and sighing in contentment.

"Is it strange that I already love him so much?" she asked and carded through the cat's thick fur. "He was waiting for me in the store ... I saw him last summer but my mum said I wasn't ready for a pet yet. It devastated me. I was sure someone else had seen how special he is and bought him."

"Why would your mum say that?" Harry wondered. Carefully, he joined Hermione's petting and Crookshanks started to purr like a little engine. "You're the most responsible person I know."

She blushed and looked away for a moment. "It's nice of you to say that, but she was right, actually. After first year, I was kind of traumatized, what with the troll and Fluffy and everything else. I wanted Crooks then, but he'd have been a crutch, and my parents didn't want me to push my issues aside. They dragged me to a psychologist ... of course she's a muggle so I couldn't tell her the complete truth, but she still helped." She paused and softly stroked along Crookshank's nose. "We were barely home and it wouldn't have been fair to drag Crookshanks into that mess."

Something in Harry relaxed, a thing he hadn't even known had been tense until that very moment. "I'm doing that, too," he confessed. "Seeing a mind healer, I mean. It helps."

"That's great. I've been wondering how to talk to you about it because honestly, out of all of us you definitely suffered the worst. Are you still having sessions?" Hermione asked, sinking slightly against Harry.

"Yeah, he wants to stay in contact while I'm at school. So far, he's given me some really good advice about how things work in the wizarding world. And other stuff, of course."
"Muggleborns or muggle-raised kids could do with a lot more introduction to the wizarding world," Hermione huffed. "I can't even imagine getting that talk from Hagrid. I like him, but he forgot to bring you home after taking you to Diagon Alley. Nevermind telling you how to get on the train!"

Harry kind of regretted telling her and Ron that particular story, but on the other hand it was nice to know that she was looking out for him and showing him what went wrong around him. Because he clearly was still too naive.

"Anyway, I've decided to approach Lavender with this," Hermione continued. "Since her mum's working as a journalist, she might be able to write an article for the summer, or even a whole extra for the paper for new Hogwarts students. Heck, she could write a yearly extra with all the standard and current information. Hogwarts clearly isn't doing enough to educate the students."

"I've always wondered why we can elect Muggle Studies, but not Wizarding Society or something like that," Harry murmured. With his free hand, he began playing with Hermione's fingers. "Gringotts got me a book about that. It's self-updating, with the most important laws in the back and everything."

"Can I read it?" Hermione asked, but immediately caught herself. "Nevermind, I can afford to buy it myself now."

Harry laughed. "You can still borrow my copy until yours arrives."

"I know the feeling," he consoled her and smiled. "There's a lot of important stuff in that book. Even you will have to work a while to get it all."

"Still, it's not right to always demand things from you. It makes me no better than Ron, and that kind of horrifies me a little. I'm sorry. Please tell me when it gets too much." Hermione bit her lip. "I really don't want to scare you off."

"Okay," Harry agreed easily. Then, he grinned. "You know, I asked my healer whether I could tell you that you're bossy."

That startled a laugh out of Hermione. "You didn't!"

"I did." He playfully tugged at her thumb. "But I like that I can tell you. We're friends, alright? That's not gonna change because we're dating now."
"You're a horrible boy," Hermione sniffed and buried her face in his shoulder. "New rule: you only get to tell me one wonderful thing a week! I don't want to be a blubbering mess all the time!"

Harry decided then and there that he'd probably never understand girls. It also was a little alarming to feel his shirt getting wet. "Are you honestly crying about that?" he asked, bewildered.

"Shut up," Hermione mumbled and cuddled even closer against him, until Harry's arm went fully around her. "I never had a best friend like you. I can happy-cry about it if I want."

That was certainl true enough, and since Harry didn't want her to feel bad about feeling good in his presence - even if her sniffles were making him a little uncomfortable - he just bussed a kiss onto her head.

A few minutes later, Hermione sighed. "Why is it already eight?"

"My fault," Harry teased. "I'm really looking forward to Defence; I probably made the time go faster."

"You're such a dork," she chuckled. With some reluctance, Hermione sat up straight and wiped her cheeks. "I'm really looking forward to Defence, too. Do you think Professor Lupin will teach us his spell? Expecto Patronum?"

"We can ask," Harry replied, although Sirius had already told him that the spell usually wasn't taught at Hogwarts at all, and was a bit tricky to master besides. In fact, Sirius had told Harry a lot of things last night, none of which he could share with Hermione at the moment. "But breakfast first."

"Yes, let's go before Ron joins us. His table manners are a nightmare." Carefully, Hermione shooed Crookshanks from her lap. "But first ..." She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to Harry's lips.

Harry was a bit overwhelmed. Yesterday, it had been easy, mellow, almost like it was supposed to happen. Today, however, Hermione had intentionally kissed him, and even though they were still alone, it felt kind of monumental. Like they were best of friends, but suddenly also so much more. He had no idea where the distinction came from, but there it was, and he suspected that it would baffle him for a while yet.

"Is everything alright?" Hermione asked, obviously a little worried about his stillness. "Was it too much?"

Harry shook himself. "No. I was just ... you know. Thinking about it. For me, it's a ..." He flushed a little. "A big deal. It feels nice, though."
"It's okay if you want to wait a little longer," Hermione said. "We're really young, after all."

"I wish I were a little older," Harry said, suddenly gripped with the fear that she'd go elsewhere to get kisses if he took too long to be ready.

"I don't." Hermione smiled. "I don't need kisses. I just want them because I like you." The soft gleam in her eyes became an impish little twinkle. "Kissing you here is also great." And she smacked him on the cheek, causing a heated blush to bloom on Harry's face and rush all the way down to his chest.

"O-okay," Harry stuttered, supremely flustered. "Uh, so, breakfast now?"

Hermione stood, offered her hand for him to take, and said, "Let's go."

They were the first to sit down at their house table, which was a good thing because Dobby served Harry a very individual breakfast consisting of Greek yogurt with elf berries and a little honey, avocado toast and two eggs benedict on sauteed spinach.

"I'm so envious," Hermione sighed as she poked at her hash browns. "What can I do to convince Dobby to let me have a plate of that, as well?"

"I guess asking would do the trick," Harry replied, not fighting his smile. He lowered his voice. "Dobby? Would it be alright to make food for Hermione too when she wants it?"

"Dobby can do that," the invisible elf squeaked quietly. "Dobby be happy that Miss Mione be liking Dobby's cooking."

"Like it?" Hermione hissed incredulously. "It looks and smells amazing!"

"Dobby be trying to teach Hogwarts elves more variety," Dobby whispered. "Dobby be making inroads."

Now Hermione was smiling as well. "Thank you very much, Dobby. On behalf of all the students I wish you much luck."

"Luck not be having anything to do with it," Dobby said.

There was a barely audible pop, and just a minute later, Hermione's plate vanished and was replaced with a breakfast just like Harry's.
"I sincerely love him," Hermione declared and moaned happily at the first bite of her eggs.

Thankfully their yearmates were a rather unobservant bunch in the mornings and didn't say anything about the unusual dishes when they descended on the great hall a few minutes later. Lavender was chugging coffee as if it were her lifeline, and Dean was as much a fan of hash browns and bacon as he'd ever been and didn't even notice a large owl knocking over Seamus' goblet of pumpkin juice when it was time for mail delivery.

"Oh, Archimedes," Neville groaned. He tried to mop up the mess, but the owl hooted angrily at him and stuck out its leg.

"I'll take care of it," Harry said, his wand already out for a cleaning spell. "You read your letter."

"Thanks, Harry." Neville took the letter, fed the owl a piece of sausage, and opened the sealed piece of parchment. "Oh, it's from my gran."

Hermione dropped her spoon into her empty yogurt bowl. "What does she say?"

Neville hastily read over the entire missive and flushed a fierce red. "She says that, uh, that the headmaster is ... er, nevermind, she'll come here tomorrow and talk to Professor Dumbledore. Says she'll put an end to this nonsense before the full board of governors has to get involved."

"That's great!" Harry exclaimed. "I'll have to thank her."

"Er, yes, she'll want to meet you, Harry." Neville looked uncomfortable. "Apparently she'd like to have a word with you. After she's talked to Professor Dumbledore."

Ron, who was perpetually late if no one woke him, stumbled up to them and elbowed his way into a spot on the bench between Harry and Dean.

"Excuse you," Dean said, annoyed that his cup of water was falling victim to Ron's flailing. "I was drinking that."

"Sorry," Ron huffed. With one hand he poured tea, while grabbing toast and bacon from their platters with the other. "It's so late already ... need breakfast."

"Ugh, keep your mouth closed while you eat, Ronald. Honestly." Hermione bent her head over Lavender's *Daily Prophet*. "Hey, where's the article about the dementors, Lavender? Didn't you say your mum would write one? I expected it yesterday, but then I thought that she was maybe getting more information before publishing it."
"She did write one, and it was amazing." Lavender scowled at her plate. "The boss told her not to bother, that the Ministry has it all in hand. Instead, they're harping on about Black, as if the whole country doesn't know already that he's wanted."

"What? He just brushed it off?" Harry asked, appalled, and many other students in their vicinity voiced their displeasure as well. A rather intimidating eagle chose that moment to land on the table, a thick newspaper tied to its leg. Harry accepted the *Wizarding International Times* from it and paid two sickles. Even at first glance he saw that things were very different outside of Great Britain. "That's obviously total rubbish. Europe's going nuts over it, see?"

The headline indeed read: *British Students Attacked By Dementors! Several Near Fatalities! Ministry Denies Involvement!*

"Probably my father's doing," Parvati said proudly. "He knew that the Ministry wouldn't admit to making a mistake and wrote to a friend in Spain, who apparently tapped his contacts here. Although I have no idea where you managed to buy the WIT; you can't buy it anywhere, as far as I know. My dad has his semi-legally imported from Ireland."

"My secret for now," Harry said. He frowned at the many pages. "Thank god I only subscribed to the weekly edition; I don't know how people find the time to read all this every day."

"We could share," Lavender offered. "Parvati and I could start with the feuilleton."

"International sports for me?" Dean asked hopefully. "Several Quidditch national teams got Firebolts for their seekers, some even for all their players. That'll change things around!"

"It's crazy," Ron said through his mouthful of food.

"I'll take the economy pages, if you don't want them," Neville said shyly. "I'm waiting on news about the trade agreement between Britain and the African Magical Union."

Harry divided the paper into smaller parts and handed them out as requested. For himself he kept the current news about Britain. Sirius had warned him, but reading about the attack from an outside's point of view himself really drove the point home: it had been dangerous on Wednesday and they could've died. Fifteen dementors had been counted, and an unnamed source from within the Ministry of Magic had admitted that none of the aurors on duty had been prepared for a search, the Hogwarts Express having been cleared by another auror team not ten minutes before departure, much less an attack.

*I know that Professor Lupin and Sirius have issues, but I'm still glad that Lupin was there. He was the first with his spell, and told everybody what to do after that,* Harry thought as he turned the page.
Next came a few short interviews with parents of students.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said. "Look, the WIT even contacted your parents!"

"They interviewed muggles?" Ron asked. "How weird, the Prophet never bothers."

"Just shows how backwards that rag is." Hermione ducked under the table instead of taking the long way round and unceremoniously sat on Harry's lap, because Ron didn't even try to scoot over. "Wow, really, they even got their photo taken." She looked longingly at her waving parents and then quickly read over the interview. "They went all out, ha. Serves Minister Fudge right."

"There's also mention of your new status," Harry said, pointing at the pertinent part of the article. "When the goblins say public record, they obviously mean it."

"It's not their fault," Hermione replied, although she didn't look very happy about it. "A good newspaper routinely checks these records, so it had to come up eventually. It's just unfortunate that the dementors and I made it into the same article."

"Unfortunate? You'll get a lot of attention that way," Ron said and stuffed half a buttered breakfast roll into his mouth. "Maybe you don't want marriage contracts, but I bet people are curious about you now."

"Why should they be? When I came here, no one mentioned the Dagworth-Granger family to me, which is fair enough. People from oversea's will care even less."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Parvati cautioned her. "The USA have a large academic community, and so do many other countries. Hector Dagworth-Granger will be known to some people, at least, and it might interest them what his newly discovered great-granddaughter is up to."

Hermione just rolled her eyes.

Next to Parvati, Lavender was slapping the front page of the Daily Prophet. "They're not even reporting that angle without dragging Hermione through the mud."

"Cheap entertainment," Neville said quietly. "Unfortunately."

"I'd sue them, but it's not worth the hassle," Hermione replied. "I'm just sorry for everyone who has to read that tripe."
"This is worse than tripe, they're keeping people in the dark about demons from hell," Lavender snapped. "And it's unfair how the editor just ruined my mum's chance at the Ackleson Award," she added and glowered. "They'll probably give it to Rita Skeeter, again."

"Your mum should quit," Parvati agreed. "It was the story of the year, at least so far, and they buried it. How much worse can it get?"

"I don't really want to insult the wizarding society," Hermione said, earning herself groans and even a few dirty looks, "but if that's how the Prophet deals with big news that could harm the Minister for Magic, then I'm afraid it's a bit of a mouth-piece. And do you even get how strange it is that there's only one major newspaper? A government-controlled newspaper wouldn't be so bad if there were independent media outlets to offset their obvious bias, but apparently the British magicals have nothing of the sort."

"I swear I have no idea what she's talking about half of the time," Ron declared into the stunned silence.

"I got what she means just fine," Katie Bell called from her place close to the head table. "And she's right! The Prophet is a joke. I'll cancel my subscription as soon as I get my hands on an owl. Fred, George, you can have that rag for that thing you're working on until my contract runs out."

The twins cheered while Percy a few seats away pretended not to know them.

"I'll tell my parents to cancel my subscription, too," Lavender said, still angry. "Maybe they'll send me the WIT instead. They're at least reporting the bloody news."

Parvati grinned. "Good idea, we can't always steal Harry's. Or did you get just the one?"

"Nah, I have a subscription," Harry replied. "When I'm done with it, you're welcome to read it, though."

Parvati thanked him graciously, while Lavender looked both thoughtful and vengeful.

Shortly after, it was time to head to the Defence classroom. Professor Lupin let them in and greeted the mixed group of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in a friendly but professional manner. To everybody's delight, he told them to keep their books in the bags and get their wands out.

"Defence against the dark arts must be practiced constantly," Lupin told them, "and therefore most of our classes will be dedicated to practical work. The theoretical part will be covered in your homework, so pay attention to what you read and always double-check your information. I'm not above setting traps if I think that you're not paying enough attention or cutting corners." With a swish of his wand, all the tables and chairs sorted themselves along the walls. A second swish brought a large wardrobe forward, which was rattling ominously. "Today's topic will be the boggart. Do any of
you know what a boggart is?"

Hermione of course raised her hand, and so did Hannah Abbott, a blond girl from Hufflepuff who always wore her hair in pigtails.

"Yes, please." Lupin pointed at Hannah.

"Boggarts are related to dementors, actually," the girl said, nervously glancing at the wardrobe. "Their magic reveals our deepest fears to them and they use that fear to defend themselves."

"Excellent, five points to Hufflepuff," Lupin said. "Miss Granger, do you have more?"

Surprised at being called out, Hermione nodded. "While dementors eat souls, a boggart will eat any kind of emotion and excess magic a magical being gives off. They are especially prone to breaking into magical homes and settling in dark corners where it is harder for magicals to reach in the first place." She pointed at the wardrobe. "I guess it wasn't very hard to lure one in there."

"No, it wasn't. Do you know why witches and wizards commonly don't suffer boggarts as house guests?" Lupin asked with a small smile. "They're not malicious and won't attack without provocation."

"But they're leeching off magic," Hermione replied promptly. "One boggart in a big family home won't do much damage, but if it breeds, the people will feel it. Magical drain is a known malady and the cure ranges from removal of the boggart and a time of rest, to rest and potion intervention. If the leech affects the core over a long time, the damage might even be incurable, resulting in permanently lower power levels of the victim."

"Very good, Miss Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor." Lupin looked over the class. "Now, the spell to fight a boggart is very easy, but what makes it hard is the intention behind it. You see, to drive away a boggart, you must face your fear and transform it into something ridiculous. And that's also the incantation of the spell: riddikulus!" He wrote it on the blackboard. "Now together!"

Everyone called out the incantation and then tried out the wand movement.

When Lupin was satisfied that everybody could do it, he continued, "The next step requires quick thinking and determination. Facing your greatest fear will be paralyzing, so you need to be able to come up with something that's guaranteed to make you laugh. The longer you take, the smaller the chance to accomplish this. Take a few minutes and think about it. You're welcome to talk to your friends."
As the class was dividing into small groups to discuss ideas, Lupin came over to Harry, Hermione, and Ron. "Harry, may I have a quick word with you?" he asked.

"Sure, Professor," Harry replied.

Lupin sighed. "I don't like singling you out, but since you have a rather unique history, I thought it prudent to have you do this after class. I won't have the other students fear for their lives if You-Know-Who were to appear."

"Uhm, thanks," Harry said, "but to be honest I don't actually know what my greatest fear is. Voldemort is pretty bad, but so were the dementors on the train. Or, um, a great snake I met last year."

"Not to mention your awful relatives," Hermione added in a quiet but sharp voice. "Nobody needs to see that if you don't want them to."

"All true," Lupin agreed. "That's why I'll give you all the chance to bow out, not just Harry. However, being able to fight a boggart is important, especially now that their big cousins are free to roam the country and will no doubt terrify a lot of people. That will very likely encourage the boggarts to occupy wizarding spaces."

Hermione smiled. "That's very thoughtful, really."

Lupin smiled back. "I'm here to teach, not to humiliate any of you." He clapped his hands. "Time's up! Are you ready?"

"Yes," the class called in various degrees of trepidation.

"Great," Lupin said warmly. "Now, I won't force anyone to do this in a class setting because facing your greatest fear is a rather intimate experience. However, if you feel that you'd like to try now instead of privately later, I'll award each student a point for bravery. It's your choice and I won't think any less of you for it."

That settled a lot of nerves and nearly half of the class decided to sit out. The other half, however, was applauded loudly for their courage.

Before any of them got to try, however, Professor Lupin stepped in front of the wardrobe, his wand raised, and motioned for the doors to open.

In a billow of darkness something pale and round appeared, hovering there for the merest of seconds. Then, Lupin's bellow of, "Riddikulus!" cut through the oppressive silence and the glowing thing transformed into a glittering bouncy ball that bounced off in a truly ridiculous fashion. The whole
class laughed and clapped as the boggart shrieked and retreated into the wardrobe.

"Now, who of you wants to go first?" Lupin asked.

Bravely, five students raised their hands, and the professor picked Neville.

"One point for bravery to Gryffindor," Lupin said with a smile. "Thank you, Neville. I'm right here, so don't be afraid. If it is too much, I'll step in."

Nodding, Neville stepped in front of the wardrobe. His wand hand shook a little, but he stood firm.

The wardrobe doors opened ...

... and out stepped Professor Snape, scowling darkly and promptly beginning to berate Neville for all of his failings.

The poor boy nearly faltered, only to squeeze his eyes shut, swing his wand, and shout, "Riddikulus!"

The whole room exploded with laughter as Snape was suddenly clad in an old woman's tweet costume, and wearing a truly awful hat with a vulture on top. In his hand, boggart-Snape was holding an ugly purse, and his feet were stuck in oddly comfortable looking lady slippers with golden buckles.

The boggart never stood a chance and vanished with an angry hiss.

"Well done!" Lupin praised. "Ten points to Gryffindor!"

Harry was the first to clap Neville on his back and congratulate him, and Hermione was almost gushing in her praise. Even Ron, who rarely even talked to the boy, found nice words. After that, the rest of the class descended and Neville found himself the recipient of a few unexpected hugs. The one from Hannah Abbott rather managed to turn him a glowing shade of pink, but everyone was too elated to tease him for it.

Ron, telling his friends that it couldn't be so bad, went next. Knowing of his fear of spiders, neither Harry or Hermione were all that surprised to see a giant spider emerging from the wardrobe, but that didn't mean that it wasn't a horrifying sight.

Ron stared at the long, hairy legs and clicking pincers in terror. Only a nudge from Professor Lupin reminded him that he could fight back now ... which he did. With a great cry of, "Riddikulus!" and a slash of his wand, the spider suddenly sported rollerblades on each of its legs. It promptly lost its
balance, stumbled comically like the world's most clumsy clown, and finally fell with a loud *splat* right on its face.

A snort escaped Ron, which made all the other students snort as well, and the boggart vanished in a black cloud.

After him, it was Susan Bone's turn, her greatest fear being the heart-wrenching sight of a whole family of headstones on a cold, deserted cemetery. She didn't really transform that scenery with her spell, but the inscriptions on the stones changed to something to outrageously irreverent and funny that everybody broke out laughing despite themselves.

"Very well done, Susan," Lupin praised her. "I hope no one will object if I award you another five points to your eleven for your resilience in the face of such grief."

Everybody clapped and whistled and Susan took her blushing self away so Hermione could go next.

Of course, being Hermione, she had do to things her way.

The boggart appeared in an angry flush of black smoke, only to ... hang there for a long while. Shapes formed into something Harry interpreted as a probable Voldemort, but with a report card full of Ts in his hands, only to vanish and try again with a wedding scene of all things, with Hermione as the bride and a man that oozed uselessness as the groom. Her parents appeared with the intent of taking Hermione out of Hogwarts, but were slapped with dozens of letters, all clearly from her friends. After that, there was Harry coming too close to a dementor, only the dementor was being repelled by a silvery light.

"Er," Professor Lupin said.

Hermione stared at the rapidly shifting images. Most of them were starting out as vaguely threatening but ended rather pitifully without any input on her part.

"Oh my god," she said derisively and snorted. "I know I've got problems when not even a boggart can manage to scare me properly."

Offended, the boggart chose to retreat into the relative safety of his wardrobe, leaving the class gaping at Hermione.

"Uhm, ten points to Gryffindor for an extraordinary demonstration of fighting fear with logic," Lupin said. "Because that'll work against fear almost as well as humour. Well done. Take another five
points for a valuable lesson to your classmates."

Hermione nodded and went to Harry's side.

"That was brilliant," he said quietly. "How did you do that?"

"That's my mind for you," she replied with a grimace. "I'm a problem solver. Getting taken out of Hogwarts? It's bad, but there are always letters, and my parents won't do it to punish me or make me feel bad. Bad grades? Impossible, really, it's just silly nonsense. And Voldemort? I don't even know how he was before you defeated him. Knowing that he was a terrorist isn't the same thing as having lived during that time, so I can't honestly have him as my greatest fear."

"And the dementor?" Harry asked. Or rather, losing him to a dementor, but Harry was mindful of listening ears and kept that to himself.

"Well, Professor Lupin can teach us to defeat them," she replied as if it were that easy. In a whisper, she added, "And you also got a very good friend who'll defend you with his life."

They watched the rest of the volunteers facing off against the boggarts and thanked Professor Lupin when he let them go early so the others could have their attempt in private. Harry didn't mind waiting with Ernie Macmillan and Wayne Hopkins from Hufflepuff. Seamus and Dean had opted to stay behind as well and even offered to wait for Harry who was called up last. He sent them on to Charms, however, and promised to follow as quickly as he could.

"Are you ready?" Lupin asked once the door to the classroom was closed.

"Yes." Harry nodded and got in front of the wardrobe.

Lupin waved his hand, opening the doors, and the boggart burst out in an angry cloud of black smoke. It stayed black but grew and grew until it towered over Harry, forming the tattered robes of a dementor. It's maw opened, a deep, rattling breath sounded, and the horrible, cold feeling of powerlessness crept into Harry's very being. Slowly, the monster leaned closer, mouth opening impossibly wide.

"No," Harry gasped, green light flimmering at the edge of his vision, "not again!" He swung his wand and cried, "Riddikulus!"

Ropes shot out of his wand, effectively binding the dementor until it looked like a very strange
worm. Next, Dobby appeared, foot raised to kick the squirming dementor into the next volcano. However, Harry’s imagination wasn’t done yet. It conjured up Hermione in her best bossy mood, and she immediately began to berate the dementor for its stupidity.

"Incredible," Harry huffed and began to snicker when Dobby finally gave the thing the boot it deserved. "She was right."

"I'm quite speechless," Lupin confessed. He looked a little grey around the edges. "A dementor ... that's rather wise, Harry, fearing fear the most."

"Maybe ... nothing makes be feel as bad as being afraid," Harry admitted. "It freezes me up, and then bad things can happen. Professor ... will you teach me your spell? Expecto Patronum?"

Lupin exhaled after a moment of thought. "Yes, of course I will. It'll take some time, but I think you can do it."

"And Hermione, too? She wants to, and I want her to be able to protect herself against those things. Or better yet, all of us. Lots of my house mates have nightmares ... I do, too."

"That's ... I'm not sure I can manage that for the whole school," Lupin admitted. "As I said, it'll take time. Mmh ... except I've heard that there was a Duelling Club last year?"

"Yeah, for all of one session," Harry retorted. "Our last teacher was a moron. Sorry, but it's true."

"Well, maybe I'll be able to start a club and teach the Patronus. I'll need at least one other teacher to support me."

Harry said, "I could ask Professor Flitwick. His class is next, anyway."

The bell rang and Lupin nodded. "Alright. I'll write you a pass and send a note along with it." He looked at Harry pensively for a moment. "You really grew up to look a lot like your dad, Harry, but you've got your mum's heart."

Harry smiled softly. "Thanks."

It took Lupin only a couple of minutes to write his note and send Harry on his way. The ten points for a job well done were nice, but knowing that someone took a real interest in the students' safety was much more rewarding to Harry than points could ever be.

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After Charms, Harry told his friends about Professor Lupin's offer, and that Professor Flitwick had seemed rather excited at the prospect of a new club.

"Professor Flitwick said that might take all year to teach us the charm, but I think it'd be worth it," Harry said. "And it's only one hour a week."

"You don't have to convince me," Hermione said. "I'm in!"

Seamus shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

The whole Quidditch team raised their hands, and after that nearly all of Gryffindor followed.

"Cool," Harry said with a pleased grin. "Lavender, will you inform the other houses?"

"Sure," she said easily and made a note in a little book. "Can I quote you?"

"Quote me on what?" Harry asked, confused.

"What you just told us. You're the instigator of this club, it's only fair that you'll get mentioned in my new student paper." Lavender preened under the astonished stares of her house mates.

"When did you decide this?" Seamus asked. "And how will you do that?"

"A simple magical press isn't that expensive," she replied. "I'll write my parents tonight, I'm sure they'll help."

"A school paper! That's brilliant, Lavender!" Hermione nearly bounced on the bench. "You could publish study tips, and schedules, and riddles, and all the interesting things about Hogwarts that no one knows because no one ever reads *Hogwarts, A History.*"

"I could use ideas," Lavender said generously, "and if someone wants to write articles, they're welcome."

"Will there be room for advertising?" Fred called.
"Or complaints?" George added.

"Yes to both," Lavender said loudly.

Just like that, the ice was broken and she was swarmed by curious and eager students. Even Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws migrated over to their table, displacing the less enthusiastic Gryffindors.

Nobody minded too much, though, as Hogwarts rarely had anything truly new to offer. Creating their own newspaper seemed almost outlandish to the wizardborn students, while the muggleborns were already thinking about how to get the project going - and keep it going past the first flush of excitement.

"Lavender's plan is ambitious," Hermione said, looking at the girl holding court, "but she'll be good at it, I think."

"Hogwarts might need a bit of an overhaul, though," Harry replied. "What with only one sports team and no art or sciences. What will she even write about when it's all rather boring?"

"For the allegedly premier school in the world it does seem a bit lacking," Hermione agreed. "When my parents investigated Beaubatons, they were floored by how many clubs the school offers. Music, divided by instruments, even, and art, and drama, and several different kinds of sports. Quidditch is fine, I suppose, but it's certainly a bit boring if only one team per house gets to play. We don't even have reserve teams."

"And you decided against going there to stay with me," Harry said quietly. "I'm sorry. You deserve much better."

"We all deserve better." Hermione slanted a look at the head table, where the teachers sat rather warily through the meal. "Well, if Lavender gets her newspaper - and I'll do my best to help her - then Hogwarts will have to change. Newspapers have a way of revealing faults that direct complaints will never manage, and there's a lot of suboptimal stuff to report here."

"Maybe she can start with Buckbeak." Harry pointed to the Slytherin table, where Malfoy was positively gloating over a letter. "Look how satisfied he is with himself. I'm sure that means trouble."

"That whole boy means trouble," Hermione huffed.

After lunch, they all trudged to the History classroom. Nobody was keen on a lecture from Binns, and none less than Harry, who had learned a lot about goblins over the summer and couldn't stomach
the thought of wasting time on yet another rebellion.

"I'll read ahead in the book," he told Hermione after they'd chosen their tables. "Don't be angry, alright?"

"I'm not angry," she smirked. "How do you think I maintained my grades?"

During class, Binns' droning made for an oddly soothing background noise. Half of their friends were asleep. If the book weren't so interesting, Harry would be half tempted to join them. History being his last class of the day made staying awake even more of a challenge. Thankfully, Hermione next to him had no problem checking every few minutes that he was still active.

"This has got to change," Harry groaned as they trudged out of the classroom. "Where are you headed now?"

"I will take one class of Muggle Studies, just to see what it's like," Hermione said. "I already cancelled, I really just want to get an impression. Next to History, I think it might be the class most in need of modernisation."

Harry eyed her warily. "Are you up to something?"

She smirked at him. "Why ever are you asking?"

Deciding that he didn't need to know right now, especially with his own club hopefully underway, he let Hermione go on and began looking for an empty room.

"This way, Harry Potter sir," Dobby called from a corner where no other students could see him and beckoned him over. "Dobby be finding perfect room for Harry Potter sir!"

"Really?" Curious, Harry followed the elf. The way was long, up to the seventh floor, and when Dobby stopped in front of a wall across from an ugly tapestry of someone who looked rather crazy, he asked, "Where is the door?"

"It be coming when Harry Potter sir be thinking about it. Harry Potter sir be walking three times
along the wall. At the same time Harry Potter sir be thinking about what kind of room he be needing.

"Magic," Harry sighed, but did as he was told. To his surprise, there really appeared a sturdy door with pretty but effective looking metal reinforcements. "Uh, alright."

Carefully, he tried the knob. The door swung open easily and revealed a comfy looking study with a large window overlooking the Quidditch pitch, a fireplace, and a beautiful large desk made of dark wood.

"Why does this room only appear when people think about it?" Harry asked Dobby, stepping inside and having a closer look around. Behind him, the door closed softly, and a lock engaged.

"This be the Come And Go Room," the elf supplied readily. "Hogwarts elves be using it to store lost items. Room be everything what a visitor needs, and it be secret. It be Hogwarts room, not school room, so elves not be telling secret to students."

"But they told you, and you told me. Is it really alright?" Harry asked.

"House elves be knowing that Harry Potter sir be a great wizard. Elves be wanting to help." Dobby hopped onto the small sofa across from a wall of bookshelves. "The Come And Go Room be knowing when it be needed. Harry Potter sir could leave things here, like letters from goblins."

Thinking it over, Harry decided to decline the offer for now. "Thanks, but I'd rather have my most important things with me for now." A Gringotts letter popped up on the desk. "Speaking of mail, is this for me?"

"Dobby be picking up Harry Potter sir's mail on Fridays now, because Harry Potter sir be having time to answer it over the weekend."

"Perfect." Harry smiled at his friend. "You really know what I need."

Dobby smiled shyly. "Dobby be bringing a snack."
Left alone with fruit and tea, Harry opened the heavy envelope. It was his inheritance test with lots of legal documents attached, all of which were requiring his signature.

"Holy crap," he whispered as he read over the letter from Sharptooth. "That's what he meant when he said that we'd talk about it later. What is all this?!"

An hour would have never sufficed to explain everything to him, and it certainly wasn't something he could trust Hermione's unprotected mind with. Knowing that, it was even harder for Harry to come to terms with it.

"Typical," he sighed and fished Sirius' communication journal from his carrier bag.

*September 3rd, 1993*

*Sirius,*

*I got Sharptooth's letter about my inheritance test. Did you know about this?*

*Love,*

*Harry*

Sirius' scrawl appeared almost immediately.

*Hey pup,*

yes, I knew. *I'm* your guardian, *at least in the goblins' eyes, and they trust me with your welfare.* However, it wasn't very important, and I didn't want to ruin your trip to Hogwarts. Not any more than it already was ruined, in any case. Being the Heir of Slytherin by right of conquest is rather ruin-worthy, if I do say so myself.

Harry groaned and raked both hands through his hair before picking up his pen again.
This must be a bad joke. People leaving me money and stuff I somehow get, even if it's weird, but conquering a whole family? How? Why am I the new Head of Family? What does that even mean? It'll be ages before Sharptooth can explain all this stuff to me!

For having spent a decade in a dank, dark prison, Sirius' penmanship was astoundingly neat.

Sharptooth knows everything about it, but I'm no slouch either. Heir of an old and noble pureblood family, here, remember?

Harry giggled about the somehow playfully affronted words.

Magic can be mysterious, but *Right Of Conquest* is an age-old established magical phenomenon, both forged from rule of law and rule of magic, Sirius continued. In essence, magic punishes those who attack without just cause, and rewards those who persevere in the face of unjust persecution. For you, it means that You-Know-Who attacked you unjustly thrice - once as a baby, once at the end of your first year at Hogwarts, and then again at the end of your second year. As he was defeated soundly every time, magic obviously ruled you the new Head of House Slytherin's line. It's an infamous family name, it's true, but there are quite a few benefits attached to it even now.

Please explain, because my head is about to explode, Harry quickly scratched out.

Of course, pup. Being head of a house generally makes you its lord. Unless the house is noble or ancient, this doesn't mean much, other than that you are the patriarch and are expected to make decisions about your family's involvement in society: politics, marriage matches, business, etc. As House Slytherin was both noble and ancient once, but fell into ruin with its last descendants, the Gaunts, its standing is largely lost. You can revive the line now, and claim everything that still belongs to the family. Deeds to property, titles, and of course the living relatives. For better or worse, you're now responsible for them. Magic more or less expects you now to make it better.

Harry groaned. That was just great.

So I have to do another inheritance test to find out who of the Gaunts is still alive? What if they're horrible people? I don't need more of those in my life!

Sirius was quick to reassure him, however, and wrote, *All done, kiddo, the goblins are thorough. Sharptooth will send the information as soon as you feel up to dealing with it. Just know that none of them are worth saving, and that the goblins will have an eye on them just in case. Maybe give yourself time until Christmas, we can talk it over then?*
That calmed Harry somewhat, but there was still the matter of strange people leaving him stuff, and he wrote as much.

Sirius was sympathetic, but couldn't offer much consolation. You're their saviour, kiddo, whether you like it or not. If you want my advice, accept it gracefully and do something worthwhile with the money and land. Give it to your house elves, if you want, the little guys can always use more land to grow their food ... or yours.

Harry brightened at once. Great idea!

Just be careful. Sharptooth can get away with a lot since Dumbledore isn't able to exert influence over your holdings, and your parents left instructions to work with the money and investments, but the old man could still notice and ask unwanted questions. I propose selling the the small properties and investing the money in something bigger that your elves can actually use.

That was exactly what Harry wanted, and if it worked out, Betty and Dobby would have land to work with that wasn't as difficult as Potter's Field.

I'll tell Sharptooth to do that, he wrote. Dobby and Betty helped me out with my first two properties, they'll surely do well with more.

Although they had a hefty price tag, Sirius teased. Warding is always expensive, especially with Malijar's Gift as ward stones, but I was a little shocked at first, to be honest.

I know, me too, but I feel safe there. Like I belong, Harry answered. To me, it's worth it, and I guess the goblins wanted me to be safe, as well.

It took Sirius a while to answer, and when he did, his words looked a little unsteady. Sorry, I just needed a drink. Yes, it feels very safe in your cottage. I communed with your ward stone yesterday and it is ... invested in your wellbeing. Its efforts even extend to me, and for that I can only thank you.

You're family, Harry replied, a little unsteady himself. To distract himself from the thickness in his throat, he changed the topic. So, I'll look through the catalogue of properties this weekend, decide which ones I want to sell, and let Sharptooth know. I'll probably freak out over the Slytherin thing again soon, though.
You have all the right in the world to freak out about it, Sirius answered. I'll be here whenever you need me. Speaking of here, my healers decided that they'll likely send me away for treatment in January, and have the goblins apply for asylum for me in Italy. The ICW, the International Confederation of Wizards, has a seat there, and they'll hear special cases such as mine. For now, they want to keep me close to the mind healers and make sure that I can defend myself appropriately. Your friend Brady is a good one. I like talking to him, although he refused to take me on as a patient. Said it wouldn't be fair to us both. Still, he's an interesting fellow, and his snakes are a friendly bunch.

Yeah, I was lucky to meet him, Harry wrote. Sorry that you can't work with him, but maybe you'll become friends anyway. By the way, Professor Lupin just now agreed to teach all the students the Patronus Charm. He and Professor Flitwick will start a club just for that. I guess with almost all the school attending they'll have to split us up in smaller groups, but I really hope I'll get to study with him. He also didn't ask me about you, even though he must have smelled me on you on Wednesday. Hermione says that a werewolf’s nose is even better than that of a dog. Maybe that means he wants you to be safe as well. I don't think he hates you, honest, but if you like I can try and talk to him.

Again, Sirius took a while to answer, and when he did, a couple drops of ink landed on the page and blossomed a little until they dried. I don't know, pup. Times were very dark back in the day, and I didn't trust him enough. Didn't trust him over Wormtail, of all people. If he's smart, he'll never forgive me for that, because that was absolutely shitty of me and your dad. Of course, it didn't help that Dumbledore was sending him away all the time to speak with other werewolves, but we should have known better. He was our brother in all but blood.

Harry didn't know what to say to that, except, I'm very sorry.

I'll hate myself for this until the day I die, Sirius wrote, and I'm okay with that.

Harry didn't think that it was okay for him to suffer that long, but didn't know how to tell him that without making it worse. Instead, he followed his instinct and painted his whole hand black with ink and pressed it onto the next page of the journal. With all his might, he sent a pulse of his magic into the handprint, hoping that touching it would let Sirius feel that he wasn't as alone as he thought.

The bell rang, signalling the end of the school day.

I have to go now, class is over and I don't want my friends to worry or get curious, Harry hastily scratched out. Love you, see you soon!

He packed his things, carefully putting the Gringotts letter into his weekly planner for later, and left
the strange magical room.

"I'll be back next week," Harry told Dobby, who was waiting for him. "Thanks for showing me, it's awesome. Uhm, do you think I could also use it to train with Hermione? She'll show me martial arts so I can defend myself without a wand if I have to."

"It be very good idea. Dobby be popping Harry Potter sir from now on whenever he can," Dobby said. "It be safer. If Harry Potter sir be needing Dobby, Harry Potter sir be calling. Dobby be taking Miss Mione, too."

"You could open a taxi service," Harry joked. "I appreciate your help, honestly. You're the best."

Dobby flushed with pleasure. "Betty be also a very good elf. She be very handy with repairs. Betty's cooking still be needing a bit work, but Dobby will have her trained up in a snap. Harry Potter sir's dogfather not be complaining."

"He's too sad to complain," Harry sighed. "Tell Betty to be extra nice to him, yeah? He's lonely."

"Dobby will," the elf promised. "Can Dobby take Harry Potter sir to Gryffindor Tower?"

"Sure! Pop us away, Dobby!"

With a grin, Dobby did just that, and deposited Harry close to the portrait of the Fat Lady, where his friends were just arriving.

oOo

As he now knew of a room that would suit their needs perfectly, Harry asked Dobby to take him and Hermione directly there on the next morning. Dobby popped away right after, but with the promise to serve breakfast when they were done. For now, they had water and elf berry lemonade.

"Since this is your show, you should do the honours," Harry said with a grin. "Dobby says we have to walk along that wall three times and think about what kind of room we need. Then it just appears."
"Incredible. I guess he wants us to keep this to ourselves for now?" Hermione asked. To Harry, she looked fantastic with her high ponytail and worn workout clothes. Even though nothing was overly tight, it accentuated her slender, strong figure perfectly.

"Yes, but I don't think the others will need it. There are lots of empty classrooms around for whatever they want to do. This is just safer." Harry smiled. "Try it."

Hermione walked along the wall with a look of concentration on her face. As the door appeared, she jumped a little, but was curious enough to open it and go inside.

"It's perfect!" she called. "Look at this, Harry! It's just like a dojo, but what a view over the grounds! There's even a corner for meditation - and showers!" Amazed, she turned around over and over, always discovering another little thing. "This will do very well."

"I'm glad. How do we start?" Harry wanted to know. He placed his bottle and towel against the wall of the room. "People do warm-ups before doing the serious stuff, right?"

"True," Hermione said and grinned a little. "But you're such a beginner that we'll start from scratch. After all, it won't hurt to give you the whole experience."

"The whole experience?" Harry followed her to the meditation corner and goggled when she took off her shoes. "Wait, what's this?"

"To be able to fight, your mind has to be on board," Hermione explained. "We'll start with just five minutes of meditation. It's not what you think; all you need to do is breathe deeply and stay completely in the moment." She sat down, folded herself into a prezel-like position, and patted the space in front of her. "Come, sit. I'll show you."

Harry sat. "Like this?" Something in his right leg twinged and he eased away from copying her position. "Ouch."

She giggled. "Crosslegged is just fine, Harry. Now watch." Closing her eyes, Hermione straightened, placed her hands palm up onto her knees and began to breathe deeply and evenly. "Just like this. In, and out. Make it as deep as you're comfortable with, and concentrate on that. Count the seconds for each breath in and out, if you like. It helps me stay focused."
"Alright, that doesn't seem too hard." Harry closed his eyes, mimicked Hermione's hand placement, and straightened himself.

The first few breaths were a little strange because he felt rather exposed, but it soon got easier. Counting the seconds helped as well; he breathed four seconds in and six seconds out. Just as he'd gotten into a nice rhythm, the time was up and Hermione gently tapped his knee to pull him back.

"That went rather well," she said, brown eyes shining with pride. "Now we can slowly start our warm-up."

_Slow_ still kicked Harry's butt, even though he didn't notice at the time. He had a lot of experience running from Dudley and his gang, but apparently that didn't translate into running mellow laps and doing a few primary school sports exercises throughout. Worse, they only did that for about twenty minutes and Harry was already winded. Hermione hadn't even broken a sweat, yet.

"Okay, that's enough for today. Are you ready for some kicks and punches?" she asked.

Harry groaned even as he nodded. "That's the whole point, isn't it? But you're killing me, 'Mione."

"Nah, not yet," she laughed. "Come on, copy my stance. Fist always like this, or you'll hurt yourself." She looked absurdly comfortable throwing punches, and was a surprisingly patient teacher when it came to correcting Harry's form. "That looks good!" she said a little while later. "Now kicks. Just one today, the front kick."

She demonstrated, first slowly, all the while explaining why she did what she was doing. She was also hissing out on each kick, which was quite strange to Harry.

"I know you don't speak parsel, but it sounds just like _sucker_ when you do that," Harry informed her. He fought a grin. "It's oddly appropriate."

Hermione stared at him. "For real?"

"Yep. Why do it, though?"

She smiled. "It's a little weird, but hissing out helps to focus the energy, and also distracts a little from the pain of impact. Now, there are a lot of ways to do a front kick - it depends on the kind of martial arts as much as it does the situation in a fight - but all require good body tension. Like this ..." She demonstrated again slowly, but this time she had Harry press his fingers against her midriff. "Feel that? It's all engaged. You need to be engaged for this to work, otherwise you could really hurt yourself. Now try. Your right leg first."
She had him do a few kicks with each leg, again correcting him gently. Harry wasn't sure how much time had passed when she stopped again, but it felt like mere moments.

"Last but not least a few blocks," Hermione said with a wink. "You did very well so far, Harry. I'm really proud of you."

Patiently she guided him through the first, easy block. First with his right hand, then with the left, and then, when he had that one down, going a bit faster every time.

"It has to come instinctively," she said as Harry clumsily blocked her fist. "That'll take time, there's nothing for it. Just like the kicks and punches, you'll have to do this over and over and over again, until it's become second nature. Even as you learn new things, we'll always turn back to the beginning, because this is the foundation of it all."

"Got it," Harry panted. He grinned proudly as he deflected her punch. "It's such an easy move, but it really works!"

"It does," she said and smiled back. "Ready for another?"

Harry was.

After another fifteen minutes, and ten minutes of stretching, they visited the showers and then sat down at the suddenly there bistro table where Dobby had already served breakfast.

"This looks fantastic," Hermione sighed happily as she spread butter onto a slice of still slightly warm herb bread. "My parents sometimes put fruit on the table, but mostly we're too lazy to bother."

"Dobby is a wizard in the kitchen," Harry joked, enjoying her pleasure. "Eat up, he'll bring more if we manage this lot."

Hungry, they decimated the feast before them until they could hardly move.

"Don't do this once we start in earnest," Hermione warned him. "Your muscles will get sore and press on your stomach. I don't want you to barf."

"Okay," Harry agreed. He frowned thoughtfully. "But when will I eat? I mean, I want to keep doing this."

"You can eat whenever you like," she replied. "Just not huge portions. Eat snacks whenever you can - the healthy kind of course. You'll need proper food to build muscle and agility. The worst thing is
eating right before training. Don't even drink too much because barfing can happen on a water tummy, too."

"Sounds like it'll be a bit of work," Harry said. "I didn't know martial arts were so complicated."

Hermione laughed a little. "They're not. You just have to get used to it."

"Noted." Harry cast a lazy tempus. "It's past ten already. Do you think we should head back?"

"Give me a few more minutes. I'm basking." Hermione laughed again at his incredulous look. "Honestly, I've missed this. If Dobby doesn't mind, I'd like to come here on my own sometimes to exercise. I love helping you, but if I've got such a great dojo at my disposal, I'd like to do it right."

"You don't even have to ask." Harry took her hand and held it gently. "Thanks for doing this."

"It's fun, and it refreshes my muscle memory."

Half an hour later they were back in the Gryffindor common room, only to be greeted by a school owl with a note.

"It's from Dumbledore," Harry said after reading it. "Neville's gran is here and I am to meet them in the headmaster's office."

"I'd come with you, but Professor Dumbledore would probably send me away," Hermione said with a huff. "What about Professor Lupin? He wanted to take care of your appeal for you."

"I'll have my good friend ask him if he wants to come." Harry smiled grimly. "I won't let the headmaster win."

Hermione nodded and sent him on his way with a kiss to his cheek.

This soon after the holidays, a lot of students were out and about. Most came from breakfast, but a rather large percentage of them was actually leaving to catch some sunshine on the grounds or fly a little. Whenever someone greeted Harry, he waved back, but he didn't allow himself to be distracted from his meeting.

Professor Lupin met him at the gargoyle, face serious but amber eyes gleaming rather mischievously. "You ready, Harry?"

Harry lifted his chin and repeated what he'd already told Hermione, "I won't let him win, Professor."
"Good, then let's go." Lupin gave a password to the gargoyle and they rode up the stairs in silence.

The office door swung open without them having to knock, and the first thing Harry saw upon entering was the vulture hat that Neville had put on his boggart's head. Confronted with that, Professor McGonagall standing next to Fawke's perch went almost unnoticed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Harry managed to say, eyes heroically not straying to Augusta Longbottom's extravagant head dress again. He offered his hand and bowed over it when it was given. "How are you doing?"

"Well, well, at least he has manners," Mrs. Longbottom said. "Well met, Mr. Potter. My Neville told me some things about you."

"None of it too horrible, I hope," Harry replied, suddenly worried.

Mrs. Longbottom's stern lips twitched a little. "Not yet, you may rest assured. Now let's talk about this absolute nonsense regarding the boy's electives, Albus, so we can get on with our day. Visiting hours at St. Mungo's have already started."


"Albus, if I may?" Remus interrupted. After the headmaster's nod, he said, "Considering that this is an official hearing regarding the educational situation of a student, even if that student is your ward, I propose to keep it professional. It's Mr. Potter from now on, just for the record."

"Yes, of course, I apologize." Dumbledore's mild expression never wavered, but Harry thought he could detect a hint of impatience in his eyes. "Mr. Potter, you applied for a change of electives this summer-"

"Which is his right as a student," Mrs. Longbottom said severely.

"Yes, of course. However, after reviewing Mr. Potter's choice to exchange Divination with not one but two very demanding subjects, I decided to overrule Professor McGonagall's initial agreement on the grounds that the lad had need of a more relaxed experience at school. After these last two years, some quiet surely wouldn't go amiss."

"Ancient Runes and Arithmancy are certainly demanding subjects, but even as his magical guardian by proxy your interference is more than just questionable, Albus."

Even if it was a little uncomfortable to see two old people quarrel, Harry couldn't help but admire
Augusta Longbottom. Her no-nonsense attitude actually made his heart beat faster, and it got even better!

"It is your job to make the school safe for your student, especially if that student also is your ward," Mrs. Longbottom continued. "I'm concerned about this as well, to be honest. I don't like what I've been hearing these past two years, and neither do Child Protection Services."

Chastised, Dumbledore blinked.

Mrs. Longbottom turned to Harry. "There are several more students in your year with the exact same electives, therefore it is unreasonable to deny you your choices." To Dumbledore, she said, "Even with Mr. Potter's special circumstances, his grades were solid, so you can't explain your decision with poor performance. I've told you this before, Albus, as has Minerva. I would have you explain yourself to all of our satisfaction before your stubbornness forces me to involve the whole board."

"Maybe not the best idea, considering what Lucius Malfoy is already up to," Remus said mildly. "I rather thought that Hogwarts shouldn't be involved in yet another scandal so shortly after the incident with the Chamber of Secrets and Hagrid's hippogriff."

"Especially not with the newly founded student newspaper underfoot," Professor McGonagall added. Harry couldn't be sure, but he thought she sounded a little gleeful.

"Albus, your explanation," Mrs. Longbottom demanded. "Now, if you please."

Dumbledore deflated a little and stood from his chair. His robe was garishly yellow and dotted with lilac moons and silver stars, usually a source of some cheer. Right now, it made him look pale and diminished.

"Ah, Augusta, as usual you're cutting right to the heart of the matter. I will explain. Mr. Potter ... I ask that you hear me out and consider my reason before making your final decision. Can you do that?"

"I can," Harry said, not sounding very graceful and not caring one bit.

"Very well. It is true, the events of the last two years are the reason why I wanted my ward to have a quieter time of it. Difficult subjects lend themselves to frustration, and I wanted to prevent young Mr. Potter from damaging his already fragile relationship with the rest of the students."

"You mean the bullying he suffered last year," Mrs. Longbottom said baldly. "Honestly, Albus, stop beating around the bush. You didn't do enough to protect the boy - honestly, you're all not doing enough to protect the students in this school! - and I find it rather amazing that you now think to punish the boy for your failings. You'll have to do better than that."
"I especially have a reason to keep Harry in the Divination class." Remus cleared his throat in warning, but Dumbledore ignored him as he continued, "I want him to learn that there's more to magic than spells and potions. As Minerva is so fond of saying, divination is a woolly subject, but that doesn't mean that someone with the sight doesn't have some worthwhile knowledge to impart. I wanted to prepare my ward for the possibility of more."

"Then you can teach him that yourself, or arrange for a few private lessons with Sybill, or just give him a bloody book." Mrs. Longbottom glowered at Dumbledore. "That not a good enough reason to deny the boy a well-rounded education. Mr. Potter, are you willing to indulge the headmaster?"

"No, ma'am," Harry said at once.

She sniffed. "I hereby overturn your decision, Albus, and if you dare to test me, I'll drag the whole board here on Monday and hold the hearing in the great hall, in public, making attendance for all students mandatory."

Be still, my heart, Harry thought in utter delight.

Dumbledore wilted another inch. "I fear that you're making a mistake, Harry, but I see that I'll have to bow to the decision of the board spokeswoman." He bowed shallowly at Mrs. Longbottom. "Your reasons are sound, of course, madam, I just wish you had a sense for the bigger picture."

"Don't madam me, and don't be a sore loser," Mrs. Longbottom snapped. "Let the boy go to his classes and keep your nose out of business that doesn't concern you. And Minerva, if I ever catch you not informing a student of their rights in such communications again, you'll get your first letter of reprimand. I'm only letting you off the hook this time because I know who's really behind it."

"It won't happen again," Professor McGongall said through pinched lips. Her cold glare at Dumbledore made even Harry shiver. "Mr. Potter, this meeting is over. You may join your friends."

"He'll accompany me to the front gate," Mrs. Longbottom said imperiously, taking up her purse and patting her skirt down. "Professor Lupin may join us, as protection against those foul things you both have failed to keep away from the school."

Harry followed Professor Lupin out the door and then fell into step with Neville's grandmother.

"Thank you," he said with utmost sincerity. "You were absolutely awesome!"

She smirked. "Thank you. I'll be frank: putting old, silly men in their place is a favourite pastime of
In front of them, Lupin snorted with laughter.

Mrs. Longbottom narrowed her eyes at Harry. "Now that I've had the opportunity to meet you, I'd like to know why you haven't yet confirmed your godbrother bond with my Neville?"

"Er, what?" Harry stared at her, nonplussed.

"Neville is your godbrother, young man," Mrs. Longbottom repeated. "Surely you knew that?"

"No, I can't say I did. He never said anything." Her gimlet stare prompted him to volunteer even more information. "Uhm, and neither did anyone else?"

The formidable lady took a deep breath. Her face was so forbidding that Harry imagined that this was how a dragon might look like before it spewed fire.

"Your magical guardian didn't tell you that you have a godbrother?" she asked slowly. "Has Dumbledore ever told you anything about your family? Anything important at all?"

Harry wracked his brain but could only think of the cloak of invisibility. While the cloak was very important to him, the corresponding conversation had been nearly nonexistent. "No, ma'am. I don't think so. At least not before I came here."

"Next you'll tell me that he's never taken you to see your parents' estate, or their graves!" Mrs. Longbottom looked ready to pop a vein at his meek headshake, not unlike Uncle Vernon when he was close to a full-blown rage. "Why, I've never!" She stopped, turned on her heel, and hissed, "We'll finish our talk another time, Mr. Potter. I need to have a couple more words with Dumbledore! Good day."

As soon as she was gone, Harry stared up at Lupin. "She's scary, but I think I'm a little in love."

Lupin snorted again. "You and several other men who haven't lost their common sense yet. She's definitely something else. Now, she seemed intent on talking about you and her grandson. Why don't you go find Neville and ask him what this is all about?"

"Yeah, I should probably do that. Thanks, Professor." Harry waved and trotted off.
He and Hermione didn't have any plans other than their training, so he checked the Gryffindor common room first and the greenhouses second, where he found Neville with his hands in the dirt.

"Hey Neville," he said and sat on an overturned bucket. Around him, half a dozen or so pink blossoms of a large bush snuck close and let their petals brush over his ears and hair. "Eh, that tickles! I just met your grandma. She, er, convinced Dumbledore to let me have my electives."

"Congratulations," Neville said and smiled. "I knew that she'd make it right."

"She also wanted to know why we haven't confirmed our godbrother bond yet." Harry sighed when the other boy flinched guiltily. "Neville, why didn't you ever say something?"

Neville's shoulders slumped. "I don't know. You're so brave and I'm so pathetic. I just ... I didn't know how."

"Just telling me generally works out pretty well," Harry said, a little exasperated. "We're as good as brothers, Neville! To me, that's a big deal! If I'd known in first year, a lot of things would've probably gone differently."

"I'm sorry." Neville abandoned his work and sat on another bucket. "I really, really didn't think you'd want to. Not after meeting Ron and being such fast friends."

"Ron is a prat a lot of the time," Harry said. "And I can always do with more friends and family. I'm really sorry if I made you think that I wouldn't want you."

"You didn't," Neville said quietly. "I'm really very sorry. If you still want to ..."

"Yes," Harry said immediately. "I'd like to know what it means before we confirm this bond, but I do."

They stared around for a few moments, unsure of what else to say.

Then, Harry remembered what Mrs. Longbottom had said about visiting hours at St. Mungos. He asked, "Is your gran going to St. Mungo's often? She mentioned it in Dumbledore's office."

Neville nodded. "She's going to see my parents every week."

"Wait, what? Your parents are alive?" Harry was shocked. "You always talk about them as if they were gone, same as mine."
"They might as well be." When Harry didn't say anything, Neville asked, "You don't want to ask me about it?"

"No more than you want to talk about it," Harry said and shrugged. "They're your parents."

"Thanks, Harry. And also sorry for my grandmum. She can be ... intense."

Harry broke out into a wide grin. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Er, sure?"

"I adore your grandmum. She ran over Dumbledore like a ... a stampeding hippogriff. If I am half as tough as her when I'm grown, I've done everything right."

Neville choked on his spit. "You're kidding me!"

"Nope." Harry grinned even more. "She absolutely slayed the headmaster."

"Uh, okay. If you're sure."

Rising from his perch, Harry clapped Neville on the shoulder. "She did me a huge favour there, so I'm allowed a little hero worship, right? She even went back to tear into Dumbledore some more when I told her that I've never seen my parents' graves, or the estate."

"If he's really your magical guardian, he deserves it," Neville said with a sudden scowl. "I mean, I couldn't quite believe it when you said he was, but if my grandma is up there screaming at him ... wow. I don't know what to say, except sorry. If I'd been more brave, I could've told you a few things about your family."

Guiltily thinking of Sirius and his family's grimoire, Harry demurred. "I have time for that, and now that I know what he kept from me, I'll bug him about it. Constantly."

Instead of the expected smile, Neville merely nodded grimly. "You should. It's your legacy, after all. Some heirs of old families take up their first duties at thirteen, and usually a magical guardian is eager to let go of the responsibility."

"You, too?"

"Yes." Neville grimaced. "I'm all that's left of the direct family line. My grandma is great with our finances, and luckily I inherited my grandpa's green thumb so our business will keep prospering, but she's not getting any younger and wants me to take business classes and whatnot. Everything to help
the goblins manage our estate."

Harry grimaced as well. "Sounds boring."

"Well, I'd rather work in my greenhouses and on the fields," Neville admitted, "but business management isn't so bad in our world. The contracts are way easier, and are usually enforced by magic. First rule: if one's not, don't sign it. The muggles don't have that advantage. The little bit my uncle showed me of it last summer seemed like a horrid mess. Everybody always seems to try to cheat someone else."

"Ugh, lucky us, then, I guess."

"Oh, before I forget again, thank you for your birthday present," Neville said. "Where did you get a cutting from a whomping willow? It's not from Hogwarts' tree, they don't feel the same."

"Why do you want to know?" Harry asked carefully.

"Just curious, because they don't exactly come cheap and they're quite tightly regulated."

"Er, I got it from a private seller," Harry said, cringing a little about his faux-pas. When Dobby had brought it from Potter's Field as a last minute present for Neville, he'd just run with it. "I'd better not say any more."

"It's fine, Harry." Neville laughed a little. "The one you gave me is an endangered subspecies. Still rather aggressive, but also protective of other plants. I've planted her close to our most profitable potion ingredients. She already knows me and lets me care for her without problems."

"She?"

"You got me a girl." Neville grinned. "I can't wait to see how much she'll have grown when I go home for Yule."

"Huh, seems like everybody will go home this year."

"Maybe not everybody, but most families will want their heirs close to get a few lessons in management in. And to show them off to the family, of course."

Harry frowned. "Where's the difference in just celebrating together?"

Neville suddenly flushed a little. "Right. I forgot that you don't know much about our customs and stuff. Presenting the heirs at Yule, and showing off some accomplishments, is kind of rubbing it into
the faces of the cadet lines that the main line is still going strong, and ready to lead for another
generation. If the families like each other, great ..."

"... but that's not always the case?" Harry guessed. "This is so strange and complicated."

"Well, not really. I mean, if you take your relatives, you're the cadet line in that scenario," Neville
explained. "I know that you don't really like them, so that's a pretty good example."

Harry had almost forgotten the Dursleys after the shock with the Slytherin thing, but even so their
mention could barely rouse him. After the summer he'd had they were already in his past, and
nothing would get them back into the present if he could help it.

"They show off my cousin often enough," Harry admitted and smiled crookedly. "Alright, it's nearly
time for lunch, and I'm hungry. Are you coming up with me?"

"Er, if you're sure, Harry?" Neville looked so hopeful that Harry felt even worse for not being a
better friend in the past.

"Of course I am. Brothers, remember?"

Since Neville had to scrub his hands before he'd be allowed at the table, Harry used the small break
to drink down his potion and refresh himself with a smart charm.

They were early for lunch on a weekend, but a few of their friends were already sitting at the table
and beckoned them over cheerfully.

"Well?" Hermione asked as soon as Harry had sat across from her. "How did it go with Neville's
gran?"

"She's a warrior and I can join you in class next week," Harry told her and all of their friends
succinctly. "Case closed."

"It better be," Hermione grumbled. "What was the headmaster's reason?"

"Oh, you'll love this ..." Harry told them what Dumbledore had said, trying to be as exact as
possible. Their astonishment and anger was amusing, now that the situation was resolved. "Yeah, I
thought it was total hogwash, too."
"What does he even mean by more?" Ron asked between two bites. "Divination is only really interesting for people with the Sight. The rest of us just have to study a little to fudge around with tea leaves and stuff. As I said, an easy pass."

"Maybe Dumbledore means that Professor Trelawney has made a true prophecy once and wants him to experience what real divination is like," Lavender pondered. "She's kind of famous for it; there aren't many true seers in Great Britain."

"Even so, why is that important for Harry?" Hermione asked. "Why put him in a class just to hopefully have him experience the giving of a prophecy? Or any bit of future-telling, I suppose. There seems to be an abundance of possibilities for that."

"Well ..." Ron cleared his throat, "everybody knows that Dumbledore is You-Know-Who's greatest opponent, right? What if this stuff is somehow important to the headmaster to fight You-Know-Who? Maybe he needs Harry as a trigger or something, so Trelawney will find out something about the war?"

"Doesn't that seem a little farfetched?" Parvati asked sceptically.

Ron shrugged. "Sure, but if that wasn't the reason, the headmaster would've tried to keep Harry from doing what he wants just because he can. And I'm not sure I can believe that."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "Your guess is as good as any, Ron. And the strategy might be sound ... but I don't know a thing about divination. What say you, Lavender? Or Parvati? Could a foretelling be triggered like that?"

"No one knows," Lavender said with a little huff. "People sure wish they did, but no study about prophecies ever brought results. Seers just give them when the time is right. I've never heard that this can be influenced."

"Me neither," Parvati agreed, "but I could ask Padma. Ravenclaw has a lot of books exclusively in the tower. She might find something there."

Hermione nodded gratefully. "Thanks, that'll work."

"We'll keep an eye on Professor Trelawney," Lavender said. "She's a bit strange, but she's not a bad person or anything. If something happens, we'll let you know."

Dean and Seamus came up them then, and Ron abandoned the topic at once in favour of a pick-up quidditch game. "Can I borrow your broom, mate?" he asked over his shoulder, barely sparing Harry
"a glance. "I can get it myself if you want to stay here for a bit longer."

"Maybe Harry wants to play as well," Hermione said a bit tartly. "Or do you want to exclude him so you can take his broom?"

Her raised eyebrow had Seamus crossing himself with a chuckle. "Merlin, no, 'course he can, if he wants to. It's just that Ginny claimed Seeker already and we weren't sure he'd like another position."

"I don't, and I'm not keen on just flying today, either. You can use my broom, Ron. But only you. If it breaks before the matches start, Professor McGonagall will kill me," Harry replied. "You have to promise."

"Yes, of course." Ron jumped up. "Can we get it now?"

"Let him finish his lunch," Hermione sighed with an eyeroll. "Honestly, Ronald. The world doesn't revolve around quidditch."

"That's where you're wrong," Dean smirked. "To us, it does."

Harry probably had a little too much fun seeing Ron squirm and huff about his slow eating, but at last they were on their way to Gryffindor tower.

"You know, you could've taken your time if you hadn't locked up your trunk," Ron remarked as they stepped through the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Darn inconvenient, isn't it?"

"I rather like knowing what's going on with my stuff," Harry replied unapologetically and ignored Ron's reddening cheeks. With a loud click the trunk unlocked. Everything was perfectly in order, his shrunken broom carefully strapped to the lid of the trunk. "There you go. Only you Ron, I mean it."

"I already promised," Ron whined. "Can I have it now? I could fly right out of the dorm window, would cut the way to the pitch down to nothing ..."

"Professor McGonagall would have your hide." Harry handed the Nimbus over and unshrunk it with a muttered spell.

"Thanks, mate. Er, what will you be doing if you're not playing with us?" Ron asked. "Don't say you'll do homework, please. We've only been here for a couple of days."

"Nah, I'll probably take a walk around the lake or something, get a bit sunshine and stuff. It's already getting colder."
"Yeah, best enjoy that while we can." Ron saluted playfully. "Thanks again, see you later!"

And off he went, running from the dorm and down the stairs into the common room. Harry shook his head and turned his attention back to his trunk.

There was a new journal lying on top of his things which hadn't been there a moment ago. It was bound in green leather and had the healers' symbol on the cover.

"Er, what is this?" he asked intelligently.

Dobby popped up next to him. "This be present from Healer Williams. He be saying that Harry Potter sir's dogfather be genius and that having talky session be no problem now. Healer Williams be asking whether Harry Potter sir be having time on Sunday for a chat."

"I think so." Harry searched around for his athame and, upon finding it, quickly bound the journal to him with blood. "All done. Sirius could earn a fortune with those." He opened the journal, found a pen, and quickly jotted down a note so Brady would know that he'd received his present.

The healer's reply was almost instantaneous.

September 4th, 1993

Hey Harry,

Good to know that you'll be able to make Sunday work. What time would be good for you?

-Brady

Harry didn't have to think very much about it.

How about five in the afternoon? We don't have much homework yet, so the time is perfect for me.

That's fine, Brady answered. With the salary Gringotts is paying me, I'm always available for you. Just let me know. Once school is in full swing, we'll find out if it can stay that way. Once a week is still alright for you?

Yes, actually. I've got a lot to tell you.
Brady drew a little smiley face. _Good things, I hope! Now go, enjoy the weather. Snake sends his regards, as does Portos. He's still a bit disgruntled that you left your warm nest that night he was over for a visit. He asks that you make it up to him._

_I'll be home for Yule; if Gringotts says he can, I'll gladly have him over again._ A warm feeling spread in Harry's chest, and he grinned. _Tell him I'm looking forward to it. If Dobby is to be believed, the first garden gnomes are moving into the garden now._

They wrote their goodbyes and Harry finally made his way outside. Hermione caught up to him and, after making sure that Harry didn't mind her presence, fell into step beside him. Hand in hand, they marched once around the Black Lake, enjoying the Scottish highlands and the slightly tangy, cool air.

"The light is really beautiful today," she said with an appreciative sigh. "I didn't know you went on walks."

"I didn't do it often last year, but if we're doing the martial arts thing, I could probably do with something to relax and stretch out my muscles. My legs are already starting to hurt."

Hermione grinned and tilted her head slightly. "Then you've done it right. But I thought flying relaxes you?"

"When do I ever really have time just to fly?" Harry asked. "Usually it's just Wood tormenting us during training, and then quidditch matches."

"Yes, those aren't relaxing at all," Hermione agreed. She gripped Harry's hand a little tighter. "You'll probably do this alone sometimes, but I love taking walks, and, uhm ... I'd really like it if we could do this together every now and then."

"Like dates?" Harry asked.

"Maybe." She flushed a little. "It's unfortunate that you can't come to Hogsmeade, but being away from the castle kind of counts as well, doesn't it?"

"To me, it does." Harry smiled at her. "Thanks for thinking of it."

"I'll bring a picnic," Hermione huffed. "And if you need something from Hogsmeade, I'll buy it for you."

They reached a small ledge and stood right at the edge to watch the giant squid as it lazily swam through the lake. Harry thought that a date like this was already rather perfect. There were no expectations of romantic words; just being together and talking about everything that crossed their
minds was enough.

As the lake was very big, several kilometers around, in fact, Harry and Hermione only entered the castle when dinner had already started. The hall was full and it was impossible to get a seat with their friends. Harry just shrugged and pulled Hermione back to the very end of the table, where some first and second years sat.

"Hey, Harry!" Colin Creevey called. "Will you sit with us tonight?"

"Sure, but only if you keep your camera away," Harry replied. "Who are your friends?"

"This is my brother Dennis," Colin said, clapping a tiny boy on the back. "He's a huge fan."

"He's really talking to me!" Dennis squeaked excitedly. "Can I have your autograph, Harry?"

Hermione smirked at Harry. "If he gets one, I want one, too. Maybe on one of Colin's many pictures."

"You're horrid," Harry grumbled and elbowed her. "Just so you know, I'll find out what I can do about all these newspaper articles and stupid books and stuff."

"Well, if someone could do with a lawyer, it's probably you," Colin gushed. "He could write up all kinds of contracts for you, Harry!" He fumbled with something in his robe pocket and pulled out an amateurish business card. "I wanted to ask about a contract for your photos - my dad said that it's not nice to just take pictures. 'Specially not if I want to sell them to newspapers, maybe."

"I'm glad you understand that now," Hermione said with an approving smile. She elbowed Harry back. "Better get a lawyer, then, to sort this out."

"You think you're joking," Harry retorted. Inwardly, his thoughts were already churning. "But enough about me. How did you like your first few days at Hogwarts?"

The first years talked all over themselves, which made Hermione giggle and Harry blush with embarrassment.

All in all, dinner with the younger students was surprisingly fun. Later, as Harry was sitting on his bed with the curtains drawn and writing a longish entry into his Sirius-journal, he felt grateful to Colin for bringing yet another matter to his attention.

*It's time that these stupid book vanish from the bookstores*, he wrote. *Please tell me that there's something I can do to stop people from believing that I grew up like a pampered little prince and*
went on adventures to slay dragons and stuff.

Sirius was still awake and ready to reassure him. Of course you can do something about it, pup. I'll contact Sharptooth, he'll find us the meanest lawyer available. It's not like I won't need one anyway as soon as the ICW has taken on my case.

Thanks, Siri. I appreciate it. Also, sorry for keeping you awake.

Not much to do here, Sirius replied. You keep thinking about what you need and I'll do my best to make it happen.

Harry grinned. You're enjoying this, aren't you?

What, preparing to be mean to people who sent me to hell for a decade without cause? You bet I am. Although I'd need the help of your little friends for my more devious plans.

Out of the question, Harry hastily scribbled. Get your own to do your dirty work!

Sirius wasn't insulted at all. Oh, I will, just as soon as you tell me how you managed to attract your two. A nice house elf would be a really welcome change.

I didn't know you could have bad experiences with house elves, Harry wrote. The ones I've met so far were super nice and helpful.

The one in my family wasn't. If he's even still alive, he'd jump at the chance to betray me to the Ministry. But that's a story for another day, kiddo. Time for bed and all that! Your bud Brady keeps telling me that I have to do adult things sometimes so you'll be able to accept me as your guardian and let me do stuff for you.

I've already accepted you as my friend, if that helps, Harry replied, adding a cheeky smiley to his words. I'm tired, though. Hermione really kicked my butt in training today. We'll do it only three times a week for now, but I'll probably have sore muscles all the time from now on.

Sounds dreadful, Sirius scribbled, his words kind of winking at Harry. But you'll probably sleep very well tonight. Sweet dreams, kiddo. I miss you.

I miss you too, Siri. Sleep well!

Regretfully, Harry closed his journal and stuffed it beneath a pillow. Knowing that his godfather was lonely and sad made him wish that Dobby could pop him over there right now. A cuddle with Sirius
until the sadness passed seemed like the best thing in the world right that moment.

As he drifted off, a vague idea formed in his mind.

_If I can't be with him, I can make sure he finds a nice house elf for himself to keep him company. Dobby might know one who needs a good home. He always knows what I need._

oOo

Sundays were for sleeping in, and Harry slept for so long that he didn't bother getting down to the great hall for breakfast. Instead, Dobby popped him to the Come And Go Room, which was already in existence and could only mean that Hermione had taken advantage of it for her personal training.

She opened when he knocked and eagerly pulled him inside.

"Are you nearly finished?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled. "Yes. I only have a bit more yoga to do. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, I could eat," Harry admitted. "Uhm, can I watch?"

"Sure, I've got no problems with that."

For a few minutes, Harry unabashedly stared as his girlfriend flowed from one position into the next, all the while breathing calmly and deeply. She looked competent and in charge, and also very relaxed ... not to mention very attractive. Then Dobby appeared with two glasses of lemonade, and he decided to act on his impulse from last night.

"Hey Dobby," he said quietly after casting the muffliato spell. "I wondered whether you knew an elf who needs a family."

Dobby's huge eyes widened even more. "Harry Potter sir needs another elf?"
"Not for me, for Sirius," Harry explained. "He's lonely and said that his family elf was a bad one. Betty takes great care of him, we both know that, but it's not the same."

"Dobby will investigate," Dobby said, eyes still wide and gleaming. "Can Dobby bring Harry Potter sir breakfast now?"

"As soon as Hermione is done. Thank you."

Ten minutes later, Harry enjoyed a huge brunch spread. Hermione helped him eat and she even asked for one of the strawberry-flavoured nutritional potions.

"I'll pay you back," she said after emptying her vial with a pleased hum. "They're just so good, I couldn't resist."

"I've got a goblin potion book somewhere," Harry said. "I wanted to try and make my own. If you want to help ..."

"Absolutely!" Hermione gave the empty vial back. "Before you told me, I didn't know that the goblins brewed potions. I didn't even know they had healers, for pity's sake. Why doesn't anyone teach us this stuff?"

"History really is a joke," Harry agreed. "I got to know the goblins pretty well over the summer, and everything Binns is teaching us is an insult to them. I think I'll protest and ask my account manager at Gringotts to reduce the Hogwarts tuition. I'm not paying for something I'm not receiving, and History is a core subject."

Hermione smirked into her tea. "And people call me a troublemaker."

"Well, I'm not asking others to join me," Harry replied with a shrug. "But the goblins are my friends. It'll make them happy."

It was early afternoon when they finally left the Come And Go Room. Hagrid hadn't written a letter yet, but Harry knew how miserable the man was and convinced Hermione to visit him.

"I can't believe Ron blew us off like that," she huffed as they trotted along the path to Hagrid's hut. "How important can flying be?"
"I'm not angry about it," Harry said and pointed at the hippogriff corral. "Maybe Hagrid will let us meet some of the other hippogriffs. Don't you want to fly on one?"

"I'm afraid of heights," Hermione mumbled, flushing with embarrassment. "I wasn't good on a broom, how do you think I'd do on an animal with its own head?"

"Oh. I didn't know that." Concerned for her, Harry squeezed her hand. "I just thought that it'd be great to do something like that together. Buckbeak was great, honestly."

Hermione smiled weakly. "I believe you. It's definitely not his fault."

They reached the hut and knocked. Inside, Fang started barking and he only stopped after having slobbered all over Harry and Hermione's faces and hands.

"It's good ter see yer," Hagrid said and smiled about their whines of dismay. "Eh, one quick spell an' all is forgotten, right? Come in, I'll make tea."

Hermione whipped out her wand and cleaned up both Harry and herself.

"How are you doing, Hagrid?" Harry asked. "Are there any news?"

"Well, Malfoy ran to his father, o' course," Hagrid said gruffly. "An' ol' Lucius naturally ran to the minister. It doesn't look good for Buckbeak."

"He's not at fault," Hermione said, lifting her chin. "We're working on it, Hagrid, I promise. Malfoy won't be able to do anything to him."

"Once the Prophet brings the article, there's nothin' anyone can do for poor Beaky. He's no' even mine; I borrowed him and his herd from a friend." Hagrid pulled out a huge handkerchief and blew his nose. "The minister is worse than a niffler, always lookin' fer gold. Ol' Lucius certainly has enough of tha'."

"As I said, he won't get away with it." Hermione stood and readied the tea cups. "Don't worry so much, Hagrid. We loved our first class, even if hippogriffs are a bit, er, demanding."

"I wanted to ask if we can visit with them, in fact," Harry quickly added to cheer Hagrid up.
"Yer really want ter see 'em?" Hagrid trumpeted one last time into his handkerchief. "Well, why not, then? Le' me jus' start the tea ..." He poured the hot water into the pot and tapped it with his pink umbrella. "Er, that's jus' ter keep it fresh, yeah?"

"Your secret is safe with us," Hermione said. "Who's this friend you got the hippogriffs from?"

"I met 'im in Greece," the giant replied, eyes already dry again. "Such a decent fellow. Dirty rich, o' course, but that's why he offered me the herd when I told 'im I'd been made professor. Beaky is one of his best stallions. I can' lose 'im."

"And you won't. Hello, hippogriffs." Hermione stopped at the corral fence and bowed to them all. Harry followed, and a minute later the whole herd bowed back. "Oh, they're all coming here! Eek!" A smaller hippogriff - a mare, Hagrid told them - with a lot of red and brown feathers, butted her beak into Hermione's hands and quite insistently demanded to be petted. "Uh, they're friendly today."

"They feel that yer' a friend," Hagrid said and gently patted her shoulder. "Yer a good sort, Hermione. Magical creatures have a nose for that."

Harry was busy stroking Buckbeak's beak and cheeks and laughed when two others crowded close for a turn. "They're awesome. We don't even have any ferrets with us."

"Yer wanna fly?" Hagrid asked. "They can have some after."

"Er, no, Hermione's afraid of heights and I don't want to go without her," Harry declined, a bit regretful but also resolved.

"Actually ..." Hermione took a deep breath and scratched her hippogriff between the eyes. "She's very nice. Maybe I'd like to try after all. But only if it's not too fast or too high. Alright?"

"Agapi knows how ter behave. Come, I'll get yer up her back. Wait fer me, Harry, better not try this alone ..." Hagrid sat Hermione onto Agapi's back and did the same for Harry, who had no choice but to ride Buckbeak, as he snapped at the other two eager hippogriffs. "Now," he told the animals sternly, "just once along the border, and no funny business with 'em mean dementors, alrigh'?"
Buckbeak snorted and Agapi pecked at Hagrid.

"Okay, then ... go!" Hagrid slapped the animals' rumps and hooted as they gallopped off, further down the hill, wings already spread wide and wind catching beneath the feathers. "Remember! One round!"

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!" Hermione screeched. Agapi screeched with her, although clearly in exhilaration, and then they took off.

Harry laughed even as Hermione shrieked. "It's okay!" he called. "Hold her around the neck! You're strong, you won't fall!"

"I've changed my mind!" she wailed. "I want down! Oh my god!"

Only a few seconds later, the rough ride stopped and the hippogriffs' wings stopped beating. Instead, they began a peaceful glide.

"See? The start is a bit bumpy, but this ..." Harry smiled when she dared opening her eyes. "Isn't this wonderful? And look, there's the forbidden forest. It doesn't look very terrible in the sunlight, right?"

Slowly, Hermione calmed down, and after a while she even managed to enjoy the flight. Her highlight was the descent to the Black Lake's surface, where both hippogriffs held their claws into the cool water and snagged a fish each.

The landing wasn't very smooth, but Hermione bore it with as much grace as she could muster and even apologized to Agapi for screaming in the beginning.

"You're really a very good flyer," she told the animal and stroked her neck. "I almost wasn't afraid at the end. Thanks."

Agapi cheeped, clearly pleased with herself, and trotted off to Hagrid who fed her a handful of fat ferrets.

"I'm really glad you tried," Harry told her once Buckbeak was gone as well. He pulled Hermione
into an embrace and kissed her slightly salty forehead. Knowing how stressed out she'd been kicked up his protective urges. "That was very brave."

"Just don't ask me to do that again anytime soon," she whispered.

"Next time we'll do something you like." Harry held her even closer and felt stupid with his affection for her.

"I'll hold you to that, Harry James," Hermione muttered against his neck.

She couldn't have made him a better promise.

End of part 7
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Wrote hard and put up wet, EAD style. You know the drill, don't like, don't read.

So this one took a while, since it's still flu season over here and I wasn't at my best. Health issues are meh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dobby's Deceit

Part 8

Harry only had an hour until he'd promised to meet Healer Williams via his journal. To make the most of it, he excused himself and let Dobby take him to the Come And Go Room, where he spread out the papers from Gringotts and tried to get an overview of the properties he'd inherited from well-meaning witches and wizards.

"Bloody hell, there's more than I thought," Harry sighed after the first dozen. "Dobby?" The elf appeared and looked expectantly at Harry. "Uhm, so I inherited a lot of houses and stuff. Sirius said it might be best to sell the lot and buy more land for you and Betty to work with, but maybe you can go and have a look first? Just to see whether we can use some of it? Maybe keep the best of them to meet friends during the holidays?"

"Dobby can," the elf squeaked. "May Dobby look at the catalogue?"

"Er, sure, help yourself! And take Betty with you if you think she can help with the decision." Harry watched, fascinated, as Dobby took the catalogue and flipped rapidly through the pages. "How soon do you think you'll be back?"

"Dobby be needing a couple of days, maybe a little longer. It be important work." Dobby bounced eagerly. "Dobby be starting right now, while Harry Potter sir be safe in the Come And Go Room."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Dobby. Please mark the ones you want to keep, yeah?"

"Dobby will," the elf promised and popped away, taking the catalogue with him.

With one less thing to deal with, at least for the moment, Harry turned his attention to the list of
monetary bequeathments. Sharptooth had scrawled a warning in red that all the galleons would have to go to the Potter family vault, but Harry felt confident that he and his elf friends wouldn't need them anytime soon.

The most important thing was still the Slytherin thing. Even sleeping on it, twice, hadn't made any of it easier to comprehend. Now, however, Harry felt at least up to checking out the family members to see what needed to be done, if anything. He made a note on his writing pad to ask Sharptooth for the details but decided to wait for Dobby's evaluation before writing a letter.

*If Sirius is to be believed, the lot might be criminal, Harry thought uneasily. What do I do? Visit them in prison? I don't think I want to go to Azkaban if they're there; the dementors at Hogwarts are bad enough ...*

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed five and the green journal flashed brightly. Eagerly, Harry opened it and watched Healer Williams' scrawl appear.

*September 5th, 1993*

**Hello Harry,**

*Are you ready for our session? I hope you're well; Sharptooth told me about you conquering the Slytherin family line. That must be difficult to deal with - I certainly wouldn't know how to react if something like that was dropped on me without warning! If you need to talk about it, I'll definitely try to help with everything, not just the dealing-with-it part.*

-Brady

Harry took a deep breath. Trust the man to know what was troubling him the most.

**Hello Brady,**

*Yeah, it's weird to suddenly have a second family line to deal with when I don't even know how to deal with my own. Sirius told me to take it slow and that whoever is left of the family (Gaunt was it, I believe) wasn't worth getting anxious over. I'll ask Sharptooth for the family tree and whatever else he can give me and then decide what to do. If they're criminals or Death Eaters, I'm not sure I ever want to meet them, though. Ron says Death Eaters are the worst and can't be redeemed.*

-Harry

Healer Williams took a minute before text appeared on the next page of the journal.
You don't have to meet anyone, especially not if they're convicted criminals. However, since your godfather was unjustly imprisoned, I'd recommend checking the court transcripts, just in case. Who knows who else is suffering like he was.

Hermione said the same thing when we all talked about the dementor attack on Friday. She said that the paper should have mentioned the file number for Sirius' case, and that it is very suspicious that they didn't. The Ministry also hasn't replied to her letter yet. Sometimes I can't get over how clever she is! A few of our friends are doubtful of Sirius' guilt now, which is ... soothing, I guess. It's hard not to tell them everything when I'm so happy to have him. Harry paused. Then, he wrote, But maybe I could ask Hermione to write an article in our new student newspaper. Just her thoughts about the missing court case number and stuff. A few weeks before Sirius leaves for Italy might be a good time, or what do you think?

Williams answered, Not a bad idea at all to encourage people to think for themselves. Just be careful, alright? Sirius' safety comes first. That being said, when will the paper go live? Will people outside the school be able to get it, or maybe even the managers at Gringotts? It might be interesting to get news directly from the students, and Gringotts is always interested in knowing what their future patrons want.

I have no idea, but Lavender, the paper's founder, said she can get a cheap press from her parents. I'll ask what her plans are. I don't even know if she can take money, that's one thing the goblins might help her with. I also don't know how often she'll publish. She and her helpers will probably tell us next week. I'll keep you posted!

Try once a month first, Healer Williams replied. That gives you lots of time to write articles and do the research for it. You should also advise your friend to mind the international press codex. If you can manage that, your newspaper will already be better than the Daily Prophet.

Once a month might about be the limit anyway, Harry hastily wrote. I've never thought about it before, but Hogwarts is kind of boring. Except Quidditch we don't have any sports, and Ancient Runes is the only language class. Any tips on that front?

Healer Williams obviously had a lot to say about that subject and wrote down a whole list of things that made Harry's head swim. One idea was conspicuously missing, however.

Why not a history club?, Harry asked when Williams finally ran out of steam. That one could really do some good.

Exactly, was the prompt answer. Why make it even easier for your headmaster to keep letting Binns teach? It's well known among the goblins that Binns disliked the horde while he was alive. If you start teaching yourself, you won't help anyone but the headmaster and Binns. I usually don't recommend failing, but maybe you and your friends should think about getting an International OWL for that subject. It's harder to achieve, but it would at least justify employing a tutor. If you find people to do this with you, you could share the cost.
I thought I'd try boycotting first, Harry admitted. I told Hermione that I want Sharptooth to reduce my tuition because History is so bad. Maybe not going will help, although Dumbledore might try to get that overturned.

Do you have someone to champion your cause if need be? Williams asked.

Yes, I think so. Harry grinned. My godbrother's gran is great, she's on the board of govenors, and Professor Lupin was all set to help me, as well. He told the healer all about Mrs. Longbottom's one-sided argument with Dumbledore and ended with, So what do you think about the headmaster's strange reason to keep me in Divination? My friends and I think it's stupid, and that Dumbledore maybe wants Professor Trelawney to tell a prophecy or something. Ron said that Dumbledore might think that I could be a trigger for that, although everybody else says that it's not proven that this is how it works.

Harry ... Williams paused for a long moment. That is a rather astounding leap to make. Your friends came up with that?

Yes, they did. But honestly, what other reason would Dumbledore have to keep me in such a useless class? I can't believe he'd want me to be stupid, or can you?

First of all, you've got better friends than I thought. You told me that the students were largely shunning you after the Heir of Slytherin thing, but apparently a lot of your housemates got over themselves over the summer. That's fantastic!

I'm not sure why, Harry replied, but I'm glad. I guess most of them really were just afraid. It's not like they didn't have any reason not to be.

Still, it was unfair of them to treat you so badly. My advice is to not sweep it under the rug just because all is well now. If an opportunity presents itself, talk to them about it and let them know that they hurt you. If they're as willing to support you as they appear to be, they'll listen.

Harry grimaced. Won't that make me a whiner?

You won't appear weak just because you want to be treated decently, Williams countered. You're not obligated to forgive each and every slight against you. Your relatives didn't leave you any choice, but you already know that that's not healthy.

But how do I do that? Harry wanted to know. Where would I even start?

To answer that, let's return to our discussion about Ron and his tendency to monopolise your time whenever it suits him. Williams' writing was even and relaxed, which in turn helped to relax Harry. You want to establish boundaries. Did you have a chance to do that during the last few days?
Harry could've slapped his forehead, he felt so stupid. Yeah, I did, actually. He wanted to borrow my broom and said that I should just leave my trunk unlocked so I wouldn't be inconvenienced.

That seems rather forward, Williams replied and Harry could almost see his frown.

Well, I told him that I like to know what's happening with my stuff, and that shut him up pretty well. Also, two of my dorm mates told me that Ron borrowed three galleons last year without asking me. Harry squirmed and sighed. He'd much rather forget about it but knew that Healer Williams would have eventually found out. He was really good at that. Dean, Seamus and I talked about it and I decided to let Ron's older brothers know ... I didn't want to go to Professor McGonagall with this. Dean said that taking three galleons is a big deal. Ron was wrong doing that, but I don't want him expelled.

Wow. I'm sorry, Harry. That's a pretty harsh breach of trust. How are you feeling about it?

I'm still angry, Harry admitted, writing each letter haltingly. I thought about confronting him with it, but I know that he'll just say that I'm rich, and that we're friends anyway and would have given him the money if he'd asked.

That's no reason to skip the asking part, Williams replied in bold pen strokes. I'm a little horrified right now, and glad that Dobby has secured your things.

Me too. But I'm also sad. Sometimes I feel like I don't really know Ron. It was hard for Harry to write this when they'd been through so much together. His brothers might talk to him. Or prank him, which is kind of the same thing for them. Harry huffed. I don't know what to do with him.

You don't have to do anything right now, Williams wrote carefully. When I told you that it is my job to offer you perspective, I meant it. He's your friend. What you decide to do about your relationship with him is completely up to you.


Williams took a while, and his writing was slow when it finally appeared on the page. To be honest, I have very little patience for people who behave like Ron currently does. I don't suffer betrayal lightly, and theft not at all. Three galleons are not change, Harry. Three galleons might feed a small family for a week if they're frugal. If he were my friend, I'd confront him and ask for the money back. I wouldn't accept any excuses or claims that I don't need it because I'm rich. I'd want to make a point that stealing is never acceptable, and that another theft would end the friendship immediately.

Harry was speechless for a moment. Uh, okay.

Yes. That's me, Harry. I've had some unpleasant experiences and have adjusted my boundaries.
accordingly. How much you’re willing to suffer in the name of friendship is up to you, but I’d advise against forgiving monetary infractions, because then they’ll keep happening, and the scale will get larger and larger. Letting small things slide is a good way to invite big things, and I’m certain you don’t need this kind of stress in your life.

That was true and Harry answered, *No one needs that. Thanks, Brady. I’ll keep it in mind!* As I said, I won’t let Ron go through my things anymore, and I’ll make him promise to be extra careful with my broom when he borrows it from now on.

*I’m proud of you. It’s not easy saying no to a friend.*

*It’s getting easier, Harry retorted somewhat peevishly, and he’s got no one to blame but himself.*

*He’ll learn that lesson eventually. Keep at it and you’ll have found out what you’re willing to accept in no time,* Williams wrote. *What else is new at Hogwarts?*

Harry brightened at once. *Me and Hermione went flying on hippogriffs after lunch! She was super afraid but still did it and I’m so proud of her. But the best thing this week was learning that I have a godbrother. Can you imagine? He was too shy to tell me, and Dumbledore also didn’t tell me, even though he’s supposedly my magical guardian, but I’ll find out what this is all about and do the bond with Neville anyway. I think it’ll be good for both of us.*

*That is the boy whose grandmother helped you win your appeal, isn’t he? You wrote earlier about your godbrother but didn’t go into details. In any case, congratulations!*

*Thanks! Yes, that’s him, his name is Neville. I guess Mrs. Longbottom has a really strong personality, but I like her, even if she rather seems to intimidate my poor brother. Harry grinned. Seems like you were right about me and strong characters.*

A few drops of ink landed on the page, like Williams was shaking with laughter, perhaps. *As long as she doesn’t try to browbeat you. She might not have a godmother bond with you, but she might still want to take charge, now that she’s aware of your headmaster’s unusual behaviour. It might be well-intentioned, but it can easily backfire on you.*

*Thanks for warning me,* Harry scribbled gratefully. *I never see such things coming.*

The grandfather clock struck six in the evening, surprising Harry.

*So late already,* he wrote, disappointed. *I feel like we didn’t really talk at all. It’s different than being together for it.*

*Just different, or worse?* Williams inquired.
Harry didn't need to think about it. *I'd rather sit with you and really talk. My hand is cramping from writing so much.*

*I'll definitely see you during the holidays,* Williams promised. *We'll make the best of it until then.*

*Same time next week?*

Williams replied, *I'm looking forward to it. Take care, Harry.*

*You too, Brady. Bye!*

Feeling a little better, Harry put his things back into his bag and then took a few minutes to just stare out of the large window. The sun was setting already, painting the lawn and forest with golden light. The mood was a little melancholic and drove the point home that the summer was truly gone now and a new year in Harry's life had begun.

"Dobby be back, Harry Potter sir!"

Harry jumped at the loud pop. "Good lord, Dobby!"

Dobby grinned and held out a page from the property catalogue. "It not be difficult decision after all. Dobby and Betty be wanting to keep this."

Taking the page, Harry made a conscious effort to calm his hammering heart. "Thanks. Oh! That's the nice one by the sea! But wasn't this far away? Like the South of France or something?"

Dobby allowed that it was so.

"How will we ever go there?" Harry asked. "The headmaster will know if I leave Britain, I'm sure."

Dobby's eyes were gleaming in that sly way Harry had come to associate with Big Plans. "Dobby and Betty be wanting to open a little pension. Harry Potter sir be saying that us house elves be taking extra work if they not be having enough."

"I did, but isn't a pension a lot of work for only two elves? Not that you aren't great, because you clearly are, but pampering folks is a full-time job." Harry let his gaze wander over the light brown buildings.

The whole estate was kind of fragmented, one building rising up on a medium high terrasse, another one sitting lower and facing a large pool area. There were more, all seemingly connected to each
other. There was both ample sun and shade, with lots of cypresses and other greenery all over the large garden, and everything looked positively rustic and vintage. With more than a dozen bedrooms, the property would certainly be able to function as a pension, and leave room for expansion, should it work out.

"Dobby and Betty be working to find more elves to help in exchange for food," Dobby explained. "We be starting with only half a dozen guests. We be wanting to grow our own food to make wizards healthy - if they be nice, of course. No bad wizards allowed."

"That's a good idea," Harry grinned. Sighing, he took a closer look at the many rooms, the terraces and the winter garden. "Alright. Talk this over with Sharptooth and let him help you set everything up. Heck, I don't even know how to do the warding, but we have to do that. There are muggles living right beside the property. Maybe he should look into buying the plots around the estate whenever something becomes available."

"Harry Potter sir not be needing to worry," Dobby told him, open face asking to trust him, which Harry did. Implicitly. "Dobby and Betty be doing everything necessary. The pension be a good idea, Harry Potter sir, we be promising."

"I believe you," Harry agreed. "I guess I'm just a little sad because I won't get to see it before I'm rid of Dumbledore's guardianship."

Dobby's ears drooped a little. "That be true. Dobby be very sorry. We be making everything extra beautiful. It be home away from home for Harry Potter sir. And ..." The elf hesitated.

"And?" Harry asked. "What is it, Dobby?"

Wringing his hands, Dobby glanced up at Harry. "Dobby be able to show Harry Potter sir memories in his dreams. It be special favour and not many wizards be wanting to have house elves so close."

"But you wouldn't do it to harm me, right?" Harry put the catalogue page on the desk and went around it to crouch before his friend. "You'd do it to show me what you're building. It'll almost be like I was there?"

Dobby nodded eagerly. "It be exactly like Harry Potter sir be there! Dobby be wanting to show Harry Potter sir everything us elves be doing."

"Then I want it. If I can't help you, I at least want to know what has you so excited. Besides, it really is a beautiful estate. I can't believe someone just left it to me." Harry took Dobby's still clasped hands in his and squeezed them. "Just ... don't do too much. I want you to be happy."

Dobby smiled, delighted. "Betty and Dobby be so happy with much work! Dobby be going now and meet Steward Sharptooth."
"Wait!" Harry called. "If you're going there anyway, let me write my letter. It'll just take a few minutes." He went back to the desk, ripped a page of paper from his writing pad and penned a quick note. "There, I think I've got everything covered for now. Thanks, Dobby!"

With a broad grin, the house elf popped away, leaving Harry standing in the burnished sunlight that was streaming into the study.

A pension, Harry thought, shaking his head in bewilderment. What'll come next?

oOo

During dinner, Harry kept silent and listened to the talk around him. Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati were still busy discussing the new student newspaper, specifically what to call it. As they came up with a monthly publication by themselves, Harry left them to it, merely passing on Healer Williams' advice about the international press codex and then turning to Seamus and Dean, who were talking about football and rugby. Ron, huffy because no one in his immediate vicinity wanted to talk about Quidditch for a change, shovelled food into his mouth as if it were a sport.

Afterwards, most students meandered to their common rooms, but Harry veered off towards the library. Hermione looked at him questioningly and beamed when he waved her over.

"You're not doing homework, are you?" she teased and bumped into his shoulder.

"Nah. I want to find out what being godbrothers means."

Hermione sobered. "I'll help you look. We could ask Madam Pince, but who knows what she'll tell Headmaster Dumbledore."

"The headmaster knows that I know. Neville's gran went back to tell him off, remember?" Harry looked briefly around and then took Hermione's warm hand, curling his fingers around hers. "I'll finish the bond anyway, I just want to know what it means for Neville and me."

"If there aren't any books about that in the library, I'll buy one," Hermione offered. "After all, it might concern me one day, as well."

Harry blushed a little, noting that she did, too. "Deal."

Thankfully it wasn't hard to locate a book about magical bonds. Hermione knew how to work the
register and took care to show Harry, who'd had no idea that finding books for research could be so easy.

"Have you shown Ron as well?" Harry asked.

Hermione scoffed. "I tried, but pearls before swines and all. I've given up; I've got enough to do without dragging his grades out of the gutter."

Taken aback, Harry gaped a little at her. "Uhm, alright. Are you, uhm, well, are you okay?"

"I'll be," Hermione sighed. "Look, it's just ... I spent so much time last year trying to help him, and you, get through your classes. Over the summer, my parents made me understand that I'm not responsible for your education, and that I'll only harm our friendship if I try to mother you all the time." She flushed a little and averted her gaze. "At least with you, mothering is not an option."

"Thanks, 'Mione. I'll do better from now on," Harry whispered and kissed her cheek. "Now let's check this out before Madam Pince chases us out."

In the end, the information wasn't as interesting as Harry had anticipated. Godbrothers were the sons of parents who'd made each other godparents to their kids. The bond only solidified that, adding a magical snap that fostered loyalty and an awareness of the other's needs.

"It seems to be a lovely bond," Hermione said after they'd both gone over the relevant paragraphs twice. "Neville certainly deserves some loyalty and friendship."

"I really wish someone had told me sooner," Harry replied. "But maybe it's better this way. I'm older and can decide for myself, and Neville will know that I really want him as a brother."

Hermione surprised him by nearly telling him the same thing Healer Williams had already told him. "Just take care that Mrs. Longbottom won't take over once you've confirmed the bond. After what you've told us, she's the sort to do that."

"My bond is with Neville, not his gran," Harry said. "But you're right. She might be tough, but I don't want a stranger suddenly deciding things for me. I'll take it up with Neville and put it in the vows."
"Do you think he'll mind?" Hermione carefully closed the old book and stroked the cover.

"I don't think so, but if he does ... well, that's for him to deal with. My healer said that I need to set boundaries, and that's mine."

She smiled. "That's good, Harry. You're too old to be treated like a little kid anyway."

They put the book away again and went to the common room, where Ron was upon them before they'd even fully stepped inside.

"Where were you?" he demanded. "Just taking off like that after vanishing in the afternoon, too; are you having secrets now, Harry?"

"We were in the library," Harry informed the other boy coolly. "Hermione saw me go in that direction and followed, otherwise she'd been here. And this afternoon you went flying with the others. What was I supposed to do, sit there and wait around for you?"

Ron scowled. "Whatever. I wanted to play a round of chess, but no one wants to take me on. Come, before the prefects send us to bed."

"Not tonight," Harry declined. "I wanted to ... ah, there's Neville. See you in the dorm, Ron."

"What about you, Hermione?" Ron asked as Harry walked off. "You're smart enough."

Harry tuned out her snippy reply and plonked down on an ottoman close to Neville's table. "Hey."

"Hey, Harry. What's up? Are you arguing with Ron?" Neville asked, looking worriedly to where Ron was just losing Hermione to what Harry spontaneously dubbed the Paper Troupe. Over the afternoon it seemed to have acquired new members, among them Colin and Dennis Creevey and their infamous camera.

"Not really. I just wanted to let you know that I looked up the godbrother bond in the library and copied the vows for us to take whenever we're ready." Harry paused, but decided to just get it over with. "Er, I hope you won't be insulted if I change the vow a little. I want you as my godbrother, but I don't want your gran to think that she can make me do stuff. And I guess you wouldn't like my relatives having any say about you, either, even if they're muggles."

Neville smiled crookedly. "Don't worry, I understand very well. I'm just happy that you're not angry at me for not telling you about it. So, when would you like to do it?"
"Er, I haven't thought that far ahead, yet," Harry admitted. "I thought we could make a small ceremony of it, invite a few friends, if you want."

"Uh, really?" Neville fumbled with his quill and dropped it. Ink splattered across his notes.

"Sure. It's not everyday I gain a brother, is it?" Harry grinned. "I even got a friend who can take care of refreshments."

Neville still looked overwhelmed. "Refreshments?"

"It can be a party," Harry said. "It should be a party. Though maybe after Hermione's birthday? I'm still planning that one."

"Er, whenever you like," Neville stammered, visibly trying to collect his thoughts. "I'll help."

"Great!" Beaming, Harry sat back. "Do you want the table to yourself? You seemed busy before I came over."

Neville shook his head. "Not really. I was just planning next year's planting season. We rotate crops regularly to keep the soil healthy."

"I think I heard about that in muggle school," Harry admitted, "but I don't know the first thing about it."

"I can show you, if you like. See here? That's wolfsbane. It prefers certain nutrients, but every couple of years we have to plant it elsewhere before they leech the ground dry. Same with the dittany. It's great for healing wounds, but it loses potency if the soil is weak. Rotating everything is a lot of work, but it saves money for fertilizer and keeps the plants strong."

Harry looked over the plans Neville had written out. There were scribbles of the grounds, with arrows pointing all over the place. "Who is doing the planting?"

"We have several house elves. They're very proud of their work." Neville eyed Harry. "Have you seen one, yet? They're not very common."

"Er, yes. Last year a house elf tried to protect me from Slytherin's monster. He went a bit overboard, but he meant well." Now that that horrible year was over, Harry could chuckle a bit about it. Dobby had made it up to him in a thousand different ways since then and Harry was only too willing to forgive and forget. "I think they're fantastic. So magical."
"They are," Neville agreed quietly. "My best friend at home is Nobby. He's especially great with the
dangerous plants and always knows what they need. He's taught me most everything I know so far."

"Can I ask how you, er, pay your house elves? I mean, I know that they belong to the family, but
surely you'd want to reward them sometimes?" Harry hoped that he wasn't making Neville too
curious with his questions, but he wanted to know what the difference between family elves and free
elves was.

"Er, well, except for being deathly insulted if we tried to actually pay them, ours sometimes ask for
new or better tools, or more land to work with. It's not payment as such, but we try to let them do
tings they enjoy next to their regular work. Nobby really likes diving, very unusual for a house elf,
so one of my ancestors had a pond installed on our estate. Of course, the elves use it to grow even
more herbs that we can sell, but Nobby can go there and have fun whenever he likes." Neville
shrugged. "That's how it's always been, and as long as they seem happy, we'll keep doing it."

Harry was relieved that he was apparently doing everything right. "That's good to know," he
offered.

"Second and third years, pack up your stuff. It's high time for bed," Percy Weasley called. "No, Ron,
you may not finish the game against yourself. It'll still be there tomorrow."

"I wouldn't be so sure," of of the Weasley twins muttered and threw Ron a narrow look. The other
twin smirked.

Shuddering, Harry helped Neville collect his papers. In front of the stairs, he gave Hermione a short
hug and whispered the promise to be in the common room early for their special time alone. Her
smile was brilliant, and then they all trotted up to their dorms to get ready for their first full week at
school.

oOo

The next morning, Harry was beginning to reconsider letting Hermione teach him martial arts. While
they didn't have as much time like they'd had on Saturday, her exercises were still incredibly
demanding. Shorter breaks to catch his breath were one thing, the other were the higher number of
repetitions. Punches, kicks, and blocks, it all was one huge blur in Harry's overwhelmed mind when
she finally declared them done for the morning.

"It's only ten to eight," Hermione said. "Take a quick shower and then we'll have a lot of time for
breakfast."

"Do we have to do this again on Wednesday?" Harry whined. "I can't lift my arms higher than so." He
tried to raise his hand over his head and failed. The muscles simply refused. "It's evil."
She hugged him, her trim, yet slightly curved body making him blush. "I know. Three times a week is hard, but I want you to be somewhat able to defend yourself quickly."

"Let's just go a little bit slower," Harry begged, unsure whether he should find the bit of sweat on her gross or interesting. "Wood'll kill me if I can't hold on to my broom. Please?"

Hermione sighed. "Alright, we'll go a little slower. But you have to do your best."

"Of course," Harry reassured her. "Thanks." Deciding that he didn't mind Hermione's slight dampness, he tightened the embrace for a moment and inhaled her scent. A little embarrassed, he said, "I don't know how I'll wash my hair. It really hurts."

Hermione bit her lip, working hard not to laugh at him. "You'll manage, I'm sure. See you in a few minutes."

At breakfast, Dobby spoiled them with hot vegetable soup, fruit, and fragrant buttered bread with goat cheese and fig jam, decorated with edible flowers. It was unusual but delicious and warmed them right up in the slight chill of the great hall.

"What is that?" Ron asked as he sat down across from Harry. He eyed the bread distrustfully. "Why would you eat flowers?"

Harry shrugged. "It's good." He sipped his tea. "What do you think we'll be doing in Hagrid's class today?"

"Not something with hippogriffs, that's for sure," Ron replied. He filled his plate with sausages, eggs, and toast. "Maybe it's something normal, like a krup or something. I wonder why he hasn't asked yet to borrow your monster cat, Hermione."

"Crookshanks is not a monster, Ron," Hermione answered evenly. "Why would you even think that? He's staying out of your way."

"He's big and ugly." Ron inhaled a whole sausage, barely chewing before swallowing noisily. "If Scabbers were still alive, your monster would surely have terrorized him."

Hermione paled with fury. "But Scabbers isn't here, and you have no reason to say such things. Take it back."

"Nope." Ron narrowed his eyes at her. "Your bloody cat is a menace, always lying in the way and bothering people."
"No one has complained yet," Harry said quietly, just as furious as Hermione about the nonsense Ron was spouting. "So, what is it to you? What's your problem? If you just want to hassle Hermione, you can stop right here. I won't listen to it any longer, and neither will she."

"Don't see how you can stop me," Ron muttered. "It's my right to complain about her bloody cat."

"Well," Fred (or George) said as he sat down next to Ron, "not stepping on him might keep him out of your hair."

"Or not trying to kick him," George (or Fred) added from Ron's other side. "We saw you, little brother, that wasn't nice."

"You tried to kick Crookshanks?" Hermione screeched. "How dare you, Ronald Weasley!"

"He was in my way, lying around on the floor like he has a bloody right to!" Ron fumed.

"We don't know what part of his brain has shut off now, but we'll try to fix it," the twin on Ron's left said cheerfully.

"And write mum a long letter," the one to the right added.

"She might have some ideas."

"Thanks, guys," Harry said.

"Yes, thank you." Hermione glared daggers at Ron. "Just so you know, we are over, Ronald. You lay one hand on Crookshanks and your parents will have a pretzel for a son. You get me? Sorry, Harry, I lost my appetite. I'll see you outside." She grabbed her bag and cloak and stomped off, whispers following her exit.

Spluttering, Ron looked to Harry for help. "Why is she talking to me like that?"

"Why are you talking to her like that?" Harry shot back. Seeing Fred and George's disgust soothed his anger a little. "Leave Crookshanks alone, Ron. Talk to us again when you're ready to apologize to Hermione."

"But Harry!"

Harry ignored the redhead's dismayed shout as he swiftly followed his girlfriend out of the hall. He took his half eaten bread with him, resolving to have Dobby slip Hermione a snack later.
He didn't have to go far to catch up with Hermione. She was literally waiting outside for him, just behind the portal, and she was crying.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," Harry murmured and pulled her a bit aside. "How can I help?"

"Can I have a hug?" she sniffled and gladly came into his embrace when he opened his arms. "He's such a prat. I know I promised to try, but I don't think I can be his friend anymore, Harry. Please don't be angry."

Harry scowled at the portal to the great hall. "It's not your fault. He was way out of line. Kicking Crookshanks would be like kicking Hedwig, and I hope he's clever enough to know that I wouldn't ever forgive him for that."

"What's wrong with him, anyway?" Hermione muttered. "It's like he's actively trying to put us off."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, he has succeeded." Harry rubbed Hermione's hunched back. "Will you be alright?"

"Yes, of course. I'm just ... shocked that he'd do that to someone's pet." Hermione loosened the embrace and wiped her eyes. "I told myself I wouldn't cry all over you again so soon."

"It wasn't your fault. Or mine." Harry smiled. "It's alright, 'Mione, I don't mind."

Instead of finding a warm place to spend the last quarter hour before class, they wandered down to Hagrid's hut and petted the corralled hippogriffs. Agapi had obviously taken a shine to Hermione; the mare had barely waited for Hermione to bow before she bowed back and nudged the girl's hands to be petted. Buckbeak was a bit more reserved and actually allowed the others to get a pat in.

Class was, unfortunately, the complete opposite of challenging. Hagrid was so scared to invite trouble that he had them feed flobberworms. Those weren't classed by the Ministry as boring by mistake, and the whole class except for a few Slytherins was groaning in disappointment.

"I bet Ron would want a krup now," Hermione muttered resentfully as they threw lettuce into their worms' pen.

"Poor Hagrid," Parvati said. "He looks so sad. Good thing Lavender wants to make the whole thing
with Buckbeak and Malfoy the headline for the first edition of her paper."

Harry perked up. "Really?"

"Of course! You've missed the Prophet today; Minister Fudge has called for a commission of inquiry, but we all know what the result will be." Parvati snorted and sneered in Malfoy's direction. "The little twit's father will do his best to get poor Buckbeak executed, at least that's what the reporter wrote, and Lavender is determined not to let that happen."

"We could start a petition," Hermione said thoughtfully. "And we should find a legal way to sell our articles to other newspapers. Maybe to other European countries, if they'll have us?"

"Well, Lav didn't mention it because her mum still works for the Prophet, but there is one other newspaper in Britain," Parvati said delicately. She looked around as if to make sure that Lavender really couldn't listen in. "It's called The Quibbler, and Luna Lovegood's dad manages it."

"Well, good! We should talk to this Luna."

Parvati shook her head. "It's, er, not quite so easy. At least not for most people. You see, Luna's not exactly ... normal ... and her dad is even more eccentric. It, er, could be difficult to work with him, because he prefers to publish riddles and nonsense articles."

"Does he have readers?" Hermione asked. "Because if he does, it's still worthwhile to contact him."

"That reminds me, can we even sell our newspaper?" Harry asked. He threw another handful of lettuce at the worms and grimaced when both ends of the creatures slobbered all over their food. "I might have heard that Gringotts would be interested in subscribing."

"Lav's mum is on it, she'll find out for us. Legally it's tricky, as we're all minors. Lavender doesn't want the paper to become school property, though, in case teachers decide to place gag orders." Parvati pulled a face. "We should probably prepare for the worst case scenario and assume that we should finance it ourselves and find a private, silent sponsor for the legalities."

"Ah, I see. Good thinking. Say, have you decided on a name yet?"

Parvati grinned. "There'll be an announcement later in the week. Can you wait that long? I don't want to spoil the big moment for you."

"Sure." Harry grinned back. "I'm looking forward to it."
Before they went back up to the castle, all the Gryffindors and again Blaise Zabini from Slytherin remained behind to console Hagrid and greet the hippogriffs. The large man was visibly moved by their solidarity and invited them all over to tea sometime.

"Decent of you to stay, Zabini," Harry told the Slytherin boy on their way to their next class. "Thanks."

Zabini shrugged slightly. "Malfoy's an idiot, and I liked the first class. I just wish I'd gotten to fly, too."

"You can still do that. Hermione and I visited Hagrid yesterday. He'll be glad." Harry frowned at Zabini. "Just ... no tricks, alright? Hagrid doesn't need any more grief."

"You do not bite the hand that lets you fly a hippogriff," Zabini retorted with a faint smirk. "And honestly, everything is better than flobberworms."

"Also, Professor Kettleburn didn't lose so many limbs because he liked the tame beasties," Hermione said from behind them. "I distinctly remember Alicia Spinnet telling us in first year how her class had to deal with a runespoor, and she was a fourth year then, so Hagrid definitely isn't the first teacher to go a little over the top."

Zabini offered her a nod. "That's why I'm not with Malfoy and his cronies. I'm here to learn about magical creatures, not to sit around and feed flobberworms."

It soon became apparent that they were all heading to the same class, Ancient Runes. Harry was really looking forward to it, especially to the spell-crafting aspect of the class. It would be a few years yet before they would be allowed to dabble in actual crafting, but finding out how magic worked seemed like a fine thing in the meantime.

The Slytherins had taken up half the room already, and to the Gryffindors' surprise Malfoy seemed determined to teach Zabini a lesson.

"You can sit with the Gryffindorks, Zabini. You seem to like them well enough," Malfoy sneered. "Maybe St. Potter will let you sit with him." He smirked when his friends laughed hissingly.

Zabini shrugged. "Why not. How about it, Potter?"

"Er ..." Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione, but when she nodded, he straightened himself and said, "Sure. This table?"
They got settled while the Slytherins stared balefully and then Professor Babbling entered the classroom.

"Welcome, students! And welcome, Mr. Potter. I'm glad the situation got sorted. You haven't missed much, and therefore we'll dive right in. Who can tell me something about this rune sequence? Yes, Miss Granger?"

Something like elation flooded Harry as he listened to Hermione explain the magical and literal meaning of the three runes the professor had written on her blackboard. Even though they were just beginning, he could already tell that this would be one of his favourite classes.

"Now, who wants to guess what spell this is?" Professor Babbling asked. "No one? Come on, just a guess!"

Harry raised his hand. "Uhm, since the runes are about power, yet lightness and lifting in a literal sense, and control in the meaning of steering ... maybe the hovering charm?"

"Very good, Mr. Potter, take five points." Babbling turned to her blackboard. "How about this one? Again, only three runes ... amaze me!"

oOo

"I honestly haven't ever seen you this animated in a class," Hermione gushed on the way to lunch. "Harry, you were really good! You guessed every charm right!"

"I read a bit ahead in my other books," Harry admitted.

"But you used logic, and I bet not every charm was an example in your books," Hermione replied. "Really, it was ..." She blushed a little before murmuring, "Very attractive."

Harry lost a step and had to scramble to remain upright. "Uh, thanks."

"You'll probably want to keep sitting with Zabini, and that's okay, but maybe we can do our homework together?" Hermione treded her arm through Harry's. "I want to attempt the puzzle for extra points."

As Harry still took a potion every day, Hermione went on to save him a seat and left him in the bathroom next to the great hall to drink it in peace.

Right on cue, Dobby made an appearance. "Hello, Harry Potter sir! Here be your potion ... and a
letter from Gringotts."

"Oh?" Harry quickly downed the potion - peach flavoured today - and accepted the heavy envelope. "Is it about your pension?"

Dobby bounced happily. "It is. Harry Potter sir's most efficient steward be done writing the business plan. He be wanting Harry Potter sir's approval."

"I'll look it over tonight," Harry promised and smiled. "You're all raring to go, aren't you?"

"Dobby be yearning for more work. Dobby be having much magic!"

Harry thought that the tennisball sized eyes indeed seemed to glow a little, and his elf friend looked almost rosy in his green cheeks. It was a very good look on him. "Then I'll be as quick as I can. Come see me tonight before bedtime."

"Dobby will!"

After hugging Harry's legs, Dobby popped away and Harry joined his friends at the Gryffindor table. Afterwards, Harry went to his first class without any of his friends. Being sorted so late into Arithmancy, Professor McGonagall had put him with the alternate class to avoid an overlap with his Care of Magical Creature elective.

Harry didn't mind the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws in the least, especially not when Susan Bones greeted him cheerfully and invited him to join her study group. Her friends, Hannah Abbott and Lisa Turpin, welcomed him as well. It almost was as if the fear and shunning of last year had been a bad dream and Harry didn't quite know what to think about that.

*Brady's right,* he thought as he settled down and readied his writing utensils, *I need to remember last year. At least those three never called me foul names, that's something, I guess.*

"Welcome to Arithmancy," Professor Vector said and eyed the two tables with four students each. "I'm pleased to see so many eager faces because Arithmancy plays an essential part in magical development. Who can tell me which branches of magic in our daily lives are especially reliant on the art?"

Harry raised his hand with all the other students, grinning when he got a chance to contribute. It marked the beginning of yet another fascinating elective, and he couldn't wait to compare notes with Hermione later.

Afterwards, Transfiguration seemed to almost pale in comparison, perhaps because Harry now knew that each spell could be taken apart and studied in depth with Arithmancy. It made his fingers itch a
little, even though he'd always liked the hands-on aspect of Professor McGonagall's class.

When the last bell rang, the headmaster's voice boomed through the school and asked all of them to convene in the great hall.

"I wonder if it's about Professor Lupin's club," Hermione said quietly. She slid onto the bench at their house table and tucked her bag between her feet.

"Seems likely," Harry replied, sitting next to her and leaning a little against her. "He's standing up there."

"Yes, but lots of other teachers as well," Ron said from across them. "I hope it won't mean more homework."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at his audacity to come near them after their fight in the morning, but held her peace. Grateful, Harry touched her hand beneath the table and smiled slightly when she curled her little finger around his.

"Students, thank you for your attendance," Dumbledore called over the noise. "Please quiet down now for my announcement, it won't take long. Now, a few of you brought to our attention that they don't feel safe with the dementors so close to Hogwarts. They asked whether they could be taught the Patronus Charm - that's the charm the aurors used on the train ride to chase the dementors off - and requested that anyone who might be interested be taught also. From this, the idea of the Patronus Club was born."

Whispers broke out, which could only be quelled by a long, pointed look down Dumbledore's nose. Achieving the desired silence, the headmaster then allowed Professor Lupin to continue.

"All seven years are invited to join the Patronus Club," Lupin said, easily managing to silence the last mutterings. "Depending on your numbers, the spell will be taught by several qualified professors in the hour before dinner on week days. The entry lists will be posted in your common rooms. You have until Friday night to sign up. Next week on Monday, the club will officially have its first meeting. You'll be notified in time when it is your turn. Thank you."

Applause surged up, quickly overtaking the whole hall and visibly humbling Lupin. The Weasley twins whistled loudly and only knocked it off when Professor McGonagall made her way over to them as the students began to leave the hall.

"I didn't think it'd happen so quickly," Hermione said, nearly gasping with excitement. "My parents will be so pleased."
"My relatives would probably hope that one of those things ate me before I could learn the spell if I told them. If I needed their permission for the club, they'd not give it," Harry replied, shrugging when Neville shot him a horrified look. "What? It's the truth."

"Well, we'll all learn that spell, and then those things won't be able to scare us again," Hermione said, her face a study in determination. "Now, who wants to go to the library? We could get a good hour and a half in before dinner."

Neville excused himself, but Harry joined her. They still didn't have much homework yet and therefore spent the time until dinner discussing Arithmancy and attempting to take the hovering charm apart. How this correlated with Ancient Runes, they could only guess at this point, but Harry was as eager as Hermione to find out.

"This is so much fun," Hermione stated as they packed their things away. The dinner bell had just tolled and all around them students left their tables. "I don't even want to imagine how boring Divination would've been."

"Yeah, me too," Harry admitted. "Speaking of boring ... how was Muggle Studies?"

She rolled her eyes spectacularly. "Oh, don't get me started. The course material is ancient, it's like the professor believes that mundane people still live in the 1800s. That's absolutely ridiculous, because the muggle-born students are telling others how modern and advanced the muggle world is all the time! Lavender and Parvati practically strong-armed me into sending Cosmo and Vogue to them over the summer because wizarding Britain is still in the Stone Age when it comes to fashion magazines ... or fashion, really."

"Tell me what you really think," Harry egged her on, grinning.

Hermione sniffed. "Oh, I won't just tell you. I'll complain to the board of governors, because that class is a massive waste of time, and an insult to all mundanes and mundane-born, and also because it is the height of cheek to actually take money for that bullshite. It's no wonder pureblood gits like Malfoy think they're better than us. You have an in with Neville's gran, you can talk to her about it."

"Hermione!" Harry laughed, a little shocked about her bluntness. "Already using me to further your cause?"

"Always," she replied with an unrepentant grin, "but my causes are mostly just, and since you are a good boyfriend, you'll let me get away with it. You will, right?"

"I might demand compensation later," Harry warned, but he took her hand and squeezed it comfortably. "If it's really that bad, it needs to go."
"We've started a list of topics we really need to write about in the school paper," Hermione murmured. "A lot of it is really infuriating because it is child endangerment, plain and simple. Mundanes would never accept this."

Harry frowned. "You're saying mundane a lot ... why?"

"That's what the French wizards call their non-magical neighbours. It's way classier than muggle. That word sounds idiotic, as if people without magic were incompetent and less smart, which just isn't true." Hermione took a deep breath. "In July, I read a paper about wormhole travel by Dr. Rodney McKay. It was just theoretical, but Harry, his mind! His equations are like poesy and his theoretical analysis nearly brought me to tears, it was so well thought out and logical. No wizard I've ever met can compete with what he's capable of. He's brilliant, and it infuriates me that being a mundane makes him less worthy in the eyes of British wizards."

"I really hope that McKay guy is old," Harry murmured and tugged Hermione into a small alcove. He pressed her against the wall and leaned his forehead against hers. "Otherwise I'll feel very jealous in a moment."

Hermione melted against him. "He's brilliant and around thirty, and I might be a little in love with his brain."

"But?" Harry looked at her, grinning. "There better be a but in there somewhere."

She smiled sweetly. "But you're you, and you're smart in a different way, and I really like you. But if you're so concerned about some astrophysicist sweeping me away, you can always get a degree or two."

"You're terrible." Harry kissed her forehead. "And you make me almost believe that I could do it."

"You can do it," Hermione said fiercely. "Don't let anyone tell you what you're capable of. Only you can find that out, okay?" She hugged him almost a little too tightly. "Most people are dumb and we don't play with them anymore."

Harry hugged her back. "Good plan. I approve."

At lunch, a few students looked at them appraisingly, but no one brought up their closeness. It served Harry well, because he had his hands full with Ron's underhanded complaints about their argument at breakfast.

"Weasley, would you shut up already?" Katie Bell hissed. "Stop angling for Harry's broom, it's pathetic."
"Yeah, you better apologize for your unfounded accusations first," Alicia Spinnet added coldly. "Crookshanks is a sweet guy. If he doesn't like you, he'll have his reasons."

Lee Jordan snorted. "I know what those are."

Ron flushed with temper. "Shut it. It's not my fault the school brooms are always checked out when I wanna fly."

"They're not," Seamus said, throwing Ron a disbelieving look. "On Sunday, at least half a dozen were still there when we went down to the pitch."

"But they're old and broken," Ron huffed. "We can't be expected to train for Quidditch on those."

"You mean you can't be expected to train on those," Hermione snapped. "No one else is complaining."

"Well, that's not quite true," Fred chimed in.

"We do, frequently," George continued.

"-because some of these brooms are death traps," Fred said. "Unfortunately-"

"-Professor McGonagall told us-"

"-that there's no money for better brooms in the school budget."

Hermione rubbed her forehead as if to ward off a headache. "You want to take it to the paper, or the board of govenors?"

"Both," Fred and George said at once, echoed by the whole Quidditch team. It was a wonder, really, that Oliver Wood had kept silent until now.

Parvati was already scribbling on the infamous list of topics and Lavender was taking a few notes on a blank piece of parchment.

"Hey, Colin," Harry called over to the second years. "How about taking some pictures of the old brooms? Maybe some of them in flight as well?"

"Sure, Harry!" Colin replied. "Can I get credit?"
"Of course," Parvati said. "We'll have contracts for that kind of thing."

"How much longer until your announcement?" Dean asked. "You said later in the week, but when?"

Lavender put her pencil down. "Well, it depends. We're in some negotiations and the results will determine what kind of printing press we get, and who's going to be our sponsor."

"Sounds serious," Hermione said.

"A good serious," Lavender assured them. "Honestly, if this works out, we'll be set. It shouldn't be later than Sunday, though."

"Then I'll keep my thumbs pressed," Harry promised, and his housemates all agreed.

To keep his promise to Dobby, Harry excused himself after dinner and let the house elf pop him to the Come And Go Room. There, he had the peace and quiet to study Sharptooth's business plan.

As the estate was situated smack in the middle of a muggle settlement - mundane, Harry reminded himself - it already had some standard wards, but the cost of increasing the security was substantial, as was the long-term plan to acquire the land around the property. For a moment, Harry was grateful that the money for it would come out of the Potter family fortune and not the elf fund, because they would have been nearly broke when everything was said and done.

Still, he wanted his elf friends and the future guests to be safe, and so he signed off on Malijar's gift for the perimeter ward stones, Gringotts France's interior designers for remodelling and refurbishing, and the hiring of human personnel in addition to Dobby and Betty's work.

"A resident healer is a great idea," Harry mumbled, checking that point. "Sirius might go there for a holiday, especially if I can convince Gringotts to supply potions for all the guests. Healthy food choices ... of course. Laundry service, yup, definitely. Taxi service for all of France ..." Harry sat back. He hadn't thought that Dobby would take him seriously, but he could see how a house elf travelling service might be a welcome alternative to Floo travel or portkeys. "Great idea, but we'll have to find out what fees are appropriate."

There was more to decide: where to locally buy produce, meat, and dairy; how to best use the garden to supplement vegetables and herbs for the kitchen; how much margin to add to the cost of running the pension to keep it attractive for guests but make it reasonably profitable at the same time. He was also tasked with deciding what kind of witch or wizard would be allowed to apply for jobs - it was kind of weird to examine his ethics and impose them on strangers. Still, he thought it wasn't too much to ask that his future employees be honest, loyal, friendly, and well-educated in their area of service. The payment plan for the employees was above average and included standard medical service through the in-house healer and options for bonus pay for exemplary service and further
training. Harry thought that it looked very well, indeed. Contrasting the generous salary, there were the employment oaths to consider, and Harry decided to err on the side of caution and opted for all the loyalty and security clauses Sharptooth had recommended in his proposal. After all, he didn't want Death Eaters, or, god forbid, Voldemort himself knocking on his door because someone decided to blab.

All of this took nearly two hours. It was rewarding work, even if Harry knew that the first year would be a dead loss. He agreed with both Sharptooth and Dobby, however, that getting things going was far more important than earning money, especially when he had so much of it sitting around in his vaults. He believed in Dobby's planning and couldn't wait to see how it all played out.

"Dobby," he finally called when the warning bell for curfew sounded. "Do you have a moment?"

Dobby popped in at once, small hands clasped and ears quivering in excitement. "Dobby always be having time for Harry Potter sir." His huge eyes wandered to the sealed envelope in Harry's hand. "Harry Potter sir be looking over Steward Sharptooth's proposal!"

"I promised," Harry said with a smile. "Everything looks good on paper and I signed off on it, but if something doesn't work out, tell Sharptooth immediately and he'll sort it out."

"Thank you, thank you," Dobby gushed. "Harry Potter sir be such a generous wizard! Dobby and Betty be beginning work immediately. Cleaning be such a pleasure!"

"Please take me back to Gryffindor tower first," Harry laughed. "And please remember to keep Sirius company, yeah?"

"Dobby will!" Smiling hugely, Dobby took Harry by the wrist and popped him into their established dark corner close to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. "Thank you, Harry Potter sir." And off the elf went.

The common room was still full of students when Harry entered, although his year mates were just beginning to gather their things. Hermione beckoned Harry over to the couch she was occupying.

"Everything alright?" she asked. "You're smiling."

"Just good news," Harry replied. Crookshanks stretched from Hermione's lap onto his and batted his paw against Harry's hand. "Yeah, okay. You're a cuddle monster, my friend." He started scratching the cat's head.

Crookshanks closed his eyes and purred with satisfaction.
The long day was catching up with Harry and he yawned. "Don't be mad, but I think I'll sleep in tomorrow. I'm knackered."

"No problem," she replied.

"How are you even doing it?" Harry wondered. "You never seem to be tired."

Hermione shrugged. "I'm used to it. But after deciding against Muggle Studies and Divination, I really only have as many classes as you do. Although I could do with a free period in the morning! It's my Arithmancy class first thing, you see."

"Bummer," Harry offered.

Smiling, Hermione answered, "It's alright. I have a short day on Wednesday instead."

The prefects chose that moment to usher them to bed, and they went quite willingly. It really had been a long day, and as soon as Harry's head hit the pillow, he was asleep.

oOo

Sleeping in on a school day felt **decadent**. Harry was also a little overwhelmed, though in a good way, because Dobby had surprisingly taken him on a dream tour through his new pension. So say that the experience had been magical would be a massive understatement.

"It's already beautiful," Harry said as his friend spoiled him with breakfast in bed. "I almost can't imagine how great it will be when you've got it ready and running. But it looks so big! Are you sure that you'll be able to manage it all on your own?"

"Well, Dobby be looking for help," the elf admitted, "but we not be needing it for a year at least. There be wizards and witches for direct services soon, so it be alright."

"Good." Harry swallowed his fruit salat. "So, what's on your agenda today?"

"Betty and Dobby be taking Steward Sharptooth to the pension for warding. He be requesting Head Warders Shanoo and Gartuk."

"Oh, okay. Isn't that kind of ... excessive? I don't actually want to turn the property into a fortress."

Dobby shook his head. "It be clever because they be able to forge connection between Harry Potter sir and the additional ward stones. It be very advanced magic, but because Harry Potter be needing to claim wards from Britain, that's what be happening."
"I'd love to get the theory behind that explained," Harry admitted. "It sounds dead useful!"

"Dobby be telling Steward Sharptooth. Maybe he be able to arrange a lesson," Dobby replied. "More lemonade?"

Thoroughly pampered, Harry had a bounce in his step on his way to Charms. Most of his friends were disgruntled about his good mood, but he just greeted them cheerfully and took his seat beside Hermione.

"They'll ambush you if you keep this up," she smirked but leaned against him. "What has you in such a good mood?"

"I'm just happy," Harry replied honestly and gently bumped against her shoulder. "How was Arithmancy?"

"I love it." Hermione whispered, eyes shining.

Then, Professor Flitwick called them to order and class began. The whole ninety minutes Harry felt Ron stare at the back of his head. It was unnerving, to say the least, but even worse were the boy's muttered complaints that Harry had all of Hermione's attention while he was languishing.

Towards the end of the class, Hermione finally had enough. She turned around and snapped, "I'm not helping Harry with his Lumos Duo charm. He's helping me. So kindly shut up. Also, I'm not your private tutor. You can do your own work."

"One point from Gryffindor for talking in class, Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick called out. The Slytherins snickered and even Ron looked triumphant. "And five points to Gryffindor for dispensing valuable advice to a fellow classmate."

Ron was close to blowing up, Harry knew, and he was not interested in waiting for the eruption of Mt. Weasley. As soon as the bell rang, he and Hermione booked it to the great hall and hid out in the bathroom until the others had passed them.

"I have a feeling that you're here more for a potion than my company," Harry said but gamely flicked a vial with blue content at her. "Bone strengthener today."

"I love it. It kind of tastes like ice mice," Hermione said. "Thank you. By the way, when do you plan on brewing your own?"

"As soon as I've found a room where we can work undisturbed. I'm kind of leery of using the Come And Go Room because it's so magical. If I've learned one thing from Snape, it's that ambient magic
can be deadly. But I also have no idea what shape the Chamber Of Secrets is in after the goblins took the basilisk. It would be ideal."

"We could look," Hermione offered. "If Myrtle's bathroom isn't safe enough for you, and I agree it isn't, that's really the best option. Also, you said the chamber is huge; we could make it into some kind of study area ... that is, if you want to share. If you want to keep it for yourself, that's fine, Harry. You certainly earned it."

"No, we can make use of it. I just don't want anyone else down there, at least for now. It's hard to find a quiet space at Hogwarts." They drank their potions and Harry put the vials away. He asked, "Does it make me a bad person that I don't want to share with Ron?"

Hermione's face scrunched up. "Are you serious? I don't know what crawled up his bum over the summer, but he's acting like a complete prat. If you wanted to include him, I'd think you were nuts. No one is that much of a glutton for punishment."

Harry sighed. "It's still ... weird. Should we maybe get him checked for curses? I heard the old Egyptians were big with them."

"I can just see Mrs. Weasley reading that letter," Hermione said dryly. "Dear Mrs. W, unfortunately your son Ronald ist being a total git this year. Since you were in Egypt over the summer, we're concerned that he might have picked up a curse or two. We'd appreciate it if you could have him checked out, maybe Madam Pomfrey can help? With thanks, Harry and Hermione."

Laughing, Harry steered her out of the door. "We can do that if he keeps it up. Until then, I'd rather not have very much to do with him."

"How will that work if you share a dorm room?" she asked, not quite sarcastically. "You're rather good with charms, but will that keep him from leaving you alone?"

"It did so far, and Seamus and Dean are rather fed up with him as well," Harry said with a shrug. "Look, he's sitting with Percy ... I'm not sure it'll do him any good."

It didn't do Ron any good. In one second, he looked utterly normal, if still a bit bad-tempered, and in the next his hair turned from red to a glowing neon pink.

"Oh dear," Hermione smirked as laughter broke out. "He'll hate that."

"Only green could've been worse," Harry agreed.

In that moment, Ron's hair turned neon green and everybody roared with laughter.
"What have you done?" Ron demanded. He grabbed a silver serving platter, dumping the roast potatoes onto the table, and stared at his reflection. "Fred! George! You take that back!"

"Careful, Ronnekins!" George hollered.

"You're looking a little purple in the face!" Fred shouted.

Ron's hair promptly changed colour, and he screamed in outrage.

"Nice look, Weasel!" Malfoy cried. "But I always wondered how you'd look with black hair. Just like St. Potter, I'd think. I bet you want to be him. That's your chance!"

More and more students got into the game, calling out colours and causing Ron's hair to change every couple of seconds.

"Er, I propose staying away from him for the rest of the day," Harry said. A few seats down, Dean was smirking at him, just like the twins. "Shouldn't be too hard in the greenhouses."

Ron was in a horrid temper for the rest of the day. He fumed all through Herbology, because Professor Sprout seemed to find endless reasons to call out colours, and during Defence Against The Dark Arts, Professor Lupin actually asked Ron to stand in front of the class, so he could explain what exactly a curse was, and to demonstrate the most common counter curses. It made Ron livid that none of the usual counters helped, which didn't keep his classmates from taking great delight in trying.

"Let's get away," Harry murmured and hurried Hermione away from the classroom. Myrtle's bathroom was close and his girlfriend didn't protest when Harry shooed her inside. "No time like the present, right?"

"Good thing we both learned several cleaning charms," Hermione said with a little grimace. "I remember vividly how you described the way down."

"Better not think about it," Harry agreed. "But I have a plan for that." He hissed at the sink, making it open the secret passageway. "Next thing on my agenda is changing the bloody password. I'll go first. Wait for my call, alright?"

Hermione nodded. "Be careful."

The way down wasn't as horrible as Harry remembered. Apparently the goblins had cleaned up the chute and even cast a cushioning charm onto the floor below. It was beginning to fail now, but fortunately it was still good enough for a comfortable landing.
"You can go!" Harry called. Seconds later, Hermione rushed down and straight into his arms. "Hey there."

Hermione grinned. "That was fun. Gringotts cleaned up for you."

"That's just cosmetics. The real deal is that they fixed the cave-in. There, this is where Lockhart tried to obliviate Ron and me." Harry took Hermione's hand with his left and cast a lumos with his wand. "Let's check it out."

All of the basilisk skins had been taken away. Harry had known that, of course, but it was still a little strange to see the tunnels so empty. The goblins had done very good work vanishing the valuables, debris, and dust. They'd even installed new sconces on the walls, which was very welcome.

"Lights!" Harry called and the torches ignited. "Nox." His wand light went out at once.

"This is incredible," Hermione breathed. When they reached the snake-guarded portal to the chamber proper, she stood up straight. "This is it?"

"Yeah." Harry hissed the command to open the door. "It was really scary."

"It still is a little scary," Hermione murmured and grabbed his hand a little tighter. The grinding of metal against stone as the lock disengaged, and then stone against stone when the door slowly opened, was deafening in the stillness of the chamber tunnels.

Carefully, they stepped through the portal, wands at the ready. The chamber was vast and silent and empty. The goblins hadn't repaired the structural damage to the chamber, but they had taken away the rubble and cleaned up the floor. Not a speck of blood remained.

"The basilisk came out of Salazar's mouth," Harry pointed to the ugly stature. "It's still open. Do you want to take a look?"

"Of course," Hermione replied at once. "The goblins won't have left anything dangerous behind ... or would they?"

"Nah, they're thorough. I learned that they value children above profit, even human children." Harry looked around but couldn't find anything to climb the statue. "Huh, I wonder if ... stairs." Like Diagon Alley, the stone began to shift and little handholds appeared. "Seems like we have to climb."

It wasn't difficult to climb up to Salazar's mouth. Once there, the opening was large enough for Harry and Hermione to walk inside upright. Both their wands spilled light into the cavern behind it. It, too, had been cleaned out, but far in the back there was an ornately decorated door. A large metal snake.
was curling all over the wood.

"Doesn't look like the goblins managed to open it," Harry whispered. "Should we try?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "Maybe some reinforcements are in order. Can you call Dobby?"

"I should've thought of him. Dobby," Harry called, barely flinching when the elf appeared beside them with a soft pop. "Hi. We're about to do something potentially stupid. Would you mind watching out for danger?"

"Dobby will!" the elf squeaked excitedly.

Harry took a breath, then hissed, "Open!"

Nothing happened, although the metal snake lifted its head and flicked its tongue as though scenting the air.

"That's not the entry word, Speaker," it hissed.

Harry's face lit up. "Oh, alright. I see."

"Harry?" Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What's up?"

"This door isn't locked with a standard password. I'll have to try others. Can you give me a hint?"

"I cannot." The snake started to slither over the door. "If you persist, I'll bite you."

"I don't think so," Harry replied, thinking of the Right of Conquest. "You see, I defeated your master three times. Whatever he owned is now mine."

"Prove it," the snake hissed. "A drop of your blood will sway me ... or be your death."

"Wait!" Hermione said sharply when Harry attempted to let the snake cut his finger with its fang for a drop of blood. "What are you doing?"

Harry stiffened. "Er, that's kind of ... secret. I really can't tell you."

"What? Why?" Hermione stared at him. A myriad of thoughts and emotions ran across her face.
"Don't you trust me anymore?"

Harry sighed. "It's not that. I trust you, but I don't trust many other people, including the headmaster and Snape. They can read minds, and I really don't want them to know."

"What?" Hermione shrieked. "They're **reading minds**? Of **students**?"

"Well, I think so. Whenever Dumbledore stares at me, it feels kind of funny. And Snape is scary even without trying." Harry shrugged when Hermione sputtered. "Apparently they're known **legilimens.**"

"But that's illegal!"

Harry smiled wrily. "Do you honestly think that'll keep Snape from doing it? He was a Death Eater ... and maybe he still is one. Who can say?"

Hermione appeared to be stunned. "That's just wrong."

"I know, and I'm very sorry. I'm trying to find out how to keep my thoughts safe, but there doesn't seem to be a quick solution." Harry pointed at the waiting snake. "I'd like to do this, 'Mione. Alright?"

"Okay. I won't ask questions." She smiled weakly. "Sorry for freaking out on you."

"And I'm really sorry for not being able to tell you. Alright ..." Harry carefully held his left index finger against the tooth of the snake and allowed it to nick his skin.

Exactly one drop was sucked into the fang. For a moment, nothing happened, but then the snake's eyes began to glow and its body began moving in a complicated sequence. Several bolts released, and a ward of some kind shimmered before it fell.

"**Told you**," Harry hissed at it. "**Shall we set a new password?**"

"**Yes, Master,**" it replied. "**Your wish is my command.**"

"**What is your name?**"

The snake reared up a little and displayed a pretty, golden hood. "**My name is Audovera. It means fighter in a war. I'm very good at protecting your secrets, Master.**"
"Then the new password shall be Audovera's hidey-hole," Harry decided. "Please let us in now."

Audovera glowed all over, her darkened scales cleaning themselves in front of their eyes to a polished brass with golden highlights, and then the heavy door swung open. Both Harry and Hermione immediately raised their wands and illuminated the chamber.

The first thing they saw were shelves and shelves of books. Their leathery spines were all adorned with gold, and despite their incredible age the air wasn't musty at all, merely cool. A fireplace sprang to life, dust vanished with a sweep of ancient magic. It didn't feel like anything Harry had experienced so far and it made him shiver. There was no wood, yet the flames were flickering merrily just like real fire. Two comfortable armchairs stood in front of it, between them a low coffee table that had still a couple of books on it.

"That's ..." Hermione's breath hitched. "Oh, Harry! That's Slytherin's library! It must be! But how is this possible? I thought all of his treasures were lost."

"They're obviously not, though." Harry swallowed. "There must be several hundreds of books."

"And journals." Hermione trembled with excitement. "His journals, Harry!"

They stepped inside, Dobby always a few steps ahead of them, fingers raised to ward off dangers. For long minutes, they inspected the shelves and the large tomes. Most of them weren't written in English, which disappointed Hermione severely. Especially the journals, which she was eager to examine, were useless to her.

"They're all written in parseltongue," Harry told her. "I'm sorry."

"You can read it, though, can't you?" she asked hopefully.

"Well, I kind of can, but it's ... old. Like Old English. It's hard to understand." Harry carefully turned a page of the journal Hermione had taken from the shelf. "But this seems to be about a spell ... healing, I think. Interesting. People always say that Slytherin was evil."

"No one with half a brain believes that," Hermione huffed. "Honestly, he founded a school with three goody two-shoes. If he'd had such a problem being good, he'd have founded his own little institute for dark wizards and be done with it."

"Maybe he's written about that somewhere," Harry said eagerly. "Just think! People would go nuts!"

Hermione exhaled slowly and turned on her heels. "This is such a treasure trove. Harry, I ... I don't know what to say. Should we tell the teachers? Or the Ministry?"
"No," he said a little sharply. "No one else except other parselmouths can even read them, and I don't want to know what people like Fudge or Lucius Malfoy would do with them. Besides, I fought a bloody basilisk for them, so they're mine."

Hermione sighed. "All true. It's still a pity. Such knowledge, and no one will really appreciate it."

"Well, we will," Harry said, calmer now that she wasn't going to challenge his claim. "I plan on looking at all of them. If there's something useful in there, we'll find it. Who knows, it might help against the Dark Git."

"The Dark Git?" Hermione laughed involuntarily. "Harry! People will lynch you if you call You-Know-Who that."

"I'm pretty sure they won't." Harry scowled. "They seem to expect me to do him in. I'd think they'd be nicer to me because of that, but apparently they're not big on common courtesy and stuff."

"I'd like to knock some sense into people," Hermione admitted, "but that'd take decades and I've got better things to do with my time. Say ..." She glanced shyly at Harry. "What are your thoughts on leaving Britain when you're older?"

The fierce blush that overtook Harry's face was a complete surprise. "Uh."

Hermione flushed as well. "Oh god, I'm sorry. I don't necessarily mean with me ... it's just ... things are so bad with the government right now, and the ... Dark Git doesn't make it any better, does he? My parents already wanted to send me abroad, I've had time to think about it ... I think it could be good. Many countries have far more modern magical governments and societies than Britain."

"Er, I haven't ever thought about it," Harry confessed, fighting down the redness in his face. "I've always wanted to go on holiday, but actually living abroad?" He shrugged. "I wouldn't know how. What would I even do there?"

Still shy, Hermione stood close to him and clasped his hand. "Everything you wanted. You could study, open a business, apprentice with someone ... your parents left you some money, and you're smart. You could do anything, I'm sure of it."
"It kind of would be nice to do that with you, at least for a while," Harry admitted quietly. "But you'll have to tell me how all of that works first."

"I don't know everything," Hermione reminded him, but she smiled gently. "But I'd love to tell you what I know. My parents, too, I'm sure. They've always wanted me to be independent, that's why I've started learning French at a young age. In a couple of years I'll add Spanish or Italian."

"Which would you like more?" Harry asked. He opened a random book and stared at the gross potions ingredients depicted inside.

"Well, Spanish would be the practical choice. Millions of people all over the world speak it. But personally I find Italian far more interesting and beautiful. I like how it sounds, and how people move when they speak." She shrugged. "I'll learn both eventually."

Harry grinned. "Maybe I should learn other languages as well. It sounds fun."

"It should be one you're going to use. Studying because you feel you should isn't a very good reason. You forget things very quickly if they're useless to you." Hermione peeked over Harry's shoulder. "Ew, is that a filetted ox eye?"

"Minotaur, actually." Harry slammed the book shut. "No idea what it's been used for. So, a language, huh? I'd be down with Italian, even if I should probably learn French first."

"I have some books already, but they're mundane. I'll find out if there are magical books. And maybe we can find someone for interactive learning, too. A penpal perhaps?" Hermione carefully put the journals back and wiped her hands on her robes. "I don't know of a student at Hogwarts who's French or Italian or at least speaks the language. There's not much talk about that."

"Zabini might be Italian," Harry said. "His name sounds like it, at least. But he's a Slytherin. I dunno if he'd want to help us, if he even knows the language."

"Well, he's not been an idiot since the year started," Hermione replied. "Asking him won't hurt, and we can always put an ad in the WIT."

"Or ask Gringotts whether they know good teachers," Harry added. "They offer a lot of services. But I'll be honest ... I only want to do it for an hour a week for now. We've got loads of new
subjects, and there'll be homework now. I don't want to have too much to do."

"That's fine, Harry." Hermione hesitated but then said, "I'll learn very quickly, because of my ... my gift. But that's good! I could teach you all the basics and you can go as fast as you like in both French and Italian. There'll be no pressure from me."

That sounded like a fine plan to Harry. With the pension a done deal, he wanted to be able to talk to the employees, even if it would be years until that could actually happen. He wanted to read the menus and the signs and even the brochures Sharptooth wanted to print.

"Do you think Hector's legacy includes languages?" he asked.

"It should." Hermione grinned. "Oh, I'll get the best books for us! This'll be fun!"

Only a few short minutes later it unfortunately was already time to head back. Dobby popped them close to the great hall, promising a fine dinner before vanishing with a soft pop and leaving the two young people to find seats at the slowly filling table.

"Hey, where are you two coming from?" Dean asked. "Seamus and I were looking for you, Harry. Since there aren't enough brooms for everyone to play Quidditch, Seamus and I decided to round up enough people for football matches. Are you interested?"

Harry remembered listening to the matches his Uncle Vernon and Dudley had watched on the telly. There had been a lot of shouting and cursing, and it all had seemed rather violent.

"Uhm, I don't know. I haven't really seen a match yet," he said carefully.

"What?" Seamus cried. "How is that even possible! Manchester United, man, everyone knows them!"

"Leave him alone, Seamus," Hermione snapped. "Not everyone is a fanatic."

"You're coming to our next game, Harry. Tomorrow after class if the weather holds," Dean said, not quite ordering him, but not sounding like he would accept an excuse, either. "You too, if you want, Hermione. We won't exclude girls, but to be honest ... it might get rough. It's British footie, after all."
"Ginny told us that she'd try out," Seamus informed them. "That one's fierce, unlike her brother."

Ron hadn't arrived yet, which probably was for the best; that remark would've easily brought his temper up like one of Malfoy's better insults. Despite being committed to Quidditch, Harry agreed to come to the next game to watch, but Hermione dismissed the idea with a little sniff and a mutter about scraped knees and bruised ribs. Harry thought that the real reason probably were her superior reflexes; it could be easy for her to hurt someone in the heat of the moment, and knowing Ginny's competitive streak, things might get ugly fast. As it was, Ron's sister was already bragging to her girlfriends about being included and egging them on to join her, or better yet, create an all-girl team and play against the boys.

Ron made an appearance towards the end of dinner. He looked exhausted and embarrassed, but his hair was back to its normal colour and he had seemingly spent all of his anger. There were still sniggers every now and then, though the students' interest was already being diverted by the latest gossip and the first mild bout of panic in the OWL and NEWT year groups.

Later, in the dorm, Harry got the feeling that Ron wanted to talk to him. The redheaded boy was subtle about it at first, but that could only last so long. He obviously waited for Neville, Dean, and Seamus to leave them alone, and the longer he had to wait, the less polite he was about it.

Neville seemed undecided and generally more interested in seeing what Harry wanted, but Dean and Seamus refused to bend to Ron's scowls and hints, not allowing him even one minute alone with Harry. It worked Ron up like a charm, so much so, that Harry was feeling guilty by the time their bed hangings were closed and privacy charms placed. Worse yet, he was grateful for the respite. The talk with Brady was still fresh and he felt rather unequal to dealing with the situation.

_If it's important to him, he'll try again tomorrow_, Harry thought, sighing and wiggling his feet happily under his thick comforter. _And I'll listen. Maybe we can work it all out then._

He certainly hoped so, but there was that small, persistent voice somewhere in his head, whispering that maybe they _wouldn't_ be able to work it all out so easily. It didn't sound terribly sorry either, and that kept Harry up for a while before sleep finally claimed him and brought him wonderful dreams of sunlight, sweet, fresh air and an old French estate that was being repaired and polished by diligent, magical house elf hands.

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Wednesday began with training in the Come And Go Room. Despite his whining on Sunday, Harry felt refreshed and strong enough for his lesson, and Crookshank's presence brought an element of hilarity to the early hour. The best thing, in Harry's eyes at least, was the simple throw technique
Hermione showed him when it was nearly time for breakfast. She threw him half a dozen times and coached him to do the same with her before allowing him to take his shower.

"That's enough for today. Professor McGonagall will post the lists for Quidditch try-outs tonight and you'll need to be fit on Saturday." Hermione grinned. "I think Professor McGongall will make Wood let everyone try out, even the established players, because so many second years want to join. And Ron! Since when does he want to play keeper? Did you know about that?"

"He's been thinking about it for a while, but I guess Ginny wanting to try out gave him a push. I think it's good to give everyone a chance," Harry said. "And if someone's better than me, they deserve to be on the team - and the team deserves them. It's Wood's last year, he'll want to win the cup."

"Very noble," Hermione teased before sobering. "Would you really be okay with it, though? You love to fly."

Harry smiled slightly. "That's just it. I like Quidditch well enough, but I love flying. I can do that anytime, I don't need to be on the team for that. It's really fine with me."

They showered, braved breakfast with Crookshanks in tow, who seemed determined to keep his mistress company despite Ron's barely suppressed animosity, and talked about their classes for the day. All was normal, until the Prophet arrived and ruined everyone's morning.

"Oh no, Fudge got his committee together," Parvati said, showing the headline around. "He's really determined to get Buckbeak executed. What a douchebag. The hearing will be on November 30th."

"Hmmm." Hermione took the paper and lazily poked the tip of her quill into Fudge's smirking visage. "Harry, do you remember what Hagrid has told us about Buckbeak's owner?"

"Sure. He said the bloke was a friend from Greece, and that he's rich. Oh." A grin slowly crept over Harry's face. "You're a genius, 'Mione."

"What for now?" Ron asked, disgruntled. He speared three sausages at once with his fork and took a huge bite.

"You're an idiot, Weasley. If Hagrid's rich friend knew what's going on here, he could throw his weight around," Dean said. "Do we assume that Hagrid hasn't told him, yet?"

"Maybe he did, but Greece is far away, an owl would need several days to make the trip." Hermione
took her quill back and snorted about the ink splot on Fudge's pudgy face. "I'll just ask the next time we see him."

"Bold as brass," Seamus said admiringly. "I reckon Hagrid will be glad to have you in his corner, Hermione. Will you write the guy if Hagrid hasn't done it yet?"

Her raised eyebrow really was answer enough.

Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall was normally interesting and demanding. Even when they were practicing, the students were usually rather quiet, concentrating on their work and trying to fulfill the professor's high expectations.

Not so today.

Buckbeak's coming hearing was the talk of the day, and while Malfoy was smugly mouthing off to his friends, Hermione was scribbling notes onto a writing pad, her half-finished project sitting next to her abandoned wand.

To make up for her slack, Harry concentrated much more than usual. The Duro spell seemed somewhat strange; he really couldn't fathom why someone would want to harden something instantly to stone ... except maybe in the case of exploding cauldrons with poisonous contents, or to stop an enemy in their tracks. It would be funny to turn Malfoy's bag into a heavy lump of stone, he supposed, but after the lecture Professor McGonagall had given them all, no one was seriously considering it.

That left the quill on Harry's table. Its edges looked decidedly stone-like already, but there it stopped and it irked him.

If I knew more Arithmancy, I could find out what I need to do, Harry thought. It might be a bigger swish, except Professor McGonagall hardly swishes her wand at all. Or I could pronounce the spell a little more sharply ... but Seamus tried that and it blew up in his face. I'm not gonna do that like an idiot!

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked as she stopped at their table. "You've been frowning at your quill for a while."

"I can't get the spell to advance to the core of the object," Harry sighed. "It's like it just stops when the material gets too thick. But it's just a feather, not a piece of cheese or something, so it's not like the magic can't reach."

"Mmh." Professor McGonagall conjured a chair and settled down in her prim, upright way. "What have you tried so far?"
Surprised to have her undivided attention, Harry repeated his earlier thoughts, finishing with, "I don't think it's the wand movement or my pronounciation, Professor." He sighed sadly. "Maybe I'm just too weak to do it."

A little snort escaped her, catching Harry offguard. "You, Mr. Potter, are certainly not too weak to do this spell successfully. What you are lacking, I believe, is trust."

"Trust?" Harry repeated. By now the whole class was listening in to their conversation.

"Trust in your ability as a wizard," Professor McGonagall explained. "Your magic is a gift, and while not everyone's gift is quite the same, how magicals access it is. You trust your magic to do what you direct it to do. However, telling someone that a spell is hard to accomplish will almost always make them struggle, just because they believe this to be the truth. It doesn't have anything to do with their actual magical ability."

"Really? It's just in my head?" Harry looked at her with wide eyes. His glasses were slipping down his nose, but he didn't care.

Malfoy scoffed. "I know what's in your head, Potty, and it's got nothing to do with magic." Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. "You're a halfblood, you really shouldn't overstep yourself. Some people just have no talent. Accept it and move on, like all the other talentless little squibs. Last I heard, they were living the good life in the muggle world."

"Excuse me, Mr. Malfoy?" Professor McGonagall rose and stared stonily at the boy. "Ten points from Slytherin for insulting another student. Your words are patently untrue, for one, and even if there was some truth to them, I'd expect you to do the polite thing and keep such harmful thoughts to yourself. Your mother must be horrified by your atrocious manners."

Malfoy just sneered.

"Maybe Mr. Malfoy would like to demonstrate to the class how superior his magical skill is," Professor McGonagall continued. "Come up around his table, class, so you'll all have a good look."

"What?" Malfoy snapped. "I never said-"

"You implied that your blood makes you a better wizard than Mr. Potter. This is your chance to prove it," McGonagall said coolly. "Don't tarry, come around ... Miss Bulstrode won't bite, Mr. Longbottom. Well? The floor is yours, you may begin, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy flushed a fiery red, from his pale cheeks to his even paler neck. "Duro!" he hissed at his quill. It didn't turn to stone. In fact, the tip began to smoke and curl up a little, as if Malfoy's spell had almost set it on fire.
"Mmmh, disappointing," McGonagall said evenly. "Mr. Potter, care to try again?"

Giving Malfoy a little glare, Harry raised his wand.

I have to trust my magic. I'm good at spells! I learned so much this summer, it can't have been an accident. Just because Professor McGonagall always says that Transfiguration is serious business doesn't mean it's any harder than the summoning charm. I can do it. I can!

Taking and releasing a deep breath, he muttered, "Duro". Immediately he knew that something was different. Like a little block had been taken away, allowing his power to work as it wanted. Magic flowed from his wand to Malfoy's burnt quill. From the tip to the feathery end it solidified in one sweep, until it was an elegant, delicate piece of stone.

"I did it," Harry said, astonished. He looked at Professor McGonagall. "Thank you!"

She nodded curtly. "Ten points to Gryffindor for your successful transfiguration. Well done, Mr. Potter." To Malfoy, she said, "I hope you have learned your lesson, Mr. Malfoy. Get back to work, all of you. You still have half an hour to finish your project. Remember that I'll grade your efforts."

To add insult to injury, she cast Finite Incantatem on Malfoy's quill, returning it to its natural state, before moving away.

After that, Harry had no problem transfiguring his own quill. For every attempt Hermione made, he matched her, encouraging her until she was also able to deliver a perfect result ten minutes before class was over.

"What were you writing earlier?" Harry asked after Professor McGonagall had taken their quills away. "Is it the letter to Hagrid's friend?"

"No, of course not. I'll only do that if Hagrid tells us that he didn't write his own yet. I'm not that pushy." Hermione's small smile took the sting out of her words. "No, I was drafting a petition to the board of governors for more club activities. I've got no interest in football or rugby, but we really should have more choices on offer. Lavender wants to bring an article about it before we launch the petition, to get public opinion on which clubs to create first."

"I could never do that during Professor McGonagall's class," Harry murmured.

"Oh, she knows about it," Hermione replied. "And she knows that I'm usually good with classwork. In fact, she's the petition's sponsor. The first edition of the student paper will come out in October, we need to get our articles together soon to get them as perfect as we can make them."

"Does the Paper Troupe have meetings?" Harry wondered. "Can I come?"
"Paper Troupe?" Hermione asked. When Harry shrugged, she said, "Sure, but Lavender will expect you to contribute if you do. We'll need every help we can get."

"She won't try to use my name to sell more papers, will she?" Harry asked a little suspiciously.

"Of course she will." Sighing, Hermione put her pencil away. "You're famous, whether you like it or not. This is important to us, Harry. If she's got an idea, will you at least listen to it?"

"I won't play monkey for the masses," Harry said firmly. "Maybe I'd like to write the article about Buckbeak, or at least help."

"The others rather thought you might want to help with the dementor article, but Buckbeak is fine, too." The bell rang and Hermione shoved her things into her bag. "Are you ready for Potions?"

"No," Harry replied truthfully. "But I never am."

Still smarting from Professor McGonagall's set-down, Malfoy did his best to get Harry into trouble with Snape. His anger made him sloppy, however, and Snape actually saw him throw a piece of valerian root into Harry's cauldron. Harry saw it, too, and managed to snatch it with his seeker reflexes right out of the air.

"Five points from Gryffindor for playing with ingredients that have nothing to do with today's potion, Mr. Potter," Snape said silkily.

Harry fought down his first reaction, which was to rail against the injustice. Hermione's gently kick against his shin helped. Instead, he just said, "Yes, sir."

Hermione next to him carefully set the piece of root as far away from their cauldron as she could and covered it with a small bowl.

"Five points from Gryffindor for not storing the valerian root properly," Snape said. "You of all people should know better, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows. "I do know better. Professor. But tell me honestly: would you have let me get up to take the root back to the stores?"
"It is not your place to question me." Snape towered over her, his black cloak not only sucking up the light in the room but also the air. The silence was so thick that Harry began to feel suffocated. "Another five points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Miss Granger."

"Of course, Professor." Hermione nodded and, when Snape had finally quit his menacing staring, made a note on a piece of paper.

The rest of the class passed in oppressive silence, and Harry thought that he'd rarely hated Snape more than he did right then.

"Don't worry about him," Hermione said at lunch, completely unconcerned, while loading her plate with roast vegetables and grilled chicken.

"How can we not?" Ron demanded. "You and Harry lost us fifteen points!"

"And it would have been far more if Malfoy's little stunt had been successful," she retorted. "We've had two years of his unfair behaviour. It won't help us to get angry in class ... and do you honestly think I'll let him get away with that any longer? Once our OWLs are coming up-"

"In two years!" Ron spluttered.

"As I said, once our OWLs are coming up," Hermione repeated with a glare, "we'll need a competent and fair teacher. Otherwise we can just fail out of the class and do Potions independently. If we did that, what's the point of going to Hogwarts? No, I'll write my parents, ask them to coordinate with your parents, and have them all send a complaint to the board of governors."

"They probably won't sack Snape," Seamus said glumly. "He's a potions master, they're not exactly abundant in Britain."

"I wonder why," Hermione said scathingly. "If there's come one out of Hogwarts during the time he has been teaching, I'll be astounded. Anyway, it has to stop. If you want to help, give me your addresses so my parents can contact yours."

As everyone had been listening, a piece of paper from Hermione's writing pad was quickly changing hands. Not everyone supplied their address, though it were mostly the seventh years who were so fed up that they wanted to complain to the board by themselves.
"Really should've done it sooner," Oliver Wood said darkly. "It's not gonna fall back on me, since Snape didn't admit me into his NEWT class, but the way he's been treating us is just wrong."

"Why didn't you do something before?" Hermione asked.

"We tried, just not hard enough. It stopped with Dumbledore." Wood sighed. "I feel like an idiot."

Far too soon, lunch was over. The page of addresses had vanished at one point, but Hermione wasn't worried.

"It'll probably make the rounds in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw," she said as she got up to leave for History. Seamus and Dean made to wait for her, but she waved them off. "What will you do if you're not going to History, Harry?"

"I'll just read the book," Harry replied. "Gringotts should send an answer soon about that. I'll ask about a tutor then. Why, do you want to share the cost?"

Hermione shrugged nonchalantly. "Depends on how unreasonable the headmaster will be when it comes to your education. If he refuses to approve the money for it, it'll be my treat."

"Hermione, that's too much," Harry protested. "Tutors are really expensive."

"Believe me, I'll spend that money anyway because Binns is a menace. I always thought that history wouldn't be as interesting as actual magic because the only topic were the goblin rebellions, even in the school books, but to understand how this society works, I'll have to learn as much about it as I can. World history, too. Reading about it only gets one so far. What we need are discussions and excursions and speeches from experts." Hermione looked around and, seeing that the great hall was mostly deserted now, bent down to smack a kiss onto Harry's cheek. "Don't look so worried. Me causing trouble isn't your fault, Harry. The adults in this place really should know better than trying to short-change us. But they'll learn."

With that, she flounced off to History of Magic, no doubt to collect more evidence against Professor Binns.
My girlfriend is a total badass, Harry thought, a little stunned. A badass with really nice legs.

Grinning, he got himself together and slunk off to the Come And Go Room to finish this year's course book and start on his first supplemental text.

End of part 8

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in viewing Harry's newest property, visit here: https://www.french-property.com/sale-property/1487-APNs7
"You're avoiding me."

Harry sighed inwardly. All week Ron had thrown him looks, and huffed whenever someone else attracted Harry's attention. He bitterly resented the fact that he and Harry only shared one elective, but when he finally got a chance to talk to Harry during Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures, he'd shuffled around awkwardly, seemingly expecting Harry to breach the silence between them. Now Care of Magical Creatures was almost over and Harry had enough.

"I'm not avoiding you," he told Ron. "I was waiting for you to actually say something."

"It's not easy with everyone around," Ron hissed, pointing at Hermione who stood a few feet away and quietly but intently talked with Hagrid. "Why won't you meet me alone?"

"Because I don't want to be alone with you right now," Harry said, deciding to be blunt so Ron wouldn't be able to misunderstand. "You were really out of line with Hermione, and you threatened Crookshanks. If I did the same with Ginny and Scabbers, you'd flip. If you've got to say something, you can, but it better be an apology."

Ron flushed. "Why are you always on her side?" he demanded. "You weren't like this last year!"

Harry couldn't believe the nerve. "This hasn't got anything to do with me taking sides. You're behaving like a prat, Ron. You're judgemental and a bully. If you can't see that, that's your problem, not mine. I don't need another Dudley in my life."
"But Harry-"

"Save it," Harry said angrily. "Really, just ... don't talk to me. I won't argue about this anymore."

"Fine, be that way. Traitor," Ron muttered and stomped off.

Blaise Zabini stared after him and then gave Harry a look that conveyed both his incredulity and disdain.

Harry could sort of understand that, even if it hurt to see his first friend so angry with him.

Soon after, Hagrid dismissed them, again with no homework, but at least he didn't seem so sad anymore. Whatever Hermione had said must've been a comfort.

"That didn't go well," she observed, carefully stepping around a mud puddle. Of course she'd managed to listen in even as she was having a conversation.

"Sorry about that," Harry said quietly. "I didn't want to make it worse, but Ron really pushed my buttons."

"It's hardly your fault. To be honest, I don't know what to make of it," Hermione mused as they tromped up the hill to Hogwarts.

Because of the rain last night the path was dangerously slick, making the girls especially fearful of slipping and hurting themselves. Harry solved that little problem with a little Duro at the ground, but he still offered Hermione his arm to help her along.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "It's time for the boots, unfortunately." Picking up their previous conversation, she continued, "Ron is behaving ... erratically. Really hot and cold. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's suffering from bipolar personality disorder or something similar. Maybe a letter to his parents isn't such a silly idea after all."

"Yeah, I'm a little worried," Harry admitted. "Maybe we should talk to Fred and George first, though. Keep the big guns for last."

"Your funeral," Hermione smirked. "I'll sit that one out."

Harry gently cuffed her arm in retaliation. "Is the Paper Troupe still on tonight?" he asked. "Lavender got a Gringotts letter during lunch, but she was sitting at the Ravenclaw table so I didn't get what it's about. It's nothing bad, I hope?"
"Everything is fine, we'll meet as agreed. By the way, the Snape thing is a hot topic. We're placing bets on how many points Professor Snape will deduct from a house during class. Since we got off lightly last time, my bet is thirty points from Gryffindor. Yours?"

"You're asking me to bet on my own misery?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"The prize are five chocolate frogs," she cajoled.

Harry snorted. "Put me down for fifty points."

They reached the top of the hill and waited for the others to pass them. Lavender and Parvati thanked them for the stone path before hurrying on. Neville was last, his hand wrapped in one of Hagrid's handkerchiefs.

"Oh Neville, that krup liked you a little too well," Hermione sighed. "Do you want me to come to the infirmary with you?"

"Nah, I know the way very well by now," Neville joked. "It's just a small bite; he didn't mean to do it. They don't get out a lot for play time and you know that they need lots of physical activity."

"Get a pass from Madam Pomfrey," Harry said. "Also, how many points do you think Snape will dock from Gryffindor today?"

"With my luck? At least a hundred," Neville replied with an eye roll. "See you in class."

Harry cancelled the Duro spell on the path before following him inside. Hermione's muttered cleaning charm on their shoes made him smile a little, and he enjoyed his amusement with the knowledge that every Gryffindor's mood would take a nose-dive during Potions.

"Don't let him get to you," Hermione whispered as they waited for the door to the classroom to open. "He doesn't deserve your anger."

"I wish it were that easy," Harry sighed. "But I'll try."

It was almost the norm that the Gryffindors collectively wished they were anywhere else but in Snape's dungeon when lessons started. Even Hermione, after only two classes so far, disliked the subject to such an extent that she barely put any effort into her notes or the preparation of her and Harry's ingredients.

Snape, of course, noticed her attitude and honed in on it like a defiance-seeking missile, picking her
work apart like a vulture and taking points left, right and centre.

Not ten minutes after the bell, Gryffindor had already lost seventy points. Hermione could boast thirty, and another thirty were due to Neville's supposed tardiness - Snape dismissed Madam Pomfrey's pass with a haughty hand wave, setting it not so coincidentally on fire. Another ten minus points went to Seamus for his angry growl.

"Yup, in rare form," Harry muttered when Snape's back was turned. "Neville will win the pot at this rate."

"You dare talk in my classroom?" Snape breathed, turning around and stalking back to Harry's work bench. "After I explicitly ordered you to keep silent while you brew? Oh, but I forgot: the rules don't apply to you, Mr. Potter, do they?"

Harry couldn't even be mad about the blatant goading. "If you say so." Remembering his manners, he tacked on, "Sir."

Snape's eyes narrowed and he tried to stare Harry in the eyes. When that failed, he snarled, "Ten points for your insufferable cheek, Potter, and detention with me on Saturday."

Fighting for his composure, Harry managed to keep his blank stare on Snape's right shoulder. After warning Hermione only a couple of days before, he was very invested in keeping the man out of his head.

"No answer?" Snape sneered. "Hm, it seems like Gryffindor's golden boy was merely lacking a firm hand. There might be hope for you yet, Potter. Saturday, eight o'clock. Do not be late, or I'll double your punishment."

The hatred for Snape was like a living thing in the room. Harry was silently fuming about the injustice, and he wondered whether he could talk Dobby into messing up Snape's stores a little in retaliation.

To his great surprise, revenge was swift and sweet. Zabini, seemingly as fed up with the drama as the Gryffindors, chucked a few balled up stinging nettles into Millicent Bulstrode's innocently bubbling cauldron and then took cover.

The thick, blubbing sludge welling up from the cauldron was a thing of beauty. It was mint green, smelled like hippogriff dung, and there was coming more and more and more of it. Soon Bulstrode's whole table was covered, her shrieks a fitting musical accompaniment to the wet globbering sounds, and still there was more coming out of the cauldron. It reminded Harry of a fairy tale, the one with the pot that cooked sweet millet pap until ordered to stop.

"Everyone out!" Snape bellowed, sleeved arm in front of his hooked nose, and everyone booked it
out into the corridor.

"Thanks!" Harry whispered to Zabini.

"There's no need," the boy replied just as quietly. "But you can let me sign your petition." Zabini slipped Harry a piece of parchment. There was an address on it. "For Granger's complaint. My mother won't care that her parents are muggles. Not for this."

Harry pocketed the slip and then laughed a little. "God, the smell is awful."

"It's no worse than the class itself," Zabini replied with a shrug. "The Hogwarts tuition is coming out of my trust fund and I'm done tolerating a third rate education. I've got plans for the future."

Harry thought that Zabini and Hermione might become fast friends one day, even with their different backgrounds, if he continued playing nice with the Gryffindors. Heck, even Harry himself caught himself contemplating it! But while that pleased him, he also worried a little about it.

What if Hermione finds him more interesting than me? He's rather pretty for a guy, too, and she did like Lockhart rather a lot before she knew what a fraud he is, Harry thought. And I don't think Zabini is a fraud. He placed ahead of me in the exams.

It was kind of maddening, especially since Harry had never really felt that way before.

Being the contrary bastard that he was, Snape refused to let them leave early. Instead, they wasted three quarters of an hour in the dank corridor talking among themselves until the bell rang.

"Finally," Harry sighed. Slowly, the students shuffled off, the Slytherins to their common room and the Gryffindors upstairs. "So, who won the pot? He docked eighty points, I believe."

Hermione consulted her notebook. "Lisa Turpin tied with Terry Boot. Normally, people bet for their own house, but I guess it's a lot more interesting to place bets on us." She glanced at Harry. "You won't accept the detention, right?"

"Of course not." Harry scowled. "After that business with my electives, I read the student charter, twice. Professor McGonagall has office hours in a bit and I'll have her cancel it. I'm really, really over Snape treating me like this."

"I'll come with you, as witness. I bet the others would help as well, if you need it."
"Thanks, 'Mione." Harry took Hermione's hand, not caring if anyone saw, and together they ambled to the great hall and asked Dobby for a snack to take their minds off the coming unpleasant conversation.

When they reached Professor McGonagall's office half an hour later, they were not the first to arrive.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked Dean and Seamus. "Are you also going to complain about Snape?"

"You bet," Dean snorted. "And we're gonna protest your detention, too."

"Lavender and Parvati would've come, too, but they thought it more important to write things down when they're still fresh," Seamus added. "Snape is about to displace the dementors from the front page if he keeps that shite up."

"Then we can just go in together," Hermione said. "If that's alright with you?"

Seamus grinned. "Sure. The more, the merrier. I'm looking forward to it!"

Professor McGonagall didn't look pleased to find four of her lions in her office, and all complaining about Harry's detention.

"While I am inclined to believe your version of events, I'm afraid that the Hogwarts Charter grants Professor Snape certain rights. If he chooses to exercise his right to correct unacceptable behaviour with a detention, there's not much I can do."

"Yes, you can," Harry said stubbornly. "Because the detention is unwarranted, and I've got a whole bunch of witnesses. Heck, I bet even Blaise Zabini from Slytherin would back me up. I talked in class, fine, but that usually costs us five points with other teachers. It's way out of line to give detention for the first offence, and I won't accept it. Even if you decide not to help us, I won't go, and you can't make me."

"Yes, I can, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said through pinched lips.
"You really can't," Hermione said almost gently. "In such a case, the board of governors would get involved, and I hate to say it, but do you really think Madam Longbottom wants to be back so soon, over such a matter?"

McGonagall's nostrils flared. "You're skirting the line of what is appropriate, Miss Granger."

"Snape has passed that line several years ago," Harry said boldly. "He's unfair; he burned Neville's hall pass from Madam Pomfrey, for Pete's sake, and docked thirty points for tardiness. In fact, I'd like to protest the whole point loss today, because we don't deserve any of it."

For a moment, Professor McGonagall was utterly still. Then, her face paled dramatically, only to flush angrily a moment later. "I see." She took a deep breath. "In the future, do remember to tell me the whole story, yes?"

"Well, I wanted to respect Snape's right to discipline us," Harry said, "but he went too far."

"The students are placing bets on how many points they'll lose in their classes," Hermione added. "And also, the lessons themselves are a disappointment. I expect better from a potions master."

"I'd be happy with just a human being for a teacher," Seamus muttered. "Sorry, Professor, but it's the truth."

Professor McGonagall opened a drawer and took out two sheets of parchment. "This is the cancellation form for detentions. Before I sign it, I'll accompany you to your detention with Professor Snape and get his version of events," she said. "In case I decide against your protest, you'll have to involve the headmaster. This form is for your formal appeal. As we all know that he'll probably back Professor Snape, I propose sending a note to the board of governors at the same time and letting the headmaster know about it after the fact. It's unpleasant, but it might be the warning shot Professor Snape needs." Her glare softened and she sighed. "You must know that I'm deeply unhappy about how things have been going these last two years. I'll do my very best to support you. I can only do that, however, if you're telling me the whole story. I won't accept cherry picking. Are we clear?"

"Yes. Thank you, Professor. That's all we need," Harry replied.

They took their leave, not completely happy as Professor McGonagall hadn't said anything about the lost points, but content with the knowledge that they had a recourse if Snape somehow managed to convince her to let the detention stand.
As the Paper Troupe would only meet after dinner, Harry and Hermione excused themselves and went to the Come And Go Room. There, a comfortable sofa and a fire in the fireplace invited them to put their feet up and relax. Somehow, Dobby noticed and popped in with fruit and tea, but he didn't stay for a little chat.

Hermione cuddled up next to Harry. "Do you think Professor Dumbledore will try to force you to go to detention?"

"I'm almost sure he will," Harry replied glumly. "I have no idea what he can or can't do as my magical guardian. He's just my guardian by proxy, so that's something at least, but it's kind of hanging over my head."

"You can find out. Write the ministry, they'll have to tell you. If they don't, you can raise a stink." Hermione grinned. "And didn't Colin say that a lawyer would be a good idea?"

"I'm on it," Harry confessed. "I guess people will mostly remember me as That-Unpleasant-Boy-Who-Sued-Everyone."

"Everyone who deserved it," Hermione corrected and giggled. "I'm looking forward to that. Surely that's worth a headline or two in the Daily Prophet. Although ... can Dumbledore stop it?"

"I don't know. But I've got a few aces in my sleeve if he tries." Harry put his arm around her shoulders. "Let's not worry about that right now. I'm more interested in not having to spend any time with Snape. At all, if possible."

"You and about every other student in this school," Hermione agreed dryly. "The whole place is a farce. I'm glad that the pretty veneer has worn off after only a couple of years. I can't believe how enamored of everything I was."

"I wasn't any better, but I'll tease you about Lockhart until the day you die," Harry smirked.

Hermione snorted. "I'll even let you. Good lord, that was embarrassing. I'm just glad that Professor Lupin is such a good teacher."

"Do you think we'll miss classes on the days he's turning into a werewolf?"
Hermione shook her head. "Not if the headmaster can help it; I know for a fact that parents and teachers alike were up in arms after Lockhart. The fifth and seventh years really needed someone competent to bring them up to speed. Did you know that the students had to take their OWLs and NEWTs independently during the holidays, because Dumbledore cancelled all exams? That's not cheap at all, and Hogwarts had to reimburse everyone for it. It's the only reason I can think of for Dumbledore to allow this. As much as I like Professor Lupin, and as much as I trust the teachers to keep us safe ... he's still a werewolf."

"I wish there was a cure," Harry said softly. "He doesn't deserve being treated like a leper."

"No, he really doesn't. He's one of the nicest people I've ever met," Hermione murmured. "Maybe there'll be a cure in the future. Hector didn't find one, but I read something about a potion in his notes that allows werewolves to at least remember themselves after the transformation. Apparently it was a huge thing back in the seventies."

"Then why are werewolves still a problem?" Harry shifted and pulled Hermione even closer. "If everyone gets the potion, they're safe, aren't they?"

"Not really. It was hellishly difficult to make, and also expensive then and I can't imagine that this has changed. The government refused to pay for it, and werewolves obviously don't get good jobs in the wizarding world, so can't afford to hire a potioneer. At least, I assume they don't. Professor Lupin's clothes are a little shabby." She huffed. "It's discrimination; those people are wizards and witches, first and foremost. They paid taxes before they got turned and everything. But social justice seems to be a foreign concept in Great Britain."

"I wonder why Professor Lupin didn't just leave. There must be countries with better opportunities," Harry said. Without consciously thinking about it, his fingers began playing with Hermione's long hair.

"He'll have his reasons," Hermione replied. She sighed contentedly. "This is nice. How long until dinner?"

"We've got half an hour, or until my arm falls asleep," Harry grinned. "You're almost purring, did you know that?"

"Don't tell anyone, but I think I kept a tiny bit of the cat I transformed into last year," Hermione mumbled. Getting braver, Harry's hand massaged her neck and the base of her skull. "Oooh, yes, just like that."

Fascinated, Harry watched goosebumps appear on her arms, and her happy little wiggles against him made him blush.
Far too soon, it was time for dinner, and after that for the meeting of the Paper Troupe.

"Welcome, new faces," Lavender greeted Harry and Luna Lovegood, a slight, blond girl from Ravenclaw Harry hadn't ever consciously noticed before, with a distinctly bossy air. To complete the boss lady image, Lavender had a yellow pencil behind one ear and another in her hand. "Let's be quick: Snape. Who wants to tackle that one? He'll bite back, so be sure."

Both Hermione and Dean raised their hands immediately and the topic was handed over to them. Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet muttered an apology; with the OWLs hanging over their head they didn't dare act against Snape, no matter how much they wanted to.

"Keep an eye on the situation with Harry's detention," Lavender said, making a note on her parchment. "It'll interest the whole school whether he got out of it, and even more importantly, how. Next: Buckbeak."

Here, Harry raised his hand and was assigned the story together with Seamus. Colin eagerly promised to provide a very flattering picture of the hippogriff.

"It'd be even better if you could fly him, Harry," Colin said. "To show everyone that he's not dangerous."

"It'd look quite spectacular, but we shouldn't," Hermione cautioned him. "As long as the whole thing is uncertain and it's Malfoy's word against Hagrid and ours, we shouldn't fan the flames. But speaking of Hagrid, I managed to talk to him today during class, and he said that he hasn't told his friend about Buckbeak's hearing yet. He's ashamed and afraid, so I offered to write an open letter for him and have it signed by as many students as we can rally. I also told him that he really needs to send a personal letter so his friendship won't suffer. He agreed and thanks us very much for our support."

Lavender nodded. "Great, then let's get to it. Send it with the fastest owl once everyone has signed. We'll print the letter as well, to show people that there are many witnesses, and that we're prepared to speak out. Parv, hit them with the dementors."

Parvati opened a large binder. "It's still our most important story, Snape and Buckbeak notwithstanding. This is everything we have collected so far. Unfortunately we don't have any photos, but I think that the witness reports speak for themselves. Madam Pomfrey allowed me to interview her, as did Professor Lupin. I tried to get some of the aurors to talk, but apparently the Ministry has placed a gag order after the first article appeared in the Prophet. None of them will correspond with us."

Harry guessed that she was flipping through the statements of Hogwarts students for his and Luna's benefit. "Well, that will make them look even more stupid, won't it?" he asked. "And what about Sirius Black? He's the reason the things were out and about in the first place."
Hermione nodded. "It's an interesting case and I'll write an article about him. It won't be much, but maybe we're on to something and can follow up."

"I'd like to help with that," Alicia Spinnet said. "Maybe we can't do something about Snape right now, but writing the Ministry and trying to dig up stuff is right up my alley. Fred and George will help as well, and Lee's got an aunt in some office. He can probably convince her to do some snooping."

"Yes, that'd be wonderful. Thank you, Alicia. Would you be alright with a short interview, Harry? He's your godfather, you should have some say."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

Lavender sighed. "This is far too much explosive material for just one edition, but our sponsors only agreed to a monthly publication, so we'll just have to deal with it. You've got your marching orders, guys, don't disappoint me. Remember: who, what, where, when, how, why, and where did you get the info. Keep it as short as possible - the average attention span of the reader is less than two minutes per article. We editors will proof everything you submit, so don't worry about outing sources, but try to avoid naming them if they want to stay anonymous because no one is perfect and mistakes happen."

"What's my job?" Luna asked in a light, dreamy voice. She had a slightly faraway look in her eyes.

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry, Luna. We'd like you to contact your dad and ask whether he'd like to buy some or all articles of our paper. He's got some readers and we'd appreciate the help in getting word out."

Luna nodded. "I can do that. How much would you like in payment?"

Lavender lowered her voice a little. "Tell him to contact a goblin named Fandar. He'll have a contract ready." When she noticed Harry looking, she coloured. "We're doing it right, yeah?"

Harry grinned. "I'm very impressed so far."

"Yes, well, you'll have to cut us some slack because you'll have to provide an interview here and there, since you're involved in some of the messes that are going on right now," she replied. "People will buy the paper because of you, and what's even more important, they'll finally see how dangerous things are here. When not even you are safe at Hogwarts, then who is?"

That was something Harry could live with, but he had absolutely no scruples demanding a say before any articles about him were printed.
"I'm not a cash cow, and if you turn the student paper into a gossip rag, I'll do my best to make you regret it." Harry looked intently at Lavender. "I'm not joking. I'm looking for a lawyer right now to get those stupid children's books out of the bookstore and I'm not above setting him on you."

Lavender swallowed, but nodded. "Of course. Hermione already advised us to set up a charter, with ethic guidelines and stuff. We won't disappoint you, I promise."

"It's not entirely selfish," Harry tried to console her. "I can't imagine forcing people to read dumb everyday stuff about my life. We've got much more important things to do."

"True. So, everything clear?" When everyone in the group nodded, Lavender dismissed them.

The three Gryffindor chasers left, but Luna stayed to write a letter to her father, and Seamus and Dean decided to get the easy part of their articles out of the way. The seven most important questions were quickly answered, all that remained to do was to fill in facts and write everything up in readable form.

"We could get your interview for my story about Black out of the way as well," Hermione offered quietly.

"I'll have to think about it for a bit first," Harry replied apologetically. "I don't want him to get in trouble if he's really innocent, you know."

"Alright. Lavender gave us one week for the rough drafts. We can do the interview anytime, just let me know when it's good for you."

"Thanks, 'Mione." Harry smiled at her. "At least the article about Buckbeak will be done soon. We've already got the whole thing together."

"All we need are a few quotes from our classmates and Colin's photo," Seamus said. "Then, we write it up prettily and voilà."

"I'm looking forward to it," Hermione said sincerely. "I think the paper will benefit from different writing styles. That'll make it harder for critics to make us out as someone's puppet. I don't even know what kind of trouble that could cause."

"They'd do that to students?" Seamus asked, appalled. He shook his head. "Man, I never notice this stuff."
"It's sad but after the whole Sirius Black business, I'm not trusting the Ministry with anything."
Hermione drew the boy's piece of paper towards her and quickly read over it. "Oh, nice touch with the bit about Buckbeak's mysterious owner. Here, that's his name, Hagrid told me during class. I'll have to double-check the spelling, but that's one more bit done. I'll hopefully find out more about him over the weekend."

"How?" Dean asked.

"I have my ways," Hermione said mysteriously. "Anyway, good start! Mind the spelling and make it a bit more personable, so people will relate to Hagrid instead of Malfoy. Not Rita Skeeter level personable, though, okay?"

All three boys looked so affronted that Hermione burst out laughing.

On their way back to Gryffindor Tower, Hermione kept Harry back and murmured, "I wanted to ask whether I could borrow Dobby to find Hagrid's friend. I've got his name, and we know that he's rich and owns a lot of magical creatures, but not even Hagrid knows where he lives because his property in Greece is apparently unplottable."

"You can ask him," Harry said. "If anyone can find the man, it's him. Good thinking."

"Let's hope that the topics for our paper won't always be that interesting," she joked, "or that international. We'd need an owl for research, or even a newspaper elf for errands if that were the case."

Harry grinned. "A house elf just for that would be pretty awesome."

Curfew was upon them when they entered the common room, so they went up to their dorms without delay.

In bed, Harry realized that he'd only have two classes on the next day. The thought both elated and worried him, because while he would have more time to take care of things, he'd also be busy with said things.

_Better get it out of the way fast_, he thought. _I'm sure Sharptooth will send me the information on the Gaunt family, and I should tell someone about Slytherin's library, and the detention with Snape. I wish Sirius could come here sometimes. And Brady._

He scowled, and when his scar didn't begin to hurt like it used to, he scowled some more.

It took a while to fall asleep.
As expected, the morning classes on Friday passed quickly, as both Lupin and Flitwick's lessons were practical. For the first time since finding his second wand, however, Harry experienced some difficulty. It was nothing major, merely a dip in power when it should've been steady, but it was concerning him.

Yet another topic to talk about with Brady, he thought with a sigh. It was tempting to just use the other wand. Knowing that he was actually training his core helped, but the uneasy feeling remained until the bell rang.

During lunch, Ron managed to sit close to Harry. "So, the Quidditch try-outs are tomorrow," he said as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, ignoring Hermione's forbidding frown.

"I know," Harry retorted without looking up from his stew.

"Since everyone can try out, I thought I'd give it a shot."

"Good for you," Harry murmured.

"So, I wanted to ask whether I can borrow your broom for that. It's loads better than the school brooms. I'd have a much better chance."

"Maybe you would, yeah. It's not a good idea, though," Harry said and waited out Ron's immediately rising angry flush.

"Why? Because I could actually make the team?" Ron demanded.

"Yes, exactly." Harry bit back a sigh. Where Ron got the idea that he'd even help him out after his appalling behaviour was beyond him, but apparently he wouldn't have any peace until they'd entertained half the great hall with their argument.

"I knew it! The great Harry Potter is afraid that his best friend could get a place in the spotlight as well!" Ron's freckles stood out on his angry face.

Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise. "What spotlight?"

"Maybe you should shut up now, Ron," one of the twins advised before Ron could shout out what he meant.
"You shut up," Ron snarled back instead. "You're just as bad as Potter!"

"Harry just tells you how it is," Hermione snapped. "For all that you're so good at strategic thinking, you forget that there's just one broom! Even if Harry loaned it to you, what if you actually make the team? Of course, you'd have to be better than Wood, first, but that's neither here nor there."

"It could happen." Ron glared at her.

"Fine, let's say it does. What broom would Harry ride, then? He can't be seeker on a school broom, he'd be way too slow. And as Professor McGonagall said, there's no money for better brooms for the whole team. In fact, she bought that broom privately to get the Gryffindor team even with the other teams."

"Keepers need to be fast, too," Ron insisted. "Also, Harry might not make the team. McGonagall might give the broom to whoever is the keeper."

"I don't think so." Hermione barely hid the scorn in her voice. "The new seeker would get the broom, because usually the seekers win the games."

"You don't know that!"

"I know the statistics because you badgered all of us with them," she said, exasperated. "Out of a hundred games, ninety-six are won by the seekers. The rare quaffle-winners hardly matter in comparison, don't you think? If anything, the chasers should get better brooms before the keepers, because they're flying just as much, and as fast, as the seekers. And the beaters too, of course."

"You're twisting my words!" Ron shouted.

"She doesn't do anything of the sort," Fred snapped. "She's telling you facts. It's not her fault that you don't like them."

"I'll talk to McGonagall," Ron growled, getting up. "It's not fair that Harry always gets the best of everything."

"For fuck's sake," Lee Jordan muttered to the twins. "Your brother will ruin us if he keeps that up. We're already last in the running for the house cup."

"No idea what's wrong with him," George said, watching Ron's stomp from the great hall with narrowed eyes. "He's been acting out since school started."

"We'll find out what's going on," Fred added.
They excused themselves and followed Ron.

"I'm sorry," Harry sighed. "I can talk to Professor McGonagall and ask her to rotate the broom, if anyone wants to use it during games."

"Oh no, you won't," Katie said firmly. "It was perfectly alright of her to give it to you. We chasers are good and we know it, but we've trained together for years on our brooms. If one of us suddenly got a better broom, we'd have to work hard to make up for the difference in speed and agility, and we simply don't have the time for that."

"No, you don't!" Oliver Wood shouted from his place with the other seventh years. "No more drama, Potter!"

"Weasley's just jealous," Angelina said and shrugged. "That's tough, but he'll get over it if he wants to keep any of his friendships."

Harry wasn't so sure that Ron really wanted to keep his friends. Right now he was really doing his level best to scare them all off. Even Percy was looking mortified, and he usually avoided his siblings' shenanigans unless they warranted the loss of house points or detention.

Feeling a little depressed, Harry let Dobby pop him to the Come And Go Room after lunch. The house elf served hot cider and a small portion of hot vanilla pudding with elf berry compote to cheer him up, and then presented Harry with a small stack of mail and two shrunken boxes.

"It be good distraction," Dobby said when Harry sighed. "Steward Sharptooth be saying that Harry Potter sir be reading letters first."

"Alright then." Harry took a bite of his pudding before accepting the first envelope. "Oh, wow, this one's got personnel information in it. Let's see ..."

Quickly pushing his anger at Ron aside, Harry read the applications of eight witches and wizards. They were of all ages and walks of life, which made choosing only three difficult. In the end, Harry decided to support an elderly lady without close family and in need of income, a young man who wanted to stay for a couple of years to gain experience in the hotel business, and a middle-aged, resolute looking woman with an impressive resume. They'd be the human representatives of housekeeping, repairs and maintenance, and administration respectively. A young man, whose magic felt quite similar to Healer Williams' became the new in-house doctor. With nearly identical training and work experience, it was an emotional decision, but one Harry felt justified in making. If Sharptooth didn't approve, the candidates wouldn't have made it this far.

Harry put his three choices in an envelope, sealed it and set it aside for delivery.
Next came a letter from Sirius. This was unusual, since they had the journals to communicate, and so Harry cautiously opened it, in case it was bad news.

It wasn't bad news.

At least, not for Harry.

"He chose a lawyer," he told Dobby, eagerly reading the rest of the short missive. "His name is Lawrence Walker, and apparently he's a Master of International Law. I don't know what that means, exactly, but it sounds serious. He'll represent Sirius in Italy. His partners will take care of my issues."

"Harry Potter sir's dogfather be wanting to sue everyone," Dobby agreed. "He be telling Dobby that he be putting whole firm on retainer. Harry Potter sir's dogfather be saying that Walker, Stone & Finch be really earning their exorbitant fee in the next few years."

Despite himself, Harry laughed. "Oh god. The one who's apparently responsible for my personal stuff is Finch. I guess he's the one who'll negotiate the contract with Colin, then. And Stone will sue everyone that needs suing. Sirius' words, not mine. She'll be busy, then."

"Harry Potter sir's dogfather be choosing well," Dobby said. "He be knowing what he be about."

"I get that feeling, yes." Harry picked up the last envelope. "This is probably about the Slytherin stuff. I don't really want to look."

"Harry Potter sir not be needing to look today," Dobby said. "But it be better to get things over with."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I don't want it hanging over my head all weekend." Apprehensive yet determined, Harry opened the envelope and pulled the papers out. "It's much less information than anticipated, at least."

Quickly, he flipped through all the pages, knowing what he'd be discovering in them, but paling anyway when it was confirmed that Tom Riddle was the last remaining member of the Gaunt family. An old uncle, Morfin, had died in Azkaban several years ago.

"I'm not gonna have that guy in my family," he said tightly and threw the papers down as if they were venomous spiders. Hastily, he grabbed Sirius' journal instead.

*September 10th, 1993*

*Sirius,*
I received the inheritance test for Slytherin's family. Tom Riddle is the only member left. But I don't want him. You mentioned being cast out - it was horrible and unfair, but this is Voldemort and I don't want him in the family.

Help, please!

Harry

Barely a minute later, writing appeared on the page.

Harry,

Calm down. I knew, and since Voldemort is already sort of dead, I didn't want to stress you out.

As to casting someone out of the family: that'll have to be done in ritual. People get angry all the time, and say things they don't mean. It takes a month to prepare, and will tax you magically, even if the one being cast out deserves it.

Of course I'll help you with it. I'll send instructions and material for the ritual, if you want to do it at Hogwarts. Sharptooth anticipated your reaction and asked me to warn you that Dumbledore might be able to feel the magic being used in that case, even if you do it in the Chamber of Secrets. That would harm you in several ways, so please think carefully about it.

In my opinion, you can just wait until you come home for the holidays, even if your personal preparation for the ritual will have to be done at Hogwarts. Healer Williams, Sharptooth and your elf friends would be on hand to support you, not to mention the rest of Gringotts and myself. I know that you worry, and that your magic is pushing you to act. It's a lesson in compromise and self-care, one I hope you'll learn soon, because your family magic will often demand things from you before you're mentally or emotionally ready. Just because you're physically able to act doesn't mean that you understand what it means.

Be careful. I love you.

Sirius

Harry drew in a shuddery breath. His eyes misted over and the muttered a curse. "Sirius is right, Dobby, I should wait, but it feels so wrong to keep Riddle in the family that long. It's intolerable."

"Harry Potter sir's family magics be strong," Dobby squeaked. He fretfully pulled at his ears. "Dobby be seeing it all around Harry Potter sir. It be agitated."
Slumping in his chair, Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll have to push back, then, but what if I can't?"

"Harry Potter sir be needing work," Dobby decided and floated the first of the two boxes onto the desk. "These be ward stones. Sharptooth be saying that Harry Potter sir only be needing to bond with the stones. They be Malijar's Gift, from the same vein as Harry Potter sir's stone on Potter's Field."

"Oh, really?" That cheered Harry up on a level he didn't really understand. "Then I'll get going, but I need to answer Sirius first, or he'll worry."

Sirius,

*I'll wait for Yule, even if it's gonna be really, really hard. The Dark Git murdered my parents and the magic wants him gone. Please send the stuff along I'll need to prepare for the ritual. I'm guessing that means cleansing and fasting? Where will we do the ritual? At Gringotts? Or can you build a circle at home? I didn't get to it, just like the brewing I'd wanted to do. Why is there so much stuff to learn?!*

*Thanks for your help. I miss you!*

*Harry*

*P.S.: I'll bond with the ward stones for the pension now, so don't worry if I'm not answering right away.*

Harry put all of his things back into his bag and placed it on the floor. With Dobby's help, he took out all the ward stones from their box. The main ward stone was much smaller than Harry's stone on Potter's field, but it still hummed with energy.

"Hello," Harry said, delighted. "It's like you're really here!"

If a stone could project pleasure, this was surely doing it. The energy warmed and pulsed eagerly, reaching out for Harry and snagging the boy's magic in a soothing embrace.

"I still remember the spell for the bonding," Harry confided. He put his hand on the stone and closed his eyes. "I hope you're doing well in our garden."

"Here be Harry Potter sir's athame," Dobby squeaked and offered it. "Dobby be sanitizing the blade."
"Thank you."

Very reluctantly, Harry took his hands off the stone. Quickly, he cut himself and pressed his hand back, relishing in the welcoming hot rush through his body. The spell glowed in his mind and he had no idea if he actually spoke it out loud, but the shift in the connection between him and Malijar's Gift was profound, so the bonding had happened without any issue.

"I'm glad you'll be helping Dobby and Betty in France," Harry said, basking in the magic. "You and your little friends." He laughed at the insistent pushing against their combined aura. "I better bond with them too. I didn't know you guys could feel jealous!"

One perimeter ward stone after the other received its drop of blood and a small communion. If the experience weren't so invigorating and pleasant, Harry would've probably doubted his sanity. There seemed to be a sort of awareness to the stones, not to mention differing moods. It was especially strange because the stones all came from the same source.

"And that's all of you done," Harry murmured in satisfaction and set the last of the seven times seven little stones on his desk. All their mithril veins were glowing like the most beautiful opal fire.

Then, a small, indignant push against his ankle made him look down. His bag rattled a little, making Dobby hop back a step in surprise.

"Oh! Oh, I forgot one. I'm so sorry!" Harry took Sharptooth's gift out of his book bag and patted it consolingly. "I didn't know that you wanted to do that with me. Hold on." He took the newly sanitized athame from Dobby and gave himself another small cut. "I'd be very happy to bond with you."

He pressed the drop of blood against the barely palm-sized piece of rock and tried to hug it with his magic. It hugged back fiercely, almost scoldingly, and accepted the bond like it couldn't wait for another second. That feeling of security that had embraced him first in the cottage and then on Potter's Field once more bloomed behind Harry's breastbone and streamed through and out of him like a river of sunshine. It stole his breath and made him indescribably happy. What was more, he could suddenly feel a presence in the back of his mind. It took a moment to parse out that he was actually sensing Betty and Sirius in Potter Cottage, and a few small life forms besides as well. Potter's Field was a magical mess as usual, but it was his mess, and it greeted him joyfully.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, guys, I love you, too." He pushed his happiness at the unexpected gift into the bond, into that feeling, and gasped when the presences startled. A second later, one was missing from the cottage and reappearing right on the table in front of him.

"Harry Potter sir be feeling Betty!" the small elf cried. She surged forward and hugged Harry around the neck. "It be so good to feel Harry Potter sir!"
"You can come visit me any time," Harry told her, carefully returning the embrace. The little love fest was making him dizzy, but in a really good way. "You must tell me when you need something, even if it's just a hug. Alright? I'm always good for that."

"Betty will," she promised. Her blue eyes then went to Dobby. "You be here too long, Dobby. Hoggywarty elves be getting impatient."

"Wait, what?" Harry sat up.

"Dobby be telling Harry Potter sir that Hoggywarty not be place for Dobby," the elf admitted, shame-faced. "But Harry Potter sir be needing Dobby, and Hoggywarty elves be very good at tolerating Dobby's presence for a little time. It be taxing them to keep secret from Dumblydore, but they be doing it because they be liking Harry Potter sir."

"Oh no, I didn't know that." Slowly, the euphoria ebbed away. "What can we do? I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Elves be trying," Betty explained, "but school be coming first. We be needing solution for problem or Dobby be needing to come less often."

"It's great to have him around, but if you need to stay away, then that's what we'll do," Harry decided. "The headmaster mustn't find out about our secrets."

"We not be liking it, but we understand," Betty said. "We be thinking about it!"

"Dobby be taking things to Gringotts. If Harry Potter sir be needing Dobby, he be calling!"

"I will. Thank you, both of you!"

Dobby and Betty fought for the privilege to carry Harry's things. Betty managed to take the letter, popping away in triumph. Dobby huffily followed with the box of bonded ward stones. Only then did Harry notice the slight sting in his finger and healed the wound with a smart, "Episkey!"

"Do you know what I haven't done in ages?" Harry then asked his personal piece of Malijar's Gift. "A magical communion."

Harry had barely thought about a cistern to cleanse himself beforehand when one appeared in the corner by the panorama window.

"Brady said I'd normally have to leave magical pets and stuff behind, but it's not a ritual, so maybe you'd like to do this with me," Harry told the stone. "If not, just zap me or something."
Malijar's Gift didn't zap him, and together, they experienced a rather turbulent cleansing. The cool mist dragged all of Harry's simmering anger about Ron and the headmaster away, until he felt level-headed enough to attempt a small ritual circle.

To give his new wand something to do, he used it to draw the circle, find the four cardinal points, and finally to paint the required runes with the flame writing spell.

"Hello, magic," Harry whispered as the power slowly heaved up around him. Malijar's Gift sparkled in his hand and vibrated slightly in resonance. It was the best feeling in the world, right on par with long, warm hugs from Sirius and Hermione, and that one, long touch of his family's magic during the holidays.

Harry let himself fall into it. Whatever *communing* really meant, it felt soothing and encouraging all at once. The push and pull to cast Voldemort out of Slytherin's family lessened, as if Magic - and something so wonderful surely deserved a capital letter! - somehow understood that Harry wouldn't be ready for it for a while yet. Magic also seemed rather interested in Harry's thoughts about Sirius, and his garden, and his non-human friends because they stayed at the forefront of Harry's mind in vivid detail and branched out in several different, interesting directions.

Too soon, the last bell of the day rang and it was time to return to Gryffindor Tower.

"We'll do that again," Harry promised the stone in his hand. He thanked the four elements for their protection in the circle, dispelled the runes one by one, and tried to let go of the intense feeling of immersion slowly. "And we'll call home at least once a week, too. I bet you miss your family just as much as I do."

Quietly humming to himself, Harry opened the second box and found several books about *occclumency* - the art of protecting one's mind against mental and magical intrusions. He stuffed all of them into his bag for later perusal. A short note from Healer Williams reminded him to start with some exercises and Harry was mellow enough not to groan about yet more work.

Once he'd left the Come And Go Room, the warmth around him quickly fled. Inside his chest, Harry could still feel a little of it lingering, though, and he reached for it with his magic as best he could.

Since the weather was still cold and misty, he opted to stay in the common room and do his Charms homework. Parvati joined him, and a little later he also welcomed Neville, Colin Creevey, and Ginny at his table. For a while, they worked in silence, but then Ginny decided to open her big mouth.

"So, who of us will be writing the article about your *donation*?" she asked, the tone of her voice clearly indicating that she was talking about the basilisk money.

Harry felt his stomach drop a little. Still, he decided to play dumb. "What do you mean?"
Ginny looked at him with large, blue eyes, the very picture of innocence. "You know what I mean, Harry. Your *donation* this summer. It's big news, surely it should be in the paper!"

"What is she talking about?" Parvati asked, engaged despite her obvious annoyance at the disruption.

"Nothing," Harry said quickly, throwing Ginny a dark look. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But Harry, people should know," she replied quietly, but insistently. "It's huge! It would make you famous!"

"No, they absolutely shouldn't," Harry replied, getting angry now. "I'm already famous enough, and I don't like it. Leave it be."

Neville thoughtfully looked from her to Harry. "Interesting that Lavender doesn't already know. Has Ginny sworn a secrecy oath?"

"Yes," Harry said. "And I don't like that you're trying to get around it, Ginny."

"You're being ridiculous," the girl insisted. "People have a right to know the whole story. Colin, you tell him!"

"Are you crazy?" Colin asked, appalled. He even pushed his chair away from Ginny for some distance. "I'd never do that to Harry. People don't ask for secrecy oaths just for the fun of it. Not even muggles do that!"

Parvati narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "I'm curious now, but I think it's time to get the ethics charter for the paper finished and signed by everyone. It'll be magically binding, Ginny, so don't think you can somehow get around keeping Harry's affairs to yourself."

"You're wasting an opportunity to improve your standing, but fine. It's your loss." Ginny flipped her long hair over her shoulder with a pout, grabbed her things, and left the table.

"That's exactly the reason why I wanted your promise," Harry sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I might want to be in the paper, but that's about stuff I'll want people to know. Can you maybe not ask me what it's about?"

"Of course," Parvati promised. "I'm not half as curious as Lavender, but even she knows that there are limits. Don't worry about it. Should Ginny get around her oath, I'll know not to accept her story."
"Thank you." Harry took a deep breath, unable to hide his disappointment. "I honestly don't get why she can't just let it be."

Parvati smirked. "Well, I have an idea, but I don't think you'll want to hear about it. She's gone for now and I'd much rather finish my Charms essay. We can compare our notes, see if we missed anything."

Harry and Neville both readily accepted. Colin's inclusion in the discussion had the added bonus that the boy asked some insightful questions none of them had thought of.

Later, shortly before curfew, Hermione joined Harry and cast a surreptitious Muffliato around them.

"Hey, I just heard from Colin that you had a little disagreement with Ginny. Did she really want to publish an article about the basilisk money?" she asked worriedly.

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "It wasn't wrong to keep it to myself, was it?"

"Absolutely not. You have a right to your privacy."

"Ginny said that telling everyone about would improve my standing in society, but I don't think so. Society already thought the worst of me after the parselmouth thing became known. If they knew that I gave money to the victims, they'd think me even more guilty. And also, I hate attention." Harry slumped a little. "Dobby told me that the Hogwarts elves had to destroy a ton of howlers last year. They never reached me, but ..."

"It hurts," Hermione finished softly. "I'm so sorry." She pulled Harry against her and began stroking his hair. "Don't let her bully you into anything. It's not her decision to make."

"I wonder why she even wants to talk about that stuff," Harry mumbled. he closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle ministrations. Now he knew why Hermione had nearly purred; it was divine! "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I had my account manager stipulate that Ginny has to use the money for healing. If it got out that people got money, they'd probably demand even more information. Then it would get out that Ginny was possessed by Voldemort, and I can't imagine what that would mean for the Weasleys."

"It could be problematic for Mr. Weasley at least," Hermione agreed. "And Bill is working for the goblins, having an oath breaker in the family could cost him his job."

"I don't want that to happen," Harry said. "Would you talk to her? Tell her what a bad idea it is? I don't think she really listened to us earlier."
"Of course, Harry."

They spent the last few minutes in quiet conversation and reluctantly went to bed when the prefects called their curfew.

oOo

This Saturday began just like the last one. Harry and Hermione met in the empty common room, workout clothes in their bags in case someone was up early, and didn't ask questions when instead of Dobby Betty appeared to take them to the Come And Go Room. A table was already prepared with breakfast and enough drinks to get them through an hour of training.

"Betty be sorry, but Betty be going now. Harry Potter sir be calling when you be done." With a snap of her fingers, she popped away.

"What was that about?" Hermione asked.

Harry explained the issue with the Hogwarts elves' loyalty to the headmaster, and that Dobby's prolonged presence would sooner or later force them to report the elf. "They've held out so far, but Dobby, Betty and I agreed that it is too dangerous. We'll work around it somehow. Right now Betty is pitching in."

"Well, if we get the potions brewed, Dobby won't have to stop by for them at least," Hermione said, utterly practical as usual. "We'll need the potions kit, though."

"Let's get two," Harry proposed. "One for our healing stuff, and the other for side projects."

Hermione agreed. "Hector has a lot of potions in his personal journals I'd like to brew, and there's some research that's been left unfinished."

"The Chamber is big enough for it, and I can have Dobby deliver the kits, I'm sure. We'll just have to pick really good ones so they'll last a while."

"I have a catalogue," Hermione confessed. "I'll get it later, but I have my eye on a kit already. Maybe you'll like it, too."

They got changed and started their day with meditation before moving on to fitness and the actual martial arts workout. As promised, Hermione didn't work him too hard because of the Quidditch try-out in the afternoon, but she taught him the most common yoga poses to make up for it.

"I just remembered that you could use your spell against sore muscles," she said when the cool-down
was finished. "Won't that help with Quidditch later?"

"It would, but my healer told me that it'd also stop the muscles from growing," Harry explained. "It's okay before important matches or stuff, but not for our normal workouts. I wouldn't make any progress if I always healed myself."

"I guess pain relieving spells are out as well," she said, "since I haven't seen you cast one, either."

Harry hummed in agreement. "It'd be dangerous to just numb the pain when it's not really necessary. He said that people can really hurt themselves if they don't feel pain, and I want to avoid that. Sore muscles won't kill me."

"That makes sense, even if it's a bit inconvenient." Hermione blew out her breath. "But I don't think many magicals think about it like that."

"Well, they're not our problem," Harry grinned. "Better muscles and reflexes against the Dark Git and his henchmen are good, so why tip them off?"

"True," Hermione snorted and got up from her lazy sprawl. "Are you ready for breakfast? I could smell the food the whole time and it's been driving me crazy."

They showered and then took their time eating. They didn't have anywhere to be until the afternoon, and choosing potions kits wouldn't take up a lot of time.

What they hadn't factored in were their friends, however. Upon their return to the common room, all their yearmates, with Ron being the notable exception, and a few students from the lower years, flocked to them.

"Studying with you last night was fun," Colin explained. "Can we do that again?"

"Not right now, I hope," Harry said, a little sheepish. "Because I'm not in the mood for homework at the moment, to be honest."

"Maybe after lunch?" Dean asked hopefully, mainly looking at Hermione. "I could really use some help with Transfiguration."

"Help yes, but I won't give you all the answers," she said warningly. "I'm done with that, just so you know."

"Oh, we noticed," Seamus said dryly.
"What with you obliterating Weasley in Charms and everything," Parvati added. "Will you come to the library?"

Hermione checked with Harry before agreeing. "Alright. After lunch, then."

Satisfied, the others wandered off, only Neville remaining behind and tugging Harry even further towards a quiet corner.

"Can I come, too?" he asked quietly, his eyes on the girls as they settled in front of the fireplace. "Uhm, and can I ask something?"

"Of course," Harry replied. "What is it?"

"You and Hermione ..." Neville shrugged. "You're, well, you're close."

"She's my best friend," Harry said easily. "Why? Do you fancy her or something?"

"No, nothing like that," Neville murmured, slanting a knowing look at Harry. "It's just that I overheard Ginny talking to Ron earlier, and she didn't sound very happy that you refused her yesterday. She wants you to shine, you see, because she still has a crush on you. She might see Hermione as a problem or a rival, is all."

Harry grimaced a little. "No offence, but Ginny isn't my type. She looks like my mum did at that age, I've seen pictures! And I don't care about shining or whatever. She'll just have to deal with it."

"Well, Ron sort of set her straight, at least," Neville continued. "Whatever you want to keep secret, he knows that it getting out would do more harm than good."

"I don't like him much right now, but that's something." Harry huffed. "I'll go get a book to read until lunch. Do you need something from the dorm?"

"I'm good," Neville replied, "but thanks for asking. But if you've got a tip for a birthday present for Hermione, I'd be grateful."

Harry grinned. "I've got a couple ideas."

He jogged up to the dorm. Half expecting Ron to sulk on his bed, he was grateful to find it utterly abandoned. As he stepped up to his trunk, the door snicked shut behind him, and the lock quietly engaged.

Instantly alarmed, Harry whirled around, both wands in his hands.
Right in front of him, a rugged looking house elf in a black, slightly shabby pillow case and with its feet wrapped in black fabric, stood and stared at him.

"Master not be needing to be afraid," it said gruffly. "Master Potter's Dobby be sending Ninja to Hogwarts because Ninja be needing strong master, and Ninja be wanting Master Sirius Black."

"Er, what?" Harry asked stupidly, relaxing his stance a little. "If you want Sirius, you can just ask him."

"Ninja cannot," the elf grumbled. Its slightly lined face radiated frustration and the dark eyes gleamed almost feverishly. "Master Potter's estate be very well protected. To bond with Master Sirius, Master Potter be needing to bond with Ninja first. Ninja be happy about family bond. It be meaning more spark for Ninja to draw on."

"Uhm, I'm no one's master, truly," Harry said weakly. Reasonably sure that the strange elf wouldn't suddenly attack, he put his wands away and plopped down on his bed. "Dobby is pretty much the boss of me."

"Ninja be knowing that. Ninja not interested in friendship. Ninja be wanting powerful master. Dobby be saying that Master Sirius be having tons of important work to do and Ninja be wanting that work."

Harry just bet he did. The elf's name kind of gave away what he specialized in, which was both a comfort and wasn't. "I'll do it, but I'll ask Sirius whether he wants you first. I don't want you to be disappointed, Ninja."

The journal was quickly located and he penned a short note to his godfather. The answer came swiftly:

September 11th, 1993

Pup,

Excellent! Dobby introduced Ninja to me last night, and he's perfect. Please bond with him so he can enter your property and bond with me as well. I'll take care of the rest. He'll listen to you, but we're of one mind in that Ninja is to be mine. Is that alright with you?

Love,
Harry smiled, which made Ninja's ears perk up.

Sirius,

It's more than alright! He's bouncing a little on his toes. I guess he's bursting with happiness ... somewhere deep down inside. I'll bond with him right away. Have fun, and please don't get him killed with whatever you have planned. He seems like the sort to do or die trying.

Love,

Harry

As I said, perfect, was Sirius cheeky reply. Thank you!

Harry laughed and closed the journal. "He says he wants you, so how do we do this?"

Ninja stared at him as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Master Potter be having two elves already," he squeak-growled.

"Yes, but they're friends," Harry insisted. "We shook hands on it and everything. So, what do I need to do?"

The elf's suspicious look vanished and a little smirk appeared on his face. "Master Potter be telling what he be needing from Ninja. Secrecy, hard work, loyalty, Ninja be providing it."

"Hold on." Harry dove into his trunk and searched for the book on house elves. "Ah, there it is. I know I read something about this ... ha!" He turned back around, facing the house elf, and after taking a moment to read over the pertinent paragraph, said as solemnly as he could, "Ninja, I'll bond with you if you'll protect all of House Potter's members and interests, and if you remain loyal to House Potter as long as the bond exists, and if you'll keep all of House Potter's secrets for as long as you live. In exchange, all the members of House Potter shall be your shelter and your spark."

"So mote it be," Ninja said excitedly. He vanished and reappeared right in front of Harry, taking his hand and sending a powerful bolt of energy through his arm and right into his chest. "Ninja be thanking Master Potter sincerely. Ninja be going to Master Sirius now. There be bad, bad elf in need of punishment!"

And he popped away, leaving a bewildered and slightly achy Harry behind.

oOo
"You don’t look your best, Potter," Wood said as the Gryffindors convened on the Quidditch pitch for the try-outs. It was only four, but the sun was already fading fast and thick clouds were rolling in. "Are you ill?"

"No," Harry mumbled. His chest was still a little tender; Ninjas bonding magic packed a huge punch and he hoped that he'd been a lot gentler with Sirius. "I can do it."

"You'd better. And what's it with Weasley the second youngest trying to get my spot? With your broom, no less?"

Harry sighed. "I'd rather not talk about it. He's already glowering at me as it is. See?"

Wood looked over to Ron, who was indeed scowling. "He better keeps that shite away from the pitch," he grumbled. He pulled out his whistle and blew it, making Harry flinch and jump at the same time. "Listen up, everyone! Try-outs are divided by positions! Go to the team members you'd like to kick off the team and show them what you've got!"

Harry glanced to the sideline where Hermione was sitting on a blanket and flipping through the catalogue for potions supplies. Noticing his look, she smiled brightly and waved, no doubt mocking him.

I'll get her for that, Harry thought grumpily and rubbed his ringing ear. Mean witch.

Only three hopefuls, Ginny among them, sidled up to Harry.

"Did you mean it when you said that Professor McGonagall would give any seeker the Nimbus?" Ginny asked, eyeing the broom. "Because then it'd be much fairer if we could use it for the try-outs, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Let's ask her first, though." He caught Professor McGonagall's attention and beckoned her over. "Can the others use the broom for the try-outs, Professor?"

Professor McGonagall looked the students over with her patented stare. "You'll keep it away from the ground," she said after several moments. "You'll also not break it, because if you do, you'll be serving detention for the rest of the year. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Professor!" they replied.

"Very well then. Good luck to you all." After one last look over the top of her glasses, she wandered off to rein in Wood's impassioned speech to the hopeful wannabe keepers.
Madam Hooch took up her place, her yellow falcon's eyes no less intimidating than McGonagall's teacher's glare. "You'll each get a chance to catch the snitch," she said. "I'll take the time. If you have no control over that Nimbus, you're out. If you hurt yourself while trying out, you're out. And if you break that broom, you're out so hard that you'll still feel it after graduation. We clear?"

Harry and his three contestants gulped and answered smartly in the affirmative.

Madam Hooch sent Colin up first. The boy flew a small lap to demonstrate his handling of the broom and then went after the snitch. It took a long while until even Harry was able to spy the telltale golden glint, and Colin took even longer. He caught it long after the thirty minute mark, but he was happy and proud of himself.

"Weasley, you're next," Madam Hooch said. "Up with you, show us what you've got."

Ginny was, in one word, talented. She had flair and shot through the air with the utmost confidence. She also found the snitch quickly and hunted it down with the determination of a long-distance predator, kind of like a wolf that wouldn't let go of its prey's trail. After fifteen minutes, she had the snitch in her fist, her long hair windblown and her face glowing with exertion and smugness.

Colin's classmate Nicholas went next, but while he was a good flyer, his reflexes were too slow. The boy gave up after chasing the snitch for ten minutes and being outwitted at every turn.

"I just had to try," the boy said, grinning and shrugging. "It's fun, but I'll leave the house matches to others."

Harry grinned back and clapped him on the shoulder. "No shame in that, Nick. Thanks for trying out!"

Ginny scoffed but said nothing as Harry took the broom back from Nicholas and sat astride the handle.

"Potter, your turn," Madam Hooch called. "Up!"

Harry obediently shot into the air, flew a lap around the pitch, and then nodded at Madam Hooch to release the snitch. He even closed his eyes for a moment to give himself a challenge before he shot away, up and up until he felt the cool, misty touch of the low-hanging clouds.

It was moments like this that reminded him why he loved the game after all. The thrill of the speed made him feel alive that few things could rival. His heart was pounding in his chest as the wind whipped around him, tried to buffet him and throw him off course. It exhilarated Harry to slip between currents, to let them push him when it suited and to angle away just enough when it didn't. Keeping his eyes open for that elusive little glint of gold was the cherry on top that got his adrenaline
surging up and provided that indescribable high that only other Quidditch players could understand.

After two years of acquaintance, Harry was convinced that the snitch had some sort of magical sentience and enjoyed being chased by him, because it didn't stay hidden for long. After only a few minutes it appeared at the other end of the pitch and gave Harry a ride to remember. First it rose up, right into the thick clouds, before zooming back down and right underneath the stands. Harry didn't hesitate, just followed it wherever it spiralled, zigged or zagged. The hunt was engaging all of his senses to get the most out of the broom, the weather, and even his magic. The snitch itself was spelled against summoning charms and other direct ways to catch it, but that didn't mean that accidental magic on its surroundings wouldn't help ... as Harry found out by accident.

Willing the snitch to swerve just an inch to the right with an intensity that had sweat breaking out on Harry's forehead produced a sudden gust of wind from the left and yes! There it was, fragile wings struggling between Harry's closed fingers!

"Woohooo!" he shouted, corkscrewing upwards and letting himself fall again. Triumphant, Harry finally sailed towards Madam Hooch and the rest of the Gryffindors. "I took too long, I know, but it was fun!" he called as he landed.

Madam Hooch took the snitch, tapping it with her wand once. "Nevermind the time, Potter. You managed to catch it while set to professional mode. The spot is yours, if you want it."

Colin and Nick cheered for him and Ginny congratulated, but she was obviously disappointed.

"Weasley, you've got some guts. If Wood agrees, you can have the reserve spot." Madam Hooch said and looked toward the still ongoing try-outs. "In fact, all positions will have a reserve from now on if possible. About time, that."

Harry couldn't agree more. As a lot of his house mates were still trying out, he went over to Hermione, settled down on her picnic blanket and finally got to get a look at the potion kit she wanted.

"I couldn't even look at what you were doing up there," she said reproachfully and handed him a bottle of lemonade. "But congratulations! You really deserve the spot on the team."

"Thanks," Harry beamed. "Sorry if I scared you, though."

"Nevermind, I know that you can handle yourself." Hermione looked a little shifty for a moment. "But I'm still studying spells to catch you if you ever fall. Just in case."

He laughed. "That's alright. I've no desire to crash-land anytime soon. So, that's the kit you want?"
"Yes, it's got two cauldrons, one standard and one gold. Hector used the gold one for his personal projects."

"It looks good." Harry flipped through the catalogue. "Hm, but nothing really seems to match what my book requires. Maybe I'll have to write Gringotts, after all."

"It can't hurt," Hermione said, not bothered by it. "We should buy enough vials so we can build up a stock. How many, do you think? I thought two to three hundred, at least."

"Yes, absolutely. One cauldron yields around thirty doses, and we'll brew the whole lot eventually," Harry agreed. "Better make it five-hundred and we'll go from there."

Hermione made a note in the catalogue. "Where will we get the ingredients? After reading a bit in Hector's journals, the quality of ingredients on the market seems to leave rather a lot to be desired. Did you know that the Malfoys own most of the apothecaries in Britain? Apparently they've been blending their stock for decades."

"Well, I know someone who might be able to help," Harry said mysteriously and managed to evade Hermione until they'd made it back to the castle.

Just before dinner, Harry and Hermione cornered Neville in the Gryffindor common room and cast a Muffliato spell before the boy could blink.

"Yes?" Neville asked warily.

"Neville, you're my godbrother, right?" Harry began. It about broke his heart when Neville first smiled involuntarily and then returned to his wariness. "I've got a favour to ask. Will you listen, please?"

"Okay," Neville murmured.

"We'd like to work on some potions in private," Hermione said delicately. "But we found out that many apothecaries don't sell good material."

"Even worse, most of them belong to the Malfoys," Harry added. "But you said that you're growing and selling lots of plants, and the way you talk about your gardening and farming and the family business I believe they're top notch."

"Would you consider selling to us directly?" Hermione finished. "Not for less, of course, we'll absolutely pay the full price."
Neville stared at them for a moment. "I didn't expect that," he finally said. "Are you serious?"

"You're the best at Herbology in the whole school," Harry replied. "We're serious. We need the good stuff, and we don't want to pay Malfoy's family if we can help it."

Relaxing, Neville leaned back in his chair. "Wow."

"Can you help us?" Hermione asked, leaning forward a little and placing her elbows on the table. "We've got a list."

Neville crossed his arms over his chest. "I could deliver directly, but probably not everything on your list. I'd have to take your order out of my personal stock to keep my gran from noticing."

"That's alright," Harry assured him. "It's mostly to keep Dumbledore away from us. He'd probably force us to brew under Snape's supervision, and you know how that would go."

Neville chewed on his bottom lip. At last, determination settled on his face and he said, "I'll help you, but I want tutoring in Potions. Please, I'm already failing. Will you?"

Hermione smiled a little. "It's a deal. Here's the list. Whatever you can get is fine, and if you could let us know where we could discreetly buy the rest in good quality, we'd appreciate it."

Agreement reached, Harry ended the Muffliato spell and casually meandered over to Colin, who was busy cleaning his camera. Hermione stayed a few minutes longer with Neville, hashing out a plan for the tutoring, before rescuing her boyfriend from Colins enthusiasm and taking him to the great hall for dinner.

oOo

It was Professor McGonagall who rapped at Snape's door at eight o'clock on the dot.

"You're late, Potter," Snape said darkly as he opened the door. As Professor McGonagall had purposefully stood a little aside, he didn't see her right away. "Double the punishment, then. Just as you like."

"We're very punctual, Severus," Professor McGonagall said with a raised eyebrow as she joined Harry. The warning couldn't be more clear. "May we come in?"

"Mr. Potter may, yes. I fail to see what you're here for, Minerva," Snape replied, drawing himself up to his full height.
"The third years came to me with disturbing reports about your class on Thursday," Professor McGonagall said. "That you docked points for no reason and even burned a student's hall pass. Of course I'll have to get your version of events before voiding the point loss and allowing this detention to commence. I'm sure you'll agree."

"Of course." Snape stepped aside to admit McGonagall. His black eyes were burning with hatred behind her back. "Do come in."

Inside Snape's office, McGonagall commandeered the most comfy looking chair and called for tea, which made Snape twitch. When a small elf appeared with a tray full of tea things and biscuits, both teachers looked a bit taken aback.

Harry didn't. He waved at the small thing and smiled at its wide-eyed stare. Just a second later, it was gone again.

"Tea, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked, already pouring.

"Thank you, Professor." Harry accepted the cup, doctored with a splash of cream and one sugar.

"Severus?"

"No, thank you," Snape gritted out. "If you would kindly get on with it? Contrary to popular belief, I do not enjoy spending my weekends disciplining unruly children."

"Is that so?" Professor McGonagall asked mildly, stirring cream into her own tea. "You see, I asked Poppy about Mr. Longbottom's hall pass. Turns out that she treated him for a small injury after Hagrid's class and issued one so he wouldn't get into trouble with you. Would you like to guess how amused she was that you purposefully destroyed her pass?"

Snape said nothing, but his sallow cheeks flushed a dull red.

"And then there's the matter of harassing Miss Granger for her lacking work ethics when she really hasn't been any worse than the rest of her classmates," McGonagall continued. "Thirty points for uninspired chopping and lazy stirring, my, my, Severus. That's a new low, even for you."

"She's decided to underperform severely," Snape replied smoothly. "Why she's decided to act that way, I couldn't guess, but it is my duty as a teacher to encourage her to do her best."

"Interesting way to encourage students," Professor McGonagall said evenly, if a little sarcastically. Harry really had to admire her composure. "Let's get to the matter of Potter talking in class. He said it was his first offence during that class and accepts that he deserved to lose points. But how does that
warrant detention, Severus? I'm all agog."

"He was disrespectful," Snape hissed. "The little toad disparaged me in front of his friends; of course it warrants detention!"

"May I ask what you said, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall threw Harry a look that told him he'd better tell the truth, or else.

"I just remarked that Professor Snape was in fine form," Harry said, lifting his chin a little. "Which was a fact. He then accused me of being a golden boy and the rules not applying to me, to which I answered, 'If you say so, sir.' He took ten points for that, and then additionally gave me detention for no reason at all."

Her eyebrows didn't rise again, but Harry knew that Professor McGonagall was close to losing her temper. "I see," she said. "Severus? Is that how it played out?"

"I wish Potter could remember potions ingredients as well as his cheek," Snape said coldly.

After taking a sip of her tea, Professor McGonagall stood. "I've heard enough. I hereby cancel Mr. Potter's detention, and also void the point loss for Mr. Longbottom's supposed tardiness, Severus. If you decide to trouble Dumbledore, I'll involve the board of governors myself." Her glare froze Snape on the spot. "You will not like it when I do. In the meantime, keep your bias out of your classroom, please. Potions are volatile enough without you adding fuel to the fire. Come along, Mr. Potter. I'll escort you back to your common room."

And just like that Harry was out of Snape's clutches again. He hadn't even touched his tea. But even though he was grateful, he couldn't help feeling apprehensive.

"Professor, what if he decides to do that again?" he asked, hurrying to keep up with McGonagall.

"I expect you to come to me at once," she said. "It's policy not to get too involved in the other professors' business, that's why I didn't void your and Miss Granger's point loss."

"Well, I deserved it," Harry admitted. "But Hermione doesn't want to put in the work when there'll never be a reward. She'll probably lose a lot more points in the future, which is unfair because she's only like that because of Professor Snape. She said there probably hasn't been a potions master since he started teaching, or at least none that aren't Slytherins. He's ruining it for all of us."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I was afraid of that." She looked around and motioned Harry to step into an empty classroom. "Listen, Potter. We teachers are aware. While we do try to mitigate the damage, there's only so much we can do. We're bound by rules that have little bearing on certain
colleagues, and I won't say more than that." She smiled thinly. "However, you students are free to express your opinion, as long as it isn't done slanderously. At least in this, you'll have my full support."

Harry grinned. "Understood, Professor."

"Your friends at the student paper might also think about lobbying for a binding house point rule book," she added. "Just to make thinks more transparent. Now come, I'm sure your friends are eagerly anticipating your return."

She escorted Harry to the common room but didn't stay long after advising everyone to seek her out whenever they felt unjustly punished. The rest, she left to Harry to explain.

"A rule book for house points would be such a relief," Hermione said, once Harry was done relaying Professor McGonagall's words. "That way, everyone would know what to expect for talking in class or being tardy."

"The same goes for earning points, I guess," a fourth year boy named Cormac McLaggan said. "Snape gives Slytherins points for breathing; that shite really needs to stop."

Lavender sighed. "Our first edition is nearly full, people! We've got exactly ten pages, eight if you discount the masthead, advertising, and large headlines and pictures. I'd say gather intel, observe the way teachers award and dock points and find out who the outliers are. If we can present an average per class and teacher, divided by houses, we might be able to pressure the school into implementing a binding guideline with our November edition. Not later than that, though, because nothing ever gets done over Yule."

"We should get the board of govenors involved in any case," a seventh year girl said. "They haven't done much regarding the day to day business in years, and I think that needs to change."

"Agreed," Hermione said, writing a note onto her ever-present notepad. "We need people to contact the other houses. The prefects?"

Percy sighed, but nodded. "I'll do it. If you give me something in writing they can work with, that might go over better."

"We'll work something out," Hermione promised. "I'll get back to you soon."

The day caught up with Harry fast after that. He left his friends in the common room, glad to be the only one in the dorm for the moment. There were a lot of books he wanted and needed to read, but his vision was blurry even with his glasses on.
Brady said that sometimes all I really need to do is rest and recharge, Harry reminded himself as he pulled the comforter up to his ears. No feeling bad about it allowed!

A few minutes later, he was fast asleep.

oOo

Since he'd gone to bed so early the night before, Harry was the first to come down to the common room. Only Crookshanks was there, lounging on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

"Good morning," Harry greeted as he plopped down next to the half kneazle. Crookshanks meowed and stretched his large paws towards Harry, who promptly used the opportunity to give the cat a high-five. "That's right, Crooks." He tapped the paw again and chuckled. "I think I'm gonna head out for breakfast. You coming?"

Crookshanks seemed to consider it, but then he curled up into a ball, making it clear that he'd rather wait for Hermione.

"Alright then. See you later." Harry gave the fluffy ball of fur a pat and set off towards the great hall.

Aside from a handful of Ravenclaws and two Hufflepuffs, no one was there for breakfast, yet. It was a bit strange to sit at the Gryffindor table alone at first, but Harry had the book on occlumency with him and was glad to read in peace while he sipped his tea and snacked on his breakfast.

"Good morning, Harry," Professor Lupin's voice said maybe half an hour later, drawing Harry from his pleasant reading haze. "Mind if I sit with you?"

"Er ..." Nonplussed, Harry shook his head. He closed the book, glad that he'd decided to wrap the cover. "No, of course not. Go ahead. Were you a Gryffindor, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, I was," Lupin replied mildly. He poured tea and began heaping food onto his plate. "It's good to be back after so long."
"How was it? Then, I mean?" Harry asked.

Lupin smiled sadly. "Different," he said. "Harder. People didn't trust each other, couldn't, really. Gringotts sent black notification letters often, usually when someone's parent or family perished. People were afraid of receiving mail, or even the paper ... they were afraid of finding out what You-Know-Who had done that night."

"I don't know how they're not still afraid. He's not really dead," Harry murmured, not looking at Lupin. "Do you think he'll be back one day?"

"I sincerely hope not," Lupin replied with feeling. He took up his tea cup, but paused before taking a drink. "Harry, you have to know ... your parents were my best friends."

"I know." Harry looked up. "I saw pictures in a photo album." And Sirius told me a lot about you, too. I wish we could just have it out; you know that something's up, after all.

"Dumbledore asked me not to tell you, to keep it professional at school, but I can't." Lupin drank his tea and filled the cup again. "Not when things are so uncertain right now. If you like, I can tell you stories about them sometime."

"That'd be great," Harry admitted. He looked searchingly at the man. Lupin patiently looked back, his whole being at rest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Harry. By the way, I asked to coach the third years in the Patronus Club. I hope that doesn't make you uncomfortable."

"No, sir. I'm glad. When will it be our turn?"

Lupin laughed. "The information will be made available this afternoon, but I'll tell you now. It's on Tuesdays before dinner, from half past five to half past six. Attendance is very high; even the seventh years want to learn the spell and they're up to their necks in work."

"I'm glad." Harry shivered. "Even from afar the dementors are dreadful."

"Hogwarts will provide very good chocolate once the boggarts come into play," Lupin said with a wink.

Their conversation turned from serious stuff to lighter topics. While the professor emptied his plate,
he asked Harry about his classes and his friends and even teased him a little about his closeness with Hermione.

"She'll keep you honest on the homework front," Lupin smiled. "Your mum was the same way with your father and the rest of her friends. Smart like a whip, she was, and determined to see them all through Hogwarts with very good grades."

"But not you?" Harry asked, smirking.

"I was a bookworm myself and didn't need any encouragement," Lupin admitted. "I still like learning ... having the Hogwarts library at my disposal is a great boon."

"What were you doing before you came here?"

Lupin smiled wistfully. "I wish I could say that I was a productive member of wizarding society, but mostly I've worked in the muggle world."

"Do you live there, as well?" Harry prodded.

"As a matter of fact, I did, but I cancelled my lease. Why are you asking? Are you contemplating moving there after your graduation?"

"I don't think so," Harry answered. "I know that I have a family vault at Gringotts. As soon as I can, I'll find out what else there is. A house or something."

"You don't know, yet?" Lupin asked, surprised. He pushed his empty plate away and poured himself his fourth cup of tea. "Why not?"

"Dumbledore is my magical guardian by proxy," Harry explained. The anger about that was still simmering, but he managed a passably laconic shrug. "The goblins told me that he ordered them not to let me enter the family vault or visit the estate until I'm twenty-one. Dunno what this is about, but I'm not gonna pay rent if I've got a place already after school."

"By proxy, you say?" Lupin murmured. His fingers clenched around the cup. "I didn't know that, Harry. I thought ... I don't know what I thought." He exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry. If you would excuse me?"

Harry watched him go, partly glad that Lupin apparently had no intention of pressuring him for information about Sirius, and partly afraid that he would go and confront Dumbledore about his inheritance right now.
I shouldn't have said so much, he chastised himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

It was done now, though, and he had the feeling that Lupin would've found out sooner or later anyway. Despite trying to stay in the background it was painfully obvious that the man was clever. Still, just thinking about it depressed Harry, and so he left the great hall a few minutes later and made his way up to the Come And Go Room.

He only noticed that he was in a snit when he slapped Sirius’ journal onto the desk of his study and flipped it open more forcefully than he needed to be.

September 12th, 1993

Sirius,

I'm an idiot. Professor Lupin ate breakfast with me at the Gryffindor table and somehow I managed to tell him about Dumbledore being your proxy and keeping me away from the family stuff. He's really good at talking and now I'm afraid that he's a spy for Dumbledore or something.

I'm sorry. And sort of panicking. Shit. Sorry; crap.

-Harry

It was still early, only barely past nine, and he knew that his godfather slept in on most days, as per his doctor's orders, and that made Harry's agitation even worse. He paced through the study and contemplated writing Healer Williams more than once, only to decide against it at the last moment.

Finally, half an hour later, the journal finally flashed and Harry ran back to the desk.

Pup,

Stop panicking. It's unfortunate, yes, but Remus is truly quite good at finding things out. Has he asked questions about me? Or did he press for information in general?

Love,

Sirius

Harry nearly broke his pen, he was fumbling so madly for it.
Siri,

No, he didn't ask me about you, and we honestly just talked about him and that he's been working with mundanes before coming to Hogwarts. I think he was honestly surprised about the Dumbledore thing, and that I don't know anything about my legacy. He excused himself and went away, though, so I have no idea what he'll do now.

Do you think he'll tell Dumbledore?

Love,

Harry

Sirius' writing was uneven and in places even splotchy; Harry resolved to give him a normal fountain pen for his birthday because using a quill in bed was horribly impractical.

It's been eleven years, so I can't be sure, but if he suspects that I didn't betray your parents ... I have to trust that he wouldn't harm you, pup.

Harry scowled. I don't like that I just blabbed things out.

Don't beat yourself up about it. It's done, and Dumbledore's actions would've come to light soon enough. Our lawyers are already chafing at the bit as it is and have ordered copies of all the paperwork at Gringotts and the Ministry. It seems like Lawrence, Stone & Finch enjoy an excellent working relationship with Gringotts. Also, Ninja's bond with me is kind of a gift from Magic, because I'll use him to dig up dirt on everyone.

Harry suppressed a shudder. So he's settling in okay?, he asked.

It's perfect, Sirius replied. He absolutely stays out of Dobby and Betty's way and keeps busy with checking my food and stuff for poisons and curses. Don't worry, your two friends are not offended. They know that Ninja is my valet, and that he's oath-bound to guarantee my safety. And speaking of safety: thanks again, most sincerely, for accepting him. He's only been with me for a day and he's already taken care of more than one problem for me.

Will you tell me what those problems were?, Harry asked.

As soon as your mind is a little better protected, I will, Sirius answered promptly. Brady told me that Gringotts gifted you with a whole crate of books about occlumency. Please read them and try to
work on it. Hermione too, if she's amenable. Once you're proficient enough, we'll talk about everything. I promise, kiddo.

I can't wait. Harry fought against the little sting in his eyes. I miss you.

I miss you, too.

A black fingerprint appeared next to Sirius' line and Harry touched it eagerly. The small zing of magic was like a soft hug and so very needed.

I'm really very sorry, Harry wrote after he'd composed himself. I'll try not to spend so much time with Professor Lupin, at least until you're in Italy and safe.

That's a deal, pup. So, what's new at Hogwarts? How's Hermione's birthday gift coming along? Only one more week and you'll be dating an older woman. Way to go!

The tension and self-recrimination finally dissipated and Harry allowed himself a small smile. It's going well, although Dobby'll have to be careful with his trips now ...

oOo

After exercising with Hermione and Quidditch the day before, Harry was rather knackered, but sitting at a desk for an hour was enough to lure him outside afterwards for a walk. He wondered for a moment whether he should have invited Hermione along, but then he set off alone to gather his thoughts.

Sirius had done a lot to assure Harry that he wasn't angry, and that Lupin knowing about Dumbledore's questionable involvement in Harry's affair wasn't the end of the world, but Harry still felt his failure keenly.

Suddenly, his bag grew warm. Startled, Harry opened it and saw that Healer Williams' journal was flashing insistently. Looking around but seeing nothing but vast grounds with swaying grass around and the glittering lake with Hogwarts on the other side before him, he tugged it out and opened it.

September 12th, 1993

Harry,
It's time! The basilisk eggs are hatching! I so wish you could be here, the little buggers are making a lot of noise! The head of the snake house has three people shooting pictures and I swear that half of Gringotts has stopped working for this event. There are screens installed everywhere so everyone can watch. It's kind of a festival around here right now.

Of course I'll send pictures along with Sharptooth's next letter, and you'll be allowed to pick one of the death adders to name it. It's the highest honour our snake breeding team can bestow on a human, so choose wisely.

Due to that event, I wanted to ask whether it'd be alright to postpone our chat, but if not, I'll make myself available at the usual time.

-Brady

Harry blew out the breath he'd been holding as he'd read the entry. On the one hand, he was incredibly exited about the little snakes, but on the other hand his mind was still in turmoil. He fished a pen from his bag to write his reply.

Brady,

Can we maybe talk a little? Do you have time right now? I made a stupid mistake and could really use your advice.

Sorry!

Harry

Healer Williams seemed to be okay with that and immediately encoured Harry to share his worries, which he did as succinctly as he could. He also relayed Sirius' reaction for the whole picture.

Alright, that's unfortunate. But I agree with Sirius; Lupin seems like a competent wizard, and he was friends with your parents. If he seems doubtful about Sirius' guilt, that's a good thing. Dumbledore could have made himself your full magical guardian only if Magic had found Sirius unsuitable. Sirius would have had to break his oath to you, which he clearly didn't and Lupin apparently knows
that very well, if he's reacted the way you described.

My advice is to let him come to you. The ball is in his court anyway, and cornering him right now might do more harm than good. If he tells Dumbledore that you know, it's not a very great loss after all - the goblins would have given you that information sooner or later anyway, and if I'm understanding Gringotts' intel about Dumbledore correctly, he is someone to plan for all sorts of contingencies.

Harry frowned. I don't want him to do that. I just want him to leave me alone.

I know, Harry, but that probably won't happen. Dumbledore will make his move when he deems it proper, and more, he'd do that in any case. Don't believe that he's not collecting information just because you've taken steps to keep them from him. He'll have his sources, and if it isn't Lupin filling him in, he'll have other people to help him. Besides, Sirius has hired one of the most feared law firm in all of Europe and they won't leave anything in the dark.

How soon? , Harry scribbled with a vague feeling of dread in his stomach.

Not before November, but in lawyer terms, that's very soon, Brady replied. As I understand it, they're preparing for an all-out assault on several fronts, and complete stonewalling on others. They'll also draw in help from allied offices to share the workload. On that note, you'll receive mail from them very soon, so be prepared to spend a few hours tying up your brain with legalese and hard decisions. Sirius will help deciding on the best course of action, of course, so don't feel too out of your depth, and don't fear that they'll do anything you're not comfortable with.

In the face of that information, Harry decided against whining about Ron and Ginny's strange and annoying behaviour, or bringing up any of the other things that had gone one this last week.

Okay, I won't, he wrote, although he was grimacing a little at the thought of taxing his already swimming brain even more. Thanks for the warning.

What else would you like to talk about? How is the situation with Ron?

Harry smiled faintly. It'll keep.

Harry, you're my first priority. If you've got things you need to talk about, I'll listen.
There are a few, Harry admitted, but they can really wait.

If you're sure, Brady replied, and even his writing looked doubtful, which made Harry smile again. But I'll have the journal with me at all times, so please don't hesitate to write. And also, I owe you one, because watching a death adder hatch is a special experience for any parselmouth, and you granting me leave to actually be present means more than I can adequately express. Thank you!

You're welcome. Greet the little ones from me, Harry scribbled. And don't forget the pictures!

I will, you have my word. Oh, the first one is already poking its nose out!

With a sigh, Harry urged Brady to go and then slipped the journal and pen back into his carrier bag.

I've completely forgotten the basilisk eggs. Too bad I didn't get to visit them during the summer, he thought. But Sirius had been far more important and he wouldn't ever be sorry for that.

Casting a Tempus and finding out that it was almost midday, he got up from his seat, a large, flat rock, and slowly wandered back to the castle. With Healer Williams gone for the afternoon, Harry suddenly had a lot of time on his hands. Resting and reading seemed rather grand in his mind, and in the evening Lavender would finally reveal the big secret about Hogwarts' new student newspaper's name, and of course the date of its first publication.

Despite everything going on right now, or maybe because of it, Harry was really looking forward to it.

End of part 9
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Wrote hard and put up wet, as usual. Don't like, don't read, nothing's mine except the plot, yadda yadda.

Happy Easter for all who celebrate, and a happy holiday for all who don't. :)

Dobby's Deceit

Part 10

Shortly before dinner the common room was a bustling hive of activity. Out of habit, Harry glanced at the messenger boards, taking in the completely filled out attendance list for the Patronus Club, the notice about the first Hogsmeade weekend, and the usual information about curfews, the prefects, and Professor McGonagall's office hours. New was the COMING SOON - Open Slots For Student Newspaper - Big Announcement TONIGHT! note on bright yellow paper, with Lavender and Parvati's names as contacts in small print underneath.

"They'll really do this at dinner?" Harry asked, sitting down next to Hermione and holding out his hand for Crookshanks, who was wallowing on her lap, to give him a high-five. "I can already hear at least one person groaning."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed when the half-kneazle actually tapped Harry's palm with his paw. "When did you teach him that?"

"Just this morning. He's smart!" Harry grinned and shook Crookshank's paw. "How was your day?"

"Exhausting. I worked on the articles about Snape and Sirius Black, reviewed the goblins' contract for photography and talked it over with Colin, and lastly I managed to call Dobby and he agreed to go looking for Hagrid's friend."

"Darius Papageorgiou," Harry said and laughed a little. "Impressive name!"

"He's an impressive man, if Hagrid told me the truth about him. Anyway, Dobby will hopefully be back soon. I already feel guilty for asking for such a huge favour."

Harry put his arm around her. "It's okay, 'Mione. He's capable of saying no if he doesn't have the
time or just doesn't want to get involved. As long as he has a choice, it's alright."

"Thank you, Harry." She snuggled against him and sighed with contentment. "I can't believe how much has been going on this year already. By the way, has Professor McGonagall talked to you about missing History classes yet?"

"Nope." Harry carefully shrugged so as not to disturb her comfortable position. "I have no idea if Binns even notices when someone skips it. If he doesn't, I'll take it!"

The long hand of the clock above the fireplace moved forward and Harry took another minute to just breathe and enjoy being with Hermione, before saying, "Say, what are you doing next Sunday?"

Hermione turned her head and quirked an eyebrow. "Getting older. Other than that, not much yet. Why?"

Blushing slightly, Harry swallowed. "I, uh, wanted to do something for your birthday, but I wanted to let you choose. We could have a party with our friends, or we could go and be alone. For a," he lowered his voice, "date. Whatever you like is fine."

Hermione sat up, eyes shining. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course." Harry smiled. "So, what will it be?"

Chewing on her lower lip, Hermione asked, "Would it be greedy to ask for both? I really rather like having breakfast with you, but I never really had a party with friends, either ..."

Harry tutted at himself for not realizing that there really wasn't any need for her to choose, the day being a Sunday and all. "Sure, yes! Great idea, actually! So, breakfast together and in the afternoon cake and a party with everyone?"

She beamed, making Harry feel decidedly wobbly even while sitting. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much!" Happily, Hermione kissed him on the cheek and cuddled back against his side.

"Mate, what was that about?" Seamus asked and plopped down on the sofa across from them.

"Harry is throwing a birthday party for me next Sunday," Hermione said, still smiling brightly. "You're invited, of course."

"Thanks for the notice," Seamus replied with a wince. "I've no idea what to give you for a present, except stuff for studying. Any hints?"
"You don't have to give me anything," Hermione said. "Just come to the party if you want. I like spending time with you this year. And Dean as well."

"Aw, Hermione. Way to make a bloke feel bad. I know I was a tosser to you and Harry last year ... Sorry about that, honestly."

"Thanks for apologizing," Hermione said softly. "That means a lot."

A few yards behind Seamus, Ron was sitting with Ginny and losing badly at Exploding Snap. Harry wouldn't even have paid attention if the sudden lack of explosions hadn't alerted him. Ron was staring at him and looking annoyed, but what really stuck in Harry's craw was the open hostility on Ginny's freckled face, although she schooled her expression quickly.

I guess she's really not over her stupid crush, yet, he thought, involuntarily drawing Hermione a little closer. What am I going to do about the party? I guess we're having it here, so how do I keep them from ruining it for 'Mione? I can't very well exclude them; there'd never be any peace in Gryffindor ever again.

Not that Harry actually expected Ron and Ginny to try and ruin Hermione's birthday, but the last two weeks hadn't been great by any stretch of the imagination and he couldn't help but plan for the worst.

Maybe I'll put up a note on the board and also tell Professor McGonagall. She might look in and discourage anyone who has a problem with Hermione having fun with her friends.

The clock chimed the dinner hour and the whole house jostled to get out of the portrait hole. Lavender and Parvati were already gone, no doubt setting up their presentation in the great hall.

"Do you know the name of the paper already?" Harry whispered in the near silence.

Hermione shook her head. "I left it to them; they deserve the honour."

The students at all tables were looking with rapt attention at the podium, where Lavender, Parvati, and Professor McGonagall were standing. A blackboard was floating above them, a piece of chalk hovering and just waiting for the order to write something down.

"Students, a moment of your time, please," Professor McGonagall called when the last stragglers had sat down. "As you undoubtedly know, one student took it upon herself to found the first ever student newspaper of Hogwarts - Gryffindor's own Lavender Brown!"

The Weasley twins started the applause and most of the students quickly followed, until the noise
was almost deafening. The girl in front blushed and curtseyed in pleased embarrassment.

After a minute of that, Professor McGonagall once more motioned for silence. "There was quite a bit of planning involved to get this newspaper up and running so quickly, but we managed. It is my great pleasure to announce that this students newspaper will be independently run by you, the students. Gringotts has agreed to sponsor your newspaper, and I'll be acting as Hogwarts' liaison. As long as this paper exists, the editorial staff and all of its freelancing supporters, as well as the school liaison, will be required to adhere to a charter and swear an oath to that effect. Information on that will be made available after dinner is over."

"Have you sworn your oath already, Professor?" Lee Jordan called into the expectant silence.

"As a matter of fact, I have," Professor McGonagall replied. "You'll find the names of all sworn participants in the newspaper's work rooms, which you can find on the third floor, not far from Professor Lupin's classroom. And now I'll cede the floor to Miss Brown for further information."

Once more, clapping and hooting echoed through the great hall.

"Hello, and thank you," Lavender said. She was visibly nervous, but also determined. "The most important thing to you will probably be the name of our newspaper, so let me present to you without further ado the ..." She waved at Parvati, who tapped her wand to a piece of parchment in her hand. Immediately, the piece of chalk began writing in big, bold letters, "HOGWARTS HERALD" and the students went wild. Shouts of approval and heavy thumping on the wooden tables made Harry's ears ring for several moments.

"Our first edition will be ten standard newspaper pages long and will be free of charge for Hogwarts students," Lavender called over the noise. "Your parents and whoever else might wish to buy an edition will be charged two knuts. Those proceeds will go to Gringotts and be invested in more and better supplies for the newspaper. We will publish monthly. Should there be more things to report, we'll adjust the schedule accordingly."

Now Parvati stepped forward. "Owing to the fact that running a newspaper is hard work and often stressful, the Hogwarts Herald will count as a school club and be eligible for extra credit in several subjects. For more information about that, please see the message boards in your common rooms after dinner." She smiled and waved at her fidgeting sister at the Ravenclaw table, which earned her a few laughs. "Suggestions leading to improvements to the running of the paper will be credited in the paper, and also be noted on your report cards, as will be notable accomplishments in class. This will most likely improve your chances of finding work or an apprenticeship after graduation. And as we already stated on the flyers on your message boards, there are many open slots to fill, from research assistants to admin support, and, of course, reporters and writers."

"And last but not least: the Hogwarts Herald's articles might be overseen by Professor McGonagall as Hogwarts' liaison, but the teachers in this school have no authority to control what we write and publish, as long as it's covered by the Herald's charter and the international press codex. The same
goes for the Ministry. Any attempts in that regard will be prosecuted by Gringotts and their lawyers.” Lavender smiled smugly, as if she knew that Snape behind her was glowering murderously at them all. "Any questions?"

Lots of hands went up and Lavender and Parvati settled in to answer a few of them before Professor McGonagall stepped in and adjourned the interrogation until after dinner.

"The Hogwarts Herald has a nice ring to it," Dean said as they filled their plates and goblets. "Swearing an oath will have my mum up in arms, though. She'll want to read it first."

"Mine, too," Seamus agreed, "but it'll be worth it. Also, extra credit! I'm all for earning that with stuff I actually like to do."

"What about you, Neville?" Harry asked the quietly eating boy. "Will you help out?"

Neville shrugged. "Depends on whether my gran will allow it or not. The oath is a good idea, though. I wish the reporters at the Daily Prophet had to swear one."

"What would he even do there," Ron scoffed, scowling. "No one wants to know stuff about stupid plants. Only flubberworms could be worse."

"Ron!" Hermione snapped. "First of all, that's not true. Magical plants are very useful! Why, in a daily or even weekly edition we could easily print anecdotes about plants as potions ingredients, with cross references to whatever else might come up. Readers remember such things, it could improve the students' studying! So don't you dare tell him that it would be stupid!"

"Besides, who says that's all he could do?" Ginny asked. "There are open positions for research assistants, right? Anyone can research, Ron. Or handling other stuff, like typesetting or filing or whatever."

"Exactly," Hermione huffed. "No one has to write articles if they don't want to. As Lavender said, there's enough work to go around."

"Why would anyone bother with staying behind the scenes?" Ron asked derisively. "It's either go big or go home."

"And you're always going home, eh, Ronnikins?" Fred (or George) asked. He sat down next to Ron, rudely stealing a piece of meatloaf from his brother's plate.

George (or Fred) squeezed in on Ron's other side and took a bite of Ron's mashed potatoes. "Ronnikins has never gone big in his life-"
"-except that one time he managed to eat Percy's whole birthday cake when he was eight." Fred smirked when the people around the little group began to titter. "It had two tiers and weighed about three kilograms ... lots of perfect strawberries and Honeyduke's finest chocolate."

"It was a tragedy," George said dramatically, clutching his chest. "There was wailing and gnashing of teeth-"

"And Ron kept up Mum half the night because he was retching every ten minutes."

Ron turned beet red. "Shut up!"

Amused despite himself, Harry snickered. The teasing lasted through all of dinner, but when it ended, Harry excused himself and followed the twins from the great hall.

"Guys?" he called once they were reasonably alone. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

The twins turned, both sets of eyebrows raised.

"What can we do for you?" George asked.

"Has it got to do with Ron?" Fred added. "Because as much as it pains me to admit it, we might not be skilled enough to beat some sense into him."

"That's just it." Harry looked around and beckoned the two boys to follow him into an empty classroom. He closed the door and cast the Muffliato, causing the red eyebrows to rise even higher. "Ron is acting weird ever since the train ride."

"We noticed," Fred allowed.

"But he's oddly resistant to our attempts to correct his oafish behaviour." George crossed his arms over his chest. "And we're not his parents."

"Wouldn't want such a kid in any case," Fred added. "So, how can we help?"

"Can you, I dunno, ask your parents to have him looked at? Hermione and I joked about it, but what if he caught something in Egypt? A curse maybe?" Harry shrugged sheepishly. "He's never been like this with us before and we're worried, I guess."

"Or he could just be a little prick," Fred snorted. "Wouldn't be the first time, right, George?"
His brother scowled. "Ron has had his moments over the years, but they've always passed."

"We'll be honest." Fred clapped both hands on Harry's shoulders. "He's not the sort of friend I'd want you to pine after. Finnigan and Thomas seem like good blokes, and we've seen you hanging around with Longbottom as well. That one's solid. Ron's ... not."

"Yeah, but why?" Harry asked, anxious. "Ginny I could understand, last year was bad for her, but not Ron."

George shrugged. "Why are we pranking people? Why is Malfoy such a little jerk?"

"Some things just are," Fred concluded. "But, if it'll make you feel better, we'll write dad and ask him to do something about it. Who knows, maybe Ronnikins actually did manage to get cursed in Egypt."

"Would make my year," George smirked.

"Er, can I ask whether your parents have Ginny taken to a doctor yet?" Harry uncomfortably stepped from one foot onto the other. "No one said anything to me; I guess they're not so happy about the stipulations on her trust fund, but I thought it was important."

"It is," George said, grin vanishing. "We haven't noticed mum taking Ginny anywhere during the hols, but then again we were, er, busy. With stuff. I'll find out. Thanks for the gold, in any case, though I'm not sure that Ron and Ginny even deserve it."

"I just want her to get better," Harry muttered. "I sure needed a doctor, and she was possessed for a really long time."

"We'll make sure to find out, Harrikins," George promised.

"Yup, we sure will, after Dumbledore told our parents nearly nothing. Good talk, and good night."

Fred saluted Harry and as one, the twins turned on their heels and left the classroom.

oOo

Monday passed in a blur, even with Care of Magical Creatures in unpleasant weather and three demanding classes afterwards. Everybody was on tenterhooks how the first session of the Patronus Club would go. Dumbledore was set to teach, and when it was time for the seventh years to meet in
the great hall, a lot of students from the lower years squeezed into corners to watch.

Harry was one of the few not eager to spend an hour watching, mainly because he desperately wanted to read Healer Williams' latest journal entry about the death adders' hatching in peace. He was therefore grateful to have his dorm room to himself and cast a mild repelling charm on the door for good measure.

September 13th, 1993

Harry,

Three of the four eggs have hatched successfully overnight. Only one little one is still fighting. We're all encouraging her, but she refuses help, even though she's a little on the small side. We hope that she'll make it soon. Otherwise we might have to disrespect her wishes, and that wouldn't be a good start in life.

The three hatched adders are beautiful. Their skin is incredibly soft as their scales will only harden after about a month out of the egg. The two males are dark grey with startlingly blue accents, and the one female looks like burnished gold with deep pink markings. I apologize in advance that the pictures won't do them justice. What their sister will look like we can only guess, but I thought I saw a dark grey blue and a touch of some sort of violet colour, maybe lilac.

Head Snake Breeder Tearclaw asked me to remind you that one of the little ones will be named by you, and that you should provide a selection of names at your earliest convenience.

Harry, I really can't tell you how emotional these last twenty-four hours have been for me. Talking to these babies is an experience I won't ever forget. They're already able to hold full conversations, and they're curious! We're rotating parselmouths in to read them stories and explain about our society. I don't think they're too impressed so far, but that's to be expected. Death adders are very particular with whom they bond, and some decide not to bond at all. That's the risk Gringotts has taken on by purchasing the eggs, although the non-bonded adders are still very valuable for breeding and no one here will begrudge you one knut of the money they paid.

Now it's my turn to entertain the little ones. I like their snarky humour and I think you would, too. The pictures are being developed as I write this, so expect a delivery very soon.

All the best (and eternally grateful),

Brady

Harry sighed happily and pressed the journal to his chest for a moment. He couldn't explain why, but he was so glad that something of the basilisk had survived, and that those snakes would be good, and be bonded to good people who did good work.
Then, he wrote his answer.

Brady,

That's awesome! Tell the kids hello from me, and that I'll find them some really cool names to choose from.

I actually noticed that wizarding photographs are a bit pale, compared to mundane photos. Why hasn't anyone invented colour photography yet, or if it exists, why not in Britain? I can't imagine that there isn't a market for it.

Keep me posted on what's going on with the still hatching baby!

-Harry

P.S.: Please stop thanking me; you and your colleagues are doing all the work. I just got lucky by not getting eaten.

Harry put the journal away and got up. The library beckoned, and he was eager to fulfill his part in the honour the goblins were bestowing on him.

Only a few students were seriously studying when Harry slunk into Madam Pince's domain, and none of them paid him any attention.

Remembering what Hermione had taught him about the register, Harry wrote, A book with great names on the page and waited. He didn't expect a huge success, and the two books the register listed were more than enough for him.

The first one was about famous people of Great Britain, which was well enough, except that none of those seemed like a good fit for a pretty little snake lady. Only Maeve, the Irish warrior queen, roused some interest, even if the sound of the name didn't quite excite him.

The next book was far better, as it included names from many countries. The Polynesian name Luana made him think of white beaches and blue sea, but his favourite after three quarters of an hour of flipping through the book was Nara, a Japanese name. For some reason, male names didn't grab his attention at all and he wondered whether that was Magic's way of telling him that he would name one of the females.

Finally having found eight names he felt he could offer, Harry put the books back and left the library again, slowly strolling by the great hall to see whether the club was already done.
To his surprise, Dumbledore was still teaching, although the lesson seemed to be winding down now. None of the students were able to produce one of those silvery animals, which was a pity in Harry's eyes. He still remembered Lupin's patronus vividly, even if he hadn't been able to make out what kind of animal it actually was.

"Thank you for a wonderful first lesson. I'll see you again next week, and until then you'll hopefully all have found a happy memory," Dumbledore said, beaming. "To cheer you up, there will be chocolate to restore your strength - some would say that this is the best part of learning the Patronus Charm. I quite agree."

Quiet laughter could be heard and Harry strained to see over the horde of students clogging the entrance. What of the seventh years he could see seemed to be relaxed, if a bit exhausted, and everyone was eager to get to their house table for dinner. Harry waited for Dumbledore to get up to the teachers' table, but the man lingered and it made his stomach twinge uncomfortably. Deciding that he would rather hide out until the man was gone, Harry turned around to leave the hall.

"There you are," Ginny greeted him, getting in his way. "I thought you'd want to see how the club works, Harry."

"Er, no, I was waiting for tomorrow," Harry said, quickly averting his eyes when Dumbledore looked over. "I'm not really hungry yet, so go, sit down." He made to step around her.

"Harry, a moment please?" Dumbledore called and strolled over. "Thank you, Miss Weasley. He'll join you shortly."

Ginny nodded and walked away.

"Sir?" Harry asked, purposefully keeping his eyes on a spot on the wall.

"I would like to speak to you about some things, not all concerning school," Dumbledore said. "Please see me in my office after dinner."

Knowing that there was no way out of that, Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Splendid," Dumbledore said and went away to take his seat at his table.

A presence at Harry's side startled him, but it was only Hermione.

"Are you well?" she asked with concern. "You look ... spooked. It wasn't Peeves, I hope!"
"No, worse. It was Dumbledore." Harry told her about the summons to the headmaster's office. "I don't want to go there alone. I'm afraid that he ..." His throat closed around the words, preventing him from expressing his fear of being magically manipulated.

Hermione understood him well enough, anyway. "Ask Professor McGonagall to come with you," she said. "She's our head of house. You know the student guide book: the headmaster can't send her away." She lowered her voice. "You said that you're having a lawyer now. They should probably be present, especially when it's about magical guardian stuff."

"You're right. I panicked for a moment there." Harry swallowed. "I never thought I'd be afraid of Dumbledore, but -"

"He hasn't given you many reasons to trust him since the summer," Hermione replied matter of factly. "Don't feel guilty for that. It's normal, Harry." She took his arm and gently led him to the Gryffindor table. Instead of sitting with their friends, she chose the very end closest to the door and cast a Muffliato around them. "You're probably not very hungry now. That man should've waited; everyone's worried when they're asked to see the headmaster!"

"Professor McGonagall's not here yet," Harry fretted. "How will I contact her?"

Hermione smiled slyly. "We've got a few options now, Harry. Hogwarts elf, please."

A small elf with huge ears and brown eyes appeared promptly. It was clearly female and was dressed in a clean, white tea towel. "How may Tilly serve?" it squeaked.

"Oh hey, you brought tea on Saturday, in Snape's office!" Harry smiled. "Nice to see you again, and to learn your name."

Tilly's huge eyes stared unblinkingly at Harry. "Tilly did, Harry Potter sir. It be nice talking to Harry Potter sir."

"Tilly, we'd like you to take a message to Professor McGonagall. Can you do that?" Hermione asked.

"Tilly can." When Hermione moved to find a scrap of paper and a pen, she piped up, "Tilly be very good with verbal messages, Miss."

"Oh! In that case, please tell her that the headmaster has asked to see Harry in his office after dinner, and that Harry requests her presence."

"Tilly be delivering message right away, Miss!"
"Thank you." Hermione laughed when the little thing popped away. "She's adorable."

"Thanks for helping me out. I'm a mess," Harry sighed. "I really ... panicked. Huh."

"Don't mention it," Hermione replied. "Really, Harry, he creeps me out, too. Your reaction to him is ... it's visceral, and it's sort of catching. I'm getting nervous just seeing you fret."

"Sorry about that." Harry listlessly played with his plateful of white bean soup. "I know that you really admired him."

"I did," Hermione conceded, "but that was his public persona. Right now, I wouldn't want to be alone with him either, and I'll ask for Professor McGonagall's presence if he ever asks to see me."

Just to spite the man, Harry waited until dinner was officially over and the tables were completely cleared. Professor McGonagall was waiting for him at the door, her gaze critical and a little worried.

"Would you like to tell me why you're not comfortable speaking alone with Professor Dumbledore?" she asked quietly.

Harry was aware of the listening ears, but he answered her anyway. "I don't like his interest in me, Professor. I'm afraid he'll try to cancel my electives after all ... or try something else."

"That won't happen, Potter. Come along and let's see what this is about."

Far too soon in Harry's opinion they reached the gargoyle, and to his dismay it jumped aside without Professor McGonagall having to give a password.

"Ah, Harry ... and Minerva." Dumbledore's eyebrows rose in genuine surprise at seeing her. "May I ask what brought you here?"

Professor McGonagall levelled a look at Dumbledore. "Mr. Potter asked me to accompany him, and as his head of house I couldn't refuse his request."

"Well, I'm afraid that quite a few of the topics I wanted to discuss have nothing to do with school ... as I've stated when I asked Harry to visit me." Now Dumbledore's tone was definitely reproachful.

"Be that as it may, Albus, when a student asks for my presence, I'm obligated to follow their wishes." To Harry, she said, "My oath to the school forbids me to reveal anything private I might learn, as long as it is not a matter for law enforcement."
"That's fine, please stay," Harry said quickly.

"Harry, my boy ..." Dumbledore sighed but didn't say more when Professor McGonagall's lips pursed. "Of course, if that's your wish. Now, the first thing I wanted to talk about is the money you settled on Sir Nicholas, Fawkes, and Mrs. Norris."

"Oh, not that again, Albus," Professor McGonagall snapped. "So what if the lad sold that thrice damned beast to the goblins?"

"It's not so much the sale, but what's been done with the money," Dumbledore said placatingly. "The goblins helpfully pointed out the circumstance of Harry's generous gift to the petrified students, but you'll agree that neither Sir Nicholas, nor Fawkes, or Mrs. Norris can count as people. They represent Hogwarts in one way or other and it saddened me greatly that the school as such didn't get a portion."

"Maybe Hogwarts shouldn't have tried to kill Mr. Potter on several occasions, then," Professor McGonagall countered pitilessly. "Fawkes came to Mr. Potter's rescue, true, but he was rewarded for it and doesn't seem to have an issue with how Mr. Potter has decided to handle the matter."

"Due to a conflict of interest, it is impossible for me to act as your magical guardian in this instance, Harry, but I implore you to rethink your decision," Dumbledore pressed. "Hogwarts is always in needs of funds; just listening to the chatter these last two weeks showed how many improvements our beloved school needs, beginning but certainly not ending with better brooms for the Quidditch teams."

"Again, that's not Potter's responsibility," Professor McGonagall said, getting impatient. "Please stop bullying the boy for money. If you need some, go to the Minister. He's been cutting funds for years, anyway."

"Hogwarts has always prided itself on its independence," Dumbledore said soothingly, "and to keep it that way it relies on private gifts."

Professor McGonagall narrowed her eyes. "Stop right here, Albus. I won't have you make the boy feel guilty for failings that fall into your purview. The money belongs to Mr. Potter. He earned it and our laws are very clear on that matter. Additionally, he's still a minor and shouldn't be pressured to make such decisions without legal council, anyway. Don't do it again, I'm warning you."

"Very well, if Harry has nothing to add ..." Harry shook his head dumbly and Dumbledore sighed, the very picture of disappointment. "On to the next topic, then. It came to my attention that your first few lessons with Professors Babbling and Vectra went very well. I'll expect you to work hard, Harry, and will be disappointed if your grade will be lesser than EE at the end of the year."

"I like the subjects," Harry said by way of an answer, still not looking at Dumbledore but at the desk, as if fascinated by the trinkets on it.
Professor McGonagall's gimlet eye twitched, but she said nothing.

"Then you won't have any problems." Dumbledore shuffled some papers before continuing, "It also came to my attention that your friendship with Ron Weasley has been ... strained. It worries me that you'd let two years of friendship languish so. Would you mind telling me what the matter seems to be?"

Harry wondered what Dumbledore thought he could do, but shrugged and replied, "He's been a prat since the train ride. He insulted Hermione, threatened her pet, and is always starting fights. No one likes him right now."

"Now, now, I'm sure that's just a misunderstanding," Dumbledore murmured. "Young boys always find some thing to fight about. I spoke with Ronald, of course, and must say that I'm a bit disappointed that you seem to distrust him so. Locking your trunk against him ... that's been hard on him. He regards you as a brother, you see."

"Well, maybe my supposed brother shouldn't have taken my stuff without asking, then," Harry said, getting angry.

Professor McGonagall sucked in a breath. "Is that true, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, yes. But I took care of it and it won't happen again. Dean and Seamus and Neville are doing it, too." Rebelliously, Harry added, "Will you ask them to let Ron go through their things as well?"

"That was uncalled for, Harry," Dumbledore sighed. "And of course not. I was merely trying to find the root cause of your estrangement."

"Tread carefully, Albus, because I heard you imply the same thing Mr. Potter did," Professor McGonagall warned. "I'm not comfortable with you discussing Mr. Potter's friendships in any case. As his magical guardian it might be your privilege to offer advice, should he seek it. However, any heavy-handed input is bound to be ignored, as I'm sure you know is par for the course for teenagers. Leave the children to sort things out among themselves first ... like you did last year, when the whole school was harassing Mr. Potter for allegedly opening the Chamber of Secrets."

"Minerva-"

"Albus," she cut him of frostily. "In all his years with his muggle relatives, you haven't taken an interest in Mr. Potter's affairs. Not once, even though you knew that they were the worst sort of muggles. Frankly, it is suspicious that you're starting to meddle now, and in matters that are not your concern."

"I always had Mr. Potter's best interests at heart," Dumbledore protested.
Chancing a quick glance, Harry saw him flush with temper.

"Well, I'm not buying it, and I'll keep watch now, Albus. I'll also warn the goblins to do the same, because after witnessing this 'talk' I'm forced to assume that you wanted to cheat Mr. Potter out of a substantial amount of galleons, and emotionally blackmail him into continuing a friendship that he's decided to put on probation." Professor McGonagall glared. "Shall I ask Filius what the Horde's view on stealing from, and the harassing of a child is?"

Dumbledore spluttered. "Where is all of this coming from, Minerva? You've known me for decades!"

"Yes, and I'm not blind." Professor McGonagall stood. "Leave the children out of your power plays with the Ministry, and do try to actually do right by Mr. Potter. You could start with signing his Hogsmeade permission slip. As Mr. Potter's magical guardian," Harry wondered how often she would stress that point until the meeting was over, "that's one of the things you're actually entitled to manage, and I can't see a reason to deny him the pleasure when the aurors will watch over the outings. Do you, Albus?"

"No, of course not." Dumbledore rather reluctantly opened a drawer and took out a sheet of parchment. "I simply have forgotten to sign it amidst my power games with the Ministry." He tried to catch Harry's eye and smiled crookedly. "Unfortunately I wasn't as victorious as I'd have liked; the dementors got stationed around the grounds anyway."

Harry didn't know what to make of it, but the form was signed and Professor McGonagall accepted it with a nod.

"If that was all?" she asked.

Dumbledore sighed. "For the moment, yes. Please accompany Harry to the common room, Minerva. Severus is patrolling tonight and I'd like to avoid further unpleasantness from that quarter."

Only after the gargoyle had settled in place and was closing the way up to Dumbledore's office, could Harry really breathe again, and only then did he notice how clammy his hands and forehead were.

"Are you alright, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked, a worried frown marring her forehead.

"Yes." Harry cleared his throat. "Thank you ... for everything you've said."

She put a hand on his shoulder and steered him towards Gryffindor tower. A few corridors away from the Fat Lady's portrait, she stopped in front of a portrait depicting a kitten that was transforming into a soup bowl and back.
"Do you feel comfortable coming into my quarters for a moment?" Professor McGonagall asked. "It's not exactly proper, but my office was too far out of the way."

"I don't mind," Harry said quickly and climbed through the portrait hole once she had given the password.

After bidding him to sit on one of the two armchairs in front of the roaring fire of her fireplace, Professor McGonagall got straight to the point, as usual. "Do you mind telling me what had you scared practically witless in the headmaster's presence, Mr. Potter?"

"I-" Harry's throat closed up again and he gasped. A shallow pain in his chest followed.

"Oh, Merlin. Sit down, Potter. Here, drink some water ... I think I'd better check for mischief."

Harry endured several revealing spells while he sipped the cold water and breathed a sigh of relief when Professor McGonagall didn't find anything.

"No compulsions or mind hexes. That was an honest bout of panic there, lad," she said just as relieved and much softer than before. "Talk to me."

"It's ... I heard about ..." Harry's stomach somersaulted but he forced it out anyway. "Spell hooks. The Imperius. Over the summer."

She blanched and sat back in her chair. "What?"

"I'm afraid of ... people cursing me," Harry said miserably. "Dumbledore's tried to control me, he obviously wants my money, and he's powerful. It'd be easy for him to-"

"He'd never-" Professor McGonagall caught herself and took a deep breath. "I apologize. Truthfully, I can't say that your fear is unfounded. I understand you, only too well, I'm afraid." She reached out and took one of Harry's clammy hands in his. "Oh, lad. I wish this weren't something you'd need to worry about."

"Isn't there something I can do?" Harry asked, trying to recover his composure and, he admitted it to himself, his dignity.

"Those curses are labelled dark for a reason," Professor McGonagall said quietly. "And I'm furious with myself for not noticing what a danger they are to you. But there are some things one can do to prevent being caught unawares."
"Will you teach me?" Harry pleaded.

"I will." She nodded firmly. "And with your permission, I'll be bringing Professor Flitwick and Professor Lupin on board, as well. For your peace of mind, I'll compose an oath to protect your privacy, but I'm afraid that my oath to the school will supersede it if challenged."

"It's alright, I'll take it," Harry said. "Thank you, so much."

"Bah, I should've never bought into Dumbledore's claims that you need as normal a childhood as you could get. What you needed was thorough schooling, and we all dropped the ball on that."

"But at least I was hidden from Voldemort and his people," Harry murmured. "When can we start?"

"Not tonight," Professor McGonagall said firmly, quelling his protest with just a look. "Tonight, I've checked you for curses. Allow yourself to be content with that, and give me some time to make arrangements. I'll send notice when we're ready to begin."

"Sorry," Harry said, ashamed. "It's just ... pushing me."

"What?" McGonagall stilled. "What is pushing you? Your magic?" At Harry's small nod, she blanched again and cursed. "I've been so stupid. Last of your line; of course it's pushing you ... I can't believe I didn't see-" Her stare became fiery. "Potter, follow my lead. Out with your wand."

Perplexed, Harry did as he was told. In a matter of minutes, he'd learned the revealing spell the professor had used on him and nervously cast it on her.

"Uhm ... you're looking like a Christmas tree, Professor," he said, gaping at the tendrils of orange and pale blue magic that were winding around her body. "What is that?"

"One is my ... it's a personal charm," she replied, face stony. "The blue one, however, isn't mine. If I had to guess, it's a very subtle mind-altering spell, and if I had to guess again, it's got to do with you." She motioned for Harry to end the revealing spell, which he did, but only reluctantly.

"What will you do about it?" Harry asked, worried. "Do you know who cast it?"

"No, but I can guess. Here, take this pen and paper ... I need you to write a note for me. Sign it with your name and the date and time."

"Why am I writing it, Professor?" he asked.
"Because, if I'm right, the spell might make me write something entirely different in a bid to protect itself," she answered so matter-of-factly that Harry's stomach clenched in horror. "A letter from you will carry weight, however. Now please write ..."

Harry followed Professor McGonagall's directions. His whole body felt jittery with nerves and outrage on her behalf, so much so that he ruined his first attempt and had to start over. The note, at least, was short and to the point: It asked Professor McGonagall's friend Amy for a meeting and a check-up for 'the usual'. Harry signed and dated it, exhaling harshly when he was done.

"Five points for being a quick study, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said grimly, motioning for him to write the directions on an envelope she summoned from a small secretary desk. "Remember that spell and use it often. Maybe also use it on classmates, if their behaviour inexplicably changes."

"I'll teach it to Hermione," Harry replied, still fighting his fight-or-flight response to their discovery. "She notices a lot of things. And maybe Neville, if he wants. It's unfair, but not many people think of him as a threat."

"In this instance, it can only be to our benefit." Professor McGonagall rose from her chair. "On behalf on Hogwarts, and even more so for myself, I sincerely apologize for not stepping up to help you through everything that's been going on. I'll get to the bottom of this, I promise, and then heads will roll."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said, standing when she rose from her chair. "That means a lot. Last year was ... it was difficult."

"I know, lad." She smiled at him, not so grimly this time, but her eyes were still flinty. "Before we leave my quarters, I ask that you'll cast that spell on me as well. Do it randomly, and send my friend Amy these requests whenever you find something. Will you do that for me?"

Stunned, Harry could barely nod.

"Good. Then come, it's getting late."

She accompanied him to the common room and then strode off in the direction of the owlery.

Hermione was by Harry's side immediately. Her keen eyes took in his pallor and the shell-shocked tremor in his hands.

"It didn't go well, I take it?" she murmured. "Come, let's sit down here ... Muffliato! Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not here," Harry replied, surreptitiously looking around and noting the many curious eyes on them.
"Tomorrow. Let's meet you-know-where."

"Alright. Can I hug you?"

"Please." Harry shifted in the old armchair Hermione had sat him down in and accepted her weight in his lap. His arms went around her and he hid his face against her shoulder. "That feels really good."

"Yes," Hermione agreed softly, gently pulling him even closer and carding her fingers through his unruly hair.

Far too soon, the prefects sent the younger years to bed. Harry wished that he could keep cuddling with Hermione, but he also needed to tell his godfather what was going on at Hogwarts.

*That won't go over well, Harry* thought miserably as he spelled his teeth clean. *I hate having to worry him. Maybe I should write Brady as well, he can help calm Sirius down.*

Back in the dorm, Ron showed him the cold shoulder. The boy didn't talk to anyone, just climbed into bed and yanked the hangings shut, followed by a surprisingly strong privacy charm.

"Does anybody else want to know what he's up to?" Dean asked, eyeing Ron's bed suspiciously.

Harry sighed and cast his own privacy charm around them. "I talked to Fred and George and asked them to write to their parents to have him checked out."

"Seriously?" Seamus hooted. "How did they take it?"

"Well, they said that Ron had his moments before this, but they'll do it. No idea what will come of it, though." Harry checked that his trunk was firmly locked before sitting on his bed. "Maybe it'll just be a howler from Mrs. Weasley."

"Even if it's just that, you did all you could as his friend," Neville said quietly. "The rest is up to family."

"Don't worry about it so much anymore," Seamus advised. "It'll either get better, or it won't, but
you'll know what to do in any case."

"Will I?" Harry asked wryly.

"Yup. You'll figure it out," Dean said and jumped onto his bed. "Night, guys!"

One after the other the bed hangings closed and privacy charms were cast. Harry only followed when everything was quiet, and then he scrambled to get Sirius' journal and a pen out of his bag. It took far longer than anticipated to write everything down, so he asked his godfather to share with Sharptooth. Healer Williams, he wanted to contact himself.

After copying and pasting everything he had told Sirius, Harry added, *I don't feel safe at Hogwarts anymore. Professor McGonagall suspects Dumbledore of mind-charming her, and I'll have to teach at least Hermione how to detect spell hooks, and I'm really freaking out right now. Professor McGonagall even had me write a letter to a friend she trusts because apparently the spell can make her change what she's writing to protect itself. It's bloody scary.*

Healer Williams' answer came quickly.

*Harry,*

*This is terrible news. I'm so, so sorry that it caught you unawares like this, and not even two weeks into your school year. I can only imagine what Sirius and Sharptooth will come up with, but you can trust them to do what's best for you.*

*In the meantime, I'll send you a book about revealing charms and spells. It's good that Professor McGonagall and her colleagues will teach you, and that she takes your concerns so seriously, but you shouldn't depend on just that. If your family magic is pushing you, the situation is at the very least pressing, if not dire, and we can't allow it to continue.*

*If I could, I'd come to Hogwarts and teach you myself, but failing that, I'll do my best to support you, and the Nation will, as well. At least you have Hogsmeade privileges now, which means that we can meet every now and then.*

*To make a glum evening hopefully a little brighter, I can report that the little adders are all well, even if the little princess is still stuck in her egg and refusing to come out. Her hissed insults are quite inventive for one so young. You'd find it hilarious, I'm sure!*

*All the best,*
Knowing that there was no way around it, Harry called for Dobby.

"Hey," he greeted his friend when he appeared on his bed. "Did you get back from Greece alright? Did you find Hagrid's friend?"

"Dobby did," the elf said smugly. "Dobby be delivering Miss Mione's letter. Mr. Papageorgiou be sending answer back with his own house elf."

"Awesome!" That little bit of good news did a lot to cheer Harry up. "Uhm, Dobby, would you please put a sleeping charm on me? And, uhm, maybe ward the bed against other people?"

Dobby instantly looked alarmed, ears raised and eyes as wide as he could make them go. "Harry Potter sir be in danger?"

"Sort of ... it's a long story. Brady can tell you," Harry replied. "Will you do it, please?"

"Dobby will. Dobby be right back."

"What?"

With a snap of his fingers, the elf vanished without giving an answer, and Harry could do little else but wait, fidgeting and glancing at the two journals, who remained ominously inactive.

After only a short while, which felt like a fright-filled eternity for Harry, Dobby was back. In his hands, he clutched three little snakes, and an egg, and he had stuffed a sheaf of photos under one arm.

"No," Harry whispered. "Dobby!"
Dobby let the beautiful little snakelings loose. They slithered over Harry's comforter, tiny tongues flicking out and tasting the air and everything that was in their way. The journals interested all of them, but soon they were wallowing in Harry's lap and hissing nonsense.

"Healer Williams be telling Dobby that Harry Potter sir be needing emotional and actual support snakes. Little death snakelings be volunteering. Head breeder not be daring to refuse. It be settled."

"God," Harry sighed. Carefully, he let the three snakes scent his fingers. The dark gold female immediately wound around his wrist as if she owned it. "But, thank you."

"We make you feel better," the female hissed. "We listen to Favourite talk about threat to you, so we come here. We bite evil people."

"I'm probably overreacting right now," Harry confessed, "but my magic is feeling upset."

"It is upheaval," she replied, sounding wise and snotty at the same time. "This place not feel very good. Many shadows."

Her brothers hissed in agreement. Both raised their dark heads, vying for Harry's attention now and seeking his warmth. The lone egg in Dobby's small hands looked almost sad. Harry carefully took it as well and petted the broken leathery shell. A single orange, glowing eye stared back at him through the crack.

"Thank you, Dobby. And thanks for the pictures as well. Uhm, when does Gringotts expect the adders back?"

Dobby bounced on his feet. "Healer Williams not be saying. It be implied that it be as long as Harry Potter sir be needing support snakes."

Harry snorted at the absurdity of having a support snake, be it emotional or actual, let alone four. "For the next year or so, then. Great. Gringotts'll want the money back." The three snakes around his wrists and forearms were surprisingly warm and soft, and actually rather soothing. "Oh well."

"Dobby be coming back in an hour," the house elf decided. "Maybe Harry Potter sir be able to go to sleep without help. Dobby be warding bed now."
"Thank you, Dobby. Have a good night."

Dobby grinned and popped away.

"Er, I'm really grateful for your company, but how will we do this?" Harry asked the snakes. "I don't want to accidentally squish you."

"You won't," the female hissed. "We are protected by goblin magic. We sleep in your bed. You will bathe little sister in your magic. She is stubborn."

"Not ready," the little snake in her egg hissed petulantly. "Make it warm, Harry."

"Make it warm, Harry," her brothers parroted, winding closer and tucking their tiny heads into his armpits. In the dark, their blue markings shimmered and changed in beguiling shades of turquoise and ice blue.

Harry got the impression that they would be far easier to manage than the females.

"Okay, if you're sure," he said. Carefully, he pulled the comforter up and snuggled in. The egg he placed in front of his stomach, were it was warmest. "Please don't bite me in your sleep."

"No worry, Harry," the golden female hissed in contentment. "We like you. Rest now."

To his surprise, Harry's eyelids grew heavier and heavier in a matter of minutes. To warm his little companions, he pushed magic at them, seeking out their little signatures and wrapping them up snugly. Sleep carried him away easily, and while he did have vivid dreams, it was also restful and refreshing.

oOo

Hermione was already waiting for him when Harry gingerly stepped into the common room. He had all three snakes hidden on his body and the egg in his bag. It had been a scramble to find an adequate warming charm in one of the household charm books he'd bought during the holidays.

"Hey," Hermione whispered and gave Harry a lingering kiss on the cheek. "How are you?"

Harry returned the kiss gratefully. "Better. I even slept okay. Let's go and I'll explain."
In an abandoned corridor, Betty picked them up and brought them to the Come And Go Room, vanishing immediately afterwards with a sad look at Harry.

Inside the room, now a cozy little study with a large fire in the fireplace and a tea service on the coffee table, Harry tugged Hermione to the sofa and pulled her close. Beneath his shirt, the snakes stirred, although they seemed unconcerned about her weight on them.

"Something's wrong here," he murmured into Hermione's hair. "Dumbledore's acting really strangely, and Professor McGonagall told him off, and then she taught me this spell afterwards and we discovered that she's been charmed."

"Wait, wait, what? Charmed?" Hermione asked, sitting up to face him. "Please start over."

Harry took a deep breath. "Sorry, ah, when me and Professor McGonagall went to see Dumbledore, he tried to send her away. She refused."

"Well, good!" Hermione said.

"Dumbledore tried to ... I guess he tried to ask for money, only McGonagall called it bullying. He said he was disappointed that I wasn't giving Hogwarts any of the basilisk money, and that the school relied on private gifts to better our education."

"Oh, that impossible man!" Hermione scowled fiercely. "How dare he! Has he tried to exert his influence as your guardian?"

"No, he said that he couldn't because of a conflict of interest. Professor McGonagall really laid into him for that, through, and he dropped it." Harry wished, not for the first time, that he had a pensieve to show her exactly what was going on. A master of words he was not.

"That wasn't all, was it?" Hermione asked, peeved.

"No. After that, he said that he's glad about my interest and good work in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and that he expects at least an EE at the end of the year."

Hermione's hair fluffed up like the fur of an angry cat. "He what? He's imposing conditions after first refusing to honour your choice?!"
Harry shrugged weakly. "Yeah, I guess so." Before Hermione could work herself into a full strop, he continued, "And lastly, Dumbledore tried to get me to reconcile with Ron."

"Did he now. How did he even hear about that?" Hermione growled. "And why would he even care?"

"Apparently Ron whined about me and Dumbledore is concerned and disappointed that I'd rather lose my first friend than try to make things right."

"Does he know that Ron was out of line?"

Harry nodded. "I told him. He said it must've been a misunderstanding. Professor McGonagall told him off, said that it wasn't right for him to interfere, and that she finds it suspicious that he's starting to meddle now when he never did before I started Hogwarts. Honestly, I have no idea what's gotten into her, but I sure am grateful."

"And the being charmed part?" Hermione asked after a little pause, during which she visibly digested the news. "What's that about?"

"I kind of panicked again when we finally left Dumbledore's office," Harry admitted. "She took me to her quarters and checked me for spells. She thought that maybe I was under a compulsion spell or something because I was so choked up. I came up clear, but something I said really rattled her and she made me learn that spell and cast it on her."

Hermione stared. She stared for so long that Harry was starting to get afraid that he'd broken her.

"What?" Hermione finally whispered. "Harry."

"I know," he said, feeling the fury well up again. "Professor McGonagall said that it's some kind of mild mind-altering spell, and that it's probably got to do with me. I am to teach you and Neville that spell, and use it on people, and her, if something seems off ... to see whether they've been charmed without their knowledge."

Hermione raised a trembling hand to her lips. "I can't believe it. Oh my god."
"Hey, I won't let anything happen to you," Harry murmured. "I'll work really hard to find out how to prevent that."

"That's great, Harry, honestly. It's just ... I'm a girl, and there are drugs in the mundane world that allow men to do whatever they like to other people ... usually girls and women." She shuddered. "I've always known that magic can be dangerous. It's just ... it's never hit home like this." She wound her arms around herself and shivered. "What good are karate and krav maga if some idiot can just charm me and-"

Harry's fury roared in his ears when he tried to imagine it. Healer Williams had put it in rather graphic words and as far as he was concerned, it had been enough to last him a lifetime. "I'll murder anyone who tries."

"I'll go to Madam Pomfrey, see what spells she can recommend. I was going to do that anyway, I just haven't found the time yet." Hermione clung tightly to Harry. "That's not how I imagined this morning to go. I thought there would be a lot of righteous indignation about Dumbledore, and maybe a little bitching about Ron. That almost would've been fun. But this ..." She shuddered again.

"Do the other girls also feel like this?" Harry asked.

"Not that I know of," Hermione murmured. "But maybe they already have something arranged. Should I ask?"

"Maybe Parvati would be best," Harry said thoughtfully, "since her family is really old and she's pretty. There's bound to be some unwanted attention, and her family will want to protect her from gold diggers and stuff, right?"

"Right." Hermione pressed a little kiss to Harry's temple. "Thanks for not freaking out because I was freaking out. It's just ... being a girl can be so unfun. It's horrible. And with magic it's even more horrible. God."

"Yeah, it is," Harry agreed. "I don't really get it, but I understand."

"Please tell me that that's all Dumbledore did," Hermione pleaded. "I'm not sure I could take any more bad news."

"No, that was all, but ... huh, I almost forgot. He signed my Hogsmeade permission." Harry brightened. "Professor McGonagall has it, so we can go on real dates!"
"Oh ..." Hermione's eyes became soft and a little wet. "That's wonderful. Did he want something for doing it?"

"Professor McGonagall would've torn him to shreds, but maybe he'll try later." Harry placed his hands carefully around Hermione's face and kissed her very gently on the lips. "Until then, I'll be really happy about it."

"Me, too," she whispered. "It's my turn to treat you."

They smiled at each other. Finally, Harry remembered the tea tray and poured them piping hot cups of tea.

"Since we're here already, should we shift our training to another day?" Hermione asked. "I totally forgot Astronomy because Professor Sinistra was gone until last night, and of course it'll take place on Wednesday, like it did the last two years."

"The day would be too long," Harry agreed with a sigh. "Tuesday is also bad because of the Patronus Club. Thursday, then? And move our weekend meeting from Saturday to Sunday to have a day more in between?"

"That works for me," Hermione replied. She pulled her planner from her bag and changed the entries with a few taps of her wand. Quietly, she confessed, "I don't want to go to class."

"I don't want to go, either." Harry sighed.

He wanted to go home, actually. Back to his cottage, and Sirius, and have Healer Williams over for visits, and take care of the wild garden and the pension the house elves were getting ready for visitors. He could even envision having tutors and meeting regularly with lawyers ... anything to get his sense of peace back.

"What will I tell my parents?" Hermione whispered, wringing her hands. "They will take me home immediately. They should!"

"Yeah, they should," Harry agreed with a heavy heart.
"But first you'll teach me that spell." Hermione raised her chin stubbornly. "And we'll learn spells to defend ourselves. I read about spell cascades the other night; they're difficult to build, but once done ... our magic would react to certain threats by itself, even without us knowing that there is a threat."

"We'll do that," Harry said immediately. "And I got lots of books about occlumency. Maybe we can do that while we meditate before our exercises."

Hermione made some changes to her planner entries. "That's a lot of work. We could do with more hours in the day."

"We'll manage somehow," Harry replied, stroking along Hermione's back and taking a deep breath himself. "I don't want you to have to leave, so I'll work really hard."

"I will, too."

Hermione's breath against Harry's neck was warm and the snakes seemed to like her closeness a lot, if their subtle squirming was any indication. At last, however, they had to get up and leave their little haven. Harry accompanied Hermione to the great hall for breakfast and they endured some well-meaning ribbing about their linked hands. Why no one had outright asked them about it yet was a mystery to Harry, but not one he was willing to solve anytime soon.

After managing to force down some toast and scrambled eggs, Harry returned to the Come And Go Room and let the snakes slither around his study. The egg he put on the desk where the snake within could see him.

"Cold, Harry," she complained. "Need magic fire. Make it warm."

Harry cast the warming charm and pushed his magic along for her to latch on. It was a strange feeling to have her practically suckling on it, but not an unpleasant one. If anything, it was humbling to know that she depended on him to nurture her for a bit until the breeders at Gringotts could take care of her again.

"Shouldn't you be in your nest at Gringotts?" he asked, carefully petting the leathery egg shell. Inside, the snake restlessly wound around itself, making the shell bulge in some places and deflate in others. "They can give you everything you need. I want you to be big and strong like your brothers and sister."

"Not ready," she repeated her words from the night before and flicked her tiny tongue at Harry's thumb. "Harry keep me warm. Harry is nice."
Touched, Harry nodded. "I'll do my best, Sweetie."

"That's not my name," she informed him primly. "But I like."

"Harry make the fire bigger," the golden female hissed, echoed, as usual, by her brothers. "We bathe in fire. Need much heat."

Smiling, Harry sent an Incendio at the fireplace and watched as the three adders dove right in. Their markings flared up, glaring blue for the males and vibrant pink for the female, and their little hisses where rapturous.

Since he didn't have that much time, Harry unpacked Sirius' journal and his pen and started writing.

September 14th, 1993

Good morning Siri,

Sorry for bothering you again so soon. I just wanted to let you know that Brady sent me the basilisk snakelings last night, for all the support, or so he said. They're awesome and really pretty. Right now they're bathing in fire and glowing like gemstones.

Also, Hermione asked whether I could have a lawyer with me whenever Dumbledore wants to talk to me. She's really freaked out about that charm on Professor McGonagall and worried that someone might hurt me ... or her. I'll teach her all the spells Brady will teach me because being a girl is very unfun sometimes and I'm going to kill dumb people who try to hurt her.

Love,

Harry

Despite the early hour, Sirius was already up, and by the appearance of his writing working his way up from angry to furious.

Harry,

Merlin's soiled pants! I'll hire a lawyer just for that as soon as you've gone to class, and I'll instruct him to take on Hermione as well! Bloody hell - being a muggle-born girl in our society isn't just unfun, it's absolutely inadvisable. Remind me to send you the current law book, you'll have a fully grown nundu!
Before you ask, yes, Sharptooth will probably skin me alive (he tried to calm me down last night and devise a plan to work around outing me as back in the game), but I don't care whether people know who hired them or not. Right now, people don't suspect that we even know each other, and even if they found out, I'd just go back to Gringotts and claim asylum. That would make them sit up and take notice! Additionally, Lawrence already told me that if push came to shove, he could raise enough red tape to keep even the ICW busy for a couple of months, allowing my healing plan to continue as scheduled, just in Italy instead of Britain. Seeing you safe, or at least safer, isn't the least bit inconvenient to me, pup, so be prepared to get a visitor very soon, and a lot of flattering headlines about yours truly in the papers.

Love,

Sirius

Harry swallowed and unsteadily answered, Thanks. I'm so, so glad.

Harry,

don't thank me for doing my job as your parent. I'm so angry that Hogwarts isn't the safe place for you it should be. I want to whisk you away and homeschool you until you're an adult! That way you'll be actually prepared to deal with Voldemort when the time comes, because it will come. The abominations in that diary and in you weren't the only ones. Ninja found another, in my family home of all places, and there'll likely be more. Dumbledore's strange ideas of giving you a crappy childhood and then wanting to teach you about divination and not much else isn't going to cut it.

Which means, of course, that a History tutor is coming to Hogwarts, and one for Potions as well. Sharptooth is already on it, so you can tell Hermione to withdraw her request. The tutors are not negotiable, but you may invite four other students to sit with you, if you like. If more students want to join, kindly remind them that it is not your responsibility to provide acceptable teachers, but Dumbledore's. Your newspaper would be the perfect medium for that.

Love,

Sirius

The first half of the first period had already passed, and Harry had the urgent wish to write to Brady, as well.

"We really need more time," he muttered, setting the pen back on paper.
Sirius,

Thanks for the tutors, they'll be a big hit around here. I already know that I'll invite Hermione and Neville for both subjects and go from there. There's this Slytherin, Blaise Zabini, who's not a total menace. He even helped me in Potions the other day. Maybe I could ask him, try to sound him out and stuff. But I won't if you tell me that his family is bad news, of course.

Harry looked up and watched the snakes sleeping in the fireplace. They were even more glowy than before, as if the fire was somehow charging them. That reminded him that he'd told Sirius about Slytherin's library, but had never gotten an answer to his question what they should do with it.

Speaking of bad news, I know that Slytherin's library is a huge deal, but I thought that at least Brady had something to say about all the books. Is something wrong with them?

Love,

Harry

Sirius' reply came quickly and gave Harry the answers he was seeking.

The Zabinis are an old family, though they're not from around here. As such, there's some stigma attached to their pureblood claims. Lauretta Zabini is a very beautiful woman - she's been married five times last I counted, and her husbands all died under mysterious circumstances. They're rich to be sure, the husbands left her tons of gold. However, I know nothing about the kid, so you'll have to rely on your instinct and not let him get too close, too fast. A contact in Slytherin would be valuable, though, so don't burn this bridge if you don't have to.

The Slytherin library ... pup, I don't know what to say about that, and neither do Brady or Gringotts. The books are yours by right. The Slytherin family magic will probably guard them zealously, now that you've claimed the family. Would the knowledge in those books and journals be priceless? Yes, of course, but we all feel ... inadequate to advise you. It's such a huge legacy that everyone is still quite out of sorts.

Harry sighed. Can you please do it anyway? There might be helpful stuff against the Dark Git in these books and I'll never, ever be able to read them all by myself.

Alright, kiddo, I'll try:
1) Try to make copies of the books. They can look cheap, it doesn't matter. If that works, continue with step 2.

2) Set up a contract and formulate an oath to viciously protect all (and I mean all) your interests. Let Sharptooth help with that, since it's not only his job, but his duty as your steward. The oath will probably have to be unbreakable, and I honestly wouldn't accept anything less in your place. It might also be necessary to stipulate obliviation after the work is done, if someone proves to be unable to contain the information. It occasionally happens and would protect them from a messy death. Slytherin's legacy simply is too valuable to take risks.

3) Find parselmouths who're willing to swear the oath and sign the contract and set them up to work. Pay them well for their effort, and store the translations in the deepest pits of Gringotts and protect them with Slytherin's family magic and a dragon or two.

4) Depending on what's in the books and journals, people will be pressing you to do something with them. Resist at all costs, until the true value and magnitude of the knowledge has been assessed. I can't stress enough that these books are your legacy. No matter how helpful the knowledge would be to other people or the government, triple check that your bases are covered and that people can't take advantage of you.

That's everything I could think of on the fly. If you really want to get started on the library, let me know and I'll make a journal for you and Sharptooth for just that purpose. Contracts and agreements will still have to be sent by mail, because of Gringotts' record keeping, but the planning can be done directly and will save a lot of time.

Take care, and don't take on too much all at once. Right now, occlumency should be your first priority, likewise for Hermione if she insists on being included.

Love,

Sirius

Harry was stunned. Of course he'd known that Slytherin's books would be valuable, but to all but demand total secrecy on the life of the people who'd work on them was ... intense. Harry had already had a problem with Brady swearing such an oath, adding more people to that number made him very uncomfortable.

And yet it's necessary, he thought with a grimace. Bloody hell.
There were only ten minutes left until the bell would ring, and so Harry thanked his godfather for his advice and the offer of a journal for Sharptooth and him and then collected the death adders.

"Are you warm enough, Sweetie?" he asked the snake in the egg while the others were climbing up his hand and into his shirt sleeve. "Do you need a charm?"

"I want to be with the others," she huffed. "Put me under your robe."

"People will see," Harry said gently. "How about my pocket? But no wiggling."


He let the egg slide into his robe pocket, made sure that the opening in the shell wouldn't be closed up by his body and suffocate the little snake, and then he cast the warming charm on her.

"Alright?"

"Thank you, Harry," she hissed blissfully.

Betty appeared, showing Harry a plate with snacks that she then vanished into his book bag, before taking him from the Come And Go Room and popped him into a corridor close to Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"Alright," Harry muttered, "let's do this. It's just another day at Hogwarts ..."

And to his surprise, it actually was. Charms, Herbology, and Defence all passed as they usually did. It helped that the Slytherins were keeping to themselves for once, and that Ron decided not to approach Harry during lunch time.

In the hour between the last class and the Patronus Club, Neville shyly came up to Harry and Hermione's table in the library and informed them that their order was as complete as he could make it, and that it was waiting in the dorm for them.

"I'm sorry for the high price," the boy mumbled as he slid the invoice over the table. "Last year wasn't very great for some of the plants, so I couldn't restock as much as I wanted."
"That's alright, Neville," Harry assured him. "I'll give you the gold tonight. Is cash alright, or do you want it in your Gringotts account?"

"Cash please. My gran checks every now and then." Neville frowned. "Ever since my uncle tried dipping into my trust fund, to be exact."

"Oh, that's horrible!" Hermione said, shocked. "I can't believe what some people will try to do."

Harry smiled a little. "Not everyone's family is like yours, 'Mione." To Neville, he said, "Thank you, we really appreciate it."

As he was already there, Neville stayed to work on his DADA essay and walked with them when it was time to head into the great hall for the Patronus Club meeting.

For the club, the tables and benches had again been banished to the sides of the hall, leaving plenty of space for the students. Professor Lupin was already there, a smile on his face.

"I'm sorry that you have to see me so soon after your last class of the day," he said, earning himself a few chuckles. "Now, you've all signed up for this club because you want to be able to defend yourselves against a dementor. Since you're very young, it might be hard on your magic to actually successfully cast a Patronus. However, what you learn today, even in theory, might help you tomorrow, so don't get discouraged if it takes longer than you'd like." He pointed to the table behind him, where two dozen large chocolate bars were arranged to their best advantage. "If anything, there'll always be good chocolate at the end, so I hope you'll return."

After his short speech, Lupin told the students to set themselves up with a bit of distance between them.

"Now, dementors feed on negative emotions as we've already learned. Their very presence strikes terror in our hearts, bringing these emotions to the surface for their consumption." Lupin walked between the students and stopped next to Anthony Goldstein. "Anthony, can you tell me what a natural protection against dementors therefore is?"

"Well, if they're working to bring up the negative emotions, logic dictates that positive emotions would stop them." Anthony shrugged. "Although magic isn't always logical, right?"

The whole group giggled and Lupin smiled. "Five points to Ravenclaw for a well thought out
conclusion. And in our case, thankfully, magic does follow logic. What powers the Patronus Charm is positive emotion, as pure as it possibly can be." He walked on, right to Pansy Parkinson, who was eyeing him warily. "Who can tell me one way to generate positive emotion? Miss Parkinson?"

She huffed, but said, "Recalling happy memories."

"Very good. Take five points for Slytherin. Can anyone think of other ways? Yes, Hermione?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Gratitude. Or rather, the mindset of gratitude."

Millicent Bulstrode snorted loudly.

"How so?" Lupin asked in his mild manner.

Hermione said, unperturbed, "If one is grateful and content with who they are and what they have in life, they're bound to feel happy. It's not instant, though, and requires training, and I also don't know if that'd be enough to fight a dementor, but I imagine that it would at least help."

"You're practicing meditation?" When Hermione nodded, Lupin smiled and said, "It's true that a generally happy person will have a far easier time of successfully summoning their Patronus than an unhappy one. And while your answer wasn't fully correct in that a general state of contentment is enough to power the spell, practicing the art of gratitude is still a very helpful life skill. Take three points for Gryffindor. Anyone else?"

No one raised their hands, and Lupin nodded. "You'd be right. If there are any other ways to call a Patronus, or Spirit Guardian as it is sometimes called, wizardkind hasn't found them yet. Memories are quickly accessible and they're free, not to mention everyone has them. How happy they are, however, is a very different matter. In your own interest I hope that you'll have the opportunity of making many very happy memories in your lifetime." Lupin reached the end of the hall and spun around, wand in hand. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Harry's breath caught as a large, silver cloud burst from Lupin's wand. It hovered for a second and then, abruptly, a wolf emerged from the mist and raced through the hall before fading away. Impulsively, he began to clap and was quickly joined by the others.

"Thank you." Lupin smiled, though he looked strained. "Now, please take a few minutes to find your happiest memory. Really get into it and remember the feeling in that moment with every fibre of your being."
For Harry, it wasn't hard to decide on a memory. The visit to his family vault, the feeling of being enveloped by the presence of generations of Potters, of being loved so unconditionally, was everything. He loved Sirius as well and was overjoyed to have him in his life, but it couldn't hope to compare to that fierce sense of belonging. Against his skin under his shirt and in his robe pocket, the snakes were wiggling excitedly.

"Alright, let's try it! You know the incantation!" Lupin clapped his hands for everyone's attention. "After me: *Expecto Patronum*! Say it loudly and clearly!"

"*Expecto Patronum!*" the students repeated.

"Now the wand movement ... like this!"

Again everyone copied Professor Lupin.

"You're a clever lot, well done," the man praised. "Now you can try."

Shouts of, "*Expecto Patronum!*" echoed through the great hall, and arms waved wildly in an attempt to get the movement right. Curious, Harry took it all in, hoping to spy a wisp of that silver light.

"I can't decide which memory to use," Hermione whispered, face anxious.

"Just try them all," Harry said and squeezed her hand. "It's our first club meeting, no one will get it right."

She smiled gratefully at him. "You're right, I'm being silly."

"Not silly." Harry grinned. "Just eager to do this."

"Do you have a good memory?" Hermione asked.

Harry's smile went soft. "I have the best."

They reluctantly split up for more room to flail around and Harry closed his eyes to concentrate. Remembering that moment in front of his family vault was easy, actually handling the surge of emotions was not. The remembered love rose up and up, tangled with his own answering emotions and bubbled from his eyes and mouth and hand and feet.
"Expecto Patronum," he murmured and could actually feel some of that intense feeling leave his body through his wand. "Oh."

In front of him, a shapeless silvery mist was hovering like a disconnected Lumos charm.

"Oh, really? Bloody Potter!" Malfoy shouted. He looked close to throwing down in wand in a tantrum.

The other students stopped what they were doing, elbowing each other as they stared at him, and beginning to talk in hushed whispers.

"Well done, Harry, very impressive!" Lupin said. As he came closer, Harry's cloudy mist winked out. "Fifty points to Gryffindor for a feat that not even the seventh years have managed yet."

"Fifty!" someone yelped and the talking got louder.

"There'll be fifty more in the cards if you manage to repeat that and get some shape to it," Lupin cajoled. "How about it, Harry?"

"I'll try," Harry muttered, blushing at the unabashed looks of his yearmates.

"There's no need to stare," Lupin reminded the group and ushered them back to their spots. "You have your own work to do. Twenty points for everyone who can also produce a mist. Mind the wand movement, Susan ..."

"That must be some memory!" Hermione said excitedly when the others had resumed their training. She was beaming. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, 'Mione," Harry replied shyly. "What about you? Did you already try?"

"Not yet." Suddenly shy herself, Hermione shrugged. "I'm really not sure if my memory is strong enough ... and it seemed to go so effortlessly for you."

Harry's brow furrowed. "It wasn't effortless. I just have a really good memory for this." He lowered his voice, nervously eyeing the other boys in their vicinity. "Look, I just totally ... felt it. Like it was happening right then, instead of just remembering. You know?"
Hermione frowned back and chewed on her bottom lip in concentration. "I think so. I mean, it's what Professor Lupin told us to do, so it makes sense."

"You have nearly perfect recall," Harry continued. "And you've got a really great family. I'm sure you have lots of awesome memories to choose from."

"I do," Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Harry."

"I'll take it from here," Lupin said, slowly meandering over and gently nudging Harry back to his own training spot. "Give it another try, Harry, our time is almost up."

Although Harry didn't want to make a spectacle out of himself, he followed the request. This time it was harder to fall into the feeling - he knew that the others were keeping their eyes on him and it was distracting.

"Harry is strong," a nearly silent hiss came from under his shirt. "Little sister wants hot feeling. Harry forget noisy people and help little sister."

It wasn't the female's voice, which startled Harry. So far, the brothers had been content to want whatever their bossy golden sister wanted, but it seemed that the quiet times were over now.

"I'll try," he whispered.

Slowly, he called up the memory again, starting from the beginning to build up to it because heaven knew that he wasn't prepared to handle it at immediate full force again.

*He was clinging to a man he barely knew, but knew well enough with Magic's help to love him ... was kneeling in front of an ancient vault, at the mercy of his family magic ... was being bathed in so much affection and pride that it was hard to breathe for the happiness of it ...*

"Expecto Patronum," he forced through the sheer heaviness of emotion in his whole body, and again something left through his wand and burst into existence.

Harry kept his eyes closed and just felt the new presence in front of him. It was warm and glowing, radiating so much peace and happiness that it was nearly painful.
"Harry, look at him," Hermione said quietly. "He's waiting."

Reluctantly, Harry opened his eyes. He was half afraid that the apparition would vanish as soon as he did so, but there he was, a beautiful, silver stag made of glowing light with an impressive set of antlers. Calmly, it was looking at Harry, one ear flicking and left front hoof soundlessly scratching the floor.

"Hey," he whispered. Harry reached out and sighed when the stag pressed his nose into his palm.

Then, it vanished like mist on a summer morning.

Silence reigned for long moments, until Hannah Abbott began to applaud. Susan Bones joined, softly, almost reverently, and one after the other most of Harry's yearmates joined in.

Lupin looked stricken and his amber eyes had a wet sheen to them. "Fifty points to Gryffindor, Harry," he said roughly. "Very well done. Very well, indeed."

All hope of actually working through the last few minutes was utterly lost and Lupin accepted that with a lot of grace. The boys and girls converged around Harry, peppering with questions and expressing their admiration for his Patronus.

"Which memory did you use?" Ron called, sounding sullen. "Maybe we want to use it, too."

"Ron!" Hermione cried. "How dare you! That's personal!"

"How important can it be when there's dementors out to eat us?" Ron snapped back.

"That's a horrid thing to say, Ron," Professor Lupin said, voice sounding so cold that Harry nearly didn't recognize it. "I won't take points because that would harm your housemate's success. Instead, you'll have detention with Mr. Filch next Saturday."

"What for? I'm not saying anything others aren't thinking!" Ron complained.
All four snakes on Harry writhed around in agitation and hisses of, "Impudent boy" slithered over the boy's skin.

"Merlin, Weasley, you're an embarrassment," Blaise Zabini said sharply before Professor Lupin could formulate a reply. "You don't get that Potter's memory might be worthless to you, do you? Everyone's values are different, you moron. Find your own happy place and stop trying to steal other people's things." He glared. "I can't believe you're after Potter's memories. How desperate can you get."

"One point from Slytherin for insulting a fellow student, Blaise," Lupin said quietly. "To the rest of you: Blaise and Hermione are right. Memories are intensely personal, and everyone deals with their emotions differently. I can almost guarantee that borrowed happy thoughts won't work."

Blaise inclined his dark head, not protesting the point loss. And while the other Slytherins didn't look happy about him speaking out in Harry's favour, they quite obviously disliked Ron more and didn't say anything.

"And if they do?" Ron demanded.

"Then I'll happily award points," Lupin replied, voice still cool.

"Fine. Then tell Harry to tell us what memory he used." Ron crossed his arms in front of his chest, smirking triumphantly.

Hermione and several other students gasped in outrage.

"Of course I won't," Lupin said, visibly losing his cool. "Another detention for asking such a morally reprehensible thing from a teacher. I think Professor Snape could do with help cleaning several dozens of mucky cauldrons. And if you persist, it'll be detention until the end of term."

Ron lost his smugness and flushed angrily. "How am I to prove it, then?"

"That is your problem, I'm afraid." Lupin turned away from Ron and made a show of checking the time. "Alright you lot, our hour is almost up. Let's set the great hall to rights so we can enjoy dinner."
In short order the tables and benches were back in their rightful places and every house had earned ten points for helping.

"Harry, if I might have a minute of your time before dinner is served?" Lupin asked as the students trotted off to their tables.

"Sure." Harry motioned for Hermione to go on and then followed Lupin out of the hall and into a small ante chamber. "Professor?"

"First of all, congratulations again for your successful Patronus Charm," Lupin said quietly. "It was a huge surprise, as you can imagine. Your Spirit Guardian ... it made me think of your father, Harry."

Harry frowned. "My dad? Why?"

Lupin smiled tiredly. "He, er, had the ability to transform into an animal. A stag, to be precise. Just like the one your Patronus formed into."

"Oh." Harry swallowed. "Sorry if that hurt you, sir."

"It hurt in a good way," Lupin assured him. "Their loss was ... horrifying. They were my family."

Harry's mind immediately went somewhere he'd sworn Sirius he wouldn't go, and it took all of his resolve not to blurt out, "Where were you, then, when I was a baby?" Instead, Harry said, "Will he come again, or will my Patronus look the same every time?"

"Generally a Patronus retains its form, although a life-changing event could cause it to alter its form to better suit the needs of its wizard," Lupin said quietly.

"Yours was very cool," Harry said honestly. "He looked beautiful ... why didn't you want us to see?"

"It's ... complicated." Lupin exhaled. "Harry, you know that ... that Sirius Black is out and about."
So there it was, the first volley. Harry tried not to stiffen, although his suddenly racing heart probably gave him away. It was a wonder that Lupin hadn't said anything about the additional four heartbeats on his person, yet.

"Everybody knows," Harry said carefully."

"So they do." Lupin's eyes were intent, also his whole posture screamed wariness. "He was your godfather. Has he approached you?"

"He is my godfather," Harry murmured, unable to resist the poke. The question he ignored outright; it wouldn't do to admit to it. He watched Lupin's reaction and the man didn't disappoint.

"Is he?" Lupin asked, quietly shocked even though he'd already heard it once, albeit obliquely. His face flitted through a lot of expressions. It looked uncomfortable, almost painful. The sliver of hope was the worst, because it was almost instantly crushed by decade-old doubt.

"I'm glad the Ministry hasn't caught him yet," Harry added, taking care not to look directly into Lupin's eyes, even though he was fairly sure that the man wasn't a legilimens. "I hope they never will."

Through the thick wooden door they could hear the voices of the arriving students. The tension between Harry and Lupin was so thick it was almost suffocating.

"Harry ...," Lupin whispered. "Truly?"

There was a world of feeling being expressed in that one word. Pain and new hope and love and hate and anger and despair.

Instead of saying anything, Harry gave a barely-there nod and quietly slipped from the ante chamber to join his friends.

_Mischief managed, as Sirius would say, _he thought, already bracing himself for the crowd because there was no way the story about his Patronus hadn't spread.

oOo

Harry was absolutely wiped out when he finally managed to get up to his dorm. He'd never socialized so much in his life and was thoroughly convinced that he never wanted to do it again.
"I bet you're pretty satisfied with yourself now," Ron said bitterly. He was sitting on his bed, already washed and dressed for sleep.

"I could've done without the mobbing," Harry said grumpily, placing his book bag onto his own bed and flopping down. "People are seriously nuts."

"This time they kind of had a right to go crazy," Dean said apologetically. "It's not everyday a third year manages a corporeal Patronus."

Ron sneered. "The first in several centuries, of course."

"Right." Dean narrowed his eyes at the boy. "You said you had a really good memory to fuel the charm, but you know what, Harry? It also takes a bit of power to do it, and most of us just aren't there yet."

"Right, yet. I bet you that you can do it at the end of the year, at the latest," Harry muttered, still annoyed.

"Why? So you can claim that as your success as well?" Ron asked, tone biting.

"For the love of Merlin, enough, Ron!" Neville cried. "I'm so tired of you starting fights! Leave Harry alone already!"

"What Neville said," Seamus snapped. "Geez, get a grip, Weasley, your jealousy is getting toxic."

"Get help, Weasley," Dean said and left for the showers without another word.

Ron huffed, drawing his bed hangings shut roughly.

"I hate that he's always bringing stuff up," Harry said. The anger left him and he deflated. "I don't know what I did to him to make him like this. Sorry, guys."

"Not your fault," Seamus said with a shrug and followed Dean, unknowingly giving Harry and Neville the privacy to finalize their business.

"One crate of magical plants, mushrooms, and herbs," Neville said, handing the nearly weightless wooden box over.
"And ten galleons, eight sickles and five knuts for you." Harry grinned. "Thanks, Neville. Everything looks really good. I'll let you know how our potions turned out with your stuff."

"Please do. If there are problems with the quality, I need to work on it."

After a quick wash, Harry climbed into bed, cast his privacy charms and checked Dobby's wards before coaxing the little adders from their hiding place under his pillow.

"Say, what do you even eat? You haven't asked for food all day," Harry said, stroking the three hatched snakes with one hand and the egg with the other.

"We eat magic," the golden female informed him and curled around his fingers, displacing one of her brothers who bore it with good humour. "Yours is yummy. Very rich. It's good for us, and little sister."

"She almost died in Mother," one of the brothers hissed. "We helped, but it nearly was too late."

"Harry make us grow," the female said imperiously and gnawed on Harry's thumb. "We will be strong and fierce."

"You absolutely will be," Harry chuckled. He cradled the egg against his chest and just let it rest over his heart while he let his magic well up. Everytime he did that, it got easier, just like the martial arts exercises Hermione had him do. "Are you well, Sweetie? You're so quiet."

"Growing," the little snake hissed sleepily. "Not too tired to eat."

"Okay." Overcome with affection for the tiny thing, Harry nuzzled a kiss on the teeny snake nose and bussed the three others as well when they complained about missing out on 'silly human affections'. "Sleep well, all of you. I'll just write to my godfather and Brady."

"Tell the Favourite that I'll come visit soon," the golden female hissed. She coiled around her brothers, forming an absurdly pretty braid. "We miss him."

"I miss him, too," Harry confessed.

When Harry opened the green journal, the four adders were already asleep. He used a sticking charm to keep the egg on his chest, making him feel a little like a sea horse dad with his kid.
September 14th, 1993

Brady,

Today's been insane. I just learned that the adders eat magic - I thought I'd let them starve because they haven't asked for food yet. Boy, do I feel stupid. Anyway, thanks for sending them, they're absolutely great. I adore the boys, and the golden one is a little queen. But I guess my favourite is the one still in the egg. She's so fierce, and her brother told me that she almost died in the Chamber. I feel like a total heel. Hopefully she won't hold it against me much once she's heard about it. Right now she's stuck to my chest and I sort of let her bathe in my magic. I didn't really know how to do it at first, but caring for them quickly taught me.

The golden one also told me to greet the Favourite, which is you, I guess, and tell you that she misses you and will come for a visit soon. I think her brothers will come with, they seem content under her rule.

We also had our first Patronus Club meeting tonight. I honestly didn't expect much, but ... you remember the visit to my family vault? Turns out that the memory is excellent Patronus fuel. I earned a hundred points for Gryffindor and my Patronus is a stag. Professor Lupin got all misty eyed afterwards because apparently my dad could turn into a stag and my Patronus looks exactly like him.

I sort of let Lupin know (for sure, that is) that Sirius still is my godfather, and therefore innocent, and he was kind of stunned and lost-looking. No idea what he'll do with that, but it felt like the right thing to do. I don't want him to be sad, and I don't want him to hate Sirius any longer. Both of them need a friend, so maybe that can happen now.

Ron's not been any nicer today. I don't know what's wrong with him, but I finally caved and asked the twins to write home. Even his brothers say that he's being a total git, and they don't have an explanation, either. Maybe his parents can deal with it before the whole school starts to hate him; Seamus and Dean are already nearly there, and even Neville snapped at him. I know how shitty being ostracised is and I don't want that for Ron. Do you have any ideas how I could deal with it? It's driving me crazy to always have him sniping at me.

Sorry for the long letter, I hope I haven't disturbed your evening too much.

-Harry

Healer Williams' answer took a while, which wasn't a surprise. Finally, the words began to appear on
the page in a fairly even flow.

Harry,

You've had a full day, it seems, and you won't ever disturb me.

Let's get the unpleasantness out of the way first, because this ongoing situation with your friend is beginning to really worry Sirius and myself. It was good to involve Ron's brothers, that will hopefully lend credence to the claim in their parents' eyes. In the meantime you should consider hitting him with a revealing spell. Even if it's a basic one, it should pick up on malicious magic and allow you to report the matter to the school nurse or head of house.

I can't judge your dealings with Remus Lupin, that is between Sirius and yourself. That being said, I agree that your godfather could use a friend. He is at a stage in his healing regimen where additional social contact will be to his benefit, although I rather question the wisdom of confronting Sirius with this part of his past first. There's bound to be tension and what with Dumbledore probably forcing us to move our schedule forward, the additional stress could harm our cause. I'll talk it over with Sirius, although I'll be honest and say that his mind healer will probably advise him to wait for Lupin to make contact. In the meantime, Gringotts will continue to gather information and act in the manner that's best for Sirius' recovery and return to society.

Your Patronus ... I don't know what to say to that, Harry, except congratulations, of course! I knew you would be able to do it, but so soon? I shouldn't tell you this, but Sharptooth opened a betting pool as soon as he learned of the club, and put a hundred galleons on your first session.

He will be so unbearably smug now.

This is a very special achievement, and one that will bring you a lot of joy in the future. I'm so very proud of you, and very happy that the touch of your family magic has brought about such a marvellous gift.

And speaking of gifts, Patroni aren't only useful to repel dementors, they can also carry voice messages that can't be intercepted, and they simply offer comfort in times of despair. Their presence reminds us wizards of the good things in our lives, of all the happiness we were already blessed to experience. Our Spirit Guides will never lead us wrong. In my country, the people call them Little Soul and I think that describes them very well.

Thank you for the snakelings' greetings, I'm looking forward to seeing all of them again, and I'm very glad that they are a comfort you. Regarding their rather special dietary needs, I can only
apologize. My plan wasn’t well thought out, in fact, I acted before I really knew what I was about, and Dobby was off with them before I could tell him how they needed to be cared for. Thankfully they’re not shy about making their wants and needs known and you seem to do just fine on that front. Also, I’d pay a galleon for a picture of you having that egg stuck to you. It must look adorable!

Shoot, it's getting late and you need your sleep. Thanks again for thinking of me on this rather special day! I'll tell Sirius all about it right now (he's invited me to stay at the Cottage for as long as the adders are with you, I hope that's alright) because I swear, your poor godfather has been biting his nails to the quick, he was so nervous about the club. He'll probably cry when I tell him about the form of your Patronus, so please don't tease him too much if he brings it up, okay?

Sleep well and hang in there,

Brady

Harry smiled and gently closed the journal.

"Betty," he called quietly.

The little elf promptly appeared, landing noiselessly on his shins and looking expectantly at him. "How can Betty serve?"

"First of all, you're wearing a dress!" Harry took in the black little number, admiring how the deep colour brought out the elf's bright blue eyes. "It looks very cute on you."

"It be gift from Dobby," Betty confessed, blushing a little. "Dobby be saying that Betty be deserving to have real uniform for House Potter's good work. Dobby not be wearing black because he be boss, but Ninja be happy to wear little black kimono for work. Master Sirius be grinning like loon about it."

"It suits you very well," Harry said, squeezing her small hand softly. "Could you do me a favour and get the camera from home? Brady said he wants a picture of me, like this," he gestured at the egg stuck to his chest and peeking out of his pyjama top."

Betty cooed at the egg and nodded. "Betty be right back!" She popped away and returned almost immediately with the old-fashioned camera in her hands. "Harry Potter sir smile now!"

Harry did, grinning happily and stroking the egg with protective pride. Under the shell, the snake
wiggled in contentment before settling down again. "I call her Sweetie until she's ready for a name."

"She be lovely," Betty agreed. "You be doing good with that little one, Harry Potter sir. Betty be going now. Good night, and many doggie kisses from Master Sirius."

Harry laughed in surprise and waved. "See you soon, Betty. Good night."

When he was alone again, Harry put the journal and his pen back into his bag and closed it tightly. Even that small visit from home, and that bit of levity, went a long way in calming him down enough for sleep and he took full advantage of that. If it was a bit strange to have four little companions in his dreams, he didn't care enough to ask them about it, just went along with whatever adventure the snakelings had planned.

End of part 10
Finally I'm done with this chapter. It fought me tooth and nail and I don't even know why.

Anyway, the usual rules apply: wrote hard, put up wet EAD style (EAD meaning Evil Author Day, which is February 15th. A lot of authors post unfinished or very rough drafts for their readers and expectations should be held in check accordingly.).

If you see something you don't like, you know where the back button is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dobby's Deceit

Part 11

Harry felt a little guilty for sleeping in on Wednesday, but he had needed the rest. And apparently the adders had thought so too, because Harry's wand failed to chime at the set time. Instead, he was woken by tiny snake tongues tickling his chin and cheeks.

"Harry has a book message," the golden female hissed, crawling over Harry's chest and raising herself up so he could see her. "It is your father's book."

"Oh." Muzzily, Harry rubbed the sleep from his eyes. One of the adder brothers dragged his glasses over the covers. "Thank you, Blue."

"That's not my name," the snakeling said, amused. "Your book has been flashing for a while."

It was urgent, then. Sighing, Harry sat up and put the journal into his lap. Only then did he notice that Sweetie's egg was still stuck to his chest ... and her little head was fully out, curiously examining her surroundings.

"Sweetie," he hissed in awe and very carefully stroked her incredibly soft skin with a finger. "Hello!"

"Harry very warm. I am doing much growing in sleep," she told him. "Harry tell me how pretty I am."
Her brothers writhed in amusement over the open journal, while her sister slithered up and touched her nose to Sweetie's.

"You're very pretty," Harry murmured. "I like your stormy blue-grey skin and those pink highlights. Also, your eyes look pretty fierce, like glowing amber."

"Sister will be just as beautiful as us," the golden one said, flicking her forked tongue against Sweetie's cheek. "We are proud that sister is so strong."

The brothers hissed nonsense, although they clearly agreed.

Harry plucked the egg from his chest and turned it around so he could look the snakeling in the eyes. "I'm so glad you decided to fight. Your siblings were glowing in the fire ... I can't wait to see what you'll look like."

"We find out," she replied, stretching a tiny bit and flicking Harry's nose with her tongue. "But now you read your father's words."

Harry put her down and took a minute to see the four snakelings' happy curling and writhing. He hadn't known that snakes could feel a family bond with their nest mates, but then again those were very magical snakes that could talk to humans, so maybe comparisons shouldn't be drawn.

Finally, he turned his attention to Sirius' entry.

September 15th, 1993

Pup,

Today is your last class with Snape. Rejoice! I found a tutor who is willing to brave Dumbledore's disapproval. She's a cousin of Stone's (of Lawrence, Stone & Finch), and that family has a zero bullshit policy. In fact, she's eager to let people know when, or rather that, they're arseholes. She'll start immediately, so please expect her to make a grand entrance tonight.

We're still working on finding a fantastic History teacher for you, but Brady's put out feelers as well and will help me get through the vetting process. Useful fellow, that one, and a great house guest. I might keep him a little longer than planned, if you don't mind and he doesn't object.

Have a really great day and please send me the memory of when Snape finds out!

All my love,
Harry choked on his spit and began to cough. "What?" he croaked when he could breathe again.

What?, he wrote after finding his pen.

*It's so true*, Sirius answered immediately. *It couldn't be more true, and I feel very accomplished right now. On that note, thanks for indulging Brady's request for a picture last night. Betty already developed it for us and I've put it in our new family photo album.*

Harry smiled reluctantly. *You're welcome. Although I hope that I don't actually look adorable. I'm too old for that.*

*I missed eleven years of your life, so bear with me when I occasionally tell you how adorable you look*, Sirius replied, his writing bold and unashamed. *And you most certainly do look adorable with that egg stuck to you. I might've even teared up a little.*

*Softie*, Harry wrote back, feeling oddly content with Sirius' coddling and teasing. *I don't think that Sweetie (that's egg-snake's name for now) will stay in her egg for much longer. She poked her head out just now and is watching everything. You'd probably like her a lot.*

*Funny that you should say that. I made Brady promise to introduce me to the little ones as soon as possible. But now I'll let you get on with your morning. Remember to rejoice in the fact that after today there'll be no more Snape for you, and most importantly, remember to have fun. Love you, kiddo.*

The warm feeling in Harry's chest intensified. *Love you, too*, he answered and then closed the journal.

The rest of the boys were already gone when Harry made it through his admittedly rather short morning ablutions. The personal hygiene spells he'd learned over the summer were great in a pinch and had gotten so easy for him to perform that he barely even had to think about them. Once completely dressed, the three small adders slithered underneath his shirt and wound around his arms, while Sweetie went into Harry's book bag with an extra warming charm to keep her comfortable in the nippy morning air.

*"Please stay super hidden this morning," he said to the snakes as he checked the locking charms on his trunk. "I've got one class with a really mean professor and I don't want him to harm you. He'd probably render you to pieces for his potions."

*"We'll be very quiet," the golden female said. "If he is very mean to you, I'll bite him later."*
"Us, too," the two brothers chimed in.

Chuckling, Harry patted his right biceps, where they'd decided to settle. "Thanks, you guys. I appreciate it."

Hermione was waiting for Harry in the common room, book in hand and Crookshanks on her lap.

"Good morning," she said and laughed when Harry and Crookshanks did a fist bump. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did, thanks, and you?" Harry scratched Crookshanks behind the ears while Hermione marked the page of her book and stuffed it into her bag.

"Oh, quite well, once I put up the silencing charm. I've got nothing against Lavender and Parvati's excitement, but they were keeping the rest of us up. Lily and Runcorn don't speak with anyone as it is; I'm sure they're about to leave Hogwarts altogether."

"Really?" Harry asked, shocked. "Why?"

"They haven't clicked with anyone but each other," Hermione said. "They're worse at making friends than I am, and Lily's mum is a tiger mum. She wants her daughter to be the best, and that's not happening here, is it?" She blushed a little. "And not just because of me. The education is simply lacking, compared to the other European schools."

"Wow, I didn't know that." Harry thought it over. "But, if they're happier elsewhere, it's probably a good idea."

Hermione nodded. "It's a pity, though. Lily is really good at Transfiguration and Runcorn loves Potions, but she hates Snape."

"Don't we all."

"Mmh. I saw a Beauxbatons pamphlet on Runcorn's night table the other day," Hermione said. "She's scribbled on it a lot, so I guess that things are pretty much decided. They'll probably not even finish the year."

That threw Harry for a loop, despite never having so much as exchanged a whole sentence with the two girls. From Runcorn he couldn't even remember the first name, just like she'd preferred it from day one. "I hope they'll tell McGonagall exactly why they're leaving, then."

"Lily's mum certainly will," Hermione said with wry grin.
Chatting pleasantly, they wandered to the great hall for breakfast, where their friends were already slurping tea and coffee and buttering rolls to go with their eggs and sausages.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked, having involuntarily scanned the whole table for the redhead, in case he needed to fend off caustic remarks.

"He wandered off a minute ago. Stuffed his face like usual, though," Lee Jordan called over four heads. "That way." He pointed to the door where Harry had come from and returned to his newspaper.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Hermione asked in a hushed voice.

"I don't know. It's just strange," he replied. "He'd never cut breakfast short."

"If you want to go and look for him, you can," she said, guessing what was on his mind. "Go, I'll bring some toast if you miss breakfast."

"Thanks, 'Mione." Harry turned and left the hall again, walking along the corridor at a fast pace. The vague feeling of dread made his stomach clench and of course the snakes were picking up on that.

"Harry what's wrong," the golden female on his left arm demanded. "You taste bitter. We don't like it."

"I'm worried," he said. "About a friend."

"Is it the boy who's always touching your trunk?" Blue hissed. "He's not nice. Why are you worried? Also, he went left."

Harry made the turn upon reaching the intersection. "Thanks, buddy. Uhm, Ron, he's ..." He paused when a group of Ravenclaws appeared in his path. Only when they'd passed him and vanished around a corner did he dare to continue, "He's usually there for all of breakfast. He eats a lot. And he's been so mean these last weeks. Something's wrong. I think he's been cursed."

"He is not cursed," Blue said. His little head poked out of Harry's sleeve and his tongue flicked out. "Go right, now, and then up the stairs. His scent has gotten stronger."

It didn't take long for Harry to understand that Ron was going to Dumbledore's office. Thankfully, the boy's steps were slow, almost petulant, and Harry was able to catch up to him long before Ron reached the gargoyle.
Harry drew his wand.

"And now?" the golden female asked. She also peeped out of her sleeve and scented the air. "How do you want to spell him? I'm not sure that you can make him nice again."

"I'd never do that," Harry hissed, taking cover behind a suit of armour. "I just want to check ... denuda turpitudinem obscurum magicae!"

The spell hit Ron right in the back without him noticing, and Harry's breath caught in anticipation of a light show like the one he'd seen in Professor McGonagall's quarters.

When nothing happened after the glow of the spell had dissipated, Harry's mouth dropped open. "But ... that can't be!"

Ron vanished around the last corner. Harry let him go; he'd found out what he had wanted to know, even if he had a hard time processing it.

"I told you that he isn't cursed," Blue said smugly. "I can smell different magics. Can we go back to your female now? I like how she smells."

Shell-shocked, Harry let them cajole and guide them back to the great hall. He only had a few minutes left for breakfast, but his appetite had completely vanished in the face of this horrifying revelation, anyway.

"Hell, mate, what's wrong?" Seamus asked upon noticing Harry's expression and scooted up to Dean to make room for Harry to sit. "You look like you've seen the ghost of a banshee."

"Tea?" Lavender asked, already pouring him a cup.

"Harry?" Hermione laid a gentle hand on his cold, clammy ones and frowned with worry when he barely reacted. "You look really sick. Let's go see Madam Pomfrey."

"Maybe some tea will help. He's British, after all," Parvati said in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Here, I put in two sugars. He can drink it on the way."

"Thanks." Hermione helped Harry up, pressed the cup into his hand and led him from the hall. As soon as they had some privacy, she asked quietly, "What happened with Ron? He's not dead, is he?"

That startled Harry enough to break him out of his stupor. "No, he's not dead." He took a drink of the hot tea. "He was on his way to Dumbledore."
"Dumbledore?" Hermione's eyebrows went up. "What for? I know that he's not that good in class, but surely two weeks into term are too soon for a stern talk, even for Ron."

"Dunno." Harry wiped his sweaty brow with the sleeve of his robe. "But I got to check whether he's cursed."

"Oh! Well, how bad is it? Is it more than one? They could conflict, which would explain his terrible behaviour."

"He's not cursed," Harry said evenly, far more evenly than he felt.

Hermione's mouth dropped open just like his had done. "What? Are you serious?"

Harry nodded.

"Are you telling me that this behaviour is Ronald's natural state of being?" Hermione's voice got a little shrill.

"I'm afraid so. He was completely clean. Like, there was nothing there. Not even remnants of the spells the twins used on him in the last days." Harry emptied the tea cup and roughly raked a hand through his hair. "I think I'll be okay without Madam Pomfrey. I was just ... shocked."

"Yes, I can imagine. Bloody fecking hell!" She glared at Harry. "Can I stop trying to be nice to him now?"

Her outburst was so uncharacteristic for her that Harry couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Crap, sorry. Yeah, I think so. I mean, apparently he's really not great, so why bother, right?"

And yet, on their way to Professor McGonagall's classroom, Harry felt the loss keenly. He'd gotten through some rather fantastical adventures with Ron; things he wouldn't burden Hermione with if he could in any way help it.

*There'll be more stupid stuff to go through, I'm sure, and I'll find a way through them. I don't need a Ron to do that,* he thought, a little resentfully. *Especially when I got in trouble because of him in the first place!*

As he thought it, he realized that it was true. Ron certainly had done his fair share of wanting to help find the Philosopher's Stone in first year, and it was his sister that had gotten possessed by Voldemort's shade.
And let's not forget the flight with his dad's Ford Anglia, Harry huffed to himself. I'd have waited for someone to get us, for Pete's sake, but Ron wanted to make a big deal out of it.

Maybe he wasn't going to miss that part of his friendship all that much, after all.

Hermione was quiet herself, just holding Harry's hand as they walked to the Transfiguration classroom.

They took their seats as the bell rang and did their best not to look at Ron's empty table too often.

Professor McGonagall, who of course noticed how out of sorts they both were, asked Harry to stay behind after class.

"You'll get him back in a few minutes," she said to Hermione and waved her on. "We won't take long." As soon as the door to her classroom was closed, she turned to Harry, face pinched. "Well? What's the matter now, Mr. Potter?"

Confronted with his head of house like that suddenly made Harry's dismay at this morning's discovery seem rather unimportant.

"Er, it's a bit stupid," he mumbled. "More like personal ... stuff."

"It was bad enough to rattle you and Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall returned, unimpressed. "Don't make me give you detention over Ron Weasley, it'll just irritate me."

Harry sighed. "I, er, followed Ron this morning and kind of used the revealing charm on him."

Professor McGonagall stood straight. "Well! About time someone did! That boy has been a menace so far. What colour does the curse have he's labouring under? I assume it's something particularly nasty if not even Lupin and Filius picked up on it."

"Ron's not cursed," Harry said dully. "At all."

Incredulous, Professor McGonagall said, "You're joking, Mr. Potter. The spell I taught you reveals all."

"I'm really not. The spell worked and there was nothing."

"I'll need to have a word with Dumbledore, then. That boy has disrupted the peace in Gryffindor too much to just let it go; his parents need to hear about it. Especially when ..." She stopped herself and cleared her throat. "Well, be that as it may, I'll let your inattention slide, this time, because you were
worried about your classmate, but don't let it happen again."

"I won't," Harry promised, relieved. "Uhm, Professor, when will you meet your friend? Amy?"

"This weekend," she said, softening a little. "And now off with you, or Professor Snape will put our house points firmly in the negative."

Feeling a little better, Harry joined Hermione in the corridor and let her lead him to the dungeons. Ron was still missing, which set both of their teeth on edge.

"Merlin, Potter, relax, or you'll make your cauldron explode merely by looking at it," Zabini muttered under his breath as he passed Harry on his way to his table. "Weasley's absence can only be good."

Ron's work partner certainly thought so, even if Snape took points off Neville for working alone on a two-person potion. It was so blatantly unfair that the Gryffindors didn't even bother getting upset about it. Hermione merely made a note on her pad - and again when Snape ripped the piece of paper off and docked five points.

"I can do this all day, Miss Granger," Snape said sardonically, ripping the piece of paper with the note off again.

"So can I," Hermione replied calmly. "I'll report every instance of destruction of my personal property, Professor Snape."

"Why, you little know-it-"

"Sir, can we get on with the lesson, please?" Zabini asked, interrupting Snape's beginning rant. "As amusing as your unfair treatment of Gryffindors is, I'm here to study."

Snape turned and glared at Zabini. "Is that so, Mr. Zabini?"

"Why else would my mother pay 5000 galleons a year?" The boy sneered. "Of course, I can tell her that Hogwarts doesn't fulfill her high expectations. Beauxbatons accepts new students all year, or so I've heard."

"Five thousand?" Hermione asked, voice sharp like it only got when she was truly worked up. "Why, my parents pay 6000 galleons a year!"

"My mum, too," Dean muttered, shocked.
"Is this really a surprise to you?" Malfoy asked derisively. "The effort it takes to get you mudbloods up to speed, and you're still an embarrassment to proper witches and wizards."

"I don't know any mundane-born students who have gotten extra education; I certainly didn't have any extra classes," Hermione said coldly. She packed her things with the precision of the truly mad. "Excuse me, Professor Snape, but I have to leave. Else I'll just disrupt your lesson further."

"If you leave now, Granger, you needn't bother coming back," Snape said, dark eyes aglow with perverse pleasure.

Hermione stared at him for a moment and then snorted. "Fine."

"You can strike me from your attendance list as well, sir," Blaise said, making the smug expression slide right off Snape's haughty face. "You coming, Potter?"

Harry smirked. "Damn right I am." He packed up the rest of the things on his and Hermione's table in the stunned silence. "See you guys at lunch."

"Potter!" Snape bellowed. "Get back to work or I'll have you expelled for being an insufferable rabble-rouser!"

"Oh, please, do your worst, sir," Harry tossed over his shoulder. He held the door for Hermione and Zabini and relished in closing it a little more snappily than necessary. "Wow, I'm feeling great. Also, what's this about the tuition?"

"It's a rather well-kept secret that muggleborns are charged twenty percent more for their attendance at Hogwarts," Zabini said. He shouldered his bag and trotted off in the direction of the library, Harry and Hermione readily coming along. "Honestly, it's an outrage, especially since the extra money is supposedly used for special classes to integrate the students into our society. Which, obviously, isn't happening. If it did, not even half of Slytherin would have such a problem with muggleborns."

"It's fraud, plain and simple," Hermione said, "and you can bet that my parents will hear of this."

Harry laughed. "Wow, you sounded just like Malfoy, 'Mione."

"I know. It's terrible." She scowled. "I'll also have to write my account manager at Gringotts to reduce the tuition. And to demand the money back for the last two years, because I won't let that absolute horse shite tower stand."

Harry couldn't help but grin. "I'd love to see Dumbledore's face when he gets the notice. He should get mine right about now, too."
"I just feel sorry for Professor McGonagall." Hermione sighed. "She's the deputy, if she knew about it, she's just as guilty."

"I don't think she is," Zabini said thoughtfully. "My mother has her contacts in the Ministry, and Fudge is only ever meeting alone with Dumbledore when it's about money. Could well be that the headmaster kept that duty for himself, as he's entitled to."

"But what about the board of governors?" Hermione asked. They reached the library and she lowered her voice so Madam Pince wouldn't send them away at the door. "Why aren't they pushing for equality?"

"Have you met those gits?" Zabini asked with a raised eyebrow. "Malfoy's father was one of them until last year and even if he bribed a lot of them to get Hagrid out of the castle, they weren't all against him. Far from it. Most were just clever enough to keep their own hands clean." He stopped at a secluded table and dropped his bag onto a chair. "I don't know Longbottom's grandmother, but she might well be the only honourable member of that club. If she knows about that practice, she was powerless to oppose it ... if she even wanted to. One never knows with the old pureblood types."

"I'm regularly getting headaches at Hogwarts," Hermione said sulkily. "Honestly, the amount of stupid is staggering." She pulled her writing pad from her bag and put the tip of her pencil to the paper. "I'll write my letter now. Can I borrow Hedwig later, Harry?"

"Sure, she'll take my letter, too," Harry said as he sat down. "Gringotts will enjoy getting up in Dumbledore's business. Again."

"Excuse me if it sounds crass, but how was it, Granger?" Zabini asked, taking out his own sheet of parchment and writing utensils. "Finding out that you're related to a pureblood family?"

"Fascinating, of course, even if it did nothing to alter the circumstances of my birth," Hermione replied, arching her eyebrow mockingly. "Still, there's so much to learn, and so much history to discover. Although having inherited a small fortune will probably become a pain in my bum once I turn fifteen."

"Marriage contracts," Zabini said and nodded. "One of magical Britain's oldest traditions. I wouldn't be too concerned about suitors from Britain; the truly influential people here are too stuck up to overlook your squib relatives. Other countries, however ..." He shrugged.

Harry didn't like the sound of that, and the way the snakes squeezed his arms, they didn't much care for such talk either.

"Well, I hope people will have fun setting up their little marriage contracts because I've instructed Gringotts to reject them with prejudice."
Zabini smiled appreciatively. "Right, you have no living magical relatives. Then it's only proper for Gringotts to handle your business. Your parents agree with your stance on this issue, I assume?"

"My parents wanted the goblins to send back curses instead of mere, if vitriolic, letters," Hermione said dryly. "I might still take them up on it if the number of so-called suitors turns out to be excessive."

Harry chuckled. "How many would that be? A dozen or two?"

"I say she can net at least a hundred," Zabini said after a long, considering look at Hermione.

"Five would be enough to annoy me," Hermione informed them both tartly. "But I don't think people will be dumb enough to send marriage contracts sight unseen."

"Granger, there's a lot you still have to learn about our society," Zabini put his quill aside and leaned back in his chair. "First of all, how easy is it to get someone's photograph? There are buyers for this exact kind of thing. And you're not exactly Millicent Bulstrode. People will go for it."

Hermione groaned. "Fantastic. How can this be legal? I'm a minor!"

"And Britain's paparazzi laws are shite whether you're muggle or magical," Zabini said. He tilted his head. "Of course you won't be the only one dealing with this once the time comes. You've just not been raised to expect it."

"And I thank my parents every day for that," Hermione said, flustered. "It's barbaric to sell kids to the highest bidder. Sight unseen, no less. Good lord, I'm not going to get over that."

"I'm not looking forward to it either," Blaise admitted, "but that's how it works in the upper echelons of our society."

Remembering Sirius' warning about the laws in Britain, Harry asked, "What about marriage law, then?"

"What about it?" Zabini asked, taking his eyes from Hermione to Harry and measuring him in that mildly interested way he had.

"Well, you get married, and then - what? In the mundane world, there are laws to regulate married life and protect people. Like, from abuse and theft and stuff."

"Oh, that. Well, I could send you on a merry chase through the law books, but why bother. There
aren't all that many laws since everything is usually covered in the marriage contracts."

"What, you mean like divorce and the splitting of assets?" Hermione frowned. "That's terribly inefficient, and horrible for the people getting married off by their families. Do they even have a say about what's in the contracts?"

"Usually they don't, no," Zabini said with a little shrug. "It's assumed that the head of the family knows best. Of course only very few families would actually disregard the child's wishes completely, and usually there are a lot of clauses and stipulations to protect either the child, the child's dowry or fortune, or both. Oh, and most families require children as soon as possible ... talk about being a stud or broodmare for mostly inbred gits."

"It's a mess, basically," Hermione concluded. "One more reason not to want anything to do with it." She offered Zabini a small smile. "Thanks for explaining."

"Believe me, I haven't even scratched the surface, and for muggleborns and halfbloods the situation is even worse," Zabini answered and rolled his eyes. "As soon as I've graduated, I'll absent myself from this country. Maybe you should do the same; your prospects will be much better literally anywhere else, Granger. Maybe even do it right and get citizenship in another country and lose the British one if things get ugly."

"You mean with Voldemort?" Hermione questioned.

"Him and his followers," Zabini confirmed. "People are still out there doing the work, you know. Passing anti-muggle legislation, quietly letting people vanish, that kind of thing. Someone like you well, they'd do their best to either marry you off to someone who can control you, or worse, get rid of you completely. I don't want to scare you, but you'd better take precautions. Being a muggleborn in Britain isn't easy."

"I ... I see."

While the message was awful, Harry couldn't help but feel anxious about Zabini's easy way with words. He was being helpful and even sort of nice to Hermione, and she of course had no reason not to react positively to it, especially as the words rang true. Again, the little monster in Harry's stomach reared its head and twisted around until he felt faintly nauseated.

"Thanks for the warning," Harry murmured, gripping Hermione's hand and wishing that he could do something to make her feel better. Seeing her so pale and shocked was horrifying.

"Just doing my part," Zabini said quietly, but with intent. "As I said, I've got plans, and pandering to someone else's ego is not a part of them." He suddenly smirked. "Of course, I can recommend Italy for relocation. The weather and the food are great and the government shares the top spot of having the most progressive civil rights with Sweden and Finland. In the world, naturally, not just in Europe."
Hermione rallied and narrowed her eyes. "That sounds like a sales pitch."

"Because it is one." Zabini quirked an eyebrow. "Do you really think that I have the time to play the long game with a pair of Gryffindors? I plan on passing every OWL, so you'll have to do with blunt words. Sorry to disappoint."

"I'm not disappointed," Harry said quickly. "I've got a ton of stuff to learn, so being blunt is not a bother. I guess we'll consider it."

"Please do; my mother's newest beau is a high-ranking Italian official and would secure me a placement at the Italian Institute Of Applied Magics in thanks." Zabini's smirk broadened when he caught Hermione's scandalized expression. "I'm also a very good student, Granger, as you well know. I'll earn my place regardless, but it'd be good to have a sure thing - and the best quarters on campus - if other options fall through."

Hermione sighed, playing dejectedly with her pencil. "I guess that's true."

"Let's write our letters," Harry said, feeling painfully awkward and obvious in his attempt to draw Hermione's attention from Zabini. "It'll be fine, 'Mione."

"I hope so," she murmured, a faraway look in her eyes.

Harry sighed and glanced at Zabini, who was looking back placidly like he hadn't just delivered a devastating blow to Hermione.

oOo

Despite her depressed mood, Hermione decided to attend History after lunch and so Harry went to the Come And Go Room and spent the first fifteen minutes telling Sirius first what had happened with Ron and Snape, and then what Zabini had told them in the library.

Sirius' answer was a surprise.

*The goblins and I are already working on it, pup. British laws really are 90% atrocity and 10% bearable guidelines for everyday life. Gringotts also recommended Italy, what with the ICW having a permanent seat there. It'd look good if I applied for citizenship after my trial. I could apply on your behalf as well, if you want.*

*I think I do,* Harry replied. *What Zabini said was horrible. Can you convince Sharptooth to contact the Grangers? Hermione will probably write them soon, but hearing it from Gringotts might be*
better.

I will, but I need you to slow down a little, Sirius wrote. She has a year before the nonsense with the marriage contracts starts. There will be contracts, I won't lie, but she's under no obligation to even entertain them. Hiring the goblins as her legal representative was smart, since her inheritance has such stringent rules attached to it. Their rejection letters will quickly become public knowledge ... and doubtlessly entertain the whole of Europe for a good while.

Harry huffed. I don't like thinking about boys sending Hermione marriage contracts. I don't even like how friendly Zabini is being. I bet he's noticed how great she is.

Not to forget pretty. Sharptooth let me see his memories of her. She's got cute teeth. A smiley followed Sirius' word. That being said, I'll let you talk it out with Brady. I never was civilized in matters of the heart, and I don't want you in Azkaban just because I'm teaching you caveman behaviour.

Harry couldn't imagine Sirius behaving like a caveman over a girl, but then again he still didn't know very much about him.

Did you have a girlfriend before ... you know. Voldemort, he asked.

Girlfriends, boyfriends, and even someone in between once, during my time in the auror corps. I'd just gotten my badge and had a job in Dublin. Great place for letting loose, by the way. The person never said it outright, but I thought that they'd lost a bet with a leprechaun which resulted in their perfectly in-between state. Stupid thing to bet with those little buggers - they'll cheat you out of your gold every time, and make you pay for it on top of it. Anyway, a good time was had by all, and to avoid a bollocking by your mind healer, I won't say more than that. He's already giving me the stink eye.

Harry grinned. Thank you. Although, boys? Ick.

Don't knock it until you try it, was his godfather's sage advice. Suddenly a large blot of ink appeared on the page. Once you're fifteen or older, of course! Merlin's beard, your Aussie doctor has fantastic aim even without magic ... lobbed an apple at my head from ten yards away, the prude.

That did it, Harry burst into laughter, and the anxiety of the morning largely bled away.

You're laughing your bum off, aren't you?, Sirius asked after a moment, a little zing of magic bringing across his suspicion perfectly.

I'm sorry, yes. Harry wiped a few tears away. The bell rang and he sobered. Class is over already. I gotta go. Thanks for cheering me up.
Always. Now, remember to have a good look at Snape when your Potions tutor arrives. And don't feel bad about keeping an eye on Ron from now on. Some friendships just aren't meant to last. It's a hard lesson, but an important one. I just wish Peter had shown his true colours sooner ...

Just like that, the joviality drifted away and bleakness crept up to Harry like a chilling mist. Surprised and a little horrified, Harry understood that the words on the page were bleeding Sirius' magic, and that the man was devastated.

"Sirius," he whispered. Quickly, hoping that the protections around Sirius' journal would allow Brady to see his words, he wrote, *Brady, Sirius is not well. Please take care of him.*

The answer came so quickly that Harry sagged a little in relief. *Yes, of course. We've been waiting for something like this. Don't worry, Harry. Sirius'll recover. I'll close the journal now, to protect his privacy. He'll write when he can.*

*Thank you.*

*"What is wrong with your father?" Blue asked, pushing his small head out of Harry's collar.*

*"He tasted very sad and cold," his brother said. "Like he wants to lay down and die."

*"Easy prey," the golden one added.*

*"He lost very good friends due to a betrayal," Harry said, gently petting Blue's sleek skin. "Something I told him reminded him of it."

*"Memories," Blue hissed and tilted his head slightly, tickling Harry's neck in the process. "You have very warm memories."*

Harry sighed. *"Yes, although they make me sad, too."

*"Harry send warm memories," the golden female ordered. "We are cold, too."

*"How do I do that?"

*"You know how," Blue said, flicking his tongue against Harry's jaw.*

Immediately the picture of a brightly shining stag flashed in front of Harry's eyes.
"Holy-" He jumped up from his chair. "Was that you, Blue?"

"Words are still hard sometimes," the snakeling replied, coiling in agitation. "Pictures are easier."

"But ... you were under my shirt at the time." Harry carefully plucked Blue from his shoulder and held him before him. The orange eyes never blinked, of course, which gave the snakeling a look of infinite patience. "How could you see?"

"I see and feel magic," the snake reminded him. "Your garments are no barrier for this. I saw your Soul Friend very clearly."

"I cannot see magic like my brother does," Blue's twin hissed, "but I felt its warmth. Very good warmth, Harry. Send it to your father."

"Hold on, I'll try with the family wand ..." Harry drew the wand from his left arm holster. After collecting himself for a moment and drawing up the memory of his visit to the Potter family vault hard and fast, he cried, "Expecto Patronum!"

Just like before, the stag erupted from his wand in a burst of brilliant, silvery white light. He galloped a few yards, turned and came back to Harry, nose lowered to nudge the boy's wand hand.

"Hey, you," Harry said, a little breathlessly. The nose was actually warm and the slightest bit wet, which was disconcerting and exciting all at once. "Uhm, the snakelings tell me that you could help soothe my godfather, Sirius. He's got moments when he's really unhappy, so ... could you go and give him a hug? Whenever he needs one would be great, but one just now would be enough, really."

The stag blinked slowly, accepted a rub to his forehead and then with a graceful twirl he vanished in a stream of light.

"Do you think it'll work?" Harry wondered.

"It already does." Blue curled around Harry's fingers, his markings glowing brightly. "So warm. I am happy Harry."

His three siblings agreed, their hisses blissful. Especially Sweetie, who was still safe in Harry's bag, gave off a whole aura of excited, yet mellow contentedness.

"I really have to go to Arithmancy now," Harry said. "And tonight I'll have to go out again for Astronomy. Maybe you'd like to go and visit Brady instead?"
"Yes, we go and see the Favourite," the golden female said.

"Betty," Harry called and laughed when she hugged his leg. "It's good to see you, too. Could you do me two favours?"

"Of course, Harry Potter sir!"

"First, I need you to pop me close to the Arithmancy classroom. And tonight, after dinner, the snakelings want to visit Brady. Would you take them, please?"

Betty nodded so hard that her ears flapped a little. "Betty will, Harry Potter sir." With a snap of her fingers she packed up all of Harry's things. A second snap saw Blue back under his shirt sleeve and coiled around his right biceps. "Harry Potter sir please show Betty where classroom is. Betty be doing the popping."

In a matter of seconds, Harry found himself right around the corner of the classroom and quickly went to find his study partners from Hufflepuff before someone became worried.

"There you are," Susan Bones greeted cheerfully. "Did you have a lot of trouble with the homework?"

"Er, no." Harry felt his face heat up. "So far, the math isn't very difficult. You?"

"Just a bit, but our friends in Ravenclaw helped us."

"You should come to our study group," Hannah Abbott piped up. "We meet every Friday before dinner for an hour to talk about problems we're having. It's not really for homework, because the Ravens would kill us if we tried to sponge off of them, but it's still super helpful."

"Sounds good," Harry said. "Let me check my planner ... yes, Friday should be fine, unless Wood calls for extra Quidditch drills or something. Could I bring Hermione? She might be interested."

"Sure," Hannah said, bouncing a little as if she couldn't quite believe her luck.

They entered the classroom and sat down at their tables. The snakes under Harry's shirt squirmed a bit to get comfortable before settling down with satisfied little hisses.

"Hello class," Professor Vector said, upbeat as usual and brimming with excitement. "Since you've all done so well the last time, I thought it would be fun to give you a little challenge." She set a miniature trunk of about a foot in length and half a foot in width and height onto her table. "This toy
trunk has been warded and I want you to figure out the layout and the function of the wards. You may use your book and write down your thought process as necessary. Amaze me!

She stepped aside to allow the class to get a good look at the trunk. All groups searched the trunk for the runes, although Harry was the only one to draw a schematic with their exact placements.

Back at their table, he and the group and Hufflepuffs bent over the drawings.

"I can't believe I didn't do this," Susan huffed and poked a rune cluster on the front side of the trunk. "Auntie has told me so often how important spacing is."

Harry shrugged. "I need to be able to look at something for it to make sense. So, this rune is for strength, obviously, but here it's at the top while it's second to last here."

"Not to mention they're spaced both horizontally and vertically." Hannah rubbed her cheeks in budding frustration. "Has anyone learned what that means already?"

"Harry?" Justin asked when Harry hesitated. "You can say it. Heck, I think we all have read a bit further than the first five chapters or so."

"It's been three and a half books," Harry confessed. "I had a lot of time this summer, and it's cool stuff."

"Yeah. Yeah, it really is," Susan agreed. "Come on, tell us."

"Well, I learned a bit about how properties are warded. But this trunk doesn't have any wardstones," Harry said. "I could be totally wrong, but I think the builder of the trunk used the runes to form the ward matrix. See? You can draw horizontal lines from the vertically placed runes, and vertical lines from the horizontally placed runes." He charmed his pencil to draw red lines and demonstrated. "The lines cross and you get squares. A matrix of sorts."

Stunned, the three Hufflepuffs stared at him. Then, they tugged out coloured pencils from their bags and did the same to the other runes, until the drawing was a mess of lines. Put together, the effect was spectacular in its simplicity. After that, it was quite easy to figure out which ward net had which function; strength to keep the trunk closed once the lock was engaged, secrecy to evade malicious intent, and space, to allow for larger storage capacity.

As they were sitting back and feeling a bit proud for figuring it out, Professor Vector came up to their table.

"Oh my, you lot are especially bright! Let me see ..." She took the drawings and looked them over with raised eyebrows. "Yes, just so ... I'm impressed! Twenty points to each of you. Well done!"
Susan and Hannah blushed with pleasure, while Justin shook Harry's hand.

"May I keep this to show the others your process?" Professor Vector asked. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. Listen up, students! Our time is almost up, and I'd like to show you what this group has discovered ..."

She walked the others through the process, engaging in a good-natured debate with the table of Ravenclaws who had almost discovered the runes standing in for ward stones but had been distracted by the meaning of the runes halfway through. Eventually, every student had at least earned five points for their work, and instead of hard feelings they all got out of class with a sense of discovery and exploration.

"It's like I could build something really simple right now," Hannah said as she stuffed her pencils into her bag. "I think I'll try to recreate the trunk during the weekend. My mum sent me cookies, the box will do well, I think."

"Can we have a copy of your notes, Potter?" Justin asked. "I'm not half as good at drawing, see, and you were right. It helps if we can see it."

"Yeah, sure." Harry tapped the stack of notes with his wand and muttered the spell he'd been scrambling to learn in anticipation of copying Slytherin's library. "I'm looking forward to Friday."

"So do we," Hannah said with a smile. "See you tonight for Astronomy, Harry!"

Harry waved the Hufflepuffs goodbye and accepted the congratulations of the group of Ravenclaws before they hurried off to their common room, no doubt to go over the problem again.

In the two hours before dinner, Harry excused himself from Hermione and went down to the Chamber of Secrets alone. It really was a rather peaceful place now ... and Dobby was bringing presents.

"The potions kits!" Harry said, grinning broadly. "That was quick!"

"Harry Potter sir's dogfather be ordering good work tables and Healer Spleenbash be adding books," Dobby explained. "Where be Dobby putting everything?"

"Away from the water, over there, close to the wall." Harry pointed to a secluded spot where the cool air wasn't as dank and not drafty at all. "We'll need some good lamps above the tables. Eternal flames are nice, but they're flickering too much for a potions lab."

"Dobby be looking into it," the elf promised.
With quick snaps of his fingers Dobby set up the work benches a good bit apart from each other to avoid contamination, placed the cauldrons and utensils exactly where they were supposed to go and stored the ingredients Harry had bought from Neville and Gringotts neatly in the new cabinet. The empty vials and other surplus items went into another cabinet, and a third cabinet remained empty, awaiting the potions Harry and Hermione would brew in the future.

"Do you think this'll make a good birthday surprise?" Harry asked once Dobby was finished.

"Dobby be thinking so," Dobby said. "But Dobby be knowing that females be liking nice things, too. Like flowers or extra juicy berries."

"I have something nice as well," Harry assured him. "I just hope she'll like it."

"Miss Mione be sensible female. She be knowing that gift be from the heart." Dobby's ears twitched. "Dobby be needing to go now. Will Harry Potter sir be going back up?"

"No, I'll stay a little while longer. I thought I'd show the snakelings where they were born, more or less. Thanks, Dobby."

"Harry Potter sir be welcome."

A little wistfully Harry watched him pop away.

"We were born here?" Sweetie asked and poked her head out of Harry's book bag.

"Yes, kind of." When the other three snakelings emerged from his collar and sleeves, he swallowed. "I don't know what Brady has told you already, but your mum and I weren't exactly friends."

Blue's tongue flicked out as far as it would go. In fact, all four snakes tasted the air with intense concentration.

"She smells old," the golden female declared after long moments.

"And she's dead," Blue's taciturn brother added. "You killed her?"

"Yeah, I ... she attacked me and I had no choice. I didn't know that she was carrying eggs, but even then ..." Harry exhaled sharply. "I'm sorry. I know how difficult it is to lose your mother. I wish we didn't have to fight."

"You survived," Blue said matter-of-factly. "We're full young yet, but we knew our mother. Black
“magic had her enthralled. I could see it even while in her belly.”

“That wasn’t your doing Harry,” Sweetie said, stretching a bit to flick her tongue against his clammy fingers.

“She probably would have eaten us,” her golden sister hissed. She slithered completely out of Harry’s sleeve, curled the lower part of her body around his hand and stretched as far into the room as she could to scent the air some more. “The black stain does not have use for ones such as us.”

“Do not worry so,” the quiet brother said. “We are alive, and life has been good to us so far.”

“But it’s getting cold,” Sweetie said, her little voice cajoling. “Can we play with your Soul Friend?”

“How would that work?” Harry asked, a little amused. When they ganged up on him, however, he drew his wand - the holly wand this time - and cast the Patronus Charm.

The stag appeared in its usual bright burst of light, but it was tamer now, as if it already knew that it wasn’t needed for anything urgent.

“Hey,” Harry greeted him and gently petted the spirit guide’s cheeks and ears. “My friends asked to play with you. Are you game?”

The stag threw his head back and then morphed until he had the shape of a snake himself. Harry’s jaw dropped ... and dropped even further when the large snake before him raised its head and displayed a brilliantly shining hood.

“Oh, wow. Just ... wow.” Harry very carefully touched the Patronus. “I guess that means yes.”

Little hissed shouts of joy were all the warning Harry got. Like little lemmings the snakelings fled from his body, and even Sweetie fought to leave his bag. Hastily, Harry got out of their way. With amazement he watched as the tiny snakes climbed all over the slowly curling Patronus. Sweetie was always inside one of his coils, no doubt getting fed a good amount of magic even as the spirit guide endured her energetic little nips.

It took awhile, but finally the silver light winked out and the snakelings curled around each other to chase the last of the Patronus’ warmth.

“Good?” Harry asked, amused.

“Very good,” the golden female said lazily. “We are so full Harry.”
"Not eat for a few days," Blue agreed.

Sweetie retreated into her shell, already half asleep. "Pick us up Harry."

"I want in your bag," the quiet one murmured. "No more magic tonight."

Harry placed them all into his book bag, glad for the dimensional store inside, cast a small warming charm to keep them agile, and finally locked the bag with blood protection.

*I should've done this much sooner,* he thought with a sigh. *And now I feel like a really paranoid git.*

He found his own way out of the Chamber and took care to remain inconspicuous until he reached the larger passages leading to the great hall.

*There's Ron!* Harry automatically hid behind a corner and watched the boy walk along. *Why is he glowing? And why isn't he noticing that's he's glowing?*

Carefully, he followed Ron, unable to take his eyes off of the many strands of pulsing light that were wound around the redhead like an intangible *Incarcerus.*

At the Gryffindor table, Ron took a place close to Seamus and Dean as if the two boys hadn't made their dislike of him clear these last two weeks. Hermione stared at Ron with outright suspicion while Lavender and Parvati remained completely oblivious to the tension around them, their noses deep in a pile of papers and parchments.

"Hey," Harry murmured as he squeezed in beside Hermione. "What's for dinner?"

"Nothing fancy," she replied and pushed a dish of shepherd's pie towards him. "I miss a certain someone's food."

"Yeah, me too." Harry spooned a healthy portion of the pie onto his plate and poured gravy over it. "Say, can you see, er, *something* about Ron?"

"Other than his slightly less terrible than usual table manners?" Hermione asked, decidedly not looking at the sluggishly eating boy. "No. Why?"

"He's not, er, glowing or something?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "No, he isn't. What's the matter, Harry?"
"Let's eat first," he murmured when Neville glanced at him with a question in his eyes.

Harry made an effort to engage Neville in a discussion about their Herbology homework and even listened to Lavender's ambitious plans for the next few editions of the student paper while he played with the banoffee pie on his plate. It got rather awkward when Ron decided to join that conversation, and not in a huffy manner either.

And through it all, Harry sat in anticipation of his new tutor's arrival. When the portal to the great hall finally opened with a dramatic bang, everyone hushed immediately. A figure stepped inside, bringing rain and wind with them.

"Who are you?" Dumbledore asked as he rose from his chair. Beside him, Flitwick and McGonagall drew their wands. "And why are you here?"

The newcomer flipped off the hood of her cloak, revealing long blond hair and a fierce, coldly beautiful face.

"My name is Tuva Stone, Potions Mistress, and I was engaged to tutor one Harry Potter," she called and confidently strode forward, right up to the teachers' table. "Who of you is Severus Snape?"

"That would be me," Snape sneered, not bothering to get up. "You're here for Potter you say? I don't think so. He's in my class, and there he'll remain."

Harry wondered how that could be. Snape had tossed Hermione and him out rather definitely, after all.

Stone snorted loudly and Snape flinched like she'd slapped him. "Cute, but you know better. At least, I assume you do. If not, let me educate you about your own school's bylaws: every student who wishes to employ tutors may do so at their own discretion, as long as they are able to pay for it. Mr. Potter is very able to pay for it, therefore he'll be tutored by me."

"Doesn't he need his guardian's approval for such a change?" Dumbledore asked mildly. "I don't remember approving your employment, Ms. Stone."

"I don't imagine you do, because I didn't, in fact, contact you for approval. Mr. Potter's actual magical guardian on record approved and that was good enough for Gringotts and me." She smirked as first astonishment and then anger flitted over the headmaster's face and all the other teachers started muttering furiously. "Don't worry, sir, I'm a very good teacher and will have Mr. Potter up to speed in no time."

"I haven't ever heard of you," Snape said, voice silky and dark. "Have you published anywhere? What are your accomplishments? Are you even qualified for teaching children?"
Stone grinned. "Do you really want to play that game with me, Snape?"

"I do not play games," he hissed.

"Oh, I think you do." She let her cloak fall open and revealed a bright red stylish robe. "You recognize the signature mastery robes of the Canadian Potions Academy, of course. And I'm very sure that you've read my thesis about the additional properties and uses of female quetzalcoatl scales; the whole international community has read it, after all. And not to boast, but it did cause quite a stir."

Snape said nothing, but if looks could kill, Stone would've burned to ashes where she stood.

"I don't care whether you approve of me or not," she continued. "Harry Potter is my student as of today. There's no need to transfer his grades as he will be sitting the international OWL. End of year tests won't be necessary under my tutelage." She nodded at Professor McGonagall. "I trust the castle elves will ready quarters for me."


Together the two women left the great hall before either Dumbledore or Snape could say anything, and the quiet whispering among the students became outright speculation. Everyone turned around and craned their necks to stare at Harry.

"Bloody hell," Seamus said. "You've got her as your tutor?"

"She's hot," Dean agreed. "And tough. I'm so envious."

"No end of year tests!" Ron groaned. "Must be heaven."

"Do you even know how demanding the international Potions OWL is?" Hermione asked. "It's every end of year test until the OWLs combined, all at once."

"Uh, yeah, not gonna happen," Seamus said, shuddering. "Still, she's hot."

"Like a valkyrie or something." Lavender blushed. "What? She looks fierce!"

Fred and George were forming hearts with their hands and swooning theatrically while the girls of the Quidditch team rolled their eyes.
"Only the best graduate from the Canadian Potions Academy," Hermione said. "She'll be able to teach Harry everything he needs to know, and it's almost certain that she'll be a much better teacher than Snape."

"I'd wager even Filch would be a better teacher," Parvati said, earning herself some laughter and a lot of agreement. "Harry, what she said about your actual magical guardian ... who is it, if not Dumbledore?"

Harry shrugged. "No one who wants to do me harm."

"It's Sirius Black," Neville said quietly, causing everyone in hearing range to gasp.

"Neville," Harry sighed. Sirius and Gringotts might be ready for mayhem, but Harry wished that he could have some peace for a little while longer ... such as it was.

"No, it needs to be said. He's still your godfather and I'm tired of listening to my grandmum insult the Ministry for incompetence without it ever doing a damn thing." Neville huffed and crossed his arms when he noticed the stares of his friends. "What? It's true. Every magical will know what it means as soon as they learn this fact and it's really past time they do."

"Do you really think Sirius Black is innocent?" Ginny called. Her voice carried even over the excited din of the other students.

"How can you think he's guilty?" Neville shot back impatiently. "You of all people know how godfathership works, Ginny."

An angry flush stole over Ginny's face and Harry felt compelled to ask, "What happened?"

"A family friend was asked to become Bill Weasley's godfather," Neville explained over Ginny's protest, "but he couldn't even give the oath because he was so magically corrupt. People still talk about it today, it's such a stigma. It's old magic, and it would have failed if Sirius Black had betrayed Harry's family. It might even have cost him his life, so I really wish people would get their facts straight."

"Merlin, somebody give Longbottom a chocolate frog. He's turning into a dragon," Lee Jordan smirked.
Angelina Spinnet took one out of her pocket and tossed it Neville's way. "Well said, Neville. Besides, why would Black rescue Harry from Snape if he wants to kill him? Doesn't make much sense, huh?"

This, of course, sparked another heated debate in which people from all houses became involved. The one good thing about the chaos was that Harry and Hermione were able to sneak away and hide in one of the many, many empty classrooms along the way to Gryffindor tower.

"You know, it'd be nice if we could do that for snogging, once we're at that stage," Hermione said and smirked when Harry's face heated. "Now spit it out, did you know that Sirius Black is innocent?" At his miserable nod, she sighed. "I understand why you couldn't tell me, and I won't ask any more questions. It's just ... I wish I could be there for you. It must be so difficult to keep everything close to your chest."

"Thank you," Harry mumbled and shyly took her fingers when she offered her hand.

"I'm more interested in Ron, anyway," Hermione said. "What has he done now? He was almost ... nice during all that hubbub. Like a pod person. I've got goosebumps, see?"

Harry glanced at her arm and raked both hands through his hair. "I don't know. I mean, I used a revealing spell on him this morning and there was nothing. Only, now he's back and he's glowing, but no one else can see it. He's alight, 'Mione!"

"First of all, are you sure that no one else has seen it? Such things are pretty normal around here, especially with all the pranking the twins are doing," she said calmly.

"I'm pretty sure," Harry said. "Not even the twins reacted, which is definitely not normal."

Hermione nodded. "Okay, that's true; they do love to gloat. Walk me through your morning, this time from start to finish. Leave nothing out. Maybe we'll find out what happened that way."

Harry tried to give her as much detail as possible, which was difficult because he had to leave out the snakelings' involvement. It made him feel guilty again, but more than that, it reminded him of an important fact.

"I, huh ... you know what? I think I cast the spell in parseltongue," he said, eyes going wide. "Do you think ... can it still be active?"

"I don't know. What spell was it, anyway?" Hermione asked. "If Professor McGonagall taught you, it must be rather good. Maybe it's just because of that?"
Harry shook his head. "No, definitely not. If that were the case, I'd still see it on her, and she doesn't glow. Also, she could see the magic herself when I cast the spell on her."

"Then you're probably right and you'll have to cast the *Finite* on Ron, just to see what happens." Hermione pulled her planner from her bag and scribbled something in it. "And we'll have to let you try casting spells in parseltongue as well."

"Might be useful one day," Harry admitted, even as he waved the last of his free time goodbye.

"Don't be too sad about it," Hermione murmured, correctly interpreting his expression, and pulled him in for a long, warm hug. "I won't make it into a test. Just a few everyday spells to see if it really works. If it was a fluke, or you misremembered, we'll know. But if not ... I want you to have all the advantages, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes, letting himself fall into the feeling of her closeness and her unwavering support. "Thanks, 'Mione."

"One of these days I'll be brave enough and ask you to check me," she whispered. "And I'll learn the spell and do the same for you."

"I thought once a week," Harry said and sighed. "I feel horrible about it."

"Well, it's not your fault that the people in the wizarding world are untrustworthy." Hermione loosened her tight grip and looked at Harry. "Not acting on what we know, or not using the spells we've learned would be dumb, though. And we aren't dumb, therefore we're doing what we can do protect ourselves."

"Do you have a journal?" Harry asked.

"I have two, one for personal stuff and one for my school work. I protected both with a couple of spells, but it could be better," she said. "And I've already ordered a third for our stuff. Will you help me ward it?"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, of course. After Lockhart it's probably a really good idea to write things down so we won't lose everything in case of ... you know."

"Speaking of whom, do you know what happened to Lockhart?" Hermione said thoughtfully. "Is he out of the hospital yet?"

"Er, no." Harry felt himself flush a little. "Dobby exchanged his medicine with butterbeer to make sure that he won't be able to obliviate any more people."
Hermione's mouth dropped open for a moment before she erupted into gales of laughter. She laughed so hard that sparks bounced off her hair and her skin began to shimmer a little. "I absolutely love him," she gasped, tears running down her cheeks. "Tell him he's fantastic."

"You're fantastic, too," Harry said, drawing her close and pressing his lips to her tempting, smiling mouth. She tasted a little sweet from the banoffee pie at dinner and a lot like amusement. Harry kissed her again, just because he could. "I'm glad you're not angry."

"Over Lockhart?" She giggled helplessly, well on her way to another bout of laughter. "Please."

Harry held her for a little longer. "I don't want to go to Astronomy later. Can we drop it?"

"I'm afraid not," Hermione said, fighting against the giggles. "The influence of cosmic energies on our magic can be extreme. We'll need Astronomy a lot to plan rituals, and it can't hurt to know when the time for casting wards or curses is especially good."

"Damn," Harry huffed. "I don't want to sound whiny, but our days are really full, and we're only third years. When are we supposed to do our homework?"

"I know," Hermione said, laying her head on Harry's shoulder with a hiccup. "I think having ninety-minute lessons is too much. One hour would suffice and free up a lot of time for individual study." She breathed deeply in contentment. "Or for this. I like this so much."

"Yeah, it's pretty great." Harry felt every inch of Hermione's body where it touched him. His arms went easily around her slender waist and his face was half buried in her wild hair. "You should block time for that on our schedules. Fifteen minutes every day, at least."

Hermione laughed. "I'll do that, you just watch me. But seriously ... I'd like to talk to the professors and other students about shorter lessons. Or less homework, whatever people like better, I guess. I should get the the board of govenors involved as well so it won't get buried."

"I'd like more time for clubs and stuff," Harry said. "Hogwarts really is rather boring when the first impression has lost its sparkle."

"I'll find people and start a project group. Tomorrow, maybe." She snuggled even closer into Harry.

"I'll help, just keep your Sunday free," Harry teased, grinning against her neck.

oOo
As the third years trotted towards the Astronomy tower, Harry was fortunate enough to be a bit behind, with Ron walking a few yards before him.

"He seems a bit confused," Hermione murmured, eyeing Ron carefully. "But still no glowing for me."

"I honestly can't believe I'm the only one that sees it," Harry replied. "He's lit up like a bloody Christmas tree."

"What colours do you see?" she asked.

Harry hardly knew where to start. "There's all sorts of green, a lot of blue, like the spell on McGonagall, a little orange, and violet. Oh, and a bit of pink."

"You think that the blue could be a mind altering spell?" Hermione pressed her lips together. "What for?"

"I don't know. Do you really think I should just try a *Finite*? What if it harms him?"

"So many spells at once can't be good for him, either," Hermione said. "Even if he is a prat, I'd rather know that this is how he really is. For all that we know, he could've been spelled to be nice and one has to wonder why. Is it just to integrate him with us and allow him to have friends at school? Or is it because he is meant to be friends with certain people?" Her pointed look at Harry didn't leave any room for guesses.

"Why would someone send him to spy on me?" Harry hissed, shocked. "Also, wouldn't that someone be Dumbledore? Ron went to see *him*! And now he's back, all magically trussed up like a rolled roast!"

"Shhh, he's heard you!" Hermione elbowed Harry into an upright position. "Hello, Ronald."

"Hey, I didn't see you there," Ron said. "Sorry for bailing on you today. I was feeling a little under the weather. But I'm fine now; Madam Pomfrey is the best."

He still looked a little foggy, Harry thought, and the winding lights were a huge distraction. "Er, alright," he said awkwardly.

Ron grinned. "So, what else beside Black being your godfather and Snape throwing you out of class did I miss?"

Hermione visibly ground her teeth. "That's not enough for you?"
"Well, sure," Ron shrugged, "but Harry's involved in both. There could always be more, considering his rotten luck."

Unfortunately he wasn't wrong about that, but Harry didn't feel inclined to take Ron into his confidences. Especially not with that dozen or so spells snaking around him.

Having him around during all of Astronomy felt restricting and when the class was over an hour later, Harry was out of sorts and fled to bed as soon as he could. Reporting the happenings to Sirius was no comfort at all and he missed the weight and warmth of the little snakes, although they'd only been with him for a couple of nights.

_Are you really sure it was clever of Madam Stone to mention you?, _he asked Sirius, who seemed surprisingly fit after his bout of depression earlier. _I'm really afraid that the Minister will find and hurt you before you're ready to go to Italy._

_Don't worry, pup. Tuva is very smart, very much like her cousin, and we talked it over before she arrived at Hogwarts. It all went over so fast that I didn't have time to tell you all, and your proximity to Dumbledore was a concern as well, I'm sorry to say. That being said, Gringotts is sorting me for travel as I write this, and since I won't be able to leave Britain the usual way, I've been invited to cross borders via their realm. It's an immense honour, and one I know I've you to thank for. And thanks for the company of your Patronus. Merlin, it's the damnedest thing - how do you get him to come exactly when I need him? He's shown up twice so far. Betty swears that she's not reporting to you, but how else can it be?_

Harry blinked away the persistent wetness in his eyes. _I'm glad I can help. You do so much for me. I wish you didn't have to go._

_Oh baby, I know exactly how you feel. It feels like I'm about to lose you and it hurts. _Sirius' words became unsteady and a little loopy, and his magic told Harry exactly how sad and desolate the impending separation made him feel. _But I'll still be there for you, I promise. And even if I'm in conference with the lawyers or the ICW, you'll have Brady and Sharptooth to support you, not to mention your own lawyers. Finch is eager to meet you, let me tell you. The sooner we get started, the sooner it'll be over and we'll be able to live together as a family. Your cottage is wonderful, I could see us spending your summers here until you graduate._

_Is that a promise?, _Harry answered, wiping at his cheeks.

_It's a vow. Now go to sleep, you'll need your rest if you want to excercise tomorrow morning. Love you, kiddo._

Harry returned the sentiment, pushing a little of his affection into the words. It was still strange to tell someone he loved them, but it got easier every time.
Sleep didn't come easy that night, as too much was whirling around in Harry's brain, but he eventually managed to doze off in the early hours of the morning.

oOo

Hermione took one look at Harry and decided that he was too tired for their usual exercise. In the Come And Go Room she made him change regardless and led him through a long meditation, followed by easy yoga stretches.

Afterwards, when Dobby had brought tea and yogurt with elf berries, she said, "So, Thursday is not working out so well. I'm too tired, and so are you, obviously. Thoughts?"

"It'll have to be Tuesday, then, and back to Saturday," Harry responded, spooning a large bite of yogurt into his mouth. "I'll just have to spend my free period on homework or something. It's not a bad thing, just a pity."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, it is." Sobering, she said, "I really will fight for shorter lessons. We deserve more diversity, and we need the rest. If people need the mundane's knowledge on the subject crammed down their throats ... I'll make it happen."

"You're such a warrior." Harry chuckled and then yawned. "I forgot how much I'm not a night owl."

"Oh yes, it's terrible," Hermione said, slumping against his side. "Harry ... what am I going to do about Potions? Snape won't let me come back, I'm sure of it. Do you think Gringotts can find another tutor on short notice? I don't want to fall behind too much."

"You won't miss a single lesson because I can invite four others to Ms. Stone's class and I thought I'd offer you and Zabini a place. I'd have said something earlier, but I forgot. Sorry. I should probably invite Neville as well, if his grandmother approves."

"Really? Oh, Harry!" Hermione threw her arms around him and sobbed a little. "Thank you!"

He flushed. "You're welcome, 'Mione. We start today."

Her wand vibrated then, signalling the end of their quiet time. After washing up, they met their friends for breakfast and continued on to Ancient Runes. Thankfully, Professor Babbling wasn't as motivated to challenge them as Professor Vector, but the lesson was still intense enough to tax Harry's reserves. Herbology right after was a relief as the fresh air did a lot to restore him, even if
Ron's persistent glowing kept on making him uneasy.

During lunch, Ron sat next to Harry, once more oblivious to the fact that he was disturbing a conversation.

"Excuse me, Weasley, I was talking with Harry about his and Seamus' article for the newspaper," Dean said, voice sharp.

"You still have more than a week until it's due, and it's just a few inches of text," Ron countered. "'Sides, everyone knows that it won't make a difference for Hagrid's hippogriff. Sad, that, but you know how the Ministry can be. I'd rather talk about strategy for Quidditch. The first match is in less than six weeks!"

"That's a terrible thing to say," Parvati snapped. "Buckbeak's life is far more important than some sport. We will save him, you'll see!"

Ron rolled his eyes as if to say, "Girls."

"I don't have a lot of time for this, so we'll work on the article now. Quidditch just has to wait," Harry told him. A frisson of horror raced through him when the blue light around Ron tightened sharply, just before the boy answered.

"Alright then." Ron shrugged and turned back to his food. "But don't say I didn't warn you. Slytherin will be brutal." Now the green lights tightened as well. "If you wanna plan for the match later, I'll help."

Harry's appetite shrivelled away and left a vague sense of nausea behind. He was also unconcentrated during the rest of lunch, which did nothing to lessen Dean's ire at Ron's interruption.

"Who does he even think he is?" Hermione muttered on the way to Hagrid's hut. Last night's rain had made the hill especially unsafe to navigate and she held on to Harry's arm tightly. "Talking about Buckbeak's execution like it's already decided."

"The magic on him did something during lunch," Harry confided. "I should tell Professor McGonagall."

Hermione bit her lip. "Can I come?"

"Please do. I feel a bit crazy and I really don't want to decide anything without her input." Harry took
her hand and squeezed it tightly. "I'm so glad that I have you."

"And I'm so sorry that you have to deal with so many wrong things all at once," she whispered.

Thankfully Hagrid knew just how to distract them. He'd built a huge bonfire and introduced fire dwelling salamanders to the class. It was great fun to watch the creatures flit over the burning logs and feed them all manners of food to find out what they liked. A huge plus was the warmth of the fire; everybody huddled around as closely as they could to ward off the wet chill of the day. Even the Slytherins seemed pathetically grateful for the respite. Blaise Zabini especially relaxed greatly when Harry issued the invitation to join his tutoring.

Potions Mistress Stone was awaiting Harry in the great hall when the class trudged back in.

"Afternoon, Mr. Potter," she greeted. "Are you ready for our first lesson?"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry tugged Hermione forward and waved Zabini closer. "This is Hermione Granger, and that's Blaise Zabini. I've invited them to attend the lessons."

Stone smiled brightly. "Great! Then come along, time's a-wasting."

She led them past the openly staring students to a large room on the second floor.

"I don't think I've ever been here," Zabini said as they passed several completely unknown portraits. "It's all a bit dusty."

"The noble quarters were housed in this wing until the practice fell somewhat out of favour," Stone said. "At least that's what Professor McGonagall told me yesterday. It'll serve us beautifully in the coming years since we'll need a lot of room to really delve into the subject matter. For today, though, we'll start slow. There are only five work benches, pick whichever you want. Your equipment has already been moved by the house elves."

There were three places in front and two in the back, all generously spaced apart. While the work benches in the front were closer to the teacher's station, the ones in the back were closer to the supply cabinets. Large windows to the left and bright overhead lights allowed for very good sight, and a slight stir in the air told of a magical vent to clear away fumes.

Without discussion, they all chose places in front, sat down and looked at Harry's tutor attentively.

She laughed. "That's sweet, you guys. First of all, please call me Tuva if you feel comfortable with it."
We'll work together for several years, in Mr. Potter's case at least until he's earned his OWL, and I like to foster a relaxed atmosphere while I teach."

"Then please call me Hermione," Hermione offered, followed suit by Harry.

Zabini smirked. "Blaise, please. Won't that make a few heads explode around here."

"Oh, I'm counting on it," Tuva replied, a wicked smile on her red lips. "I was lured here with the promise of perpetual drama and I'd hate to get back at people for denying me the fun I deserve." She parked her butt on her table and clapped her hands. "Now, today is all about finding out what you've learned these last two years, and I'm afraid that we'll have to start with the protoplasm of potion brewing ... the preparation. Show me how you set up your work place for a Forgetfulness Potion."

When they were done, Tuva began to show them the correct way, altering the layout of knives and other utensils here and pushing a cauldron a few inches to the left there. Even Zabini, whose work table garnered less tutting than Harry or even Hermione's, was rearranged efficiently. Through it all, Tuva explained why her way was better, even if it felt restricting.

The whole class passed that way. Tuva would ask them to slice, dice and peel vegetables and then, after the feat, show them where they went wrong. It was a startling way to teach as it required a lot of patience, but Harry found that it was uniquely effective.

"Now that's a great peeled carrot," Tuva praised Hermione's effort. "If you use that same technique on boomslang, you're set. Harry, your dicing still needs a little finesse. If you find the time, you should seek out the house elves in the kitchen and let them demonstrate again. They're true artists. Blaise, you're too generous with the slicing. Having passion for a subject is a great thing, just not when it leads to cutting corners. Keep an eye on the measurements in your recipes and you'll be just fine."

The bell rang, startling the three of them.

"It's already over?" Harry asked.

"Yes, a full ninety minutes," Tuva said, pleased. She handed out a slender book to each of them. "You did well today. For homework please review the first two chapters of this preparatory textbook and if you could get some more practice in, that'd be great. Remember, to brew competently and with consistent results, the preparation of your work space and your ingredients is just as important as the quality of the ingredients themselves. The innate magic of things will react to the level of care you're willing to invest. Class dismissed, I'll see you next week."

"That," Blaise said as they walked back to the main stairs, "was amazing."
"It was," Hermione said in a hushed voice. "Snape went over all of that, but not like that."

"Your prep was still mostly perfect," Harry grinned, "but I guess one never stops learning."

Hermione's jaw tightened a little. "Actually, it was probably so good because I've begun reading Hector's journals. He was a huge stickler for proper preparation. He has one whole journal dedicated just to testing methods of preparation, to improve efficiency and yield of ingredients. It's fascinating stuff."

"I guess we can be glad that that potion in second year turned out as well as it did, then," Harry said, shivering a little.

"Yes," she agreed. "Let's not dwell on what could've gone wrong."

"Do I dare ask?" Zabini wondered and smirked when Hermione shot him a glare. "I guess not."

They separated on the stairs, Zabini going down and Harry and Hermione climbing up to Gryffindor Tower.

"I'm knackered," Harry puffed upon reaching their landing.

"Why don't you take a nap?" Hermione suggested. "I'll lie down for a while, too. Dinner isn't for two hours and Professor McGonagall will see you afterwards, I'm sure."

"I'll send a note with a house elf," Harry murmured and then gave the password to the Fat Lady.

It took some effort to excuse himself from several invitations to play Exploding Snap or chess, but it was worth it. As soon as Harry sank into his bed, he sighed deeply and relaxed more than he would've thought possible.

"Hogwarts elf, please," he said quietly.

An elf popped up next to Harry, and it definitely wasn't Tilly. This one had a normal sized head and silver grey eyes, but its body was rather weedy compared to Dobby and Betty, who were both rather well fed and very fit.

"How can Jules help?" it squeaked.
"Hello Jules." Harry waved. "Excuse me for not getting up, I'm a little tired. Could you take a message to Professor McGonagall, please?"

"I can," Jules said, bouncing once.

"Great. Please ask her whether I could meet her after dinner tonight. If that doesn't work, have her choose another time."

"I will be right back," Jules promised and vanished with a soft pop.

Harry waited only for a couple of minutes. Then Jules was back, in the exact same spot as before.

"Professor McGonagall says that you can meet her tonight. She will meet you outside the great hall and take you to her office, as is proper," Jules relayed dutifully.

"Thank you, that's great." Harry smiled.

Jules surprised him by tilting his head and watching Harry out of his unnerving eyes. "May I ask a question, Harry Potter sir?"

"Er, sure."

"Are you the Head of House Slytherin?"

"Uh, what?" Harry stared at the elf. "Where did you hear that?"

"I noticed where Dobby has been taking you. Dobby has all the elves atwitter, you see." Jules hopped half a step closer. "So, are you?"

"I guess so," Harry replied warily. "It's not exactly a secret, but ... okay, people were freaking out last year and I'd like to avoid a repeat. Surely you've noticed that as well."

"This is splendid news!" Jules' ears quivered in nervous excitement. "But Harry Potter sir has no idea what it means."

"Well, what does it mean?" Harry asked, getting a bit louder than he wanted, but unable to help himself. Thankfully, Jules didn't seem intimidated at all.
"It means that us Hogwarts elves can help Harry Potter," Jules whispered. "It means that Jules can ask Harry Potter sir if he can be Harry Potter sir's elf. Jules is a very good elf."

"Er, what now? Stop, please, can you say that again? What does me being head of the Slytherin line have to do with you being able to help me, or that you can be my elf?"

"Salazar Slytherin is a founder of Hogwarts." Jules' eyes bulged a little and his nose almost touched Harry's. "Hogwarts elves are bound to the school, but we are also bound to the founders' families, so they'll always have help when they need it. The founders' kin always come first. It's law."

"Wow." Harry exhaled and flopped back onto his pillow. "Really?"

"Really."

"I don't understand why you would want to be my elf, though. I'm just a kid," Harry said.

"Harry Potter sir does not just bind elves to him. He makes friends," Jules answered. "Dobby told me so. Dobby told all of us." A dull flush washed over his cheeks and nose. "Dobby is very strong, and Betty is so beautiful."

Harry grinned. "She really is rather cute. I told her that I could always use more friends when she asked to join Dobby and me. That means that they keep my secrets and work for me as they like. I also won't have them punish themselves, especially not for things they can't help, or that aren't important. If you can deal with that, you're welcome to shake hands."

Jules quite literally lit up. His eyes glowed and the little flush spread over his neck and chest and even down to his elbows.

"I'll be a very good friend, Harry Potter sir. The very best, and I won't ever disappoint you."

Harry sat up and steadied the small, vibrating elf with careful hands. "Then welcome to my family, Jules." He offered his hand and let the elf shake it rigorously. The expected zing shot through him, although it felt a little different from Dobby and Betty. When he said so out loud, Jules withered a little.

"I am weak," he confessed, wringing his hands. "My mother was sick when she carried me and some of my magic went wrong. I'm not a great worker." His eyes filled with tears. "Please don't be
"Of course I'm not angry," Harry murmured and patted the narrow shoulder. "I have more room at home than I know what to do with, and I meant it when I said that you can do whatever work you feel like doing."

"Can I work with books?" the elf whispered. "No master wants too smart elves, but I am smart and I want to work with books. I love reading."

Harry grinned. "Is that so? Then you'll love Hermione. I'll have to introduce you! She reads a lot and can remember nearly all of it. She always has things going on and I guess you can help her research stuff if I don't need you."

Jules lightened up again, the tears quickly drying on his cheeks. "Dobby was telling the truth. Harry Potter sir is a great wizard!"

"Well, I hope so. I want all my friends and family to be happy." Harry took both of Jules' hands in his. "Is there anything you need from me?"

Jules' eyes teared up again. "Harry Potter sir must order Jules to only obey to him. The other one in the Slytherin family is very, very dark. Jules does not want to serve the Dark One."

"And I certainly don't want you to serve him," Harry agreed. "Should I tell the others as well?"

"Better be safe than sorry."

"Alright then. Betty, Dobby, Ninja, would you join me for a moment, please?" Harry grinned when his friends appeared at once and stared at Jules with unabashed curiosity. "We have a new elf in the family - say hello!"

Betty bounced and actually hugged Jules to her, while Dobby smiled smugly. Ninja merely twitched an ear.

"I've called you because Jules has told me something important. It seems that Voldemort, as a member of Slytherin's family, might have access to you as long as I don't forbid you from serving him. It won't be an issue in the new year, but until then I ask that you neither heed his calls, nor serve him in any capacity that would help him against me or my friends. Can you do that for me?"

"Your will be done, Harry Potter sir," the four elves murmured, although Ninja and Dobby had a
rather sly gleam in their eyes.

"Thank you." Harry looked from his elves to Jules. "Say, can they be at Hogwarts, now that you know that I belong to a founder's family?"

"I will tell the head elf immediately," Jules said, standing straight. "Head elf Romy will want to talk to you soon and verify for herself. Do not be insulted if she wants proof."

"She can pop in whenever I'm alone, only maybe not when I'm in the loo." Harry impulsively hugged Dobby and Betty. "I really miss you guys. Let's hope that things'll work out for us. Ninja, you keep taking good care of Sirius."

"Ninja will," the black clad elf growled and vanished.

"He be busy spying," Dobby said. "Harry Potter sir's dogfather be having bones to pick with many people."

"Betty be helping when there be time," Betty said. "It be great fun!"

The two elves bade Harry and Jules a cheery goodbye and popped away.

"You did me a huge favour here," Harry told his new friend. "Is there anything else I can do for you? Do you need a new place to sleep, or will the Hogwarts elves let you stay?"

"I will stay with them," Jules said, "but may I please visit your properties, sir? Jules is not very strong, but I need to know all your places to help the best I can."

"Of course you can. It's your home now. Maybe you'll find out how we can tame my garden. It's a hot mess." Harry laughed. "Last I heard, my godfather's house elf uses it to hone his fighting skills."

"Jules has got to see this," the elf said earnestly. With a little bow, he wished Harry a good night and popped away.

Harry laid back down and stared at the canopy of his bed for a long moment. He knew that he needed to inform Sirius about this latest development, and he really wanted to talk to Brady. Nevermind the journal that he'd started during the summer but hadn't had the time to update in more than a week now.
"I really need more time," he muttered.

Then, just to flip everything the bird, he crawled under the covers, closed his eyes and napped until Crookshanks came to get him for dinner with tickling whiskers and a careful paw in his face.

oOo

To say that Professor McGonagall was displeased about Harry's news would be a massive understatement. She raged about it for a good ten minutes, Harry and Hermione watching her with wide eyes and a newfound respect for both her swear vocabulary and her stamina.

"This is unconscionable," Professor McGonagall fumed when she was finally winding down. "How can the headmaster charm a student and not tell me? And even if he didn't do it himself, which is highly doubtful, he should still know that someone with such an amount of spells on them is inside the castle and inform the rest of the staff! Why, the possibility of the boy blowing up is astronomical! Albus must be out of his mind."

"What can we do about it?" Hermione asked.

McGonagall pursed her lips. "Not much from the outset, but you can be assured that I'll keep a weather eye on Mr. Weasley. As will you, Mr. Potter."

"Me? But Professor-" 

"It has to be you, if you can still see the spells affecting Mr. Weasley," she said sternly. "I'm not in a position to easily use the revealing spell on Mr. Weasley, not to mention conduct an in-depth investigation into which spells have been used on him. Were I to do that at will, parents would be justified in baying for my blood."

Hermione fidgeted a little. "We understand, but I really don't feel good letting Ronald run around under that kind of influence. Shouldn't Harry at least try to end the spells? His magic is acting a little unusual, so it could work."

Professor McGonagall went quiet and thought about it for a minute. "The spells could be sanctioned
by his parents. That being said, if you can do so undetected, lad, you may try. If they protest, it'll be my responsibility," she finally said. "Report to me afterwards."

"And if it doesn't work?" Harry asked.

"Then the spells will be so high-levelled that I'll have a word with the lad's mother," she decided. Her shrewd eyes gleamed a little. "It's been a while since I've had a good row with Molly Weasley anyway. It keeps me on my toes."

As it wasn't that late yet, she sent them off without a hall pass and the warning to steer clear of Snape, who was in a truly beastly mood. Apparently he hadn't liked it one bit that three of his third year students had actually dared not to show up to the class he had banned them from and beg for forgiveness.

Harry was fully expecting to be called into Dumbledore's office over that one.

Back in their common room, Hermione kissed Harry's cheek and excused herself for an early night, something that Harry decided would benefit himself as well. He had a lot of writing to do and wanted to get it out of the way.

"Come on, mate, you can't be serious," Ron whined. "You've put me off at lunch, and now too?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at the flare of the green spells around Ron. "Yeah, looks like it. I'm knackered." He waved at everyone who was following their little argument. "I'll see you tomorrow, guys."

"Night, Harry," Parvati called, followed by the whole Quidditch team, who actually chirped the words in a credible a capella cadence.

Harry grinned as people started giggling.

A quick cleaning charm later he was in bed and updating Sirius on the matter of the new house elf and of course McGonagall's plans regarding Ron. Afterwards, and with quite a bit more calm, he opened Brady's journal and began to scratch out his woes on paper.

*September 16th, 1993*
Hello Brady,

I hope it's alright to write you sooner this week since it's Hermione's birthday on Sunday and I'll be busy throwing her a party.

Sirius probably already told you about Hermione and the marriage contracts that'll come her way next year. Can I please say that I find this stupid? I don't want other guys to propose to her - they don't even know her! Also, I'm her boyfriend, shouldn't they find out first whether she's already got someone before trying to buy her?

It's still making me mad, and I've had a bit time to calm down. I think I kind of understand what Sirius meant with caveman behaviour, after all. Is that weird?

This thing that's going on with Ron is also making me mad. I'm really bloody certain that Dumbledore did it, and Hermione sort of suggested that he might have done it to have someone close to me. I don't want to believe it, because what? But, what if it's true? Can he do that, without Ron's mum knowing about it even? That'd be really awful. Also, what even for?

At least not everything his terrible at Hogwarts. I found a new friend today. He's a house elf and his name is Jules. He wanted to come work for me, so we shook hands on it. He says he's smart, and the first thing he asked of me was to make sure that the other member of Slytherin's family can't order him around. Did you know that Voldemort can do that? I didn't! I thought I'd go mad for a second when I imagined him using Dobby and Betty, and Ninja too, to do evil things. It's all sorted now, thankfully.

And also, apparently the Hogwarts elves can help Hermione and me out, now that they know that I'm the head of Slytherin's family. Another thing no one knew, and I guess Dumbledore is trying to keep that one as quiet as possible. Once the head elf has verified my status, Dobby and Betty will be able to come to Hogwarts as often as they like. It'll be good to have them here once Sirius is gone. I already miss him terribly.

How are the snakes? Are they missing me yet? Somehow I don't think so. I do miss them already, though. They're funny and really helpful. I've given two of them names now, although they've told me that they're not their actual names. But I have to call them something, don't I? Four times Snake would make for some great confusion.

Anyway, that's all from me for now.
Harry waited until the ink had dried and then closed the journal carefully. It wasn't terribly late, but despite the nap earlier he still felt wrung out.

Maybe I did too much magic this week, he thought as he pulled the comforter up to his chin. Already his eyelids were too heavy to blink open again. I'll ask Jules for some chocolate tomorrow, maybe that'll help.

And with that hopeful thought he was off to the dreamlands and enjoying another tour through the estate in France, which was coming together beautifully at a truly magical pace.

The next morning proved to be a hectic one. Any hope Harry might have harboured of spending some quiet time with Hermione before breakfast was shattered by Ron's insistence to follow him around. For that, the boy had gotten up extra early and Harry half suspected that a spell had been involved.

"I'm not sending Crookshanks away," Hermione said when Ron stepped into the common room after Harry.

"Hey Crooks," Harry said and gave the kneazle a high-five. "Catch any mice last night?"

Crookshanks mrowed smugly and swished his fluffy tail.

"Yeah, about your cat ... thing." Ron plonked down beside Harry, practically breathing down his neck. "Sorry for being mean to him. We had a huge cat prowling around the house this summer. I bet it scared Scabbers to death; the poor little guy bit the dust two days later."

Hermione wasn't in a mood to forgive him, though, and snapped, "That may explain your reaction to Crookshanks, but it's no excuse for your appalling behaviour."

"Bloody hell, I know that, Hermione. I said I was sorry, didn't I?" Ron huffed and eyed the cat.
"He's still huge."

Since it didn't look like they would be able to lose Ron, Harry decided that they might as well go down to breakfast already. Hermione quickly got lost in her DADA textbook after she'd filled her plate, and Harry followed suit, citing a need to find some more information for his essay.

Ron took it well outwardly, but the spells on him churned and churned and Harry lost all interest in his lovingly prepared eggs florentine.

"That has *got* to stop," Hermione said quietly just before the door to Professor Lupin's classroom opened. "You didn't eat much at dinner either."

"It feels so wrong," Harry said, the tightness in his chest suffocating. "We need to free him of the spells."

"Even if they make him almost bearable," Hermione sighed. "Yes, of course."

All through DADA Harry tried to come up with ways to catch Ron alone, but it was hopeless. Whatever magic was making him behave, it was also making Ron be social. It got worse in Charms, when Flitwick asked the class to pair up for a project. Harry was only too glad to let Hermione boss him around. It was mostly to drive Ron away, although then it was Neville who got saddled with the suddenly overly chatty boy, which wasn't what Harry had wanted to achieve.

"You have to help me, Harry," Neville said during the stampede to lunch. "After this I can honestly say that Ron and I just don't click. I truly never want to have to spend so much time with him, ever again."

"What did he do?" Hermione asked.

Neville shrugged. "He tried to talk to me. I mostly just like plants, and I know what he thinks about that, only he kept being *nice*. And he was asking lots of questions about you. *Nicely*. What's wrong with him?"

"We wish we knew," Hermione muttered, saying out loud what Harry was thinking. "Sorry that you're getting sucked into it."

"I'm pretty sure it's in the job description as Harry's godbrother somewhere," Neville said and smiled hopefully.

"It is," Harry replied gratefully. "Speaking of godbrothers, what do you say to October 24th for our ceremony?"
"R-really?" Neville stumbled over his own feet.

"It's a Sunday and it's the waxing moon. It'd be good for a ritual and I'd like it to mean that our relationship will grow from then on. I really mean to be your brother, Neville."

"I'd like that," the boy admitted shyly and took a breath. "October 24th it is."

"We'll plan it together," Harry said. "After Hermione's birthday."

"You will come, right?" Hermione asked. "I'm so looking forward to it - my first real party with friends."

Pleased, Neville nodded. "Of course. Around three in the common room, wasn't it?"

"Exactly right. Leave some room for cake." Harry grinned.

They somehow managed to sit away from Ron and spend lunch in conference with Lavender and Parvati. The girls had taken to occupying the rear end of the table to spread out their things and have at least some semblance of privacy, using the seventh years who also wanted some quiet as a barrier.

"You still need to take the Herald's oath," Lavender said, critically looking over the latest draft of the Buckbeak article. "We can only publish this once you do, and I can safely say that Dean'll kill you if you don't."

"I know, there was just always a lot going on this week," Harry replied. "How about tonight?"

"Suits us. You should come visit our office, it's great," Parvati said. "Neville, has your grandmother already replied to your letter?"

"Not yet." Neville poked at his potatoes. "I'll remind her if I haven't heard from her by Sunday."

"Thanks. You know, half our year has expressed interest in columns about our school subjects. You could take Herbology and amaze us with funny and obscure facts. Hermione volunteered to write articles for Charms and Transfiguration until others want to step in."

"Not potions?" Harry asked. "You could do it easily."
"Zabini wanted to try his hand," Hermione said, "and I didn't want to rub it in people's faces that my ancestor was a Potions Master."

Harry felt shamefully relieved at hearing that. "Right, don't remind people to send those stupid contracts."

Their friends laughed and Hermione blushed a little and smiled.

"Needs must," she said.

"How is your tutor, Harry?" Lavender asked. "And do you think she'd enjoy being interviewed?"

"You'll have to ask her yourself," Harry said. "Our first lesson was good, though. We learned a lot about how to prepare our stuff."

"And Madam Stone neither took points, nor has she belittled us," Hermione added. "Her instruction was very hands on, and she's given us this book for reference."

"Can I see?" Parvati accepted the book from Hermione and flipped through the pages. "Nice, with moving pictures! Huh, and the explanations are good, too." She showed Lavender something. "Snape never told us how to do that, did he?"

"Nope." Lavender pursed her lips. "I'm envious, just so you know it, Hermione."

Parvati shrugged. "I'm envious, too, but that's the nature of tutors. If they even allow other students than their primary charge, they restrict the number to a handful at most."

"Then we can only hope that our article about Snape somehow gets him sacked so we can get someone like her." Lavender sighed dramatically. "The work just never ends."

Harry glanced at Neville and found him struggling to contain his laughter.

"I'll ask my father if he can send Padma and I a copy," Parvati decided and handed the book back to Hermione. "It's from Canada, right?"

"Yes, it's the academy's introductory text." Hermione sighed. "Studying there must be fantastic, if the actual lessons are as well structured as this book."
"Present it in the newspaper," Lavender offered. "There's still a bit room left over."

"I thought you were completely full?" Neville said.

"Oh, we were, but Lee Jordan decided that he didn't want his schmalzy love poem to Summerby published for all of Great Britain to read, after all," Parvati explained. "It was about her prowess on the pitch, you see, but Alicia managed to convince him that it would be in bad taste after Cedric Diggory ousted her from the seeker position in the tryouts."

"Oh, ouch." Harry grimaced in sympathy. "Better wait a while before trying that."

"Or maybe he should just never let it see the light of day," Lavender said dryly. "His rhymes aren't exactly Shakespeare."

"I could quote something from *Pride and Prejudice* here," Hermione interjected, "but I think I'll refrain, lest I do these young gentlemen irredeemable damage."

Parvati snorted with laughter. "Right. The bell's about to ring anyway. History awaits."

"Uh, no, it doesn't." Harry ate the last of his vegetables, squeezed Hermione's hand under the table, and stood. "Have fun!"

"Rude!" Lavender called after him while the others laughed.

Harry smirked all the way to the Come And Go Room.

**End of part 11**
The next chapter will take some time due to being away and also being a little burnt out from writing so much, so quickly, so don't be too surprised if it'll be a month or so until I post again.

ETA 08/13/2019: I'm back to writing this story, so there will be new content soon. Thanks for your patience! More info to come in the notes of part 12.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!