The Phoenix Burns Brightest

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/17475989.

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The Phoenix Burns Brightest

by AnyaYanko

Summary

**Canon Divergence AU**

Dumbledore raises Harry from the age of four after the Dursleys are found to be unfit guardians.

They live in relative isolation, away from the pressures and dangers of the wizarding world, until Harry turns eleven. Then they return to Hogwarts together in the role of headmaster and student.

Nothing has changed except for Harry and Dumbledore and what they mean to each other.

And that changes everything.
The Dursleys insisted that they were both good, respectable people. They did not deserve, they complained, to be interrogated by a whole horde of police officers and social workers. What had happened to their nephew was not their fault.

‘It’s all just a big misunderstanding,’ Mr Dursley blustered. ‘We thought he was here, in the house. We didn’t even realise he was gone.’

Mrs Dursley was quiet and fidgety, unwilling to comment, but she nodded along with her husband supportively.

‘We should have checked on him sooner, of course,’ Mr Dursley admitted, throwing up his hands. ‘It was a mistake, I know, but we never expected he would run away. He’s never done that before.’

The detective, who was heading the interview, nodded sympathetically.

‘I can see that it was quite a shock for both of you,’ she said tactfully, ‘and I’m sorry to be taking up so much of your time but it’s important that we get all the facts. I’m sure you understand that whenever a child this young goes missing, for any length of time, the police take the matter very seriously.’

‘But we’ve already told you everything!’ Mr Dursley exclaimed exasperatedly. ‘We’ve gone over and over this with the other officers and that awful woman from Child Protection Services, answering the same questions again and again. Don’t you people share notes?’

‘Yes,’ the detective replied delicately, ‘but it’s very important we make absolutely sure we know exactly what happened. I’m sure you understand, Mr Dursley.’

‘No, I don’t understand,’ Mr Dursley responded hotly. ‘We’ve had people traipsing in and out of the house for the last few days, practically tearing the place apart. God knows what the neighbours think.’

‘Mr Dursley,’ the detective leant in slowly and looked man straight in the eyes. ‘This is a very serious matter. Your nephew went missing for over twenty-four hours. Anything could have happened to him.’

‘Yes, but it didn’t!’ Mr Dursley protested. ‘He came back home, safe and sound, didn’t he? Thank God.’

This last part was added hastily, as if he realised that he was coming off too rough or defensive. His face flushed bright red and his hands twisted into fists.

‘We’re all very relieved that Harry got back home safely,’ the detective said quietly, ‘but we both know that the situation could have been much, much worse. Small children alone on the streets are very vulnerable. He could have been involved in an accident, seriously injured or even killed. He could easily have been assaulted or kidnapped.’

The room fell silent for a moment while everyone considered these bleak possibilities. Mrs Dursley moved a little closer to her husband and he placed one meaty hand on her shoulder.

Mr Dursley cleared his throat. ‘Don’t you think you’re blowing the matter a little out of proportion,’
he asked. ‘I mean, children run away all the time, don’t they?’

‘Actually it’s quite rare for a child this young to run away,’ the detective said calmly. ‘It usually suggests that there’s something wrong at home.’

There was another uncomfortable silence. Mr Dursley’s face went from bright red to snow white in the space of a few seconds.

‘Why don’t we start again, from the beginning,’ the detective suggested. ‘What time did you realise that your nephew was missing.’

Mr Dursley took a moment to clear his throat.

‘It was around eight in the morning on Saturday. We went to fetch him for breakfast and found out he wasn’t there.’

The detective nodded encouragingly. ‘And when did you call the police.’

‘Around ten.’

The detective nodded again. ‘And why did it take you so long to you call the police? Almost two hours?’

‘We searched the house first,’ Mrs Dursley said shrilly. ‘Then we called all our friends and neighbours, asking if anyone had seen him.’

‘We didn’t think he could have gotten far,’ Mr Dursley added defensively. ‘We thought he must have wandered down the road or into someone else’s garden. Dudley’s done that a few times, the little tyke.’

‘But he was found quite far away, wasn’t he?’ The detective said, her lips twisting to a strained little smile. ‘Wembley. Any idea how your four-year-old nephew managed to travel over thirty miles away in the space of a few hours?’

‘Maybe he hitch-hiked?’ Mr Dursley suggested. He let out a false little laugh, too high and strained to be natural.

The rest of the room remained deadly silent. The police officers all exchanged disbelieving glances, their eyebrows raised high.

‘Really,’ Mr Dursley said, clearing his throat. ‘I have no idea how he travelled so far.’

‘Obviously we’re still worried that someone may have taken him,’ the detective said slowly. ‘Is it possible that anyone could have come into the house during the night and taken him away?’

‘Absolutely not!’ Mr Dursley replied fiercely. ‘We’ve got the latest burglar alarm system. There’s censors all around the house. If so much as a cat walks by it sets them off.’

‘When did you last see your nephew, before he disappeared?’ The detective pressed. ‘Did you look in on him before you went to bed?’

‘No,’ Mr Dursley said gruffly. ‘We’d sent him to bed early for misbehaving.’

‘And what time was that?’

Mr Dursley exchanged a quick look with his wife. They suddenly looked very tense and nervous.
‘I suppose around four or five,’ Mr Dursley said slowly.

The detective frowned deeply, little wrinkles creasing her brow.

‘And you didn’t check in on him after that?’ She asked. ‘What about for dinner? Had he already eaten?’

At this, the Dursleys became even more tense and uncomfortable. Mrs Dursley’s mouth withdrew into a line so tight that it might have been drawn on with a biro.

‘He wasn’t getting any dinner,’ Mr Dursley said quietly. ‘We’d sent him to bed early, without any dinner. It was part of his punishment.’

‘He’d eaten earlier that day,’ Mrs Dursley said quickly. ‘He’d had a big lunch and a snack so it wasn’t as if he was really going hungry.’

Once again, her voice was very shrill.

‘Did you often send your nephew to bed this early, without food, and leave him alone for the rest of the night?’ The detective asked.

‘No,’ Mrs Dursley hissed. ‘Of course not.’

‘Look, I was sent to bed early dozens of times when I was a child and it never did me any harm!’ Mr Dursley exclaimed. ‘It’s a perfectly normal form of punishment or it used to be, before all these namby-pamby ideas about child-rearing came in. It was far worse in my day, I assure you.’

‘Vernon, please!’ Mrs Dursley hissed, but apparently her husband had worked himself too much to stop now.

‘I’ve done everything I can to care and protect my family and I object to being treated like a criminal and subjected to questioning in my own damn home. Now I made a mistake and I’m man enough to admit that. I should have checked in the boy earlier but you must see that I could never have expected him to get out!’

A silence far heavier and more unpleasant than any that had come before greeted this pronouncement. The detective moved right to the edge of her seat, leaning over towards the couple.

‘Get out?’ she repeated softly.

The words hung in air for a few moments.

‘Mr Dursley, are you saying that you lock your four-year-old nephew in?’

**

When all the police had gone and the boys had both been sent to bed Mr and Mrs Dursley stayed up together to talk.

‘It will be alright,’ Mr Dursley assured his wife. ‘Kids run off all the time. They’re mad, wilful little monsters and that boy’s the worst of them. I’m damned if I know how he got out of that cupboard but they found him alright and brought him home.’

Mrs Dursley shook her head slowly, hands twisted in her lap. Long bony fingers toyed with the buttons on her cardigan, spinning them round and round.
‘He was alone with the social worker for a long time, Vernon.’ She murmured. ‘What do you think he told her?’

‘He wouldn’t have said anything,’ Mr Dursley assure her. ‘He knows better than to go around telling tales. Besides, he’s only four years old. No one’s going to listen to him.’

‘But what if he tells them where he was sleeping,’ Mrs Dursley pressed. ‘You know what they’ll think about that.’

They’d emptied out the cupboard before they called the police, carefully clearing away any traces that a small child had been kept in there, but they were still worried that they had forgotten something.

‘I set him up in the spare room tonight,’ Mr Dursley told her. ‘The bed’s all made up and there’s toys on the shelves. It looks like he’s been in there all along.’

He reached out and wrapped an arm around his wife shoulders.

‘It will be alright,’ he said again.

But Mrs Dursley wasn’t convinced. She gave her husband a desperate, frightened look.

‘What if they say it’s abuse?’ She whispered. ‘What if they say we’re unfit parents and can’t be trusted with children?’

‘Petunia!’ Mr Dursley exclaimed with a forced little laugh. ‘You’re letting your imagination run away with you! There’s no reason for them to take things any further.’

He tried to take her hand, to calm her down, but she shrank away from him.

‘They won’t just let it go though, Vernon,’ she hissed. ‘They’ll be back again, asking more questions. Setting all the neighbours whispering. God knows what they’ve been saying about us.’

‘They know what’s being going on, Petunia,’ he said soothingly. ‘They know that Harry went missing. I’m sure they’re just concerned. We can go round tomorrow, if you like, to let them know he’s back. We’ll thank them for all their help and smooth things over nicely.’

Mrs Dursley looked up at him uncertainly. She was chewing at her bottom lip like a small, anxious child. She’d never looked more weak and pathetic.

‘What if they try and take Dudley away?’ She whispered. ‘What if they say he’s not safe here?’

‘No one is taking our boy away,’ Mr Dursley said fiercely. ‘I would never, ever let that happen, petunia. If they came after us we’d just hire the best lawyers in the country. We’d crush them.’

He let out a mad little laugh. ‘Take our little boy away from us? I’d like to see them try!’

Mrs Dursley swallowed. ‘And Harry?’ She said tentatively. ‘What if they tried to take him into care?’

‘I won’t let anyone anywhere near our family,’ Mr Dursley said decisively. ‘You think I’m going to let Social Services make a fool out of me? You think I’m going to let them come in here and treat us like criminals?’

At last, Mrs Dursley was starting to look a little more reassured.
‘I suppose they don’t have any evidence of anything, do they?’ She said, more to herself than to her husband. ‘I mean, the only thing that’s really suspicious is how far away he travelled and that wasn’t anything to do with us. We were doing everything we could to keep him in the house.’

‘That boy,’ Mr Dursley said bracingly. ‘He did that all by himself. He got himself out of that cupboard and miles away before we had any idea. The little devil. We won’t let it happen again though. We’ll keep a much closer eye on him from now on.’

He was relaxing now into one of his more familiar subjects. He spent a few pleasant moments complaining about his nephew and making fresh resolutions to keep him in line.

Mrs Dursley nodded but there was still the slightest flicker of doubt behind her eyes.

‘And I don’t imagine that ... well, that any of ... the other lot would hear about this?’

Mr Dursley stopped short. ‘You mean ... his lot?’

His wife nodded.

‘No,’ he blustered. ‘No, of course not. How could they? It’s not as if they talk to the policemen or social services, is it?’

‘No,’ Mrs Dursley agreed. ‘No, I don’t see how they could. I just wondered ... what would happen if they did hear that he’d gone missing? What if one of them came here to ask questions too?’

This thought was almost too terrible to contemplate. It took Mr Dursley some time to respond to his wife and when he finally did he found that all the confidence had left his voice.

‘No,’ he murmured feebly. ‘No, they wouldn’t come here now. They couldn’t.’

He was wrong, of course.
It was several weeks later that Professor Albus Dumbledore knocked on the door of Number Four, Privet Drive. By then, the Dursley’s had decided that the trouble was all over and were beginning to relax again.

Mrs Dursley was smiling when she came to the door. She was expecting a visit from one of her neighbours, Mrs Stevens, who had borrowed her best casserole dish over a week ago. Mrs Dursley had been dropping hints every time she saw Mrs Stevens that she needed it returned and she had said she might stop over around eight. When Mrs Dursley saw the tall, silver-haired gentleman standing on her doorstep the smile slid off her face, like butter on a hot knife.

Albus Dumbledore was dressed in a fancy three piece suit with a white shirt and a wool overcoat. While the clothes were quite conventional, the colour and patterns used made them extraordinary. The suit was a bright emerald green with golden embroidery and a gold chain hung from the buttonhole to an antique pocket watch. The coat was a darker shade of green and also accented with gold details.

Mrs Dursley’s eyes danced over the man’s clothes with mounting horror before lighting on his face. In addition to the professor’s eccentric clothing he had long silver hair and a beard, both of which hung down to his waist. His eyes were a bright electric blue that glittered, brilliantly, behind a pair of half-moon glasses. He was smiling politely, but there was an intensity to his stare that made Mrs Dursley shrink back into the doorway.

‘Good evening,’ Albus said. ‘I assume that you are Mrs Petunia Dursley?’

Mrs Dursley hesitated for a moment. Her hand trembled against the edge of the door, as if she was considering slamming it shut but quickly thought better of it.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly.

Albus inclined his head. ‘My name is Professor Albus Dumbledore. We have never met in person but I am sure you will remember my name. I wrote you a letter three years ago.’

Mrs Dursley went very pale. She didn’t move or speak for several seconds, during which time Albus continued to smile pleasantly and glance about himself with interest.

‘I think,’ he said eventually, when it became apparent that Mrs Dursley was not going to recover the power of speech. ‘That we should go inside. I have something quite important to discuss with you and it would be better to do so in private.’

‘This isn’t a good time,’ she squeaked desperately.

Professor Dumbledore sighed. ‘It never is,’ he said sadly, ‘but we must make the best of it.’

Mrs Dursley didn’t want to let him in but when he stepped towards her she jumped aside instinctually. He was past her in an instant and she was forced to shut the door and follow him.

Mr Dursley was sitting on the sofa and watching the news. He didn’t look up as Professor Dumbledore entered the room but called out his wife.

‘The prime minister of India’s been assassinated,’ he told her. ‘Bloody uncivilised country. Can’t
Mrs Dursley crept in behind Professor Dumbledore and cleared her throat.

‘Vernon?’

Mr Dursley glanced up at them. When he saw Albus Dumbledore standing there, in his bright green suit, his face went white.

‘Good evening,’ Albus said again. ‘You must be Mr Dursley. My name is Professor Albus Dumbledore. I’m sorry to drop by unexpected but I’m afraid I have something very important to discuss with you. It’s regarding your nephew, Harry.’

This seemed to confirm Mr Dursley’s worst fears. He went, if possible, even whiter. It made him look all the more paler and insubstantial next to the bright, vibrant stranger.

‘Do you mind if we have a little silence?’ Albus asked. He waved his wand towards the TV and the screen went black. ‘We have a lot to talk about and it would be best if we have no distractions.’

Mr Dursley gaped at him. Mrs Dursley lingered uncertainly by the doorway.

‘We ought to all sit down and make ourselves comfortable,’ Albus said, taking a seat in the armchair. He nodded at Mrs Dursley. ‘Please will you take a seat Petunia?’

Mrs Dursley sank down onto the sofa, beside her husband.

‘Now, I’m sure you must have some idea about why I’m here today,’ Albus said. ‘I understand that Harry went missing a few weeks ago.’

Mrs Dursley swallowed. ‘He was only gone for a day,’ she said weakly. ‘Then the police brought him back. He was alright.’

‘And how did this happen?’ Albus asked.

Mrs Dursley looked at her hands. ‘I don’t know what happened.’ She said quietly. ‘I don’t know how he got out. I assumed that he ... did it .... with his,’ she waved one hand vaguely. ‘You know.’

Albus nodded. ‘I believe that Harry may have indeed used magic to run away,’ he said. ‘It’s very rare for children this young to be able to use magic but sometimes, under extreme circumstances, they’ve been known to do so. It’s usually when they’re in serious danger. It’s a survival mechanism, you understand.’

There was another brief, uncomfortable silence. Neither of the Dursleys seemed able to meet his eyes.

‘Look,’ Mr Dursley said eventually. ‘It was a nasty business, I agree, but it’s all settled now. I don’t know we need to go over it all again.’

‘I’m afraid the situation was far more serious than you may have realised,’ Albus said softly. ‘Social Services were actually planning to remove both children from your care and place them in a foster home. They had already selected a group home a couple of miles away from here and were making the arrangements when we intervened.’

Mrs Dursley gasped. She raised one hand to her mouth and started to shake uncontrollably. In contrast, Mr Dursley went very still as if he’d just been transformed into a marble statue.
‘You stopped them though,’ Mr Dursley said hoarsely. ‘You stopped them from taking our son away.’

The professor gave him a very cold look. ‘We had to. We cannot allow Harry to be moved to another home. He would not be protected there, as he has been with you. What’s more, that magical protection that has been granted to him, as long as he lives with his blood relatives, would be broken forever. So even if he returned to live with you in the future he would still be vulnerable.’

‘So you stopped them,’ Mr Dursley repeated, apparently still unable to comprehend this fact.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘But now am I faced with a problem. While Harry is magically protected here, from ambush or attack, he is not necessarily safe. In fact, he has been found to be categorically unsafe by your protective services. This is an unsafe home.’

Mrs Dursley gulped like a fish and Mr Dursley patted her on the shoulder.

‘I don’t know what you’ve been told,’ he said, ‘but we’ve never laid a finger on that child. He’s been as safe here as he would anywhere.’

Albus was quiet for a moment. His expression remained calm and thoughtful but his bright blue eyes seemed to grow colder.

‘I believe that,’ he said quietly. ‘I do not believe that you have ever hit, slapped or beaten him or put his life at risk in any way. However, you have not cared for him as I asked him to. You have not treated him like your own child. You have neglected and mistreated him.’

Mr Dursley made a noise in the back of his throat, as if he meant to argue, but at one look from Dumbledore silenced again.

‘You have only given Harry only the barest essentials needed to survive and some of those only grudgingly. You have denied him food whenever it suited you and locked him up whenever he became troublesome. You have treated him more like a dog than a human being, except most people would treat a dog quite a bit better.’

A terrible chill seemed to emanate from the professor as he spoke and Mr and Mrs Dursley huddled closer together. They looked scared and shaken, like survivors from a shipwreck.

‘So,’ Albus continued, ‘I must consider whether Harry can be allowed to continue to live here, under these conditions. If not, there are a couple of other options. I could place him with a powerful wizarding family or I could hide him with another muggle family, somewhere where he is unlikely to be found, but neither of these options would provide him with same level of magical protection. Unfortunately I am forced to admit that your home remains the safest place for Harry. So the question I must ask you now is this: can you do better?’

Mr Dursley gaped at the professor for a second and then turned to his wife. Mrs Dursley’s face was all screwed up, as if she was in intense pain and she was chewing at her bottom lip again.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly. ‘We can. We will.’

Albus nodded thoughtfully. ‘I should like to believe that. Your sister sacrificed her life for that child. It seems remarkable that you, on the other hand, cannot even sacrifice a bedroom.’

‘I will do better,’ Mrs Dursley repeated hoarsely. ‘I will.’

Albus rose from his seat. ‘I want to talk to Harry before I make my decision.’ He said. ‘Will you
‘He’s in bed now,’ Mr Dursley said gruffly. ‘He’ll be asleep.’

‘Well then, I shall have to wake him,’ Albus said sadly. ‘I’m afraid this cannot wait until morning.’

After another quick glance at his wife Mr Dursley got up and escorted the professor out of the room. He took him up the stairs and nervously showed him to the bedroom.

‘He’s in here,’ he said quietly.

Albus did not knock. He simply let himself in and then closed the door behind him. He did not allow Mr Dursley time to follow him. He wanted to speak to Harry quite alone.

He found the boy fast asleep and, rather than waking him suddenly, decided to cast a spell to allow him to wake up naturally, sitting down at the foot of the bed and waiting for it to take affect. Slowly, Harry’s eyes opened and he peered up blearily at the stranger.

‘Hello Harry,’ Albus said softly.

‘Hello,’ Harry mumbled. He blinked uncertainly for a few seconds and then asked, ‘Are you real?’

‘Yes,’ Albus replied, with a smile. ‘My name is Albus Dumbledore.’

‘I’m Harry,’ Harry said.

‘I know,’ Albus replied.

‘I’m four,’ Harry said.

‘I know,’ Albus replied.

Harry blinked a few more times and yawned.

‘What are you doing here?’ He asked.

‘I’m here to talk to you,’ Albus told him. ‘I want to ask you about the day you disappeared.’

‘I didn’t mean to do it,’ Harry said quickly.

‘I know,’ Albus said.

‘I just wanted to get away,’ Harry said.

Albus nodded understandingly.

‘Sometimes when you really want something to happen it just does. It used to happen to me too, when I was a child.’

Harry stared at him, wide-eyed. ‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘Could you tell me where you were before you disappeared?’

‘At home,’ Harry said guardedly.

‘Where at home?’
Harry hesitated. ‘In the cupboard.’

‘Were you trapped in there?’ Albus asked. ‘Is that why you wanted to get out so badly?’

Harry nodded slowly. ‘It was locked,’ he said.

‘I think you must have been very scared and unhappy to make yourself disappear like that,’ Albus said. ‘It’s very hard to do that, when you’re so small, so I think you must have really wanted it.’

‘Yes,’ Harry agreed. ‘I just really, really wanted to get away. Then I was.’

Albus leant in a little closer, still smiling encouragingly at the little boy.

‘I’ve just had a talk with your aunt and uncle. I’ve told them that they ought to be a lot nicer to you and they’ve said that they’re going to try. Do you think they’ll be able to do that?’

Harry considered. ‘I don’t sleep in the cupboard anymore.’ He said. ‘I sleep here now.’

‘Yes and that’s much better,’ Albus said, ‘but do you think they’ll be able to be nicer to you as well? Do you think they’ll say nice things to you and buy you nice things?’

No,’ Harry said bluntly. ‘They don’t like me.’

Albus nodded sadly. ‘I’m afraid you’re right about that. Do you know why that is?’

‘I’m not their son,’ Harry said simply. ‘They don’t want me here.’

‘Whose son are you?’ Dumbledore asked.

‘No one’s,’ Harry told him. ‘My parents are dead.’

Albus nodded again. ‘If you could go and live with another family would you want to do that?’

Harry eyes lit up. ‘Yes,’ he exclaimed. ‘Yes, please!’ He scooted down the bed towards Albus, staring up at him with wonder. ‘Are you really real?’ He asked, reaching out to touch him.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied with another smile. ‘I’m real. You can feel me here, can’t you?’

Harry pressed his palm flat against Albus’s chest. ‘Will you take me away to another family?’ He asked eagerly. ‘Please. I promise to be good.’

Albus could feel an awful ache in his heart, just where Harry was touching.

‘Yes,’ he said softly, ‘if that is what you want.’

Harry’s face crumpled. ‘Promise you’re real,’ he begged, in a quavering voice.

‘I promise,’ Albus said. Seeing that the boy was about to cry he searched for a distraction.

‘Why don’t you start packing your things now?’ He suggested. ‘I can take you away tonight, if you like? You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to.’

Harry jumped up excitedly. ‘I don’t need anything,’ he said. ‘Can we go now, please!’

‘Why don’t you at least pack a change of clothes?’

Albus flicked his wand and a backpack appeared on the bed. Harry picked it eagerly, without
questioning where it had come from. He moved quickly, pulling out clothes from the nearby chest of drawers. They were all a little too large for him and the colours were faded, as if they’d been washed too many times.

‘Is there anything else you’d like to take?’ Albus asked. ‘You don’t need to rush.’

Harry considered and then came back over to the bed. He knelt down beside it and pulled out a small metal tin from underneath.

‘Just this,’ he said. ‘This is mine.’

‘May I see?’ Albus asked curiously.

Harry handed it over and Albus carefully praised it off the lid. He was expecting to find a collection of trading cards, or stamps, or small plastic toys. Instead he found several buttons, of varying colours and sizes, a rusty old key and a couple of long, frayed pieces of string. He stared down at the collection of small, scavenged items in silence for several seconds, his heart pounding in his chest.

He understood what he was looking at. It was a collection of things so dirty, broken and utterly unwanted that Harry could keep them without worrying that anyone would try to take them from him. Albus glanced around the room, for a moment, taking in all the books and toys, and felt a fresh wave of anger wash over him.

‘What about one of these toys?’ He said quietly, gesturing around the room. ‘Why don’t you take one of these?’ He spoke calmly, keeping the fury out of his voice.

‘They’re Dudley’s,’ Harry said simply.

‘Well, I think you can take at least one thing,’ Albus told him, ‘as you’re leaving.’

Harry looked uncertain. ‘No, it’s okay.’ He said.

‘Very well,’ Albus said. ‘You might want a jumper as well. You can pull it on now and then we’ll get your coat and shoes and you’ll be ready to travel.’

It did not take long. A few minutes later Albus Dumbledore was escorting Harry downstairs to say goodbye to his aunt and uncle forever.
Dear Minerva,

I am so sorry to hear of the trouble that my sudden departure has caused within the school. Please accept my apologies for not updating you sooner; I did not want to worry you until I had made my final decision.

I have written to the board to explain the situation and to recommend Ursula Sheridan as my replacement. Providing my sabbatical is approved, I hope to return to Hogwarts in seven years time. If possible, I would like to travel up with Harry before the start of term and expect to arrive on 1st July 1991.

As so often happens, I find myself in the unenviable position of admitting that I was in the wrong about something, while you were in the right. You warned me that Mr and Mrs Dursley would not prove adequate guardians for a boy like Harry Potter, but I did not listen. I knew that their home would provide a safe place for Harry, away from the dangers and pressures of the Wizarding World, and I hoped that they would come to care for him, in time. As it turns out, I was mistaken.

I know that you also consider my decision to raise Harry myself a mistake, but I hope that in this case I am the one in the right. I can assure you that I have considered the matter quite carefully. I had thought of placing Harry with a magical family, as you have suggested, but I don’t believe that anyone else would be able to provide Harry with adequate protection.

The Gillians were my first choice, as both Nerissa and Daniel are retired aurors and already have two children, aged six and seven. However the Gillians have accumulated many enemies in their time and have only recently been subject to an attack. It is likely that placing Harry with them would make him even more of a target than he already is.

I also considered the Wades as they are a particularly capable, trustworthy couple. Caspar has an excellent position in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Leanna works as a healer for St Mungo’s. You may also recall that their youngest son, Cato, was killed five years ago, so I think they would be especially welcoming to a young boy who was orphaned by Lord Voldemort. However the Wades too, would be vulnerable to attack, and far less likely to be able to defend themselves successfully.

Harry requires a guardian who is not only strong enough to protect him but unlikely to be challenged those dark witches and wizards who are currently at large. I flatter myself by suggesting that I am one of the most powerful wizards of this generation and therefore more capable than anyone else of protecting Harry from harm.

More importantly, I am probably the one of the few people that Lord Voldemort has ever actively avoided, which makes it far less likely that any of his supporters would seek me out.

Besides this, I care for the child. I want to be the one who looks after him.

I intend to find a safe, secluded location to raise Harry. It is likely that I will fortify and hide the house from detection but I will let you how you may find me.

I am, yours most sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore
Their first home was in Oxford. Albus had taken the house over from one of his friends, Harriet Holmes, who was currently out of the country studying a tribe of mermaids. Harriet was happy to let Albus stay there and only asked that he kept an eye on her garden and stop the keratchula plant from eating the neighbour’s cat.

Harriet had inherited the house from her parents, who were muggles, so it was relatively normal two-story terrace house. Like its neighbours, it had tall windows with stained glass and jutting gables with dusty grey tiles. The inside though was quite a bit larger than one would expect and there was a magnificent fireplace at the heart of the living room.

On the way there Albus played a game with Harry. He asked him to imagine what his bedroom would be like and listened as the boy made suggestions after suggestion.

‘What about the furniture?’ Albus asked. ‘Will there be a big, squishy armchair, do you think? Or a cosy window seat?’

‘A window seat?’ Harry guessed.

‘What else could there be?’ Albus asked. ‘Remember, this is the most wonderful bedroom in the world.’

‘A hammock?’ Harry guessed.

‘To sleep in?’ Albus asked.

‘No, just to swing in,’ Harry said. ‘There’d be a huge bed to sleep in with loads of pillows and cuddly toys.’

‘What kind of toys do you think there are?’ Albus asked. ‘What are the best toys in the world?’

‘A giant teddy bear,’ Harry said, ‘so big it fills the room. And a big castle with knights and guns. And a train set that really works.’

Albus listened carefully and by the time the arrived at the house he had already made sure that the bedroom contained everything that Harry had wanted most.

When he led Harry in the little boy’s eyes went so wide it looked like they were about to pop out of his head.

‘You guessed right,’ Albus said, his eyes twinkling.

The first few days were difficult.

Albus wasn’t sure how to behave around Harry. He was used to dealing with children, having taught at Hogwarts for nearly forty years, and been a headmaster for nineteen, but he had never had to act as a parent before and didn’t know what was needed by a child so young.

He knew that most four-year-olds needed help with almost everything and he hesitated whenever he asked Harry to do something, wondering whether he ought to reach out and help him. Harry was not a normal four-year-old though. He wasn’t used to anyone caring for him. His aunt and uncle had never washed his hair or helped him dress or even picked him up when he fell down. He had learned
to do things by himself.

So Albus felt awkward about touching Harry. He thought about taking Harry’s hand, when they were walking together, but he could see that it wasn’t necessary or expected. Harry was capable of walking by himself without tripping or stumbling and he never tried to run off.

When Albus first told Harry to take a bath Harry had gone into the bathroom by himself and locked the door behind him. Albus, who had followed him upstairs, dithered uncertainly outside.

‘Leave the door open a little,’ he called through to him. ‘Just in case.’

Once the door was propped open Albus started heading downstairs but once again he hesitated, unsure whether it was right to leave Harry unsupervised. He knew it was what Harry was used to, but he that didn’t mean it was right.

He sat down at the top of the stairs and watched Harry as he moved clumsily around the bathroom. He flicked his wand towards the taps to stop the water getting too hot and slid the bathmat under Harry’s feet so that he didn’t slip. While Harry was rinsing his hair out he draped a large, thick towel over the side of the bath so that it was ready for him when he reached for it.

Harry took a very long time in the bath. So long that Albus had to call out to him and command him to get out. Like all small children he seemed to be of the opinion that he never, ever, ever wanted to be in the bath. Right up until the moment he got in, that was. Then he abruptly decided that he never, ever, ever wanted to get out.

Harry also took a long time getting ready for bed. He was able to dress and undress himself but only very slowly. He wriggled himself into trousers one inch at a time and struggled with buttons. Albus was beginning to suspect that he needed glasses from the way he squinted down at his hands.

Albus continued to watch him from the top of the stairs, waiting patiently as Harry wrestled with his Pyjamas and packed his clothes away in the laundry hamper. Harry did not get into bed once he was changed but wandered absently around the room. He was still in awe of his new bedroom and kept gazing and touching at all the soft toys. Once he’d completed a couple of circuits he turned his attention to the train set and sat down on the floor to play with it.

Albus waited a couple of minutes and then called out to Harry again.

‘Are you in bed?’ He demanded.

‘Yes,’ Harry lied.

‘I’ll be up in a moment to tell you a bedtime story,’ Albus told him.

This did the trick. Harry hastily dropped the train and scrambled up into the bed. Albus waited until he was settled and then followed him into the bedroom.

‘Are you ready for your story?’ He asked.

‘Yes,’ Harry replied.

Albus smiled at him and took a seat at the foot of the bed.

‘I’ll tell you one of my favourites from when I was your age,’ he said softly. ‘It’s called The Fountain Of Fair Fortune.’
He didn’t have a copy of the book but he remembered it well enough to recite it exactly. An uncanny ability to recall everything he had ever read was one of Albus’s special gifts.

‘Did you like that?’ Albus asked, once the story was done.

Harry nodded.

‘Tomorrow I’ll take you to the bookshop,’ Albus told him, ‘and you can pick out some books for yourself. Does that sound good?’

Harry nodded again.

Albus smiled, straightened the covers and wished Harry goodnight. Once again, he thought about tucking him in properly and hugging him tight, but felt unable to initiate contact.

He switched off the lights and left Harry to his dreams.

**

Albus felt most at ease when he was surrounded by books. Books were his comfort, his refuge and his salvation. If ever he felt uncertain about anything it was his instinct to reach for a book. So it was quite natural that he would consider a visit to a bookshop the perfect choice for his first outing with Harry.

There were dozens of bookshops in the fashionable areas of Oxford. Most were antiquarian bookshops, filled with the sort of crumbling, sweet-scented books that Albus liked best, but he knew these would hold little appeal for a small child. Instead he chose to take Harry to a children’s bookshop that was filled to brim with new, brightly-coloured books.

Harry took to the place immediately and spent ages just walking round and round the shelves peering closely at the covers. He picked up book after book, flicking through them and squinting at the pictures, agonising over which one to get. He kept apologising for taking so long, unaware that Albus would have been willing to wait all day. He was so glad that Harry was enjoying himself.

‘You can have more than one if you want,’ Albus told him. ‘You can have at least three of the picture books and one or two larger books. They won’t take long to read.’

‘Really?’ Harry asked him. His face was shining with excitement. ‘Could I maybe have all of these?’

He gestured at his small pile of favourites.

Albus smiled. ‘Yes, if you want them all.’

They gathered up the books and Albus took them to the till. Harry watched, open-mouthed, as Albus paid, as if it was the most unbelievable thing he’d ever seen.

When they were outside Harry turned to Albus and, quite unexpectedly, threw his arms around his legs.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

Albus was still for just a second before he sunk to his knees and wrapped his arms around Harry. He held him tight for several seconds before pulling away gently and rising from the ground. Then he picked up the bag in one hand and took Harry’s hand in the other.

After that, Albus wrapped a towel around Harry whe he got out of the bath and helped him to dry his
hair. He tucked him into bed properly hugged him tight before leaving the room. And he held his hand, whenever they went out together, even though he didn’t need to.
After the trip to the bookshop Harry changed dramatically. It was as if some sort of switch had been flipped inside him. Where he had previously been quiet, distant and self-sufficient he was suddenly very clingy and desperate for attention.

It worried Albus. Before Harry had acted like a much older child, doing things by himself and never asking for help. Now he was behaving more like a toddler, unwilling to leave Albus’s side for more than a minute at a time. He also talked incessantly, assaulting his guardian with an endless barrage of questions.

‘How old are you? Are your parents still alive? Do you have any brothers and sisters?’

One question after another, with barely a breath between them. Albus tried to answer each one in order but found this difficult because Harry kept interrupting him to ask more.

‘I’m a hundred and four,’ He told Harry. ‘My parents -’

‘That’s so old!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘When’s your birthday?’

‘The twenty-eighth of August,’ Albus replied. ‘My parents are both dead, unfortunately.’

‘Did they die when you were young or old?’

‘They died when I was young,’ Albus said. ‘My father died when I was eleven and my mother died just after I turned eighteen.’

‘How did they die?’ Harry continued relentlessly. ‘Was it some sort of accident?’

Albus had to pause for a moment to work out how to phrase his answer. He didn’t want to lie to Harry but the circumstances of his parents death were very complicated, not to mention painful. Thankfully Harry didn’t try and fill the brief moment of silence with yet another question.

‘My mother died in an accident,’ He said eventually, ‘while I was at school. My father died from an illness. He went away somewhere quite dangerous, got sick there and died before he could come home.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said. ‘Do you remember them much?’

‘Yes, I remember them quite well although they all died a long time ago.’

Albus decided to press on quickly and get through all the other uncomfortable questions.

‘I used to have a little sister but she died too,’ he told Harry, ‘when she was fourteen. I have one brother who’s still alive. He’s my only living relative.’

‘Is your brother as old as you?’ Harry asked.

‘A year younger,’ Albus said, with a strained little smile. ‘He would be one hundred and three now.’

‘Does he -’

‘I think that’s enough questions for now,’ Albus said gently.
Harry blinked. ‘Why?’ Another question.

‘Well, we don’t want to run out of them,’ Albus replied teasingly. ‘We should save some for tomorrow, at least. We have plenty of time to get to know each other.’

He felt he had to be firm with Harry otherwise they would be at it all day. Harry was obviously thrilled to have someone finally paying attention to him but he also seemed terrified that they might lose interest at any second. It would be some time before Harry learned that Albus wasn’t going to just disappear if he took his eyes off him for too long. Until then, Albus would probably have to force Harry to spend time alone.

The Oxford house had a good-sized study that Albus had claimed as his own and he quickly established the rule that whenever the door was closed he was not to be disturbed.

‘I’ve got a lot of work to do,’ he told Harry, ‘so I’ll be in my study for most of the day. You’ll need to entertain yourself during that time.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’ Harry demanded incredulously.

‘You can do whatever you like,’ Albus replied, ‘as long as you stay in the house or the garden. You have plenty of toys to play with and I’m sure you can come up with some interesting games to pass the time.’

Harry seemed unconvinced. ‘I don’t want to play by myself,’ he complained. ‘Why won’t you play with me?’

‘Because I am a very boring old man,’ Albus replied. ‘Besides, didn’t you play by yourself at your aunt and uncle’s house?’

‘Yes, but I didn’t like it!’ Harry exclaimed hotly. ‘I want you to play with me! And you’re not a boring old man! That’s just an excuse!’

‘I am a very boring old man,’ Albus said seriously, ‘and I have a lot of very dull, boring work to attend to.’

‘What sort of work?’ Harry demanded suspiciously.

He seemed to have already worked-out that Albus Dumbledore was a strange and powerful man and assumed that any work he was involved in must be equally remarkable.

‘Mostly reading books, articles and essays,’ Albus told him. ‘Nothing that you would find interesting.’

‘Can’t I just sit with you while you read?’ Harry asked unhappily. ‘I won’t be in your way. I won’t even talk if you won’t want me to.’

Albus found it remarkable that Harry would rather sit silently in an office with him than play in a room full of toys by himself. It spoke volumes about how lonely he was.

‘No, I’m sorry,’ Albus said. ‘I need to be alone sometimes without any distractions, so that I can work properly.’

When will I see you, though?’ Harry asked miserably.

‘We’ll sit together in the evenings,’ Albus promised him, ‘After dinner until bedtime. We’ll read
together and talk and play games then.’

Harry eyed him uncertainly. ‘All evening?’ He asked suspiciously.

‘Yes,’ Albus assured him, ‘and we’ll have breakfast, lunch and dinner together too.’

**

Albus quickly drafted a schedule for Harry with set times for meals, chores and activities. It was naturally modelled on the Hogwarts timetable, with breakfast at half-seven, lunch at twelve and dinner at five, but the bulk of the day was left free for play.

Albus also modelled their meals on what was served at Hogwarts, although the food he prepared obviously couldn’t compare to what team of experienced house-elves produced. His skill in transfiguration allowed him to create meals that were of a reasonable quality and he learnt to adjust the dishes to suit Harry’s tastes through trial and error.

Albus worked hard to conceal the fact that he was using magic when cooking, even going so far as to lay out all the ingredients in the kitchen and inviting Harry to help him prepare them. This also gave them something else to do together and helped make mealtimes a bigger, more exciting activity.

At first, Albus only gave Harry very simple tasks like cracking several eggs into a bowl or opening tins and emoting their contents into saucepans, but none of these jobs took that long and didn’t take much effort either so he decided to take it up a notch.

‘We’ll have a full roast dinner tonight,’ he announced one day, ‘and you can peel and chop all the vegetables for me. Then we’ll put them in the oven to roast.’

He demonstrated first, stripping-down and slicing-up a carrot, and then handed Harry the knife. Harry handled it clumsily, as expected for such a small child, and Albus had to reach over a couple of times to correct his grip and move his fingers out of the way, but he managed to get the hang of it eventually.

Albus knew that most muggles would not let a four-year-old handle a knife but he didn’t think it was that dangerous an activity, under supervision. He supposed that, like all wizards, he had developed a rather cavalier attitude to injuries. When broken bones could be fixed with the flick of a wand it was easy to become careless.

A muggle parent would have to worry about their child inadvertently slicing off one of their fingers or stabbing themselves in the face. Any accident, no matter how small, would mean permanent damage. Eyeballs could not be popped back into their sockets and scars could not be smoothed over. For muggles, it simply wasn’t worth the risk.

‘You’ve done really well,’ Albus told Harry, once he had finished with the carrots.

‘Not really,’ Harry replied sadly. ‘I took too much off and they’re all lumpy.’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Albus assured him, ‘they’ll taste just as good and you’ll do even better next time.’

Albus’s mind started to wander and he found himself thinking about potions preparations. A lot of that was just chopping and slicing, after all. As Harry started to work his way through a sack of potatoes Albus considered how he might fare with herbs and roots and leaves.

He didn’t intend to start teaching Harry magic until he was old enough. In fact, he hoped to shield
him from magic entirely until he was able to understand and control his own powers. But that didn’t stop Albus from imagining all the different ways he could begin to lay the groundwork. It would be easy, for instance, to teach Harry about all the different plants with magical properties and help him to identify them. Harry needn’t know what he was being taught. He could be led to believe that this was part of basic biology, something that every child was taught about. Albus could guide him quietly without him ever realising it.

‘We’ll need to add some seasoning before we put the vegetables in to roast,’ he told Harry once all the vegetables were sliced. ‘Would you like to help with that too?’

Harry nodded eagerly.

‘Then we’ll need salt, pepper, rosemary and thyme,’ Albus told him. ‘Can you see which ones those are, on the shelf? Go fetch them down and we’ll mix them up in a bowl with olive oil and vinegar.’

His eyes glinted a little as Harry measured out the powers with his fingers.

**

The routine that Albus had developed seemed to reassure Harry that he was not going to be abandoned any time soon and so he was a lot less anxious about spending time alone. However whenever he and Albus were together he was still quite needy and demanding.

Albus had anticipated that Harry would crave a great deal of love and attention, after being denied it for so long, but he still found himself completely overwhelmed by the sudden torrent of affection that came his way.

‘I love you,’ Harry declared as Albus tucked him neatly into bed. ‘I love you more than anything or anyone in the world.’

‘I love you too, Harry,’ Albus replied softly, because he knew that was what he was supposed to say.

He didn’t really believe that Harry loved him. Not yet, anyway. They were still practically strangers and hadn’t spent enough time together to develop a deep familial bond.

When Harry said ‘I love you,’ all he was really saying was, ‘Please take care of me; I need you to survive.’ And when Albus replied, ‘I love you too,’ all he was saying was, ‘I promise I will; You are safe with me.’ It was a script that nature had written long before either of them had ever been born. They were only playing their parts and speaking the lines that belonged to them.

One day they would say those words to each other and really mean them. They would look at each other and see someone that they truly knew, cared for and trusted. Then, when they said the words, they would inflict a stab of pain, just as surely as any curse.

Albus tried to push aside these thoughts as he stared down at the little boy in the bed. He could already feel the primal tug at his heart that urged for softness and sweetness. He reached out gently and stroked at the child’s hair, carefully shifting it over to cover-up the lightning bolt scar.

‘I love you very much, Harry,’ he assured him. ‘My brave little boy.’

He leant down gently and gave Harry a warm hug and a kiss goodnight. Harry hugged him back tightly and when Albus tried to pull away he kept on clinging to him.

‘Again,’ he whispered.
Albus found himself caught off-guard for the second time that night.

‘Again?’ He repeated, raising his eyebrows.

‘Again!’ Harry squealed back.

Albus sighed theatrically and then leaned in for another hug. This time he covered Harry’s cheek in a fluffy of small kisses. ‘I love you,’ he murmured into his ear, I love you so much I could just eat you up!’

Harry shrieked with delight and clung to him even harder. Once again when Albus tried to pull away he locked his arms tight about his neck.

‘Again!’ He demanded.

This struck Albus as a little excessive. He could see the little boy’s eyes shining bright and eager and his fingernails were digging into his skin. It was time to cut him off now and lay down the law.

‘One more time,’ He said slowly and deliberately. ‘Then we’re done. It’s bedtime now, not playtime, and you need to get your sleep.’

He tried to make the final hug the warmest and tightest so far and kissed Harry at least a dozen times. He hoped that this would be enough to satisfy Harry, but unfortunately it wasn’t. Children always wanted more.

‘Again!’ Harry demanded, as soon as Albus lifted his head.

‘No,’ Albus said sternly. ‘I told you that was the last time.’

He reached up and started to untangle the boy’s arms from his neck. Harry resisted though, clinging on for all he was worth and looking up at the man pleadingly.

‘Once more?’ He begged.

Albus had already said ‘no’ and given an explanation so didn’t feel the need to repeat himself. He wasn’t about to risk entering into an endless loop of ‘please’ - ‘no’ - ‘please’ - ‘no.’

He took hold of Harry’s arms and gently pushed him back down onto the bed. Harry tried to get up again right away, stretching out his arms eagerly, but Albus simply forced him back down a second time.

He was afraid that Harry might keep fighting him and he would have to decide whether to wrestle with him for the next half an hour or restrain him with magic, but after the second attempt all the fight seemed to drain out of Harry.

He shrunk back against the pillow and stared up at Albus with a stricken expression. Tears welled up in his eyes and his lips started to tremble. Albus quickly looked away, trying to harden his heart, but he couldn’t shut out the sound of Harry drawing a long, shaky breath.

Harry had started crying properly by the time Albus reached the door. Not loud, impatient howls which would have been easy to ignore, but muffled little whimpers that sounded raw and genuine. Albus left hastily, without looking back.

Once downstairs Albus positioned himself in the armchair closest to the door and straightened his clothes. He knew he ought to find something to distract himself but he couldn’t think of anything to
do so he just sat there, in silence, and watched the clock.

Once half an hour had passed Albus cast a disillusionment charm over himself and crept back upstairs. It was quiet now and he took care not to make any noise as he nudged the bedroom door open.

He found Harry curled up in a tight ball under the covers, fast asleep. His face was smooth and calm, with only the slightest trace of tears upon his cheeks. Albus lingered for a moment, watching him breathing softly, and then left, closing the door silently behind him.
Hi everyone. I’ve edited this chapter quite a bit and slotted in a new one just before it. I think this will be the last one from Dumbledore’s POV. I think we’ll be jumping ahead a few years and then seeing everything from Harry’s perspective for pretty much the rest of the story.

I’m sure everyone is keen for them to get to Hogwarts. I know, so am I, but there’s still a few chapters to go before then I think. Harry’s got to learn he’s a wizard and how his parents died and all that mind-blowing stuff first. Also Dumbeldore builds him a treehouse so yeah, lotta important stuff.

They were in the middle of breakfast one morning when Harry looked up from his waffles and asked,

‘Are we going to live here forever?’

By this time they had been at the house in Oxford for just over three months and had settled in quite nicely. Harry had a wardrobe full of new clothes that he had picked out himself and six shelves of books. Albus had transformed the study into an exact replica of the headmaster’s office at Hogwarts and had built a small aviary in the garden to house his owls.

‘Would you like to stay here forever?’ Albus asked Harry.

‘Yes, I like it here.’ Harry said.

Albus smiled. ‘I do too, but I don’t think we can stay here for too long. A year or two, at the most.’

Harry looked up at him with surprise. ‘Why not?’ He demanded.

This was probably first time that Albus had ever asked him if he wanted something without then offering it to him. Harry had obviously expected Albus to smile and tell him that, of course, they would stay here forever. That was the way they played that game.

‘Well, this isn’t actually my house,’ Albus explained. ‘It’s my friend Harriet’s. She’s away at the moment but she’ll be back in a couple of years. When she’s back she’ll want to live here again.’

‘But it’s our house now!’ Harry protested.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Albus said softly. ‘Harriet kindly agreed to let us stay here while she’s away, but it’s still her house. We’re her guests.’

‘Where is she then?’ Harry asked. ‘If this is her house then why isn’t she here?’

‘She’s travelling,’ Albus explained patiently. ‘She’s writing a book about people who live in unusual places so she has to go to lots of unusual places to see what they’re like and how they live.’

Harry was not interested in this at all.
‘You said you’d find me a new family,’ he said suddenly. ‘You said you’d find me a nice new family to take care of me and I’d live with them forever!’

This caught Albus completely off-guard. For a moment he thought Harry was actually saying that he wanted to leave him, which he was not prepared for, but then he realised that Harry was just complaining because Albus had broken his promise.

He’d been wrong before; There had been one other time when he’d asked Harry if he wanted something and then failed to give it to him. Harry had not forgotten. He was hastily adding it to a growing list of betrayals.

‘Do you still want a new family?’ Albus asked quietly, just to make sure.

Harry looked surprised. ‘No, of course not!’ He exclaimed. ‘I want to live here, with you, forever!’

‘Well, we can’t live here forever, I’m afraid,’ Albus sighed. ‘We’ll just live here for a short while and then we’ll move somewhere else. Somewhere nicer, perhaps.’

He assumed that this would placate Harry, but it didn’t. If anything Harry looked even more upset.

‘Why can’t we live here forever?’ He asked again.

Albus shot him a stern look over the top of his glasses. ‘I’ve already told you why.’

‘Why can’t you make this our house?’ Harry asked.

Albus raised his eyebrows. ‘I can’t take something away from somebody else. If Harriet wants to keep her house, I can’t make her sell or give it to me.’

‘Yes you can!’ Harry objected. ‘You can do anything!’

It was obvious that Harry he had come to view Albus as some sort of fairy godmother who would give him everything he wanted. It wasn’t his fault though; Albus had been far too generous.

‘Actions have consequences, Harry,’ Albus said solemnly. ‘I have told you why we cannot stay in this house and you will have to accept that. I’m not going to discuss this any further.’

Harry’s face flushed red. ‘You’re a liar!’ He shouted.

‘Harry,’ Albus said quietly, ‘you will not raise your voice like that. I am sorry you’re upset but you need to control your temper.’

His cold, disapproving tone had reduced dozens of adolescent students to quivering wrecks, contrite about everything they had ever done in their entire lives, but it had no absolutely effect on the four-year-old boy in front of him now.

‘You’re a liar!’ Harry repeated, his voice rising even louder. ‘Liar!’

Then he shoved his breakfast across the table. The plate slid right over the edge and smashed on to the floor.

Albus stood up and walked smoothly over to where Harry was sitting. Harry continued glaring up at Albus, even as he towered over him, but Albus could see his lips quivering.

‘Harry, I warned you that you needed to control your temper. Now you are going to sit here for the next five minutes and think about what you’ve done.’
He was afraid that Harry would continue to defy him but Harry sat still for the duration of his punishment, even as he sobbed and whimpered.

Albus cleared the table but left the broken plate and scattered waffles on the floor. Once the time was up he went back to Harry and kneeled on the floor in front of him.

‘Harry,’ he said gently, ‘You behaved very badly just now. You raised your voice and threw your breakfast on the floor. Are you ready to apologise for what you did?’

Harry was crying heavily now, though obviously trying to stop. Snot was dribbling out of his nose in a steady stream.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whimpered. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you,’ Albus said.

He gave Harry a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Harry clung to him, still sobbing quietly, and buried his face in his hair.

‘I love you very much, Harry,’ Albus said softly. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

Harry sniffed loudly. ‘I love you too,’ he murmured thickly, through about three inches of hair and beard.

‘Good,’’ Albus said, pulling away gently. ‘You remember what I told you though? Actions have consequences.’

Harry frowned uncertainly and took a hiccuping gulp of air.

Albus raised his eyebrows in a friendly sort of way and pointed over at the broken plate.

‘I would like you to pick up all that mess and put it in the bin. You’ll need to wipe the floor clean too.’

Harry took another deep breath, wiped his nose and then got to work. Albus watched him as he knelt down and picked at the pieces of china.

‘Watch your fingers,’ Albus warned.

When Harry was done Albus told him to go play in his room and he ran away eagerly, for once. Albus waited for a moment, to make sure he was out of sight, and then reached into the bin and retrieved the broken pieces of plate.

He set them down on the side and waved his wand over them. In a second they were whole again and sparkingly clean. Albus took the repaired plate and put it back in the cupboard with the others.

**

For the most part, Albus was good at hiding his magic from Harry, but sometimes he got a little careless. He performed spells to please or entertain him without thinking through the consequences.

That evening he was reading to Harry and had the idea to make each words light up as he said them. He thought that this would help Harry to learn to read and the glowing letters certainly caught his attention.

He followed their movements with his eyes and then started frowning and reached out to touch the
‘How’s it doing that?’ He asked.

Albus was surprised. He had assumed that Harry was too young to know the difference between science and magic, being so used to modern conveniences like lights that turned on and off at the flick of a switch, but he’d been wrong. Harry didn’t have any idea how electricity worked but he had already learned how it behaved. He knew that a button needed to be pressed and there had to be a wire and some sort of machine to do the work. When he touched the page of the storybook and found that it was just plain paper he was instantly suspicious.

Albus supposed realised he ought to have hidden it better. It would not have taken much to clip something on the edge of the book or hold a small pen in his hand. If only he had something that Harry could mistake for a torch then there wouldn’t have been a problem. But it was too late now.

‘It’s just a little trick,’ Albus said vaguely.

Harry was not at all convinced by this. He frowned deeper and peered closely at the page. Albus started reading again, hoping that Harry would be distracted by the story, but Harry kept chasing the light with his hands.

It didn’t show up on the back of his fingers so he could tell that that the light wasn’t shining down on the book from above. The page also wasn’t hot or bumpy so knew there couldn’t be anything in or behind the paper.

‘I can’t read the words if you’ve got your hands all over them,’ Albus said sharply. ‘Would you like me to stop?’

Harry quickly pulled his hands back and shook his head. Albus continued reading and there were no further questions about where the light came from.

**

Albus often worried about how he was going to explain everything to Harry, when the time came. The problem was that there was just so much that Harry needed to be told and there was so little he could understand. It would have to be done very carefully, in stages, so that nothing troubled him too much.

He thought about it that night, as he tucked Harry into bed. He supposed that there were lots of little things too which he ought to have explained to Harry which he hadn’t.

‘Harry,’ He began gently, ‘I know that I told you that I was going to find you a new family and I never did.’

‘That’s okay,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I don’t want a new family anymore.’

Albus smiled. ‘I know. I just want to make sure you understand. I wasn’t lying to you when I said that. I was planning to find you a new family but my plans changed.’

‘I know!’ Harry exclaimed loudly. He was squirming about impatiently under the covers. ‘I’m not stupid, you know! I understand!’

Albus hesitated for a moment. ‘What do you understand?’

Harry looked suddenly unsure, like a student that’s just been asked an unexpected follow-up
‘You’re my new family,’ he mumbled, his face going red.

Albus chuckled in surprise and reached out to stroke Harry’s cheek.

‘Yes, that’s true,’ he said. ‘I decided I was going to look after you instead so now I’m your family.’

‘I only want you,’ Harry said earnestly. ‘I don’t need anyone else.’

Albus felt very calm suddenly, very sure of his position. It seemed like they’d turned a corner somehow.

‘I love you very much, Harry,’ he told him. ‘I’m going to look after you forever. I want to make absolutely sure that you understand that. We’re always going to stay together.’

Harry nodded, blinking a little.

‘We won’t stay in this house forever,’ Albus continued, ‘and we’ll probably end-up moving house quite a few times but we’ll always live together.’

Harry nodded again then he reached out his arms towards Albus. ‘I love you,’ he said.

‘I love you too,’ Albus replied, giving him a warm hug. ‘I love you so much.’

He held Harry tight for a couple of seconds and then drew back very slowly. Harry let him go instead trying to cling on to him.

Albus sat back on the bed and adjusted his glasses.

‘I did look for a new family for you,’ he told Harry. ‘I looked very hard but there was no one who was quite right.’

Harry seemed a little surprised by this but he didn’t say anything. He just waited patiently to see what else Albus had to say.

Albus let out a sigh. ‘The thing is Harry, you’re ... a very special little boy and .... and you need someone special to take care of you. There were many families who would have loved to have taken care of you but none of them were good enough.’

Harry’s eyes seemed to get wider and wider as Albus talked. Obviously, no had ever said anything like this to him before. The Dursley’s certainly wouldn’t have told him he was special.

‘I don’t even know if I am good enough to take care of you,’ Albus said solemnly, ‘but I will try my best to be. I hope that you will be patient with me.’

Harry let out a little splutter of protest. ‘You’re the best - the greatest - ’ He didn’t seem quite capable of forming a coherent sentence but the sentiment was clear enough.

‘I’m glad you think that,’ Albus said, beaming at him.

He reached out on hand to stroke at Harry’s hair. His fingers combed through through the thick, black locks smoothly, and the little boy seemed soothed by the motion.

‘Your parents were very special too,’ Albus said quietly.
Harry’s breath caught in his throat. ‘My parents?’ He said, surprised.

‘Yes,’ Albus said. ‘I knew your parents very well. They were very special people indeed.’ He swallowed, trying to think how to proceed from there.

Harry stared up at Albus expectantly, his bright green eyes shining with excitement. Albus looked from Harry’s flushed face to his tiny hand clenched over the duvet. He realised that it was impossible.

‘One day,’ he said slowly. ‘I will explain to you just how special your parents were and why they died.’ He swallowed again. ‘I wish I could tell you now but it’s ... too complicated for you to understand.’

Harry looked disappointed and as if he might be about to argue. Albus didn’t feel up to having that discussion right now so he quickly searched around for a distraction.

‘Your parents loved you very much,’ he said hastily. ‘I remember how happy they were when you were born. They threw a big party and invited everyone they knew to come see you.’

He related the story in as much detail as he could remember. Harry listened to it all spellbound, his mouth hanging open a little.

‘Tell me more,’ he demanded as soon as the story was finished. ‘Please.’

Albus looked at him sadly. ‘Not tonight,’ he said, as gently as he possibly could. ‘I promise I’ll tell you more tomorrow.’

He braced himself for another battle but Harry just sighed sadly and dropped back against the pillow.

‘You’re tired,’ Albus observed. ‘It’s time we said goodnight.’

Harry said nothing but closed his eyes and jiggled his head a little in what Albus supposed was meant to be a nod.

Albus leant in and gave Harry one last kiss on the cheek. ‘I love you,’ he said.

‘Love you,’ Harry replied.

Albus switched off the light and left him alone to drift off to sleep. He hoped that, at least for tonight, his dreams were sweet and pleasant ones. There was so much darkness and sorrow waiting for him in the future.
Harry Potter had lived in a lot of different places when he was growing up but the house he shared with his guardian, Albus Dumbledore, in the Scottish highlands, was by far the strangest and most wonderful.

In was a very large, beautiful house, surrounded by spectacular gardens and several acres of woodland. It was only situated a mile or so from the small village of Catchcombe but none of the locals seemed to be aware of it. The dog walkers and ramblers always took different routes into the countryside and if they ever happened to come close to the property they quickly decided that the ground was too rough and rocky and turned back again.

The house had no name or number so it would have been practically impossible for anyone to find it even if they had the address. The postman had only visited the house twice, as far as Harry could remember, and both times he had seemed utterly perplexed to find himself there.

The house had probably been built centuries ago but it had been repaired and redecorated before they moved in. The window frames had been painted a bright white and the red bricks were clean and regular. Nothing was crumbling or peeling and when Harry ran his hands over the ornate pillars and archways the wood felt solid and smooth under his fingers.

Harry’s bedroom was right at the top of the house, on the fourth floor. He had chosen it himself, when they had first arrived, knowing that it would be just right for him. It was quite a small room but very light and comfortable, with a large skylight in the ceiling.

The furniture was all built into the walls, carefully shaped to fit their contours. Harry’s bed was tucked snuggly into one corner and his desk in the other. The rest of the wall space was taken up by cupboards and bookshelves that arched up at a sharp angle into the slope of the roof.

Harry loved the peculiar shape of the furniture and the way it all slotted together exactly. He knew that it had all been built just for him and arranged exactly as he wanted it. He liked being able to reach out in the middle of the night and touch his bookcase or his bedside table and know that he was home.

He had the entire fourth floor to himself because the other two rooms up there were so small and so cramped that they weren’t suitable for anything other than storage. The professor had slowly filled them up with old pieces of furniture and boxes of books until the doors wouldn’t even open anymore.

Now and again, Albus would murmur that he really ought to clear some of the things out, which Harry understood as his way of admitting that he never would.

One day, Harry came out of his bedroom and found Albus standing outside the left-hand storage room with an upright piano. He was peering through the keyhole, obviously trying to work out how to fit it in.

‘Albus,’ laughed, ‘that’s not going to work! You’ve got too much in there!’

The professor blinked for a second and then nodded. ‘Yes, you’re right, Harry. I should clear a few things out first.’

Harry smiled his agreement and headed downstairs. He was halfway down when he heard a loud
crash. It sounded alarmingly like a piano falling over and smashing into the floor.

Harry doubled back hastily, expecting to find a wreckage of wood, metal and ivory. Instead he found professor straightening up and dusting off his hands. The piano was nowhere to be seen.

Harry gave his guardian a quizzical look but the old man had adopted one of his infuriatingly vague expressions that meant there was no point questioning him. Chances were he would probably just blink his eyes and say something ridiculous like, ‘Piano? What piano?’

It was impossible, of course, that an entire piano could have been squeezed through a keyhole, but seemingly impossible things often happened around Albus Dumbledore. Things tended to appear when he wanted them and disappear when he didn’t, without any explanation.

It never happened right in front of Harry. It was always while he was out of the room or looking away. It was as if Albus wanted to pretend that things were coming and going in a normal way but he wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

Usually, it happened overnight, like with Harry’s birthday and Christmas presents. When Harry went to sleep there was nothing there and then when he woke up there was something wonderful waiting for him. Like a new bike or a pair of skates.

When he was small this had never struck him as particularly strange. He just assumed that his guardian had purchased the presents and then hidden them somewhere in the house. It was a big house, after all, and presents were supposed to be a surprise.

He only really started to get suspicious last year, on his sixth birthday, when albus gave him the treehouse.

For one thing it wasn’t an ordinary treehouse; It actually was a cluster of small circular houses spread out across the branches of two oak trees and connected by rope bridges and wooden walkways and swings.

The inside of each house was just as fabulous as the outside with dozens of hidden compartments and sliding panels. One had a little observation deck, with a railing around it, and another had a trapdoor.

When Albus had first taken him to see it he had cried with shock and delight. It was the most wonderful gift he had ever been given.

‘How did it get here?’ He exclaimed.

Albus smiled at him, eyes twinkling. ‘I put it up last night,’ he said. ‘Do you like it?’

The answer to that was obvious. Harry laughed, wiping the tears from his cheeks. ‘Of course!’

Then he had hugged the old man tightly, overcome with joy and gratitude. It had only occurred to him later that there was something seriously wrong with Albus’s story.

**

One crisp autumn morning a large brown owl swept in through the kitchen window and dropped a letter on the table. This was not an unusual occurrence. Owls were always fluttering into the house and dropping-off letters and parcels. Harry had grown used to the flapping of wings and the clacking of beaks interrupting breakfast. He supposed that birds were better at navigating the countryside than postmen.
As Albus opened up the letter Harry noticed that the back of the envelope bore an official-looking coat of arms.

‘What’s that?’ He asked curiously.

Albus glanced up distractedly. ‘It’s from my old school,’ he said.

‘What?’ Harry exclaimed. ‘Where you went a child?’

‘Yes,’ Albus chuckled. ‘Although that’s not why they’re writing to me. It’s also where I used to teach and where I worked as headmaster.’

‘Oh,’ Harry said simply.

He knew that Albus had once been the headmaster of a boarding school but they hadn’t talked about it much. It was one of the subjects that Albus seemed to avoid.

Harry stared the discarded envelope with intense interest. After a moment he reached across the table for it.

‘Can I see that?’ He asked.

Albus looked up again to see what Harry was talking about. He seemed to hesitate for a second but then he slid the envelope over to him.

Harry picked it up happily and peered curiously at the school’s coat of arms. It was an old-fashioned shield with four animals prancing around the large letter ‘H.’

‘What’s it called?’ Harry asked.

‘Hogwarts,’ Albus told him.

Harry giggled. ‘No, really!’

Albus raised his eyebrows. ‘Really,’ he insisted.

‘It can’t be called Hogwarts!’ Harry protested, still giggling. ‘That’s such a silly name.’

Albus smiled. ‘Perhaps, but the name was chosen a long time ago. It might not have seemed so silly back then.’

Albus turned his attention back to the letter, brows furrowing as he made his way down. When he reached the end he let out a very heavy sigh and quickly folded the paper back up again.

‘Personally, I think it’s a very good thing for a grand, important place to have a silly name.’ He continued. ‘It makes people feel less intimidated.’

Did you name it?’ Harry asked.

‘Oh no!’ Albus exclaimed. ‘The school’s over a thousand years old!’

‘It’s the sort of thing you would do,’ Harry teased.

‘It is,’ Albus admitted.

Harry peered closer at the envelope. ‘If it’s called Hogwarts then why isn’t there a pig on its shield?’
The coat of arms appeared to be decorated by a lion, a badger, an eagle and a snake. They were all looking at the large capital ‘H’ with bright, beady eyes, as if they were about to fight over it. Harry wondered which of them would win. Probably the lion; it was the biggest and toughest, after all.

‘The four animals represent the four houses of Hogwarts,’ Albus told him. ‘They were chosen by the founders because they all symbolise the virtues they most value.’

Harry frowned. ‘Houses?’

‘They’re groups that the students belong to,’ Albus explained patiently. ‘Each house has their own dormitory and common room and their own table in the dining hall.’

Harry ran his fingers over the little animals, tracing over the wings of the eagle and the curves of the snake.

‘Are the houses all named after animals then?’ Harry asked. ‘Is it Lion House and Eagle House and so on?’

‘No,’ Albus chuckled. ‘Although that would be far simpler. They’re named after the founders: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin.’

‘More silly names!’ Harry declared.

Albus leant over and tapped each of the animals in turn. ‘Gryffindor is the lion, Ravenclaw the eagle, Hufflepuff the badger and Slytherin the snake.’

Harry nodded slightly to show that he was listening.

‘The lion stands for courage and loyalty,’ Albus told him. ‘The snake, cunning and ambition.’

Harry nodded again. ‘And the eagle?’ He asked. ‘Would that be ... ‘ He fumbled for a possible meaning.

‘Wit and wisdom,’ Albus said. ‘It’s not necessarily the sort of thing you think of when you see an eagle but animals never work as perfect symbols.’

‘No,’ Harry agreed. ‘Snakes aren’t really cunning, either. They’ve very patient and they’ll hide and wait for their prey for a long time before jumping out at them but lots of animals hunt like that don’t they?’

‘Yes,’ Albus said. ‘It’s - ‘

‘And what about the badger?’ Harry interrupted. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Hard work and perseverance,’ Albus told him.

‘Because badges build dens?’ Harry asked. ‘But foxes do that too and rabbits. I don’t think that badgers are that hard-working, compared to other animals.’

‘No,’ Albus smiled. ‘You’re right again.’

There was brief silence. Harry was thinking about different types of animals and their traits and behaviours and Albus was watching him thoughtfully. After a few seconds had passed Albus opened his mouth again, to say something else, but just then he was interrupted by a loud squawking from the other room.
The owl that had brought the letter seemed to taken a liking to their own tawny owl, Tabitha. Unfortunately Tabitha didn’t feel the same way and had decided to gently rebuff their visitor’s advances by pecking his eyes out.

‘Ah well, they say the path of true love never runs smooth,’ Albus said, ‘but in this case, I think it’s best if we intervene before romance changes to tragedy.’

‘I’ll go,’ Harry offered. ‘I can take Tabitha out to the aviary and let the other one go. She’s just cranky because she hasn’t slept yet.’

‘No,’ Albus replied. ‘I’ll go. Finish your breakfast.’

He got up from the table and headed into the living room. The frantic squeaking increased for a moment and then died away completely. Harry heard Albus speaking softly to the birds and then the click of the door.

He had left the letter on the table.

Harry waited for a moment and then got up hurriedly and picked it up. He unfolded it and read as quickly as he could, knowing that Albus would not be gone for long. Luckily, the handwriting was not too difficult to read, although it was embellished with little swoops and flourishes.

Dear Albus,

I’m afraid I have more bad news. In addition to the latest DADA appointment falling through, Ursula has just given in her notice. She won’t even be able to stay until the end of term as her son has fallen seriously ill and she needs to travel up to Yorkshire to care for him.

You may already know this of course, I am not sure how much information reaches you these days, but Henry Sheridan was part of a team trying to track down Fenrir Greyback. Apparently there’s been a series of attacks out on the moors and several children were found dead. Ursula claims that Henry has contracted Grusgarius, but I fear that he has in fact been bitten. That would explain why Ursula is leaving to care for him herself rather than taking him to St Mungo’s.

This leaves the school in a difficult position as there isn’t much time to find a replacement. Lucius Malfoy has been trying to get the board to appoint Orpheus Storme and I’m sorry to say that they’re seriously considering it. I think they’re worried that if they don’t appoint someone quickly the role of headmaster will start to gain a reputation to rival that of the DADA post.

I know that you are not ready to return to the school but I hope that you will be able to intervene somehow. If you write to the board and advise them to consider another candidate I am sure they will listen to you.

I really cannot bear the idea of Storme taking charge of the school. He has already made it quite clear that he favours the old ways and is sure to bring back the cruelest forms of punishment. Filch is all for it of course, but the rest of us are worried sick about it and missing you terribly.

Yours Faithfully,

Minerva

Harry was still reading through the letter, trying to puzzle it all out, when the front door slammed. He
hastily shoved it back down and hurried back to his seat but he wasn’t quite quick enough. He was just sitting down when Albus entered the kitchen.

Albus narrowed his eyes at him. ‘What were you doing?’

‘Nothing!’ Harry said shrilly. ‘I was just ... getting some more juice.’

He always found it difficult to lie to Albus. The man always seemed to know everything that was going on and it was impossible to hide things from him. As Harry sat upright in his chair, body tensed, Albus’s blue eyes swept over the table like a searchlight.

‘Did you read my letter?’ He asked.

Harry bit his lip. ‘Yes,’ he admitted.

Albus smiled gently. ‘It’s okay,’ he told Harry. ‘I could tell you were curious.’

Albus sat down and picked up his letter again, re-reading it once more to remind himself of its contents.

‘They’ve got to find a new teacher and a new headmaster,’ he summarised, ‘and that’s going to be difficult.’

He didn’t say anything about the other parts of the letter. The parts about a man killing children on the moors and biting people who tried to stop him. Harry didn’t want to bring it up himself though so he just nodded.

‘The person who wrote the letter,’ he said, after a moment. ‘Mi...Mer...’

‘Minerva McGonagall,’ Albus said softly. ‘She’s a teacher at Hogwarts and a good friend of mine.’

‘Yes, her,’ Harry agreed. ‘She wants you to come back and be headmaster again, doesn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ Albus admitted. ‘There are a lot of people who would like me to come back.’

‘But you’re not going to?’ Harry asked.

Albus glanced up at him with concern in his eyes. ‘No, not yet,’ he said softly.

‘Not yet?’ Harry repeated. ‘So you will go back one day?’

Albus was silent for a moment. ‘We will go back,’ he told Harry. ‘When you’re old enough.’

‘What do you mean?’ Harry asked sharply.

‘It was always my plan to take you to Hogwarts when you were old enough to study there,’ Albus admitted. ‘You will go as a student and I will return to my position as headmaster.’

Harry was so stunned that he had to lean back in his chair. ‘When?’ He demanded.

‘Well,’ Albus began unsteadily, ‘students start at Hogwarts when they turn eleven. So, we would go there in just over four years.’ He gave Harry a sidelong look. ‘Do you like the sound of that? Going away to school?’

‘Do I have a choice?’ Harry demanded.
‘No,’ Albus said simply. ‘That’s one of the reasons I didn’t tell you about it until now. You don’t always handle change well.’

‘That’s not true!’ Harry protested. ‘Why would you say that?’

Albus quirked a smile. ‘You’re right, I was wrong. Please forgive me.’

Harry scowled. ‘Now you’re just teasing me.’ He picked up his fork and started toying with what was left of his scrambled eggs.

‘Do you think I’ll like it at Hogwarts?’ He asked, sulkily.

Albus smiled wide. ‘You’ll love it there,’ he assured him.
Snakes & Storms

If you were to come across a list of Harry Potter’s favourite things you might easily mistake it for a list of the things that scared him. This is because the sort of things that terrified most six-year-olds were usually the things that Harry liked the most.

Heights, for instance. Harry spent most of his time climbing to the tops of trees or tip-toeing all over the roof. He loved the sensation of being up high and looking down at the world below. He even quite liked falling. He had a special knack for it. He knew how to angle his body so that it hardly hurt at all. In fact, sometimes the wind seemed to catch him and he just glided gently to the ground. It was almost like flying.

Then there was snakes. Harry had learnt from books and films that most children were scared to death of snakes but when he first caught sight of a snake whipping through the grass he felt nothing but a thrill of excitement. He tried to chase after it but it moved too fast for him and was gone in a moment.

‘I saw a snake in the woods,’ he told his guardian excitedly. ‘It was yellow and black and it moved like lightning!’

Lightning was another unusual thing that Harry loved. He always got excited when there was a thunderstorm brewing and liked to watch for the first flash of lightning. For this reason, he was especially fond of the small scar on his forehead which was shaped exactly like a lightning bolt. He had had it as long as he could remember, ever since he was a baby, and it was his favourite thing about his appearance.

‘That would have been an adder,’ Albus said mildly. ‘There are quite a few of them around here. They won’t bother you though, as long as you leave them alone.’

‘I wasn’t scared of it,’ Harry objected, ‘I just thought it was interesting. I don’t want to leave it alone.’

Albus smiled. ‘Well, just make sure you don’t get bitten.’

Harry was surprised. ‘Are they poisonous?’ He asked. ‘I didn’t think there was anything really poisonous in this country.’

‘Venomous,’ Albus corrected him. ‘It injects a poison when it bites, but it’s not a very strong poison. It might hurt a lot and you’d probably be quite sick though.’

‘Well, I won’t get bitten then,’ Harry said confidently.

‘Oh won’t you?’ Albus replied. ‘Well then, that’s a very wise decision.’

He ordered him a big book on snakes with lots of pictures and diagrams and Harry spent several hours poring over it, digesting the information. Then he set out to hunt down the adder he had seen and study it.

He searched all through the woods, peering into likely looking cracks and holes, but he couldn’t find any sign of a snake living there. So he decided to lie down in the grass and wait for it to come out.

He knew it was unlikely that the snake would slither right up to him but he couldn’t think of anything else to do. He lay as still and quiet as he could, waiting patiently as the sun set, but nothing
happened.

In desperation, Harry started to sing out to the snake, hoping it would respond. This was a very silly idea as snakes weren’t like cats or dogs and didn’t come when they were called, but somehow it worked. He’d only been murmuring softly for a few minutes when he caught sight of a flash of yellow between two blades of grass.

‘Hello?’ He called out. ‘Will you come here and say hello to me? Don’t be afraid.’

The adder seemed to hesitate for a moment and then headed straight for him. It stopped just a few inches away from him, eying him nervously.

Harry desperately wanted to reach out and touch it but he was worried that might scare it away, so he stayed still, breathing quietly, and addressed the serpent again.

‘Hello there,’ he whispered. ‘It’s nice to meet you. My name is Harry. I live back there, in the big house.’

He pointed back over his shoulder. The sharp slopes of the house’s roof were just visible through the trees. Amazingly the snake lifted up its head and looked where Harry was pointing.

‘Where do you live?’ Harry asked. ‘In some nice little hole in the ground somewhere? I couldn’t find it when I looked.’

The snake flicked-out its tongue teasingly.

‘May I touch you?’ Harry asked. ‘May I stroke your scales?’

The adder slithered forward and laid itself out before him. Harry reached-out gently and ran a hand over it’s cool, smooth body.

‘You are very pretty,’ he said. ‘May I pick you up?’

The snake considered for a moment and then bowed its head in agreement. Harry lifted it up carefully and wound its coils about his hands.

‘You are such a lovely creature,’ he said happily, ‘aren’t you?’

The adder flicked out its tongue again and opened its mouth a little in something resembling a smile. It seemed pleased by the compliment.

‘What’s your name, I wonder?’ Harry said. ‘I have to call you something.’

The adder crawled up to his shoulder and pressed its head into his ear. It hissed loudly; a strange, sinister sound that stuck in Harry’s ears.

‘What was that?’ Harry murmured.

The adder looked up at Harry with its inky black eyes. ‘My name,’ it said, quite clearly. ‘That’s my name.’

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‘I found the snake!’ Harry sung out as he hurtled into the house. ‘It’s a girl and we’re friends now!’

‘It’s gone dark,’ Albus replied severely. ‘I told you not to stay out after it got dark.’
‘I know but I had to wait until the sunset,’ Harry protested. ‘Snakes like to come out when the sun goes down. I read that in the book.’

He went over to the kitchen sink and started washing his hands.

‘I spoke to her,’ he said excitedly. ‘She told me all about her life and her name but I can’t repeat it properly. It’s just a hiss, but it means something like “first-born”, I think.’

He turned around with the tea-towel in his hands and regarded his guardian earnestly.

‘I’m not pretending,’ he said quietly. ‘She really did talk to me. She spoke just like a person and I understood everything she said.’

Albus looked down at him with furrowed brows. Behind his half-moon spectacles his eyes were narrow and wrinkled.

‘I mean it!’ Harry whined. ‘She really spoke!’

‘I believe you,’ Albus said. He tapped the back of the dining chair. ‘Sit down. It’s almost dinnertime.’

Harry sat down obediently but was unable to keep still. He jiggled his legs under the table.

‘Can you talk to snakes?’ He asked

Albus set a plate down in front of Harry without looking down at him. The corners of his eyes were still all crumpled-up.

‘No,’ he said after a moment. ‘That’s a very special gift.’

Harry considered this as cut up his steak. Albus often used the word “special” as if it was some kind of secret code word but Harry hadn’t worked out exactly what he meant by it.

‘Could my parents talk to snakes?’ He asked.

‘No,’ Albus replied.

‘They were ... special though, weren’t they?’ Harry pressed.

Albus looked up at him over the top of his glasses. His eyes were crinkled-up again but he was smiling gently as if he was pleased.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘You’re right.’

There was another poignant pause.

‘I will explain all that to you, one day,’ Albus promised quietly.

‘When?’ Harry demanded.

‘When you’re older.’

Harry made a face. ‘I am older, Albus,’ he protested, ‘I’m getting older everyday.’

Albus smiled sadly. ‘I know.’ A pause. ‘It won’t be long now.’

Harry dropped his head down. ‘Okay,’ he said.
There was a storm that night. Harry curled up in the largest chair in the living room, right by the fire, and listened happily to the sound of the thunder. He had never felt more comfortable or more at home.

He had a book in his lap and reading contentedly but he slowly became aware of his guardian staring at him. He looked up suddenly and their eyes met.

‘What is it?’ Harry asked.

Albus looked uncomfortable. He glanced down at his own book, hands folded over an open page.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said at dinner,’ he said quietly. ‘You are getting older Harry and there are a lot of things I ought to tell you.’

Harry put down his book and leant forward.

Albus was quiet a moment. ‘I can’t tell you everything yet,’ he began sadly, ‘but you deserve to at least know about what really happened to your parents.’

Harry sat very still, holding his breath. Overhead the sky roared.

‘Your aunt and uncle told you that your parents died in an accident, didn’t they?’

Harry nibbled at his bottom lip. ‘They said they died in a car crash,’ he said quietly.

‘Well,’ Albus sighed, ‘that wasn’t true. They lied to you. Perhaps to make it easier for you but probably just to make it easier for themselves.’

Harry stared at him. ‘What’s the truth?’

Albus got up and came over to kneel on the floor, right in front of Harry. It was very warm there beside the fireplace, but they both shivered as if they were cold.

‘Harry,’ Albus said gently. ‘Your parents were murdered.’

Harry sunk back into the chair.

‘Murdered?’ He repeated. ‘How could they have been murdered?’

Murder was something that happened to people in books. It belonged to the world of heroes and villains, not the world of normal, everyday people.

‘They got in the way of a very dangerous man,’ Albus told him. ‘He wanted something from them and they wouldn’t give it to him. So he killed them.’

Harry twisted his hands in his lap. ‘What did he want?’

Albus considered for a moment. ‘It’s a little complicated. To put it simply, he wanted them to help him kill someone else and they refused.’

‘Why did he want to kill so many people?’ Harry asked.

‘He wanted to become the most powerful man in the world and he killed anyone who tried to stop him.’
Harry bit down hard, making his mouth bleed a little. He wiped the blood and drool away on his sleeve.

‘Don’t do that,’ Albus said, grabbing at his arm. ‘I’ll get you a tissue.’

Harry swatted him away. ‘No,’ he protested. ‘I’m fine.’ He looked up at his guardian with a hard expression. ‘Was it because they were special?’

Albus dropped his arm down. ‘That was part of it,’ he admitted.

‘Was he was special, too?’ Harry asked.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘He and your parents were both special in the same way. The same way that you are special.’

Harry curled his fingers around the arm of the chair. He could still taste blood on the inside of his mouth.

‘Could he talk to snakes?’

Albus let out a breath. ‘Of all the connections to make!’

He laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. ‘Yes, as a matter of fact, Lord Voldemort could talk to snakes. It was one of his very special powers.’

Harry sucked in his bottom lip. ‘Was that his name?’ He mumbled. ‘Lord Voldemort?’

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘It was a name he chose for himself, to make himself seem more important and powerful.’

‘It sounds like a story,’ Harry said quietly. ‘You used to tell me lots of stories like this, when I was younger.’

Albus smiled sadly. ‘I hoped that they would help you understand.’

Harry reached up and wiped at his mouth again and then all over his face. His skin felt hot and rough like he’d been burned.

‘Was Lord Voldemort really a very powerful man?’ He asked.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘He used to be very powerful. ‘Your parents were very brave to have fought him.’

Harry looked right into Albus’s eyes. ‘Then who was more powerful? You or him?’

Albus’s hand tightened on Harry’s shoulder.

‘I was more powerful,’ he said quietly. ‘I was far more powerful.’

Harry kept his eyes locked on Albus’s. His jaw tightened.

‘Then why,’ he asked hoarsely, ‘didn’t you stop him?’

Albus’s face fell.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘I would have saved them if I could have. I didn’t know that he was going
to come after them that night. They were unprotected.’

Harry frowned and jerked Albus’s hand off of his shoulder.

‘You’re lying to me,’ he said quietly. ‘You want me to believe you’re the most powerful person in
the world so that I’ll feel safe. You’re not though. You weren’t.’

Albus looked up at him sadly. ‘You’re so smart, Harry. You must understand by now that no one is
all powerful.’

‘What happened to him?’ Harry demanded. ‘What happened to Lord Voldemort?’

‘He lost all of his powers the night he killed your parents,’ Albus said. ‘It was very unexpected and
no one knows exactly why.’

He tried to replace his hand on Harry’s shoulder but Harry just shrugged him off again.

‘Where is he?’ Harry demanded. ‘Is he dead or in prison?’

Albus sighed. ‘He’s still alive but he’s very weak. He can barely move or speak and he can’t do
anything by himself.’

Harry relaxed a little.

‘Is he in hospital then?’

Albus drew in a breath. ‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘He ran away to Albania when he lost his powers and
he’s still hiding out there.’

‘How do you know that?’ Harry murmured.

‘I know because people have gone looking for him and seen what he’s like now.’ Albus said simply.

‘They might be lying though,’ Harry objected. ‘Or they might have got it wrong. He could be
anywhere. He could be right outside the door for all you know.’

‘No,’ Albus said sharply. He took Harry’s face in his hands. ‘Listen to me, Harry. You are
completely safe here. No one bad could ever find you here.’

A shudder ran through Harry’s body.

‘That’s why we live out here isn’t it?’ He said quietly, ‘To keep me safe.’

Albus’s face crumpled like a sheet of tissue paper. He opened his mouth to say something else but
Harry cut him off before he could even start.

‘I don’t want to talk about this anymore,’ he said. ‘I’m tired and I’m going to bed.’

‘But Harry -‘

‘Thank you for telling me.’

He pushed his way past his guardian and charged out of the room. He half-expected Albus to follow
after him, but he didn’t. He left Harry run up to bed without another word.

Perhaps he thought enough harm had been done already.
Harry lay awake in his bed for a couple of hours listening to the last vestiges of the storm. He was trying not to think about what had been told but once the rain died down completely there was nothing to distract him.

Now that he knew his parents had been murdered strange, unpleasant memories had started to resurface. His ears were ringing with the sound of a madman’s cold, cruel laughter and there was a bright green eyes burning through his eyelids.

He tried to shut it out, burying his head under the duvet and clutching at his cuddly toy dragon, but it was impossible. Even when he fell asleep his dreams were haunted by the sound of that laughter, along with a woman’s desperate, frantic screaming.

He woke up shuddering and sweating, the sheets all tangled up around him, and started to cry.

A light flickered outside the door and footsteps creaked along the corridor. Harry just had time to wipe the tears from his eyes and duck back down under the covers before the bedroom door swung open.

He lay as still as he could and kept his eyes screwed shut but he was sure Albus could tell he was pretending. The bed sagged under his weight as he sat down and leant over him.

‘Harry?’

He pushed back the damp strands of hair from his sweaty forehead.

‘I heard you screaming,’ he whispered. ‘Did you have a nightmare.’

Harry hesitated for a moment and then opened his eyes.

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

Albus nodded sadly. ‘What were you dreaming about?’ He asked.

Harry was sure that he must already know so there was no point in trying to hide it.

‘My parents death,’ he said quietly. ‘I heard them screaming as they were killed.’

Albus let out a heavy sigh. ‘I shouldn’t have told you,’ he said. ‘It’s too much for someone your age to deal with.’

‘No!’ Harry protested. ‘I needed to know! It’s important!’

Albus smiled. ‘You’re a very smart, capable little boy, Harry. I just don’t want you to be scared.’

‘I’m not scared,’ Harry insisted. ‘I’m just sad.’

‘Of course,’ Albus said softly. He rubbed at Harry’s shoulder. ‘Do you want a hug?’

Harry sat up and let Albus give him a big hug, resting his head on Albus’s shoulder.

‘I had to go to the woods after the murder,’ he said quietly. ‘I had to go hide there to be safe. It was so cold and dark though and there was no one there to help me.’

Albus was confused. ‘You mean you dreamt about coming home?’ He asked. ‘About hiding here, in
our woods?’

‘No,’ Harry replied. ‘Different woods. Our house wasn’t there and you weren’t there. No one was around for miles and miles. I was all alone and it was so cold.’

Albus was quiet for a moment.

‘Sometimes,’ he said softly, ‘our dreams can get very confused. The past and present get all muddled-up, along with things we only imagine.’

‘I know.’ Harry sighed. He pulled away from Albus and rubbed at his eyes. ‘It was all jumbled up in my dream. I wasn’t even really sure where I was most of the time. I couldn’t see the house at all.’

‘The house?’ Albus repeated.

Harry nodded. ‘The house where I lived with my parents. I couldn’t picture the room I was in or what I was doing. It was like I was just floating in a blank, empty space.’

‘Well, you were only a baby,’ Albus said reasonably. ‘It makes sense that you wouldn’t be able to remember it.’

‘I suppose,’ Harry agreed sadly. ‘I wish I could remember something about what it was like though.’

Albus sat in silence for a little while, stroking at his shoulders.

‘You were in your bedroom when it happened,’ he told him. ‘It was blue and there were stars on the walls and ceiling. Your mother decorated it for you.’

Harry looked up at him with surprise. ‘I didn’t know you were ever there.’

‘I visited them a few times,’ Albus told him. ‘I can tell you some stories about them if you like.’

Harry considered for a moment. ‘No, thank you,’ he said. ‘Not right now.’

He lay back and burrowed back down under the bedclothes.

‘Why didn’t you come get me?’ He asked.

Albus frowned uncertainly. ‘You mean ... after it happened?’

Harry nodded.

‘I did come for you though,’ Albus said earnestly. ‘I sent someone to fetch you and then we both took you to your aunt and uncle’s house.’

‘But why?’ Harry protested. ‘Why didn’t you just take me home with you.’

Albus sighed. ‘You’re forgetting that it was never my plan to take care of you. I can see why this confuses you. As far as you’re concerned, this is something that was always meant to be, but neither of us knew that at the time.’

‘I needed you though,’ Harry mumbled. ‘I needed you to come take me home.’

Albus smiled. ‘You’re very tired, Harry. I think you’re mixing things up again.’

He straightened the duvet and tucked him in properly.
‘Try and get some more sleep,’ he told him. ‘It’s only a few hours until dawn.’

Harry nodded and lay quietly until his guardian had left the room and gone back downstairs. Then he sat up again and reached out to his bedside table. He clicked the light on and picked up the framed picture of his parents.

His mother and father smiled up at him from behind the glass, their faces frozen in matching expressions of everlasting joy. He tried to imagine them saying or doing something other than just standing there smiling, with their arms around each other but found it impossible.

He concentrated on the woman’s pretty face, on the sparkle of her eyes and the dimples in her cheeks. He imagined her screaming as a shadowy figure bore down on her and his stomach lurched unpleasantly.

It wasn’t real though. It was just something his frantic imagination had pieced together from books and films. Even the screaming couldn’t actually be real. He couldn’t possibly remember something like that, after all this time.

He wiped eyes again and returned the picture to the table. Then he rolled himself up in the duvet and squashed himself against the wall, determined to go right back to sleep as if everything was fine.

He left the light on though.
Age of Reason

The day of Harry’s eighth birthday dawned bright and clear, with no trace of the dreary rain that had filled the days before it. Harry woke just as the first light broke and then lay basking in the pure, white sunshine.

He was brimming with excitement, his fingers tingling and his toes twitching, but he knew he had to wait until a reasonable time before running downstairs.

Albus had been dropping hints for weeks that this was going to be an especially big birthday so Harry was looking forward to opening his presents even more than usual. He had an idea that he was going to be getting something really incredible.

He let himself fantasise for a while about what it might be. A new pet perhaps, an owl of his very own, or a trained rat, or a Burmese python.

He was distracted from this thoughts by the appearance of a real owl at his window. The bird flew in and dropped a large, square envelope into his lap.

This surprised Harry, as he almost never got mail, but he could tell from the shape and feel of the envelope that it contained a birthday card. He opened it up quickly, eager to find out who was writing to him.

It took Harry several minutes to decipher the writing inside the card, which was very small and curly, but eventually he managed to work which letters were which and read the message in its entirety.

**Dear Harry,**

*It was lovely to meet you last week. I hope it wasn’t too dull for you spending time with us. Albus said that you had fun but I’m sure that he was just being polite. He told us your birthday was coming up and I just had to send you something. It’s not everyday you turn eight, after all. I hope you have a truly amazing day.*

*Love from,*

*Perenelle & Nicholas*

Harry was very touched. He had enjoyed meeting the Flamels and was happy to hear that they had liked him too. He had been worried that he had made a bad impression because he had been so nervous.

It had been so long since he had spoken to anyone other than Albus that he had almost forgotten how to do it. He was half-worried that when he finally tried to speak nothing would come out of his mouth but garbled nonsense.

Indeed, he had struggled to get out more than a few words at first, just murmuring ‘yes, please’ and ‘no, thank you,’ when it was required of him, but then then Albus had taken them out to the opera and after they had all sat through three hours of Faust together they had almost started to feel like old friends.
Perenelle whispered translations into Harry’s ear throughout the performance and then chatted with him during the interval. She answered all his questions about her home and family back in France and even teased him a little, telling him that she was six-hundred and fifty years old, which was obviously impossible.

After the performance, Albus and Nicholas got into a spirited argument because Albus insisted that he still preferred the play by Marlowe. Nicholas said not no self-respecting music-lover would ever say such a thing and Albus replied that most Opera was completely overrated, kept afloat by snobs who only pretended to enjoy it. This debate went on for almost half an hour before the two old men finally agreed to let it go for another decade.

By this time Harry felt brave enough to ask Albus some questions about the story. Albus answered them all carefully while the Flamels listened on with interest. They seemed strangely impressed with Harry even though he obviously didn’t know anything at all. Nicholas said he was very smart little boy with a proper appreciation for opera, unlike some people.

There was something else inside the envelope. Harry turned it upside down and shook until a small metal badge fell out onto the bed. Harry picked it up and discovered, with delight, that it was shaped like a long, tightly-coiled snake.

Harry pinned the badge on his jumper before heading downstairs. He skipped the last flight of stairs and slid right down the bannister and jumped off at the end.

‘It’s my birthday!’ He sung out as he ran into the kitchen.

‘I know!’ Albus replied wryly. ‘Happy birthday!’

He bent down to hug Harry and recoiled when he felt the metal pin digging into his chest.

‘What’s this?’ He asked.

‘It’s my first present,’ Harry said proudly. ‘The Flamels sent it to me by owl. They sent me a card too, but I left that upstairs.’

‘That was nice of them. You should write back to say thank you.’

‘I will,’ Harry promised and then turned his attention to the table, which was groaning with food, ‘Can I start breakfast?’

‘That’s what it’s there for,’ Albus replied.

Harry grabbed himself a big stack of pancakes, with ice-cream and blueberries, and started wolfing them down.

Albus sat down and watched-on fondly as the eight-year-old boy gorged himself. He didn’t touch anything himself. When Harry asked why, he said he just wasn’t hungry yet.

As soon as Harry was done he started looking around expectantly.

‘Where’re my presents?’ He asked.

‘In the living room,’ Albus replied, ‘but don’t go just yet. I want to talk to you first.’

Harry had already started up and had to sit back down hastily. He tried to sit still and appear attentive but his eyes kept drifting over to the door.
Albus sighed and shook his head.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘I can tell you’re not going to be able to concentrate until you’ve seen what you’ve got. Go and open your presents and then we’ll talk.’

Harry grinned apologetically and then hurtled out of the kitchen. His presents were stacked up by the fireplace in a tall, glittering pile. He fell to his knees in front of it and started sifting through excitedly.

He could tell that several were hardback books, as usual, and decided to open those first, leaving the more interestingly-shaped presents for later.

He tore the paper off of the first one to reveal the puzzling title, ‘A Children’s History Of Magic.’ He flicked through quickly to see what it was about and discovered that it was filled with fantasy stories about wizards, elves and goblins.

‘This is nice,’ Harry declared happily, before reaching for the next one.

‘Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,’ was written like an encyclopaedia but was all about mythical creatures, like dragons and mermaids and fairies. Harry liked the look of the illustrations which were very detailed and beautiful.

The last book that Harry unwrapped was the strangest of the lot and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. It was called, ‘Fun & Diverting Potions for Beginners,’ and was filled with detailed recipes for magic potions.

Unlike the other books, it didn’t have any pictures and didn’t seem like the sort of thing you would read for fun. He turned the pages slowly, frowning over the instructions, and tried to work out whether it was meant as some sort of joke.

He paused over a recipe for a ‘Moonsflesh Potion,’ which was supposed to make the drinker’s skin glow in the dark for up to twenty-four hours. He ran his finger down the list of ingredients and was surprised to find that he recognised every one of them.

‘Can we really make these?’ He asked.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘We can make them together.’

Harry turned the page and glanced over a recipe for a ‘Hair-growth Potion.’

‘They wouldn’t work though,’ Harry objected. ‘Would they?’

‘They might,’ Albus replied, ‘but only if you do everything right.’

Harry frowned up at the old man. He didn’t like it when he teased him like that. He never knew how to respond.

He quickly opened up the rest of his presents and was a little disappointed to find that they were all themed items that were just for show. To go along with the books about magic, Albus had gotten him a large black cauldron, several glass bottles of potions ingredients and a sleek wooden broomstick.

‘Is it all witch and wizard stuff?’ He asked sadly.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied gravely, ‘It is all wizard stuff.’

‘It’s all really nice,’ Harry said quickly. ‘It’s just not what I was expecting.’
Not wanting to seem ungrateful he quickly picked up the broomstick and took a proper look at it. It looked like it was solid wood and was varnished to a fine shine.

‘Is it for playing with?’ He asked doubtfully, ‘Or is it for decoration? It’s very pretty.’

‘Here,’ Albus said, standing up suddenly. ‘I’ll show you what to do with it.’

Harry was surprised. Albus didn’t usually play pretend games and Harry was getting a little too old for that type of thing anyway. He did as he was told though and stood still with the broom held out at arm’s length.

‘Okay,’ Albus said softly, ‘Now let go.’

Harry did as he was told. He expected the broom to drop down with a clatter but instead it hung suspended in the air, right where Harry had left it.

Harry gasped and then spluttered with laughter.

‘How did you do that?’ He demanded. ‘Is it held up with strings?’

Albus grinned at him, eyes twinkling. ‘Have a look,’ he suggested.

Harry ran waves his hands through the air, feeling for invisible threads, but he couldn’t feel anything. He put his hand back on the broom and pushed down on it. It resisted him for a second and then fell to the floor.

Harry laughed again. ‘How?’ He demanded. ‘How did you get it to do that?’

‘Magic,’ Albus said simply.

‘No, really!’ Harry protested.

‘Really,’ Albus replied. ‘I’m a wizard.’

Harry opened his mouth to argue and then what Albus had said hit him properly. A little shudder ran through his body. He glanced down at all the books, the cauldron and the broomstick.

‘You mean ... it’s all real?’

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘It’s all real.’

Harry started at him in silence for a second or two and then he burst out laughing.

‘I knew it! I always knew you were a wizard!’ He gasped. ‘You look just like one!’

He suddenly felt a little light-headed and sat down heavily upon the floor. Albus joined him, sitting down cross-legged on the other side of the broomstick.

‘You’re taking this well,’ he commented.

‘I just can’t believe it,’ Harry whispered. ‘You really are a wizard? Really?’

‘It must seem very strange,’ Albus said gently. ‘Is there anything you want to ask me?’

Harry glanced around vaguely and grabbed one of the books. He turned it over and over in his hands.
'Are you going to teach me magic too?' Harry asked. 'Are you going to train me to be a wizard like you?'

The thought was almost too wonderful to contemplate.

'Yes,' Albus replied. 'I’m going to teach you magic. You don’t learn to become a wizard though, it’s just something you are.' He cupped Harry’s face in his hand. 'It’s in your blood.'

Harry felt his face flush hot. 'What do you mean?' He asked.

'I mean you take after your parents,' he said. 'They were a very talented witch and wizard and you’re sure to have inherited their powers.'

Harry gasped at him.

'Would you like me to prove it to you?' Albus suggested.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a wand and murmured a spell, just like a wizard in a story. The tip of the wand started to shine like a torch. Albus waited a moment, allowing Harry to admire the light, and extinguished it again, with a single word.

Harry leant forward, fascinated. The wand looked just like a normal stick of wood, the sort of thing you could just snap off of a tree, but it was clearly very special.

'Where does the magic come from?' He asked. 'The wand or you?'

'A good question,' Albus said. 'The magic comes from the wizard but the wand helps to channel it.'

He turned the wand over in his hands so that the handle was facing towards Harry.

'Now you try,' he said. 'I’ll show you how to do it.'

Harry hesitated. 'Are you sure?' He asked. 'What if I accidentally blow up the house or something?'

'It will be fine,' Albus assured him. 'As sure as you do exactly as I tell you.'

Albus wrapped his hand around Harry’s, tightening his grip, and helped him lift the wand up into the right position. He whispered the spell into Harry’s ear and Harry repeated it out-loud, his heart fluttering with excitement.

'Lumos.'

Instantly the tip of the wand began to glow. Harry laughed delightedly.

'Is it really me doing it though?' He asked, unable to believe it. 'Isn’t it you?'

'Try it by yourself,' Albus suggested. 'I’ll let go now.'

Harry found it a lot harder to cast the spell by himself. He had to repeat the word three times before it worked and the light that came out was far weaker than before.

'That’s very good,' Albus assured him. 'Most wizards don’t start casting spells until their first year of school. Young children are supposed to refrain from using magic until they are old enough to control it entirely.'

'Should I be doing this then?' Harry asked nervously.
'It's alright if you're with me,' Albus said dismissively. 'That's probably enough for now though.'

He held out his hand meaningfully and Harry returned his wand to him.

'Will you teach me more later?' He asked.

'Yes,' Albus replied, 'but for now, wouldn't you like to try flying?'

Harry's heart leapt and he looked down at the broomstick.

'You mean I can really fly on it?'

'Yes,' Albus replied. 'It's not a toy - it's a real racing broom. It's not a very fast one though. I didn’t want to make it too easy for you to break your neck.'

He got up from the living room floor, picking up the broom with one hand and pulling Harry up with the other.

'Your father was an excellent flier. I’m sure you’ll have inherited his instincts.'

He was right, of course.

**

Harry spent the rest of morning flying round the woods, pushing the broom to its limits and weaving in and out of the trees. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

He would have liked to keep going all day but he had to stop for lunch. By then, he had worked up quite an appetite anyway so he was looking forward to it.

Once Harry had blown out all the candles on his cake and cut himself a extra-large slice Albus sung him his special birthday song. This changed a little each year so Harry had to listen carefully to catch all the new lyrics.

_Eight summers now have come and gone,_
My darling, Harry James.
So I'll sing for you your birthday song,
And play your favourite games.

_Another year’s been swept away,_
Into the sands of time,
But I’m glad for you were born today,
And glad that you are mine.

_At seven you were growing strong,_
Tall and tough and tanned,
And when you leapt into the sky
You never seemed to land.

_I knew that it would not be long,_
Until your powers could be claimed
Wild magic that still runs so free,
With patience can be tamed.

*Your birthright is a set of wings,*
Your kingdom is the sky,
And I’m glad to give you both today,
I’m glad to watch you fly.

*Now you are eight you’ll know at last,*
Exactly who you are,
You’ll trace the journeys of the past,
You’ll see you’ve come so far.

*Autumn is waiting round the door,*
With winter at its side,
But I’m glad for you were born today,
And glad that you are mine.

Harry giggled his way through the song and then got up to give his guardian another hug. He felt so happy that he thought that his heart might burst open with it.

‘I’d like to practice flying until the sun goes down,’ He suggested instead. ‘May I?’

‘Of course you may,’ Albus replied. ‘I would let you fly later, but it wouldn’t be safe in the dark.’

‘I know,’ Harry said reasonably, getting up and reaching for his broom. ‘Will you leave out some cake for me? I might run and get some later.’

‘I’ll leave it all out,’ Albus replied. ‘I can put a spell on it so it doesn’t go stale.’

Harry laughed. ‘Magic really is amazing!’ he declared before running out the door.

**

Later, once the light had faded and the day was almost done, Harry had some more questions for Albus. He was no longer certain of what was real and what was not. Now that magic existed, everything else had to be called into question as well.

‘Is Father Christmas real?’ He asked. ‘Or the Easter Bunny? Or the Tooth Fairy?’

‘No,’ Albus replied. ‘They’re just made up stories to make growing up more exciting for little children.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I get all your Christmas presents for you and your Easter eggs too and I’ve never even pretended otherwise.’

‘Yes, but what about other children?’ Harry insisted. ‘Do their parents buy all their Christmas presents and stuff too?’

‘Yes,’ Albus confirmed. ‘But wizards don’t usually tell their children stories about Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy anyway. They have their own traditions, like turning baby teeth into pearls and then slowly adding them to a necklace or bracelet.’
'Oh, Ok,’ Harry said, before moving on abruptly to, ‘Is God real?’

Albus smiled and shook his head. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know. I don’t think anyone knows for certain. It’s a matter of faith.’

‘Can’t you find out using magic?’

‘Well I could certainly try,’ Albus declared gamely. ‘The only difficulty is knowing where to start. If you have any suggestions about how to go about it I’d be happy to hear them.’

Harry, of course, did not.

‘Was Joan of Arc really a witch?’ He asked next.

‘No,’ Albus said smilingly. ‘I don’t think so. She certainly never claimed to work magic and no one ever saw her cast a spell or fire a curse.’

‘Did they just accuse of being a witch because they wanted to get rid of her, then?’

‘Yes,’ Albus confirmed. ‘I believe so. They certainly didn’t have any evidence that would suggest she really was a witch. The only things she did which were unusual was claiming to speak to God and riding into battle with the soldiers, and these things wouldn’t have even been that unusual if she’d been a man.’

‘What about Queen Elizabeth the first?’ Harry suggested. ‘People used to say she was a witch, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, but people often used to say that about powerful women, just because they were powerful. People also used to accuse Elizabeth of secretly being a man simply because they thought no woman could rule as she did.’

‘They said she caused a storm though,’ Harry insisted eagerly, ‘and sunk the Spanish Armada.’

‘I think that’s very unlikely,’ Albus said. ‘It would take a lot of magic to cause a storm like that. In any case, there’s never been any evidence of magic in the royal bloodline. I think if a witch or wizard had ever become king or queen they would not have felt it necessary to hide their powers anymore.’

‘What about Rasputin?’ Harry suggested next. ‘He claimed to have magical powers, didn’t he? And he didn’t die even when he was stabbed and poisoned and shot.’

‘No, I don’t think he was a wizard either,’ Albus said. ‘He never did anything that looked like real magic and even wizards can die if they are stabbed or shot.’

‘How did he survive then?’ Harry demanded.

‘Well, I believe the story of his assassination has somewhat exaggerated,’ Albus said, ‘but it can take a man quite a while to die from a stab wound or poisoning and he can recover if he receives help.’

‘Perhaps he was a vampire,’ Harry suggested eagerly. (Vampires had only just been added to the list of things that were actually real after all and Harry was quite excited about that.) ‘He looked like a vampire.’

‘People are not things just because they look like them,’ Albus told him.

Yes but - ‘
'I do not believe Rasputin was a vampire.' Albus said quickly. 'He did not exhibit any of the usual symptoms.'

Albus seemed to sense that Harry was about to go through a long list of historical figures because he quickly offered to get him a book about all the witches and wizards known to have lived.

'We’re able to track back most wizarding families over eight centuries, at least.' He told Harry. 'So although there have always been new witches and wizards emerging, in non-magical families, we’re able to tell quite reliably who had genuine magical powers and who did not.'

Harry was reasonably satisfied by this and stopped asking who had and who hadn’t been a witch.

'Merlin was a real wizard,' Albus told him, 'but the stories that I told you about him were mostly made up. I’ll get you a new book about him as well so you can learn what the true story behind the myths and legends.'

'I like Merlin,' Harry replied. 'I’m glad he was real.'

'He’s one of the greatest wizards of all time,' Albus told him. ‘That’s why muggles know about him too.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Harry asked.

Albus frowned. ‘Aren’t I what?’

‘Aren’t you the greatest wizard of all time?’ Harry asked. ‘I always assumed you were.’

‘Well, you don’t know any other wizards,’ Albus said reasonably.

‘That’s true,’ Harry agreed. ‘I just always thought of you as this incredibly powerful person who could do practically anything.’

He shrugged. ‘I suppose you’re just like everyone else in the wizarding world though. I suppose you’re just a weak, little nobody.’

‘You’re teasing me,’ Albus said grinning. ‘You know I am quite powerful. I’ve already told you so.’

‘Yes,’ Harry admitted. ‘I know.’

He leant back on the sofa, grinning with self-satisfaction.

‘I always used to think you were like Merlin,’ He said. ‘When you used to read to me from The Legends of King Arthur I always used to look at Arthur and Merlin and think that’s you and that’s me.’

He gave his guardian a cunning look.

‘Is that why you used to read me that book?’ He asked. ‘Is it one of the stories you hoped would help prepare me for the truth?’

Albus let out a breath. ‘You’ve grown so clever, haven’t you?’ He said sadly. ‘I can’t get anything past you now.’

‘No,’ Harry said happily. ‘I understand everything now.’

**
When Harry finally went to bed that night he lay awake for a long time, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of the future. For the first time he felt as though he could see his whole life spread out before him, as clearly as if it was a book sat his lap, and every page was filled with joy and wonder.

He would go to Hogwarts and learn all there was to know about magic. He would become a master at potions, just as his mother had done and play on the Gryffindor quidditch team, just as his father had done. He would make good, loyal friends that understood him and when he eventually left school he would be a great wizard, just like Albus, and they would go on many adventures together.

Everything fit together perfectly, with no uncomfortable gaps.

Before he went to sleep Harry got up and plucked his battered old copy of The Legends of King Arthur from the shelf. He turned to the very start of the book, where there was a big picture of the young Arthur sitting beside Merlin in front of a roaring fire.

Just looking at the picture made Harry feel warm and soothed, as if the fire in the picture was real and casting heat upon his face.

Harry flicked through the book lazily, pausing on each of his favourite illustrations from Arthur’s childhood.

On one page Merlin stood on the ground, his white hair and beard flying, while Arthur took flight into the sky, transformed into a bird.

On another, Arthur held Excalibur aloft, his fair face shining with joy. Merlin stood in the background, looking on with a knowing smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

The amount of joy that Harry felt was almost uncomfortable. It was a squirmy sensation in the pit of his stomach that made lying still incredibly hard.

‘This is who I am,’ he whispered. ‘This is what my life will be like.’

He flicked through the rest of the book happily, increasing his speed as he passed over the latter part of Arthur’s life. This was filled with epic battles with hundreds of knights on horseback and was obviously far less relevant.

He took a quick look at the last illustration in the book which showed Arthur mortally wounded, lying in a boat with his arms wrapped across his chest, before closing it shut and setting it to one side.

He just about felt tired enough to drift off to sleep now, so he lay back in the bed and turned the lights off.

His dreams would all be about flying and all the golden days of summer in which he would begin to learn magic.
11th August 1988

I have just started learning magic but I think I am doing quite well. Today I brewed an Oraculus potion all by myself and it came out all thick and gold, just like it’s supposed to. It’s not a very powerful potion but it is quite difficult to make and a lot of fun to use. When you drink it your eyes start to change colour depending on your mood and Albus and I spent a lot of time trying to make each other laugh so we could watch our eyes turn yellow. The only problem was that we were having such a good time that we never got to see our eyes turn any other colours. Towards the end of the day Albus’s eyes started to change from orange to blue, but I couldn’t tell if that was because he was actually feeling sad or if it was just the potion wearing off.

13th August 1988

I’m trying to keep notes about everything I’m studying but I also want to write about how I’m feeling too because I’ve been so happy lately. I wake up every morning with a big, fat smile on my face and can’t wait to get up and start the day. I never want to forget how wonderful it felt to find out that I was a wizard. I think it was a little like falling in love because it made me feel safe and special and like everything was going to be good from now on and forever and ever and ever.

14th August 1988

Today I found a new flower growing in the woods. I think it might be a Ghost Orchid, although they’re supposed to be extinct. We have a lot of unusual plants growing in our woods. I think this is because there is so much magic around although not all the plants have magical properties.

I took a cutting from the flower so that I could add it to my book of plants. I had to use my gloves, just in case it was poisonous, but it turns out it’s completely harmless. Albus was able to tell just from looking at it and then we found its entry in the encyclopaedia.

It’s quite an interesting plant because it spends most of its time underground and only flowers once every ten years or so. I think I am a little like a Ghost Orchid because I am hidden away at the moment and no one knows I’m here, but when I turn eleven I’ll be out in the world with everyone else. It’s a little scary, but so exciting!
19th August 1988

I’m getting really good at flying now. I practice for hours every day and I can do lots of tricky manoeuvres. Albus enchanted some tennis balls to go flying through the woods so I could chase after them but they were so slow and stupid that it was easy to catch them.

I’ve asked Albus if he can get hold of a real snitch for me, but he says it would be too dangerous. According to ‘Quidditch for Beginners,’ they can fly really fast, up to eighty miles per hour, but what really makes them difficult to catch is how they twist and loop around and change direction suddenly.

I can’t wait to start playing Quidditch. It’s probably the thing I’m looking forward to most about going away to school. It will be great to be part of a team and play together. I’ve never done that before and I know I’m going to love it.

21st August 1988

Today I met up with First-Born again, for the first time since my birthday. She wasn’t surprised to hear that I was a wizard, even though she’s never met one before. She knows that normal people can’t talk to snakes and so understood right away that I was special.

I think that snakes are especially attuned to magic. They’re listed as one of the ten creatures most useful to magicians in ‘Basic Principles of Magic,’ but I don’t know if that’s because they can actually assist with spells or just because that their venom is useful in potion-making.

I brought First-Born a dead mouse to eat, as a special treat, because we got quite a lot in for potions ingredients, but there aren’t that many simple potions that need them. I was secretly a little glad about this because I don’t like skinning them or cutting them up. It’s really disgusting.

I wanted to draw a picture of First-Born to add my observations notebook but I’m not that good at drawing animals so First-Born lay down on the page and let me draw around her instead. That meant I got the shape just right. I also measured her and found out she is now twenty inches long.

First-Born enjoyed the mouse and was happy to hear that she had grown. She told me snakes don’t get together to celebrate birthdays but she was glad I had a good one. I told her I would celebrate her birthday with her if she liked but she had no idea what day it was on.

25th August 1988

I think even Albus is surprised by how much I’m reading at the moment. He doesn’t complain, of course. He promised me that he’d order me as many books as I want, but there’s pretty much one arriving every day now and he’s started to look worried.

Maybe he thinks I’m not clever enough to understand some of the magic I’m reading about or maybe he thinks I’ll end up reading something that will upset me. I’m not quite sure, but there’s definitely something up.

Today he gave me one of his crinkly-eyed anxious looks and said something like, ‘You know there are some dangerous things in the magical world too, don’t you?’

‘I know,’ I told him. ‘There’s giants and dragons and trolls and ogres, but none of them live
Albus started to say something else but then he changed his mind. That happens a lot. It’s like there’s always lots of thoughts buzzing around in his head and sometimes they make it out and sometimes they don’t.

26th August 1988

Albus started talking to me about dark magic today. He told me that there are some types of spells which are very dangerous and can hurt people. I already knew this though because dark magic is mentioned in a lot of the books I’ve been reading, although they don’t go into a lot of detail.

I had the feeling that Albus wanted to talk to me about something more complicated but he wasn’t sure how to do it. Perhaps he was waiting for me to ask the right questions. I’ll try harder next time.

2nd September 1988

I feel so stupid. I don’t want to write about my feelings anymore. I can’t even bear to look at what I’ve already written. I thought I would want to read about my life over again and again, just to remind myself of how good it was, but now I just want to tear all these pages out.

I don’t even understand how I could have missed it, how I could have blocked that one thing from my mind. Albus didn’t bring it up, of course, but he’s been watching me all this time and waiting for me to put the pieces together, but I didn’t because I’m so stupid.

I felt so proud on my birthday too. Like I’d got it all worked out. I thought that I was really going to live happily ever after. As if life could be like some fairytale just because magic was real and that’s stupid to start with because even fairytales have terrible, scary things in them.

If only I’d thought about it for five minutes I would have realised that Voldemort was a wizard too. I didn’t even think about him though. I forgot all about him. I didn’t think about my parents’ death at all. I only thought about what they were like at school and how I was going to be just like them.

It’s so unfair. I know it was stupid and didn’t make sense but for little while I really believed I was going to live a perfect life. I was completely and utterly happy and I know I’ll never ever ever feel that way again.

Chapter End Notes

I swear to God, the next chapter we are off to Hogwarts. This is the last of Harry’s young childhood. Its eleven-up from here on out. Thank you so much for your patience.
The day before they were supposed to leave for Hogwarts Albus announced that he was going to start packing up the house. Harry assumed he was speaking figuratively until he started systematically dismantling the kitchen around them. Harry barely had time to leap up out of his chair before Albus whisked it up and collapsed it down into a cardboard box.

‘Surely we’re not taking the furniture?!’ Harry exclaimed with alarm.

‘Oh no,’ Albus said quickly. ‘We wouldn’t have anywhere to put it. You’ll be going in the dormitories and I’ll only have one small room.’

‘Then why - ?’ Harry gestured emphatically at Albus who was now disconnecting the stove.

‘We need to leave the house as we found it,’ Albus said simply.

‘As we found it ... ?’ Harry repeated. He strained his memory but could not recall the house ever being any other way. He certainly always remembered it having a stove.

‘It was quite empty when we first came here,’ Albus assured him. ‘Old, abandoned and falling down.’

‘Well then, can’t we leave it a little better than we found it?’ Harry said sharply.

Albus paused in the act of stippling off the wallpaper and considered. ‘I suppose,’ he said slowly, lowering his wand. ‘It wouldn’t do any harm.’

The wallpaper fell the floor in a long curl, like fresh apple peel, and Harry heaved a sigh of relief.

‘Is there anything you want me to do?’ He asked. ‘I don’t suppose I’ll be able to help with the magic - ’

‘No, no, no,’ Albus said quickly. ‘Just pack up your clothes and your books and things for me. I’ve put a trunk outside your room.’

Harry did as he was told, trying not to linger too much over his old toys and notebooks. The trunk had been magically extended so he didn’t need to worry about being selective; he just packed up everything as neatly as he could and then hurried back downstairs.

By that time Albus had already stripped most of the house. Harry found him standing in the middle of the living room, right where the coffee table used to be, looking around himself at all the empty space.

‘I think that will do for now,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Shall we take a tea break? There’s still some things we ought to go over before we leave.’
‘Alright,’ Harry agreed.

The chairs were all gone of course, so they both had to sit down on the floor. Albus summoned two cups of tea from thin air and handed one over to Harry.

‘You know that things will be very different at Hogwarts, don’t you?’ He said. ‘I’ll be headmaster and you’ll be one of my students. We won’t be able to behave as we have at home.’

Harry nodded and took a sip of his tea. ‘I know. I’ll have to live like all the other kids. Sleep in the dormitory. Eat at the house table.’

‘Yes,’ Albus said slowly, ‘But it’s not just that. You’ll have to try to talk to me as the other students do.’

Harry frowned a little. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well,’ Albus began, ‘When you’re talking to me you should address me as ‘Sir’ or ‘Professor,’ just like you would any other teacher.’

Harry started at him blankly.

‘And if you’re talking to another teacher about me you should refer to me as ‘Professor Dumbledore,’ Albus continued, ‘but if you’re talking to a classmate you can just call me ‘Dumbledore.’ Most of them do.’

Harry started to laugh. ‘Are you joking?’ He demanded. ‘What will you call me? Mr Potter?’

‘Oh no,’ Albus said quickly. ‘I’ll always call you Harry, but that won’t seem that unusual. Teachers can use first names if they wish.’

‘What about when we’re alone?’ Harry demanded. ‘I don’t need to call you ‘Professor’ all the time, do I?’

‘No,’ Albus replied, ‘but I think we should try and get into the habit. It might be difficult to remember otherwise.’

Harry rolled his eyes and lay back on the floor. ‘Okay, professooor,’ he said, drawing out the word. He lay there in silence for a few minutes while Albus finished off his tea.

‘I know you’re happy to be going back, but will you miss living here?’ Harry asked. ‘Will you miss this house?’

Albus set his teacup down. ‘I will,’ he said softly. ‘I love Hogwarts, of course, but this has been a home just for us. I’ve never had something like that before. Something private and domestic. Not since I was a child, anyway.’

Harry smiled to himself, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. There was a hole right above his head where the chandelier used to be.

‘It’s been nice to take some time off too,’ Albus continued.

Harry snorted. ‘Time off?’ He repeated. ‘You never took time off! You were writing letters every single day and you left for two weeks last month to sort that crisis in Paris!’

‘I knew you were still annoyed about that,’ Albus said grimly.
'You said you’d only be gone a day!'

'Well, you said you could take care of yourself,' Albus countered, ‘and I came back to find the house full of snakes!'

'I got lonely!' Harry protested.

Albus chuckled. ‘I know,’ he said fondly, ‘but it was a lot of trouble getting your friends to leave. The one in the toilet was especially stubborn.’

He got up and stood over Harry, peering down at his face.

‘How are you feeling about moving?’ He asked.

‘I’m fine,’ Harry said, swatting away Albus’s beard.

‘Is there anything you’ll miss?’ Albus asked. ‘Other than the snakes, of course?’

Harry thought for a moment. ‘The treehouse,’ he said eventually. ‘Although I suppose I’m too old for it now anyway.’

‘Oh, I’ve packed that,’ Albus said cheerfully.

‘You haven’t!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘Where on earth will you put it?’

‘I’ll find somewhere inside the forbidden forest,’ Albus replied. ‘You should be able to get to it without being attacked by anything too dangerous.’

Harry laughed. 'Thank you. I’ve always wanted a secret hideout surrounded by deadly monsters.'

Albus laughed too then he reached down, grabbed Harry by the wrists and swung him round playfully across the polished floorboards. Their mingled laughter echoed throughout the empty house.

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They got up early the next morning and did one last sweep of the house to make sure they hadn’t forgotten anything. The place seemed very white and bare now, like a carcass picked down to the bones. There was nothing of theirs left anywhere.

‘Well then, shall we go?’ Albus suggested. ‘I’ve already sent our luggage through.’

‘May I go up to the roof first?’ Harry asked. ‘I’d like to take one last look at everything.’

‘Of course,’ Albus replied. ‘Take as long as you like.’

Harry spent a long time looking out over the gardens and woodlands, trying to fix the image in his mind, before climbing down again.

He found Albus in the living room, waiting by the fireplace with the jar of floo powder in his hand. The fireplace was the one of the few things in the house that was still intact and it looked just as it always had done, black tiles gleaming and a full fire blazing in the grate.

Albus smiled at him encouragingly. ‘Are you ready?’ He asked.

Harry nodded, a lump in his throat. ‘Is what I’m wearing alright?’ He asked.
Albus looked him up and down. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘I thought maybe I ought to wear robes,’ Harry replied. ‘I’m surprised you’re not.’

Albus shrugged. ‘I suppose I’ve gotten used to used to dressing how I like. I’ll start wearing full robes again when term starts.’

He held out his hand to Harry. Harry took it and for a moment they both stood perfectly still and then Albus threw the powder onto the flames, turning them green, and they walked through them together.

‘Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts School,’ Albus ordered.

The fire shifted around them and everything dissolved away in a wild, swirling rush. Harry closed his eyes and held his breath as his childhood home disappeared forever.

They came out seconds later in a large, circular room with smooth stone walls. It was obviously a tower room but it was impossible to tell how high up it was. There was no furniture, but the walls were covered with portraits of old, serious-looking wizards.

There was also a large tabby cat curled up in front of the door, as if it was guarding it. It looked up as they entered, its yellow eyes bright and curious.

‘We’ve got someone here waiting for us,’ Harry said cheerfully.

Albus seemed greatly amused by this. Harry glanced at him suspiciously, wondering what the real joke was, then he turned back to the door and understood immediately. The cat was gone now and in its place there stood a rather severe-looking woman with a tight bun of hair and square glasses.

‘Professor McGonagall!’ Albus exclaimed. ‘You really didn’t have to sit up here and wait for me you know. I would have come and found you.’

The woman raised her eyebrows at him. ‘I’ve been waiting for you for the last seven years, Dumbledore. A few hours more waiting in your office floor hardly makes any difference.’

Albus stepped neatly out of the fireplace, and Harry, who was still holding onto his hand, tagged along like a frightened six-year-old.

‘It’s good to see you, Professor,’ Albus said warmly.

‘You too,’ Professor McGonagall replied, ‘and —my goodness! This must be Harry!’

‘That’s right,’ Albus said, beaming down at Harry. ‘I’m sure you’d recognise him anywhere. He looks so much like his father.’

‘Exactly like him,’ Professor McGonagall agreed. ‘Except for the eyes, of course. He has Lily’s eyes. I’m sorry, Harry, you must be tired of hearing this.’

Harry shook his head quickly. ‘No, not at all. It’s lovely to hear.’

Professor McGonagall face softened noticeably. ‘Your parents were two of my favourite students,’ she said. ‘So talented, so dedicated. It was a privilege to teach them.’

‘Thank you so much for saying so,’ Harry replied. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you, professor.’
‘Such lovely manners,’ Professor McGonagall commented approvingly.

Harry blushed and shook his head.

‘Manners are just what I was taught in place of adequate socialisation,’ he joked. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have any social skills whatsoever, although I can recite a lot of sixteenth century poetry.’

McGonagall looked taken aback. She raised her eyebrows at Albus. ‘He’s grown very like you,’ she said. It sounded like an accusation.

‘An accident, I assure you,’ Albus replied apologetically. ‘Children are so prone to picking up bad habits. A surreal sense of humour is probably better than most.’

‘Well I suppose the damage is done and nothing can be done about it now,’ Professor McGonagall said grimly. ‘Are you feeling up to meeting anyone else yet or do you want some time to settle in first?’

‘We’ll be down in a little while,’ Albus promised. ‘I just want to show Harry the view.’

Professor McGonagall’s eyes slid over to the stain-glass window.

‘Of course,’ she murmured. ‘That’s the only disadvantage of travelling in by floo powder. You don’t get a first glimpse of the place.’

‘I wanted to fly here,’ Harry told her, ‘but Albus said it was too far.’

He realised too late that he had called Albus by his first name, but Professor McGonagall didn’t seem to mind.

‘You’re a good flier then?’ She asked.

‘I think so,’ Harry said modestly. ‘I’ve never flown with anyone else though.

‘He’s very talented,’ Albus insisted. ‘I’d say he flies even better than his father. Just you wait until you see him.’

‘I look forward to it,’ Professor McGonagall replied. ‘I really hope you’ll be a Gryffindor, Harry. We desperately need some talent for our team.’

Harry assured her that of course he would be a Gryffindor, which seemed to amuse her. Then she left them alone and he and Albus went over to the window.

They stood together in silence for several minutes, looking out at the grounds, then Albus asked, ‘Well, what do you think?’

‘There’s a lot of it,’ Harry said breathlessly. ‘The forest looks huge.’

‘It is,’ Albus agreed. ‘Although it was far larger when Hogwarts was first built. Over the years witches and wizards have cut back a lot of it, which is a great shame.’

‘It looks ... a lot like home,’ Harry said slowly. ‘Only bigger.’ He felt himself go red. ‘That’s not an coincidence is it?’

‘No,’ Albus replied. ‘It’s not. I couldn’t resist reshaping the countryside to suit my tastes. I hope it’s a pleasant surprise.’
‘It is,’ Harry assured him.

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The next few hours passed very quickly. Harry was rapidly introduced to the majority of the teachers, all of whom seemed utterly delighted to meet him, and then Albus took him on a quick tour of the castle.

‘It’s impossible to show you everything in one day,’ he said regretfully, ‘but I can definitely give you the highlights.’

Harry quickly formed the opinion that the things Albus Dumbledore considered highlights were probably not thought so by anyone else, but the stories that accompanied them were all very funny though so Harry did not resent being given an unconventional introduction to Hogwarts. The only thing that worried him was how large the castle appeared to be and how many twists and turns were in its corridors.

‘I’m bound to get lost in here,’ He said nervously.

‘Oh yes,’ Albus agreed. ‘You’ll get lost the second I let you out of my sight, but that’s nothing to be afraid of. After all, ending up where you meant to go is always quite dull. It’s much more exciting to end up somewhere completely unexpected.’

‘What about finding my way out of that exciting, unexpected place?’ Harry countered. ‘It seems like Hogwarts has a lot of places to get trapped. I don’t want to end up starving to death in some mysterious cupboard that only appears every other Tuesday.’

‘Oh, that hardly ever happens,’ Albus said brightly. ‘It’s been over fifty years since a student actually died and that was no accident, that was just plain murder.’

‘I feel very reassured,’ Harry said sarcastically. ‘What about that story you literally just told me five minutes ago about the professor who disappeared for two weeks because he got trapped in an enchanted teapot.’

‘Yes, but he didn’t starve, did he?’ Albus said.

‘Only because he was surrounded by tea!’ Harry protested. ‘I don’t want to end up anywhere I have to eat my way out of.’

‘I promise that I will never let you get trapped in a teapot,’ Albus said solemnly. ‘Anyway, people always turn up. That’s what I say every time someone goes missing. They always turn up eventually.’

Harry decided to let the subject drop then, if only because he didn’t think he could cope with any more of Albus’s attempts to reassure him.

Albus was just showing Harry an especially ugly painting of trolls attempting to perform ballet when they were approached by a tall, dark man with greasy black hair.

When Harry turned to face him he actually recoiled a little, in shock. Like many of the other teachers he seemed to recognise Harry immediately, but unlike the others he didn’t look a bit happy to see him.

‘Ah Severus,’ Albus said brightly. ‘It’s good to see you.’
He put an arm around Harry’s shoulders and nodded down at him. ‘This is Harry,’ he said. ‘Harry, this is Professor Severus Snape.’

Harry held out his hand and smiled politely. ‘It’s nice to meet you, Professor,’ he said.

Snape stared at Harry’s hand as if it was something dead and slimy so Harry drew it back hastily.

‘Sorry, is that not done?’ He said. ‘I’m still new to this. Meeting people, I mean.’

Several of the other teachers had shaken his hand and appeared eager to do so but he supposed that was because he was famous. It was unlikely they greeted every student so warmly.

Professor Snape certainly wasn’t about to give Harry a warm reception. He glared over his head at Albus, ignoring him entirely.

‘What’s he doing here?’ He demanded.

Albus appeared puzzled. ‘Harry will be starting school this year,’ he said simply. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

‘Of course,’ Snape snapped, ‘but what’s he doing here now? Why isn’t he arriving with all the other students?’

‘Well, he’s with me,’ Albus replied.

If Professor Snape was expecting any further explanation than he was sorely disappointed. Albus just stood smiling pleasantly while the other man glared at him.

‘Where’s he even staying?’ Snape demanded.

‘I thought he could go in the Gryffindor dormitory,’ Albus said. ‘It’s empty now, of course, but he’ll be fine by himself.’

‘Don’t you think that’s a little premature?’ Snape hissed. ‘You can’t know for certain that he’s going to be a Gryffindor.’

‘I could get sorted now,’ Harry suggested helpfully, ‘then we’ll know for certain.’

Snape gave him a cold look. ‘Sorting is always done on the first day of term in front of the whole school. I would have thought Professor Dumbledore had told you that already.’

His eyes flickered back to Albus and they seemed to grow even colder.

‘Of course, if you think it’s worth breaking over nine hundreds years of tradition for your own convenience then please, be my guest.’

‘Oh no,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I wasn’t saying that. I didn’t realise.’

‘Well, perhaps Harry could stay in the Slytherin dormitory,’ Albus suggested, ‘and then you could keep an eye on him.’

Snape looked appalled.

‘I know you’ve been away from Hogwarts for a long time Dumbledore, but surely you must remember that the location of each house common room and dormitory is supposed to be a secret from the rest of the school.’
‘Oh yes, of course,’ Albus said nodding. ‘Well, I’m sure I can find a suitable room somewhere. It’s only for a few weeks, after all.’

Snape was silent for a moment. He looked as though he was struggling to find something else to complain about but failing to do so.

‘Well you must do what you think is best headmaster,’ he said quietly. ‘You always do.’

Then he turned on his heel and walked away without another word. Harry waited until he was gone before turning to Albus and pulling a face. Albus smiled at him and shook his head.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ he said. ‘People can be very rude when they’re caught off-guard. He obviously didn’t expect to find you here.’

‘He seemed furious about it,’ Harry replied. ‘I though he was going to insist on having me thrown out.’

‘Luckily, he does not have that authority,’ Albus replied. ‘A point which he himself seemed keen to emphasise.’

Then Albus’s expression cleared and he began to speak brightly once more, keen to resume his tour of Hogwarts’s unappreciated wonders.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘There’s a hidden tunnel I want to show you that runs right under the school. It doesn’t actually go anywhere, just loops around, but it’s filled with hundreds and hundreds of lost socks. I think there’s a creature living in there somewhere who keeps stealing them from the students, but I’ve never been able to catch him at it.’
Portraits & Poltergeists

Despite Harry’s initial worry, he actually managed to learn the layout of the castle quite easily. He only got lost twice in his first week and was soon able to find his way around without any trouble at all.

This was not because he had memorised all the tricks and rules of the castle though, such as when certain doors disappeared or staircases changed, but simply because he knew so many of the shortcuts and secret passageways. Albus had shared the location of every single one he knew about and these made getting around the school relatively simple.

Albus had kept his word to Professor Snape and not shown Harry the location of any of the dormitories, but he had given him access to dozens of other restricted areas.

The best of these was undoubtedly the Prefects’ bathroom, which contained a bath roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool and had unlimited supplies of magical bubble bath. Since all the prefects were still on holiday Harry had the place entirely to himself and was able to luxuriate for hours on end.

Once morning he was lying in the bath singing to himself (the prefects bathroom also had excellent acoustics), when he was suddenly ambushed by the appearance of an unfamiliar ghost.

At least, Harry thought he was a ghost at first, but the man’s appearance and behaviour was so bizarre that that he quickly became convinced that he must be a poltergeist. Harry had read a little bit about poltergeists at some point, but he was still a little confused about what they really were and what they wanted.

He certainly didn’t know why one had to burst in on him while he was taking a bath.

The poltergeist seemed to have been attracted by his singing because he came in bellowing his own made-up lyrics and cackling with delight. Then he did a double-take at the sight of Harry, as if he was expecting to find something or someone else, and started shrieking at him to identify himself.

‘You’re not s’posed to be here!’ He squealed maliciously. ‘You’re not s’posed to be here! Students are s’posed to be home with their families, they are, and you’re not even a prefect!’

‘Well neither are you!’ Harry shot back indignantly. ‘And I can go wherever I like.’

This defiant response seemed to impress the poltergeist quite a bit and he took a great liking to Harry ... for about a minute. Then he started trying to drown him.

Harry had to swim frantically around the bath turning off each water tap while the poltergeist swooped around turning more on. In a few minutes the entire bathroom was in real danger of flooding.

‘You can’t beat me!’ His tormenter cackled. ‘I’m way faster than a pasty, pimply little flesh-bag like you!’

Harry tried various different approaches in an attempt to reason with the poltergeist - Laughing along good-naturally, addressing him with interest and respect, confronting him aggressively - but none of these seemed to have any effect.

The Poltergeist could be distracted for a moment or two, if Harry said something really unexpected to
him, but he quickly grew bored again and returned to his original goal.

Eventually Harry grew so frustrated that he started yelling with unrestrained fury.

‘What even are you?! You’re not a ghost! You’re not a person! You don’t have a body! You don’t have a soul! What is the point of you?!”

This proved to be a big mistake. The words drove the poltergeist into a real frenzy and he set about tearing the tiles off the walls and throwing them at Harry’s head. By the time he finally stormed out the entire bathroom was utterly wrecked.

Harry was left naked, shuddering and very, very annoyed. He got dressed, did his best to clean up the mess and then went to complain about it to the headmaster.

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Albus found the story thoroughly entertaining. He was especially amused when Harry told him that at one point the Poltergeist had gone and got an armful of robes from somewhere and just thrown them in the bath with him.

‘They weren’t even mine!’ Harry protested while Albus laughed. ‘I don’t know whose they are! Someone else is going to be really annoyed about this.’

‘Oh no, no,’ Albus chortled. ‘Peeves is always messing about the storerooms. I’m sure those were just old ceremonial robes of immense historical value to the school but of no personal value to anyone in particular.’

‘Can’t you get rid of him?!” Harry demanded. ‘If he’s always pulling stunts like this?’

‘It’s almost impossible to get rid of a poltergeist once they’re attached to a place,’ Albus assured him. ‘As far as I know he was - for lack of a better word - ‘born’ here and he won’t - for lack of a better word - ‘die’ until the place is in empty and in ruins.’

‘Oh,’ Harry said glumly. ‘Well, I still think you ought to try and do something about him. It’s really creepy that he’s able to go into the students’ bathrooms.’

‘Technically, all the ghosts can do that,’ Albus replied, ‘although most of them are too polite to make a habit of it. Hadrian Odore, the third headmaster of Hogwarts, thought it was a very good thing. Kept the students on their toes.’

Albus raised his head and addressed one of the portraits on the wall. ‘Isn’t that right, Hadrian? Hadrian?’ He clicked his fingers impatiently. ‘Good for the students to have ghosts around?’

The faded portrait stirred wearily and murmured, ‘Yes, yes. Ghosts. Excellent source of fibre.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Albus said, turning back to Harry. ‘He’s very old now. He really needs to be restored.’

‘Well I don’t care what he says,’ Harry said stubbornly. ‘Good source of fibre or not, I don’t think the ghosts should be able to float in on students when they’re naked.’

‘Well, it’s very rare for ghosts to develop a taste for that sort of thing,’ Albus replied, ‘and it’s not as if they can actually do any harm.’

‘Yes they can!’ Harry exclaimed, ‘Peeves shouted insults at me, personal insults about my body, and he nearly drowned me in rose-scented bath water.’
‘Yes, but he managed to restrain himself from actually sexually assaulting you,’ Albus said seriously, ‘and that’s the important thing.’

Harry pulled a face and then they both started laughing.

I’m sorry, darling,’ Albus said eventually, wiping the tears from his eyes. ‘I’m know it must have been very annoying and humiliating. I’m glad to see you’re not too traumatised.’

He summoned up a towel for Harry, whose hair was still dripping wet, and two mugs of Chocolate and they sat in silence for a little while, sipping at their drinks.

‘Can I ask you something about the portraits?’ Harry asked eventually.

‘These portraits?’ Albus asked, glancing up at the office walls.

‘No,’ Harry replied. ‘Well, not just them. All the portraits.’

Albus nodded. ‘Go on.’

Harry hesitated, picking at a marshmallow. ‘Well, it might sound stupid, but are they real?’

Albus looked interested. ‘Do you mean are they like real people?’

‘Yes,’ Harry said. ‘I mean, they can think and talk like real people. Some of them are even portraits of real people who were once alive. Are they like the ghosts?’

‘No,’ Albus said. ‘Ghosts are the true spirits of dead human beings. They are exactly the same as they used to be when they were alive except for the fact that they have no body.’

Harry nodded. ‘Yes, I understand that,’ he said, ‘and poltergeists like Peeves have never been human but they have still real thoughts and feelings. All be it, perverse and destructive ones.’

‘That’s right,’ Albus confirmed, beaming at him proudly. ‘The paintings however, only appear to think and feel. They do not really do so.’

Albus pointed a finger up at Hadrian Odore’s again and Harry noticed that the old Wizard had now slumped so far down in his frame that he was almost out of view.

‘Portraits like these are created by wizards. They’re enchanted so that they’re able to move and speak but their reactions are very limited indeed. They don’t have much depth or knowledge and if you converse with a portrait for any period of time you’ll soon discover their shortcomings.’

‘And they’re all the same?’ Harry said uncertainly. ‘Even the ones of real people?

‘Ah, the ones of real people are a little more sophisticated,’ Albus said cheerfully. ‘Not because they’re made that way though, but because they’re trained. When a portrait is painted of a living subject it’s customary for said subject to spend some time conversing with their portrait to teach them how to talk and, for lack of a better word, think as they do.’

Harry stared at him. ‘So do you a portrait like one of these, hidden away somewhere, that you go and talk to for hours on end?’

‘That’s right!’ Albus said, beaming.

Harry burst out laughing. ‘That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard! Are you seriously telling it all your strangest dreams and favourite flavours of chewing gum?’
'Of course!' Albus replied. ‘If someone asks about that in a hundred years time, I want to know that my portrait has the right answer.

‘That. Is. Insane!’ Harry exclaimed, laughing. ‘So will the portrait be just like you when it’s done?’

‘No, no,’ Albus replied. ‘It will be know as much about me as I can help, but it can never be exactly like me. It doesn’t really think or feel.’

Harry frowned. ‘I’m sorry. I still don’t quite understand.’

‘That’s quite alright,’ Albus said brightly. ‘It is a little complicated. I’ve always thought it’s like having an imaginary conversation in your head with someone you know very well indeed.’

‘Oh,’ Harry said excitedly. ‘I get it! You can imagine how they might respond to some bad news or whatever, but they don’t actually feel anything. It’s just pretend.’

‘Exactly!’ Albus beamed at him. ‘Portraits can behave uncannily like their subjects because unlike us, they know everything about the people they’re imitating.’

‘I bet they struggle when you ask them about something they’ve never heard of though.’

‘That’s right.’ Albus said. ‘Although, that’s true of people too. Portraits also often vary in quality. Can you tell me why that might be?’

Harry’s face fell. ‘Honestly, Albus! Does there always have to be a test?!’

‘Tests are fun!’ Albus said brightly. ‘And don’t forget, you’re supposed to be calling me ‘professor’ now.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘Yes, Professor,’ he grumbled, thinking hard. ‘Um ... I suppose it depends on the strength of the magic?’

Albus seemed unimpressed with this. ‘Can you elaborate a bit more?’

Harry sighed heavily and leant back in his chair. ‘I guess ... if the spell isn’t strong enough then the portrait might not be able to remember that much? Or the magic might fade over time and the portrait might forget what it’s been told and start to behave out of character?’

Albus nodded excitedly. ‘That’s right! That’s right! What else might affect the quality of a portrait?’

Harry thought again, really straining his brain. ‘Well, if the subject didn’t talk that much to their portrait then the portrait wouldn’t have that much to go on. They’d struggle with tricky or personal questions.’

‘Right again!’ Albus said delightedly. ‘You see, that wasn’t that hard.’

‘No, professor,’ Harry intoned dryly.

He picked up his mug and took another gulp of Hot Chocolate.

‘I’m glad that the portraits aren’t real,’ he said. ‘I think it would be very wrong to trap a person in a picture for eternity.’

‘I think so too,’ Albus agreed. ‘It’s a very sensible thing to ask about.’

Albus summoned some biscuits so that they could soak up the last of their drinks. Harry dunked his
biscuit happily and sucked the chocolate from his fingers.

‘There’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ he said thoughtfully.

Albus spread his arms wide. ‘Ask away.’

‘Are teachers at Hogwarts allowed to get married?’

‘Of course they are,’ Albus replied, surprised. ‘Did you think they all had to take vows of celibacy, like monks in a monastery?’

‘I don’t know,’ Harry said darkly. ‘There are a lot of strange rules and traditions here and none of the teachers are married, are they?’

‘Not at present,’ Albus admitted.

‘Why’s that then?’ Harry demanded.

Albus shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I wouldn’t like to speculate about anyone else’s personal life, but I think it can be very hard to find a partner in our world. There aren’t that many witches and wizards alive today and although it’s become more acceptable to marry muggles those who do still face a lot of difficulties.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Professor Flitwick was telling me the other night that he’s actually half-goblin and I expect that makes it even harder to find someone.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ Albus said sadly. ‘He faces discrimination from both races.’

Harry considered Albus for a few moments before asking, ‘Were you ever married?’

‘No,’ Albus said simply.

‘I didn’t think so,’ Harry said, ‘but I wasn’t sure. You’ve been alive a long time. For all I know, you could have been married and widowed three times over.’

‘No,’ Albus said again. ‘I’ve never been married and I’ve never had any desire to get married.’

‘Really?’ Harry asked. ‘Because you could still get married, if you wanted to. I wouldn’t mind.’

Albus chuckled. ‘Thank you. It’s very gracious of you to give me permission.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t have liked it much when I was younger,’ Harry explained, ‘but I’m getting used to sharing you with other people now.’

Albus smiled. ‘I appreciate it,’ he assured Harry, ‘but I’m far too old to even think about marriage. Besides, I’m not interested in women.’

Harry stared at him. ‘What? Not at all?’

‘No,’ Albus met his gaze. ‘Not at all.’

‘Oh, well ... ‘ Harry fumbled around uncertainly. ‘If you wanted ... to get a boyfriend that would be okay too.’

Albus laughed loudly. ‘Thank you, again. I think I’m too old for all that now, though.’
‘Really?’ Harry said, starting to relax again. ‘I don’t think so. Would you consider dating a muggle? I think it would be really good if you went out with a muggle professor. Someone from Oxford University or somewhere like that.’

Albus laughed again. ‘Now that’s an idea,’ he said. ‘You really think someone like that would be up for all this though?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ Harry replied gamely. ‘I was pretty happy when a powerful wizard appeared out of nowhere and swept me away to a life full of excitement.’ Then a thought occurred to him and he blushed a little. ‘I mean, you don’t need to have sex or whatever.’

‘Oh, a lot in it for me then,’ Albus said, raising his eyebrows.

Harry tittered. ‘I mean, you were the one going on about being too old for relationships.’

‘I am too old for relationships,’ Albus replied seriously. ‘My heart is too weary to sustain a tortured love affair. I have just energy to love you and that alone’s nearly killed me ten times over.’

‘What a lie!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘I can’t have given you more than two heart attacks in my time. Three tops.’

They both laughed.

Harry set his empty mug down and got up from his seat. ‘Well, I’m going to go now, Professor. Unless there’s anything else you’d like to quiz me on?’

‘No,’ Albus said, his eyes twinkling. ‘Not unless you’ve got any strange, personal questions for me.’

Harry grinned. ‘Not right now,’ he said. ‘I’ll let you know if anything else hilariously traumatic happens to me while I’m wondering round the school.’

‘Very good.’
In the summer holidays the great hall was completely empty apart from the teachers and they all ate at a single table. Harry found this a little daunting at first, but after a while he managed to relax and chatted away with everyone quite comfortably.

Professor Flitwick, in particular, took a great shine to Harry after he struck up a conversation about duelling, enquiring about his trophies and titles, and ended-up taking to him about it for hours.

‘At its highest level competitive duelling is all about being creative,’ he told Harry. ‘You have to catch your opponent off-guard and then keep them distracted for as long as possible.’

Professor McGonagall also seemed to be quite fond of Harry and was keen to discuss quidditch with him at every opportunity. She’d seen him flying all over the castle grounds and while she was quick to stress that this was, strictly speaking, against the rules, she also had to admit that she was very impressed.

‘You’ll need to get a proper broom, of course. I don’t know what Dumbledore’s been thinking, letting you ride around on that old thing for so long. I’ll have a word with him about it, just as long as you promise you’ll stick to the pitch once term starts.’

In fact the only teacher who didn’t seem to like Harry was Professor Snape. Since their first meeting he’d barely said a word to Harry but Harry often caught him glaring at him from across the table with a look of intense disgust on his face.

‘He doesn’t think you should be allowed to eat with the teachers,’ Albus explained, when Harry brought it up with him. ‘He doesn’t think it’s appropriate.’

‘He doesn’t think I should be allowed to stay here at all,’ Harry complained. ‘He doesn’t think I should be allowed to breathe.’

‘Now don’t be silly,’ Albus said sternly. ‘Severus Snape is a reasonable man. He concedes that you must be allowed to breathe, he’d just prefer if you didn’t do it anywhere near him.’

Harry was all too well aware of this. Professor Snape had already swapped seats with Professor Sprout just to ensure that he was as far away from Harry as possible.

‘Everything I do seems to annoy him,’ Harry declared glumly. ‘He flinches whenever I start laughing and grinds his teeth together if it goes on too long.’

Albus let out a heavy sigh. ‘I’m afraid you remind him too much of your father. They were in the same year at school but didn’t get along at all. Your father was always picking fights with him and making jokes at his expense. So naturally, Professor Snape reads malice and ill-intent into every cough and sneeze you make. He already thinks of you as an enemy.’

‘But that’s not fair!’ Harry objected. ‘I haven’t done anything to him!’

‘I agree, it’s not fair at all,’ Albus replied calmly, ‘but people often behave very unfairly indeed and we still have to deal with them.’
'I expect he’ll be even worse in class,’ Harry said glumly. ‘I’ve heard he always favours Slytherins anyway.’

‘He respects talent,’ Albus assured him. ‘He’ll change his mind about you once he see what you can do.’

Harry thought that this was unlikely and although he didn’t say so, something of his feelings must have shown in his face.

‘I do not deny that Professor Snape is blinded by his past,’ he said softly, ‘but I hope that, in time, he will come to see you as you really are.’

Once again, Harry cast the headmaster a doubtful look.

‘At the very least,’ Albus insisted. ‘I hope that he may come to see a bit more of your mother in you. As you know, Lily Evans was an outstanding potions student and she and Professor Snape were very good friends.’

‘Really?’ Harry exclaimed. ‘I’m surprised he had any friends at all. I suppose my mum got sick of him too eventually and chucked him.’

There was a tense pause in which Albus gave Harry a hard, meaningful look.

‘You’re not wrong, Harry,’ he said quietly. ‘Professor Snape was never very popular. I think it would be fair to say your mother was the only real friend he’s ever had. Her death utterly devastated him and I believe he mourns her loss more deeply than anyone.’

Harry felt embarrassed. It was true that Professor Snape had been very cold towards him, but that didn’t make what Harry had said any less cruel or thoughtless. From what Albus was telling him it sounded like Professor Snape had had a very unhappy childhood and Harry’s own father had spent a lot of time teasing and taunting him.

‘I must ask you not to bring any of this up with Professor Snape directly,’ Albus said quickly. ‘I know he would be very upset if he knew I had told you any of this.’

‘Why are you telling me about it then?’ Harry asked.

‘Because I think it will help you to understand him better,’ Albus said seriously. ‘I’m hoping that you’ll be able to show Professor Snape a little compassion, even though he hasn’t shown any towards you.’

Harry was quiet for a moment, turning the proposition around in his mind.

‘I’ll try,’ he promised.

Albus gazed down at him seriously. ‘I know you’re a very kind, sweet-natured little boy,’ he said slowly, ‘but you also have quick wits and a very sharp tongue. It’s very important that you do not try and mock Professor Snape, not even playfully. I assure you he has no sense of humour whatsoever.’

‘Alright,’ Harry said impatiently, ‘I understand.’

‘What do you understand?’ Albus asked, in his teaching voice.

Harry sighed. ‘I understand that if I make fun of Professor Snape it will just remind him of all the times my father did the same thing and he’ll take it as confirmation that I’m an arrogant, mean-
spirited little bastard who deserves a good thrashing.’

‘Good!’ Albus said, very pleased.

‘I have to stay polite and friendly, no matter how rude he is to me.’

‘Exactly!’ Albus agreed. ‘I know it sounds impossible, but it would be so helpful if you could try and be patient with Professor Snape. Please promise me you will try.’

‘I promise,’ Harry insisted.

Privately, he simply resolved to stay out of Professor Snape’s way as much as possible. The potions master seemed to have no desire to see him or speak to him, so Harry reasoned the kindest thing to do was to let him have his wish.

**

It was a while before Harry met the school’s groundskeeper, Rubeus Hagrid, because unlike the teachers, he didn’t come into the castle for meals. He was a great giant of a man with long, shaggy black hair and a wild tangled beard and lived in his own ramshackle little house just on the edge of the forbidden forest. During the holidays, he seemed to spend most of his time going back and forth from the forest and tending to his vegetable patch. Harry often caught sight of him from a distance, as he wasn’t a difficult man to spot, but assumed he wouldn’t want company.

It was only when he ran straight into Hagrid, nearly scaring the life of him in the process, that they finally crossed paths. Harry had chosen to take a secret passageway out of the castle and when he emerged he only narrowly avoided colliding with the giant, who yelped in alarm and staggered back against the wall.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘S’allright, S’allright!’ Hagrid insisted, waving Harry away. ‘I jus’ need to catch me breath. Nearly give me a heart attack. What’re yeh doin’ here anyway?’

‘I’m a student,’ Harry said helpfully. ‘At least, I will be when term starts. I came here a little early. I’m Harry Potter.’

‘I know who yeh are!’ The man said impatiently. ‘Yeh think Dumbledore didn’t tell me you was coming? I jus’ didn’t expect yeh to be jumping out of the walls!’

‘Sorry!’ Harry said again. ‘Dumbledore showed me the secret passageways. I like using them to get around.’

‘Hallways not empty enough for yeh?’ Hagrid demanded, but he was grinning now.

He pulled himself back up to his full height, which was quite impressive, and then peered down at Harry with interest. His black eyes crinkled with delight as he took in the boy’s face.

‘Yeh look an awful lot like yer dad, y’know,’ he told him, ‘but yeh’ve got yer mum’s eyes.’

‘Everyone says that,’ Harry said with a smile. ‘I just wish I’d gotten my mum’s eyesight too.’ He tapped the frame of his glasses.

Hagrid chuckled and then his expression turned wistful.

‘Las’ time I saw you, you was only a baby,’ he told Harry. ‘Don’t s’pose you remember me though.’
‘No,’ Harry admitted. ‘Dumbledore’s told me about you though. You were the one who brought me
to my aunt and uncle’s house.’

‘Tha’s right!’ Hagrid said happily. ‘Though a great heap o’ trouble that turned out to be.’

‘I don’t really remember them either,’ Harry told him. ‘I just remember Dumbledore coming and
getting me.’

‘Well, he was furious when he found out how they’d been treatin’ yeh,’ Hagrid said. ‘Don’t know
think I’ve ever seen him that angry before. Everyone else was s’prised when he took off with yeh,
but I thought he was gonna do summat like that. He’s alway goin’ out of his way to help people,
Dumbledore, and I heard he was pretty taken with yeh.’

He grinned down at Harry fondly.

‘Well, I s’pose I ought you ought to come round for a cup of tea,’ He said. ‘Can’t stand out here
chatting all day.’

‘Can I?’ Harry asked eagerly. ‘I don’t want to bother you if you’re busy, Mr Hagrid.’

‘Just Hagrid,’ Hagrid said, chuckling. ‘That’s what everyone calls me. ‘An’ I wouldn’t have invited
yeh unless I wanted yeh there.’

He walked Harry back to his house, one immense hand clapped over his shoulder. Once inside,
Harry was instantly set upon by a great black boarhound that had been lying in wait behind the door.

‘Back, Fang!’ Hagrid said impatiently, ‘Back! You stupid great brute! Harry don’t want yeh
slobbering all over him!’

‘It’s alright,’ Harry insisted, as the dog licked at his face. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘Just push him off if he’s bothering yeh,’ Hagrid told him. ‘He’s a big, softie really.’

Harry sat down at the little table while Hagrid bustled about with the tea things.

‘Oh, I wanted to ask you something actually,’ Harry said, scratching behind the dog’s ears. ‘Do you
know where I might be able to find some snakes? Dumbledore said there should be a few living in
the forbidden forest.’

‘Sure, ‘undreds of ‘em,’ Hagrid replied. ‘Whatcha want a bunch of snakes for though?’

‘Just to play with and talk to,’ Harry said. ‘I’m a parselmouth, you see.’

There was a sudden smash. Hagrid had dropped a teacup in shock. He spun around unsteadily and
stared at Harry with utter disbelief.

‘Yer never!’ He exclaimed.

‘Yeah, I am,’ Harry said, grinning. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not evil or anything.’

‘I didn’t say yer were!’ Hagrid objected, although he looked shaken.

‘Well, I know what they say about Parselmouths,’ Harry said. ‘I think it’s ridiculous though because
snakes aren’t evil.’

‘O’ course they’re not,’ Hagrid agreed, quickly regaining his composure. ‘People are just scared of
'em 'cause they don’t know how to handle ‘em.’

He fetched another cup for Harry, poured him some tea and set it down in front of them.

‘I wouldn’t go around telling people yer a parselmouth though,’ he warned. ‘People’ll be talking about yeh enough as it is.’

‘Yes, but they’ll be needing some new material,’ Harry quipped. ‘They can’t keep going on about all that stuff with you-know-who forever.’

Hagrid chuckled. ‘I take it yeh not too keen on being famous?’

Harry made a face. ‘It’s not too bad. I just don’t like the idea of everyone judging me before they know me.’

He took a sip of the tea and then hastily added several lumps of sugar.

‘I once read a book called, ‘Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century’ and there was a whole chapter about me. It said things like I was a prodigy from the moment of my birth, but I had a wild temper and all sorts of things about my personality, even though no one’s even seen me since I was one-year-old.’

Hagrid chuckled again. ‘Yeh can’t blame people for being curious. Yeh just don’ wanna give ‘em too much cause to gossip.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Harry assured him. ‘I’m quite dull, when you get to know me. I’m sure I’ll quickly disappoint anyone who takes a real interest.’

Hagrid added a small plate of rock cakes to the table and then he sat down heavily in the chair opposite Harry.

‘Not long ‘til your birthday now,’ He said brightly. ‘Yeh looking forward to yer party?’

‘I don’t think there’s going to be a party,’ Harry said with surprise. ‘Dumbledore said he’s getting a cake, though.’

Hagrid chuckled. ‘He’ll do a lot more than that. Yeh think he’ll let yer eleventh birthday pass by without markin’ it?’

Harry frowned uncertainly. ‘Well, he’s getting my presents on Thursday, when we go to Diagon Alley’

‘I’ll have to get yer something too,’ Hagrid said. ‘What would yer like?’

‘Oh you don’t have to do that,’ Harry said quickly.

‘I know I don’t have to,’ Hagrid replied. ‘I want to. Tell yer what, I could get yer an animal.’

‘You could just get me a snake from the forest,’ Harry suggested. ‘That’s be enough, honestly. I think Dumbledore’s going to get me an owl anyway.’

‘Nah, I’ve got a better idea!’ Hagrid declared, his face splitting to a huge grin. ‘Just yeh wait. Yer gonna love it.’

Harry wasn’t sure about that but he was grateful all the same. He thanked Hagrid and tried one of the cakes. It tasted strangely salty and almost broke his teeth.
Hagrid’s prediction about Harry’s birthday turned out to be correct. When Harry came down to dinner on evening of his birthday he found the great hall decked out in bright, festive decorations. A banner had been hung on the wall behind high table with the words, ‘Happy 11th Birthday Harry’ written out in glittering green letters.

All the teachers were there, even Professor Snape, although he had obviously not come to dinner expecting a party and looked thoroughly sickened by it all.

After a few minutes they were also joined by Hagrid, who shot Harry a knowing look before taking his seat, and a pale young man who Harry had never met before.

‘P-professor Quirrel,’ the stranger introduced himself nervously. ‘I’ll be teaching d-defence against the d-d-dark arts this year.’

‘Oh, right,’ Harry said smiling. ‘I’ve been waiting to meet you. I heard you were travelling.’

The man seemed unduly alarmed by this attempt at polite conversation.

‘W-w-waiting to meet me?’ He declared. ‘W-w-why would you w-want to meet m-me? It’s m-my honour to be m-m-meeting you!’

Harry was amused. When he shook the man’s hand he could feel him trembling under his touch.

‘I used t-to t-teach Muggle Studies,’ Professor Quirrell continued forlornly, ‘b-but then Dumbledore s-said he needed s-someone to fill the Dark Arts p-post and I felt I had to s-step in.’

He looked as though he thoroughly regretted the decision.

‘I-I had a g-good g-grounding in the subject, o-of course. A g-good theoretical grounding, anyway, so it made sense. I thought I m-might need a bit more p-practical experience s-so I took a year o-off to t-travel. I-It all went v-very, v-very well, apart from a c-c-couple of instances with v-vampires and a but of t-trouble with a hag. But I g-got out alright in the end.’

‘I look forward to attending your classes,’ Harry said politely.

Professor Quirrell laughed weakly. ‘I d—d-don’t s-suppose you’ll need much instruction from m-me, eh Potter?’

Professor Quirrell took a seat at the end of the table and Harry returned to his place at its centre, between Albus and Professor McGonagall. He could feel everyone staring at him and felt a little overwhelmed by all the attention.

Albus stood up, smiling, and addressed the table.

‘As you can see, tonight is the night of Harry’s eleventh birthday. I hope that everyone will indulge me by joining in a modest celebration to mark the occasion. It’s my last opportunity to make a fuss of Harry and really embarrass him before the start of term so I would be grateful if you could all raise your glasses and make as much noise as possible.’

Everyone obliged, raising their goblets and cheering enthusiastically. Harry felt his face go red and had an urge to crawl under the table to hide.

‘Wonderful,’ Albus declared, when the noise finally died down. ‘Just one more thing then, to really
get us in the spirit, then we’ll get on to the feast.’

Albus waved his wand and instantly everyone found themselves wearing silly party hats. Professor Sprout’s usual witch’s hat was swapped for a fake flowerpot with a fat, cuddly mandrake wriggling around inside, while Hagrid was given a large hat with a sleeping dragon sat on the brim. The two of them immediately started giggling at each other and then swapped their hats over so that they could compare them.

Harry felt the weight of something heavy and metal on his own head and reached up to find the unmistakable points of a crown. He had the nasty suspicion that it was real gold and not a cheap magical costume like everyone else’s. He wished that Albus had chosen something a little less ostentatious.

Most of the teachers seemed to think it was quite charming, but Professor Snape, who had been given an especially ugly pirate’s hat, glowered over at Harry with undisguised revulsion.

‘Little prince, is he?’

Albus beamed down at Harry. ‘Of course,’ he said quite cheerfully. ‘He’s the birthday boy.’

Professor Snape looked like he wanted to say something else but he either thought better of it was distracted by the appearance of the food which was suddenly covering every inch of the table.

Harry always thought that the food at Hogwarts was excellent but this evening everything was especially good. There were all his favourite foods, of course, like and lots of other things he’d never tried before. He had a bit of everything and ate until his stomach started to ache.

In addition to the feast, Albus had also laid on entertainment in the form of a spectacular indoor firework display. Harry almost leapt out of his seat when a great dragon made of scarlet fireballs hurtled towards him, only dissolving at the very last moment into a puff of glittering smoke.

‘I told yeh Dumbledore’d put on sommat special,’ Hagrid yelled over to him, laughing. ‘Although, truth be told this is a little more’n even I expected. I think yeh might’ve gone too far there.’

‘Of course he’s gone too far!’ Harry yelled back. ‘That’s what Albus Dumbledore does, he goes too far! When he dies, that’s what they’ll put on his tombstone! **Albus Wolfric Percival Brian Dumbledore** - He went too far.’

Several people laughed at this, including Albus himself.

‘Please don’t make that my epitaph,’ he pleaded. ‘I have so many fine achievements you could highlight.’

After the feast, the fireworks, the cake and a rousing chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’ everyone started handing over their gifts. Harry, who had not been expecting anything from anyone but Albus, was very touched to receive boxes of chocolates, new quills, books and parchment.

Professor Snape didn’t give him anything and he looked especially nauseous when Professor McGonagall presented Harry with a brand new racing broom.

‘Oh, this is too much!’ Harry exclaimed delightedly. ‘Look, Albus!’

It was a wonderfully sleek broom with a mahogany handle and a straight, neat tail of twigs. It was a **Nimbus Two Thousand**, as proclaimed by the gold inscription in the wood, one of the best brooms that money could buy.
‘Really, Professor! You shouldn’t have!’

‘I agree,’ Professor Snape declared coldly. ‘First years are still forbidden from owning their own broom, are they not?’

Professor McGonagall did not flinch.

‘Exceptions have been made before,’ she said sharply.

‘Indeed?’ Professor Snape spat back. ‘Not in the last hundred years. Correct me if I’m wrong.’

‘Harry is an excellent flyer,’ Albus said calmly. ‘and I am confident he can handle the responsibility of owning his own racing broom.’

‘It does not surprise me that you would break yet another rule for the boy,’ Snape snapped. ‘I just wonder how he will ever learn how to behave properly when you are always making allowances for him.’

‘I assure you Severus,’ Albus replied steadily, ‘when term starts Harry will be subject to the same rules and restrictions as any other student and if you catch him in any infraction you will be free to punish him accordingly.’

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure,’ Professor Snape hissed darkly.

‘Well, that will keep me on my toes,’ Harry said brightly. ‘What a wonderful birthday present. Thank you, Professor.’

Then he turned back to Professor McGonagall, without waiting wanting to see Professor Snape’s reaction.

‘And thank you so much for the broom, Professor McGonagall. I promise I’ll take very good care of it and won’t fly outside of the quidditch pitch.’

It was quite late when the party finally started to break up and everyone slowly made their way up to bed. Hagrid lingered behind to make a few more ominous hints about Harry’s forthcoming birthday present.

‘Sorry I couldn’t give it to yeh tonight but it’s not the easiest thing to get a hold of. I’ve had a bit o’ trouble, actually, but I think it’s all sorted now and I should have it for yeh next week.’

‘You know we’re only supposed to keep owls, cats, rats and roads as pets,’ Harry said nervously. Hagrid waved his hand dismissively. ‘Don’t worry about that! I’ve talked it over with Dumbledore an’ he says it’s fine.’

Harry was somewhat relieved to hear this. He didn’t think that Albus would agree to anything really unpleasant.

‘Oh, okay then.’ He said. ‘Sorry for going on about it. I just wouldn’t want anything really big or dangerous like a dragon or something.’

Hagrid looked surprised. ‘Wouldn’t yeh? I’d love a dragon, me.’

Harry’s stomach fell. ‘You would?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Hagrid said, taking off his party hat and turning it round in his hands. ‘Wanted one ever
since I was a kid. They’re ‘mazing creatures, dragons.’

Harry looked down at the little velvet dragon, which had smoke curling in and out of its nostrils, and felt a renewed sense of foreboding.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a while, but I really enjoyed writing it. I love the idea of Snape losing his mind because Dumbledore’s breaking all the rules for Harry and throwing him a huge birthday party and pretty much forcing everyone to play along. I don’t have Dumbledore defending Snape too much, as I think he is wrong in how he behaves in canon, but I think he’s actually behaving quite reasonably in this chapter. I feel very sorry for him, having to watch Harry get so thoroughly spoiled! :’)}
Harry twirled his new wand round and round between his fingers, delighting in the feel of it. He had been wanting a wand of his own for so long he could scarcely believe that he finally had one.

‘I’d rather you didn’t do that in here,’ Albus said. ‘It might attract attention and you’re not supposed to know any magic yet.’

They were sat in the corner of the leaky cauldron, taking a break and having a butterbeer before starting their journey back to Hogwarts. Harry’s purchases were piled up on the seat beside him, making the spacious booth seem crowded. A snowy owl in a cage also crammed in there with them, taking up most of the table.

Harry pocketed his wand obediently. Just knowing that it was there, within reach at any moment, was enough to keep him smiling.

‘I think Ollivander could tell I’d used a wand before,’ He commented.

‘Well, you made it quite obvious,’ Albus replied. ‘Most children barely know how to hold a wand properly. You took it from him and flourished it as though you were about to cast a summoning charm.’

‘Well, I was,’ Harry admitted. ‘I only just managed to stop myself.’

Albus smiled. ‘You must remember to be more careful. We’re not alone anymore and we can’t be seen to be breaking the ministry’s laws.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Harry agreed, making a face. ‘That Ollivander is madder than a box of kneazles though. I don’t think he’s concerned with the Restriction of Underage Sorcery. All he cares about is wands.’

‘Exceptionally talented people are often a little bit unhinged,’ Albus replied, opening up a bag of cockroach clusters and popping one in his mouth.

‘Yes, but all that stuff about Voldemort was really crazy,’ Harry insisted. He gave his guardian a sidelong glance. ‘Were you surprised that I ended up with the same wand as Voldemort?’

Albus frowned thoughtfully and took another sweet from the bag. Harry waited impatiently as he chewed his way through it, strongly suspecting that he was only doing it to play for time.

‘I was surprised,’ Albus said eventually, ‘but I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. Wands often have an affinity for a particular type of magic.’

‘And you think I have a similar type of magic to Voldemort?’ Harry asked.

‘Possibly, possibly,’ Albus said. ‘I’m not an expert in wand-lore, of course. It might be something else entirely.’

Harry gave him a hard look. ‘Albus, you never lie to me, do you?’

Albus tensed a little. ‘No, Harry,’ he said firmly. ‘Sometimes, there are things which I choose to keep
from you until I think you are ready to hear them, but I never lie.’

Harry continued to stare intently. ‘Sometimes you have theories that you don’t share with me at all,’ he accused.

Albus shrugged. ‘That’s true,’ he agreed. ‘I have a lot of theories and I don’t like to tell you anything unless I’m quite certain it about it. Especially if it’s something that might upset you.’

Harry shifted in his seat restlessly. He took one of the cockroach clusters, just to distract himself, and found that they were actually quite good, if a little crunchy.

‘There’s something else I’ve been wanting to ask to you about,’ he said steadily. ‘Something about Voldemort. May I?’

Albus looked wary. ‘You may,’ he agreed. ‘Although if it’s very serious then this may not be the best place to discuss it.’

The small pub wasn’t very busy at the moment, but there were still half a dozen witches and wizards sat around drinking and they kept throwing curious glances over them. There was also the danger that someone new might come in at any moment, spot them, and rush over to speak with them.

It had been like that all day. Wherever Harry and Albus had gone they’d been the centre of attention and barely five minutes had gone by without someone new accosting them. Some people just wanted to introduce themselves to Harry, but most wanted to speak to Albus and seemed keen to have a lengthy conversation.

‘I suppose it’s not the best idea,’ Harry said gloomily. ‘I can talk to you about it later. It’s just ... well, you’re probably just going to laugh at me, anyway.’

‘Oh well,’ Albus exclaimed cheerfully. ‘If it’s something ridiculous you may as well go ahead.’

Harry grimaced. ‘It is rather ridiculous. I know it is, but I just feel like I have to ask.’

‘Go on,’ Albus urged, taking a swing of butterbeer.

‘Alright,’ Harry declared, ‘Alright. I’m just gonna say it.’ He fixed Albus with a determined stare. ‘Is Voldemort my real father?’

Albus almost choked on his drink. He hastily shook his head, gasping and swallowing as he did so.

Harry could feel himself blushing. ‘I know it sounds crazy. Everyone is always saying how much I look like James. But there are a lot of traits I share with Voldemort too. Traits that ought be hereditary. Like being a parslemouth.’

Albus met his eyes. ‘Harry, I can assure you that James Potter was your father. I knew him and your mother very well.’

Harry held his gaze. ‘And you’re absolutely sure?’ He pressed. ‘You don’t have any doubts?’

Albus frowned. ‘Do you really think it’s possible that your mother would have had an affair with Voldemort?’

‘Well ... I never imagined it being consensual,’ Harry explained, ‘but I thought it might be possible if he used a love potion or put her under the imperious curse.’

Albus pushed his drink aside and leant over the table so that he could speak to Harry more privately.
'Why would Voldemort do something like that though?' He asked quietly. ‘I’ve told that he was incapable of loving anyone.’

‘Well, he didn’t have to love her,’ Harry whispered back. ‘Unless ... you don’t think Voldemort was capable of even desiring someone like that.’

Albus was quiet for a moment. ‘I’m not sure about that, but I think he would have needed a much better reason if he was going to go to the lengths you’ve described.’

Harry was still for a second and then he let out a great sigh. ‘I know. It doesn’t make sense. I have so much of my mother and father in me, but a lot of Voldemort too, and I just can’t work out how it all fits together.’

Albus smiled sadly. ‘I know that feeling. You can see some of the pieces in the puzzle but not all of them and you can’t quite fill in the gaps.’

Harry looked up at him pleadingly. ‘Do you have a theory, Albus?’

Albus twined his fingers together so that they formed a tight wall in front of him. ‘I do have a theory,’ he admitted, ‘but it is just that. I have no evidence to speak of.’

Harry looked at him expectantly.

‘I believe,’ Albus began, after a lengthy pause, ‘that Lord Voldemort accidentally transferred some of his powers to you on the night he tried to kill you.’

Harry could feel his heart racing in his chest. ‘How?’ He pressed. ‘Why?’

Albus shook his head. ‘That, I’m afraid, cannot tell you. I’m sorry.’

Harry was disappointed, but he knew that there was no point in arguing. He picked at a couple of cockroach clusters and poked them through the bars of the cage. His owl pecked at them curiously before turning away in disgust.

‘Harry,’ Albus began delicately. ‘I understand how you came to think what you did but I have to admit that it surprised me. I had no idea that you suspected such a thing.’

Harry smiled sheepishly to show he knew how foolish he’d been, but Albus still looked serious.

‘Didn’t it upset you to think that Lord Voldemort might be your father?’

‘No,’ Harry replied, and then hastily corrected himself. ‘Well, obviously I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else to know about it, if it was true, but it wouldn’t really have mattered to me.’

‘Wouldn’t it?’ Albus said, with surprise.

‘Of course not,’ Harry replied, looking up into Albus’s eyes. ‘It doesn’t make any difference at all.’

For a few seconds, Albus continued to frown down at Harry before understanding dawned. Harry had to look away, embarrassed, as Albus got all misty-eyed behind his spectacles.

**

They got back at the castle just in time to catch the end of dinner and Harry ate quickly, eager to get up to the owlery.
Professor McGonnagall engaged Albus in a brief, furtive discussion which Harry strained to overhear. He couldn’t catch much, because they were talking so quietly, but he gathered that it had something to do with the package that Albus had collected from Gringotts.

When he got up to the owlery he found that Hedwig had settled herself in comfortably amongst the half-dozen school owls. She hooted contentedly at him when she saw him arrive.

‘You’re lucky,’ Harry told her. ‘You’ve got the run of the place at the moment, just like me.’

Hedwig hooted again and flexed her wings languidly.

‘Here,’ Harry offered her some treats. ‘Don’t worry, they’re not cockroaches. You’ll like them.’

He stayed with his owl for a little while, petting and playing with her, and watched the sun set from the tall tower window. When he finally came down he was surprised to find Albus waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase.

‘Missing me already?’ Harry joked.

‘Of course,’ Albus replied. ‘You rushed off so quickly after dinner I didn’t get a chance to talk to you.’

‘What is it?’ Harry asked. ‘Did you want to tell me what you and Professor McGonagall were whispering about? Or what was in that package from vault seven hundred and fifteen?’

Albus ignored these questions. ‘I have another gift for you,’ he declared.

Harry allowed himself to be distracted. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a secret,’ Albus said tantalisingly. ‘Come to the office with me. I’ll give it to you there.’

Harry followed Albus up to the headmaster’s office and waited while Albus rifled around in a bottomless drawer.

‘Professor Snape is right, you know,’ he told him. ‘You are spoiling me.’

‘Well, this is actually something that already belongs to you,’ Albus replied. ‘It was your father’s.’

He brought out a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. Harry took it from him and wrapped it carefully, revealing something bright and soft and silver. Harry took hold of the edge and shook it out properly. The fine cloth fell to the floor as smooth as shadow, without any weight or resistance.

‘Is this ... what I think it is?’ Harry asked, in a hushed tone. ‘Is it an invisibility cloak?’

Albus nodded, eyes twinkling. Harry immediately threw the cloak over his shoulders and gasped with delight as his body vanished from sight.

‘Will you summon a mirror?’ He requested. ‘I’d like to not see myself.’

Albus obliged, producing a full-length mirror with the flick of his wand. Harry stepped in front of it and pulled the hood up over his head. He disappeared entirely, leaving only the office wall showing in the mirror’s glass.

‘This is insane!’ He exclaimed ecstatically. ‘How long have you had it?’

‘Since before you were born,’ Albus replied. ‘Your father leant it to me just before he died. It’s quite
an exceptional cloak, you see. It’s been passed down in your family for generations but it’s never faded or failed.’

‘Why didn’t you give it to me sooner?’ Harry complained.

Albus raised his eyebrows. ‘Are you joking? I couldn’t give you something this powerful when you were little. What if you got into trouble while you were invisible? I’d never be able to find you.’

‘Don’t you think It’s more dangerous at Hogwarts?’ Harry laughed.

‘No,’ Albus said, waving one hand dismissively. ‘You have a wand now. You can take care of yourself.’

He took a step towards Harry and felt about in the air for him, while Harry giggled. Once he found his face he chucked him playfully under the chin.

‘Do you feel invincible, now?’ He asked.

Harry had to admit that he did. It was as if putting on the cloak had completed some sort of grand transformation. He suddenly felt very strong, confident and free.

‘Can I go anywhere I want like this?’ He asked.

Albus smiled. ‘I don’t see why not. You know the castle very well, but I’m sure you’ll gain a difference perspective when you explore it unseen.’

‘What about the forbidden forest?’ Harry asked. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t go too far in with the cloak on? If something happened to me in there I’d be in real trouble.’

‘It would be best to exercise caution there,’ Albus agreed, ‘and not stray too far from the path, but you’ll be safer travelling in the forest with the cloak than without it. I trust your judgement as to how far you go.’

Harry drew back his hood and made a face at him. ‘Really?’

‘Of course,’ Albus said brightly. ‘I’ve taught you enough to protect yourself. I think it’s a good thing for you to run a little wild now, while you’re all alone. It will prepare you even better for when the term starts.’

Harry grinned at him. ‘Alright then.’

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took quite a bit longer than expected because I wasn’t sure how to split up the stuff I wanted to include. Next chapter should focus almost entirely on Snape and Harry, with a little bit about Hagrid’s mysterious birthday present, and then the chapter after that will be the start of term AT LAST!

Thanks again to everyone who’s commented so far. It really is a huge help to know what people are thinking of this fic so far and what they’re hoping to see in the future!
Very keen to keep going and deliver!
Liberty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he was exploring the castle in his invisibility cloak Harry often pretended that he was a ghost. He liked to imagine what it would like to not have a body, hidden beneath the cloak. He thought that it would probably feel much the same, except that he wouldn’t be able to reach out and touch the place he was haunting.

As a consequence he had grown more curious about the Hogwarts ghosts and had started to seek them out and follow them. He wanted to discover what they did with all their time and although he found out a great deal about their routines, sooner or later he always ended up hitting a wall (both physically and metaphorically) while his quarry glided straight through.

He asked Albus whether there was any magic that would allow him to go through walls too, but Albus advised that Hogwarts’s walls were so heavily protected by magic that they were utterly impenetrable by wizards.

‘Besides, I think it’s rather hypocritical of you to go around spying on the ghosts,’ he commented, ‘after you took such exception to ghosts spying on you.’

‘That’s hardly the same thing!’ Harry protested. ‘Ghosts don’t have any bodies or bodily functions so they don’t need privacy, and anyway - ‘ he continued hastily, because he could see that Albus was about to argue with him and didn’t want to get drawn into a heavy metaphysical debate, ‘I have another problem. Something else I wanted to ask you about.’

He quickly related a terrifying experience he’d had when he tried to follow the Blood Baron. He’d only been on his tail for a minute or so when the grizzled, dead-eyed spirit had suddenly turned around and stared right at him. Harry had stood frozen to the spot, heart banging in his chest, for what seemed like an eternity, until the Bloody Baron had finally turned away again and left him.

‘I thought the cloak worked on everyone, including ghosts, but he looked straight at me.’

'He probably just heard your footsteps,’ Albus replied soothingly. ‘You might be invisible but people can still hear you.’

‘No one else noticed,’ Harry said glumly. ‘I suppose they weren’t really on their guard though. The Bloody Baron looks like he’s always on edge.’

‘I can show you how to silence your footsteps, if you like.’ Albus suggested. ‘It’s a fairly simple spell.’

He actually ended up teaching Harry several different spells of concealment and advising him on which ones were best for which situations.

‘For instance, Captis Canetis is perfect if all you want to move around completely undetected,’ Albus explained. ‘It actually stops you making any noise whatsoever so you can tell straight away if it’s working properly.’

‘How do I break it though?’ Harry asked - or at least tried to - no sound actually came out of his mouth.
‘Oh yes, that’s a good point,’ Albus said, as if this issue had not occurred to him. ‘If you cast the spell on yourself then you’ll be stuck like that forever - or, at least, until someone else releases you.’

He quickly did so with an apologetic smile. ‘I always perform the counter-spell non-verbally, but that’s probably too advanced for you.’

‘That’s okay,’ Harry replied. ‘I prefer the first one you showed me anyway, the obicantis charm. I like being able to hear myself.’

‘You have to watch that though,’ Albus warned. ‘Walking around invisible and talking to yourself isn’t the healthiest way to spend your time and if you go mad everyone’s bound to blame me.’

Harry chuckled. ‘I should think so.’

Harry performed the obicantis charm once more to make sure he’d got it. It felt a little like being encasing himself in a bubble, and when he broke the spell there was the faintest of pops inside his ears.

‘Could I cast it over myself and someone else?’ He wondered. ‘Then we could both get under the cloak and talk to each other without anyone else seeing or hearing us.’

Albus was pleased by the suggestion.

‘Yes, that would work well. If you just wanted to have a private conversation though, there’s better ways you could do that.’

Then he was off again imparting all the major spells that could be used to distract or confuse an eavesdropper.

‘Muffliato has always been popular, of course, but it’s quite imprecise. I personally recommend disconcelia, especially if you’re trying to conceal a conversation from just one person in particular. Your target will still be able to hear you talking, but they’ll only get a garbled version of your conversation. Something like, ”Yeah, next Tuesday with the squirrels. I don’t want that soup though. Bring your best shoes.”’

Harry laughed.

‘It’s quite subtle though,’ Albus assured him. ‘Most people under the influence of the disconcelia don’t even realise it. They just assume they haven’t been listening closely enough or that they were distracted somehow and students talk utter none sense most of the time anyway so teachers are unlikely to find it suspicious.’

‘You really shouldn’t be telling me this,’ Harry said, still laughing.

‘Oh, it’s all good fun,’ Albus replied. ‘You’ll want to scheme and share secrets with all your friends and if anything serious ever comes up it’s good to have some tricks like these up your sleeve.’

Since presenting him with the cloak, Albus’s attitude towards Harry had grown a lot more careless and indulgent. He did little to curtail Harry’s activities, other than dispensing the occasional warning, and enjoyed listening to stories of his adventures.

He had only intervened on one occasion, after Harry had gotten lost in the Forbidden Forest, by sending Fawkes out to find him and bring him back safely. Even then, he hadn’t lectured him too severely, just reminded him to stick to the path and return before dark.
Harry certainly appreciated the freedom and liberty but what he enjoyed far more was the friendly, conspiratorial atmosphere that had grown up between himself and Albus.

‘Tell me a story about some of Hogwarts’s worst-behaved students,’ Harry requested, flopping down in his usual place on the sofa and throwing his legs over the arm. ‘What’s the stupidest thing someone’s ever done?’

Albus shot him a mischievous look and settled himself behind his desk.

‘Well, that’s a very difficult question,’ he said softly. ‘I hardly know where to start.’

Half an hour later Harry was crying with laughter as Albus recounted some of the most amusing incidents he had witnessed, during his time as a teacher.

‘The best part is the excuses,’ Albus said as Harry wiped the tears from his eyes. ‘It’s always something like, “Oh, I was just trying to do my homework, with my parchment on my lap and I tried to put an enlargement charm on it, you know, just so I could fit a bit more in my essay, and then my wand just slipped!”’

All this was delivered in a high flutey voice that almost made Harry choke his own tongue.

‘I know it sounds crazy, but I swear it’s true!’ Albus continued his impression before smoothly dropping back to his normal voice. ‘Oh no, not at all. You’d be surprised how many boys have the exact same problem. I appreciate their dedication to their homework, but I think they would do better not to obsess so heavily over length.’

Harry gasped for breath. ‘Does it really happen every single year?’

‘Almost every year,’ Albus replied. ‘Young boys seem have an irresistible inclination towards self-improvement and students are always trying to modify themselves, one way or another.’

He leant forward in his desk. ‘Let me give you some good advice for the start of term. Something very important. Probably the most important thing I’ve told you so far.’

Harry giggled in anticipation. ‘Go on,’ he urged.

‘Well, if you ever wanted some ... privacy when you’re in the dorm, then you should use the obicantis charm. Not on yourself though, on the bed. It’ll fix itself to the frame and cover you completely. If you do it right then it’ll last a few days so you can cast the spell in advance, while no one else is around, and no one will know anything about it.’

He raised one hand and wagged a finger at Harry.

‘Whatever you do, don’t use the barrier spell. The other boys will hear you casting it and as soon as it’s up you won’t we able to hear then either. So, of course, they’ll immediately start making fun of you. Talking about what you’re doing, moaning and groaning.’

Albus’s lips twitched for a moment. ‘It is very funny,’ he admitted before turning stern, ‘but cruel. There was a boy in my year who did it for years. He was so humiliated when he found everyone was laughing at him.’

‘Oh no!’ Harry said, squirming with delight. ‘You didn’t tell him, did you?’

Albus looked sheepish. ‘No, I didn’t, but I should’ve. He was a good friend of mine and it went on for far too long. I just felt too awkward bringing it up.’
Harry laughed. ‘Oh Albus!’

It was at this point that there was a loud knock on the door. Albus composed himself instantly, granting permission to enter, and Professor Snape swept into the office.

His immediately spotted Harry, sprawled over the sofa, and glared at him with disgust.

Harry’s face was burning with shame. He sincerely hoped that Snape hadn’t overheard any of his and Albus’s conversation.

‘What are you doing in here, Potter?’ Snape demanded coldly.

‘N-nothing,’ Harry said defensively. ‘Just - just hanging out.’ He sounded absurdly guilty for someone who had been doing nothing wrong.

‘This is the headmaster’s office, you know,’ Snape said sneeringly. ‘Not your own personal common room.’ He stared pointedly at Harry’s legs, dangling over the side of the sofa. ‘What do you think you’re doing anyway, lounging all over that thing? It wasn’t put in here for you to sprawl out on for hours on end.’

‘Yes it was!’ Harry objected, without thinking. ‘That’s exactly why Albus put it in here! It’s my sofa!’

Snape’s look of disgust only deepened, to the point at which he almost looked in physical pain.

‘Is there anything I can do for you, Severus?’ Albus said kindly. ‘I’m sure you had some purpose in mind for coming to visiting me now.’

‘Indeed,’ Snape replied, ‘but it’s a confidential matter. School business.’ He glared at Harry again. ‘I could not possibly discuss it in front of Mr Potter.’

‘Ah,’ said Harry, feeling suddenly bold and reckless. ‘Is it something to do with the very important and powerfully magical item that was recently retrieved from Gringotts?’

Snape spun around in shock. ‘You know about it?!’ He spat at Harry. Then he rounded on Albus. ‘You told him?! You said no students were supposed to know about - ‘

‘No, no, no!’ Albus protested, holding up his hands. ‘He doesn’t know anything! Please watch what you say, Severus. He’s just trying to trick you into letting something slip.’

Professor Snape took a moment to catch his breath and then he shot Harry a filthy look. He looked like he wanted to take him apart, piece by piece, until he was utterly unrecognisable.

‘Perhaps you should go, Harry,’ Albus said smoothly. ‘Professor Snape and I have business to discuss now.’

Harry started to scramble off of the sofa but Snape thrust out a hand to stop him.

‘Don’t bother,’ he hissed. ‘I wouldn’t want to intrude on your cosy little chat. I’ll come back later, Headmaster.’

And with that, he strode right out of the office again.

Harry sat back down again, glancing up at Albus nervously. The old man was frowning unhappily.

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said. ‘I wasn’t very polite. I got carried away.’
Albus shook his head. ‘I know it’s hard,’ he said sadly, ‘but you must try to control yourself around Professor Snape.’

‘I know, I know.’

Albus leant across his desk and steepled his fingers together.

‘Let me be clear, Harry, we’ve had a lot of fun tonight, but once term starts I want you to get serious about your studies.’

Of course,’ Harry said.

Albus was giving him a very intent look now.

‘I’ve done everything I can to give you an advantage,’ he said softly. Given you a thorough grounding in magic. So I expect you to perform well in all your classes and receive perfect grades.’

Harry smiled slightly at this and raised his eyebrows. ‘What if I don’t?’

‘Then there will be consequences,’ Albus replied smoothly.

‘What sort of consequences?’ He couldn’t recall Albus ever punishing him before.

Albus met his eyes. ‘Creative consequences.’

Knowing Albus as he did, Harry took this very threat very seriously indeed.

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘I’ll do my best.’

‘I’d like you to do more than that,’ Albus said. ‘I want you to go above and beyond in order to succeed.’

Harry snorted. ‘How?’

Albus looked him right in the eyes. ‘I want you to try and ingratiate yourself with Professor Snape.’

There was a brief silence.

‘Are you joking?’ Harry asked. ‘I mean, it’s one thing trying to keep things civil but now you expect me to try and make friends?

’Yes,’ Albus replied.

‘You’re insane,’ Harry said. ‘Utterly insane. I mean, I know people are always saying that you’re mad just because you want to broker peace between wizards and giants and build a garden entirely out of liquorice but this really bonkers.’

‘I’m sure it will be a challenge, but I want you to try. It would make a great difference if you could win Professor Snape over before the start of term.’

‘How, though?’ Harry protested. ‘How am I supposed to do that?’

Albus was ready for this. ‘I think you should go and ask him if there’s anything you can do to help him to prepare for his first classes.’

Harry opened his mouth wide and then shut it again without saying anything. He couldn’t think of
any good arguments to make.

‘I’m glad you agree,’ Albus said. ‘It’s a good plan. Just be as humble and deferential as possible and don’t lose your temper. You should mention your mother too, if the opportunity arises.’

Chapter End Notes

I had to chop this chapter up because it was getting so long and it wasn’t working so well. So more Snape stuff in the next chapter.
Harry knocked on the potion master’s door with a deep sense of foreboding. He was sure that Professor Snape wouldn’t appreciate him disturbing him like this. He always took offence at Harry’s presence so was sure to consider him turning up uninvited as an especially vile insult. His reservation proved justified when Snape finally appeared, greeting Harry with a thoroughly filthy glare.

‘What are you doing here?’ He demanded; His usual refrain.

‘Professor Dumbledore sent me,’ Harry said, thinking it simplest to tell the truth. ‘He said that you might need some help preparing for the start of term.’

Snape’s lip curled. ‘I have managed without help for the last eleven years so I don’t see why I would suddenly need your assistance now. Of course, I do appreciate you taking time out of your busy, busy schedule. Good day, Potter.’

He started to shut the door on him.

‘Wait!’ Harry said urgently. ‘Please let me do something! I know it’s really troublesome for you, but Albus wants me to make myself useful.’

The door creaked open again and Snape surveyed him suspiciously.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘I’ll find you something to do.’

It sounded like a threat.

He quickly set Harry to work sorting out the classroom store cupboard, chopping up ingredients and putting them in fresh jars and bottles. It was very tedious and unpleasant work, made all the more awful by a constant stream of criticism. It soon became obvious that Snape had only given Harry the job so that he could tell him that he was doing it all wrong.

Harry did his best to follow Snape’s instructions but no matter how hard he tried, the man was never satisfied. Harry could feel anger rising up inside him even though he tried to push it down.

‘No, no, no,’ Snape said, for about the hundredth time. ‘Are you really incapable of following even the simplest instructions? You have to cut off the tips of the toadstools before pickling them otherwise they’ll be useless.’

‘Oh, Ok,’ Harry mumbled, reaching for the knife.

’Not with that Knife!’ Snape said urgently. ‘You’ve just used that on the valerian leaves. Don’t you understand how dangerous that is?’

‘Yes, I was just going to - ‘

‘Scourgify!’ Snape barked, wiping the blade clean with magic. ‘Really, Potter, it’s a miracle you haven’t poisoned yourself yet. I suppose it’s easier with Dumbledore looking over your shoulder, telling you what to do.’

‘Mm-hmm.’

‘I can see you’ve become lazy and complacent. You’ll need to pull yourself together before the start of term. Potion-making is a delicate, complicated craft. It’s not about just throwing a bunch of
ingredients into a cauldron.’

Snape then started to rhapsodise on the beauty of poisons and elixirs. Harry got the impression that he had made this speech, or something very similar, many times before.

‘I don’t expect a crude mind like yours to really understand but there’s a subtle power to potions that can’t be matched by any spell or curse. I can brew mixtures potent enough to transform the body and mind. I can make the drinker braver, smarter or stronger. I can make them forget everything they’ve ever known or recount their deepest secrets. I can bring them back from the very edge of death, or push them right over that precipice.’

‘And yet you can’t make shampoo?’ Harry quipped irritably.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth he regretted them. The professor visibly tensed and his face went very white indeed.

‘I’m so sorry - ‘ Harry began, but it was too late.

‘Get out!’ Snape hissed, a lock of his greasy hair falling down over his forehead. ‘Get out right now!’

Harry threw down the knife and headed for the door, thinking it best not to argue.

‘And don’t come back!’ Snape called after him. ‘You can tell Dumbledore I’m not wasting any more of my time babysitting his spoiled little brat!’

**

Albus was not angry when he heard what had happened but he was disappointed. He surveyed Harry grimly from behind his desk.

‘I warned you that he might try and provoke you. I told you that you needed to stay calm, be patient and control your temper.’

‘But why am I the one that’s got to be patient and understanding?’ Harry asked, pacing back and forth across the office. ‘He’s the adult and I’m the child! He should be the one swallowing his pride and making an effort.’

Albus sighed. ‘I know. It’s not fair.’

‘You’re right, it’s not!’ Harry said hotly. ‘Why haven’t you called Professor Snape in here and given him a lecture about trying to play nice?’

Albus gave him a look. ‘What makes you think I haven’t?’

This surprised Harry.

‘Do you really think I wouldn’t defend you?’ Albus continued. ‘I’ve told Professor Snape that you’re a smart, good-natured boy and that he needs to give you a chance. For what it’s worth, I think he has been holding back a little. He certainly hasn’t been going out of his way to attack or humiliate you.’

Harry considered for a moment. ‘That’s not especially reassuring. If this is Professor Snape at his best, I definitely don’t want to see him at his worst.’

Albus smiled. ‘I’ve already acknowledged that Severus Snape is a very difficult and troubled man. I’ve done my best to influence him but now I need you to do your part.’
‘You want me to try again?’ Harry asked dully.

‘Yes, I think you can do better.’

Harry sighed. ‘He told me not to come back. He’s really angry with me now and he didn’t want me bothering him in the first place. Don’t you think it would be better to wait until the start of term? It might be easier to earn his approval in class.’

‘No, It wouldn’t,’ Albus said firmly. ‘Professor Snape is a very strict and exacting teacher. You’ve just had a taste of how critical he can be and how difficult to please. He also tends to make sport of his worst students and mock them for the amusement of the rest of the class.’

‘Why do you let him get away with that?’ Harry protested furiously.

‘Once again, you presume that I have never spoken to Professor Snape about his teaching methods. I am the headmaster, you know. What exactly do you think my job entails?’

‘I don’t know,’ Harry grumbled. ‘I thought you just sat up here all day eating bon-bons and arguing with the portraits.’

‘Well that’s the bulk of it, yes,’ Albus said breezily, ‘but I also spend a significant amount of time arguing with real people. Now, I want you to think of another excuse to go and see Professor Snape again. If you try hard enough, I’m sure you’ll find a way to connect with him.’

**

Harry wasn’t convinced. He spent the next few days trying to come up with a plan and failing miserably. Professor Snape seemed quite determined to hate him now and Harry felt inclined to let him.

He was lying on his belly in the grass one morning puzzling over it when a great shadow fell across him. He looked up and found the groundskeeper grinning down at him.

‘Hullo there!’ Hagrid said cheerfully. ‘I’ve been lookin’ for yeh everywhere! Got yer birthday present ready at last!’

Harry had almost forgotten about Hagrid’s present. He felt a rush of excitement and anticipation.

‘Where is it?’ He asked, jumping up. ‘Back at your house? Can we go now?’

‘That’s right!’ Hagrid replied, chuckling.

They walked back together and Hagrid escorted him into his hut, hustling back Fang the boarhound.

‘Ere,’ Hagrid said gruffly, ‘It’s just in this box.’

He gestured at a small wooden crate on the table. Harry approached it gingerly, afraid of what he might find, and then let out a huge sigh of relief.

‘It IS snakes!’ He exclaimed. ‘No wait -’

The tangle of scaly bodies was quickly uncoiling and Harry saw that it was not, as he had first thought, three snakes, but one snake with three heads.

‘Tha’s a Runespoor,’ Hagrid said proudly. ‘Quite rare. Comes from Africa.’
Harry leant closer and whispered a greeting in parseltongue. Three bright orange heads rose up to look at him.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Harry said delightedly. ‘I mean, they’re beautiful. Is it ‘it’ or ‘them,’ do you think?’

‘Oh, I dunno. I hadn’t thought about it.’

Harry switched to parseltongue again. ‘Tell me, pretty ones, what are your names?’

They seemed confused. The middle head hissed something garbled about being itself and the other two followed suit, suddenly jostling for space.

‘They keep doing that,’ Hagrid noted. ‘Fightin’ with each other. The right one bites quite a bit, but if he gets too outa hand the other two gang up on ‘im.’

He sounded amused.

‘How old are they?’ Harry asked. ‘They seem quite young.’

‘Oh, only a coupla weeks old,’ Hagrid said. ‘I wanted to get yeh an egg so yeh could watch it hatch, but it didn’ work out.’

Harry hissed down at the snakes again. ‘Don’t fight, my darlings. Tell me are you sons or daughters?’

The heads all spoke at once in sharp, insistent chorus. ‘Daughters! Daughters! Daughters!’

‘What’re they sayin?’ Hagrid asked curiously.

‘They’re just telling me they’re girls, not boys,’ Harry translated.

‘Are they?’ Hagrid said excitedly. ‘They’ll be worth more’n I thought then. Runespoor eggs go for a galleon a scoop.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed excitedly. ‘They’re really useful for potions.’

An idea was slowly forming in his mind.

‘Thanks so much, Hagrid! It’s a really brilliant birthday present!’

He ran over and gave the man a big hug, which seemed to embarrass him greatly. His naturally ruddy face turned a bright, shiny scarlet.

‘Don’ mention it!’ He said gruffly. ‘Really.’

Harry turned back to the box and reached in carefully to pick up his new pet. The runespoor was not at all shy and wrapped itself around his wrist.

‘Where are we going?’ The left head asked. ‘Are we going outside? We’ve been outside before!’ The middle one exclaimed. ‘You smell interesting,’ the right one commented.

‘Do you mind if I take them away now?’ Harry asked. ‘I can’t wait to show them off.’

‘Go ahead,’ Hagrid said. ‘Dumbledore hasn’t even seen ‘em yet. They like you already, don’ they?’

As he spoke, the right head opened her mouth and tried to bite Harry’s arm. Luckily Harry caught
her in time and pinched her mouth closed.

'Don’t bite me, precious,' he hissed. 'I’m your friend.'

'You smell good,’ the right head complained. ‘I only wanted to taste you.’ The middle head nudged at her, angrily. ‘No biting!’ She urged. ‘No biting!’ The left head agreed.

‘Watch yerself,’ Hagrid chuckled.

Harry set off back across the grounds, whispering to the girls as walked, telling them where they were and where he was taking them.

'I’m Harry. I’m going to be your friend and take care of you from now on. Bring you food and give you strokes.’

‘What about the big man? Won’t he take care of us anymore,’ Asked the left head. ‘He can’t understand us,’ the middle head objected. ‘He can’t be our friend.’ The right head licked at Harry’s skin. ‘Will you feed us meat? The big man gave us lots of meat.’

'I’ll get you lots of tasty meat,’ Harry assured them. ‘I’ll take you back to see the big man - Hagrid - sometimes too.’

Once inside the castle he headed straight to the dungeons. He was not going to visit the headmaster, as Hagrid had assumed, but to the potions master. The runespoor gave him the perfect pretext for meeting Professor Snape again.

**

It took Snape even longer to answer the door this time and as soon as he saw it was Harry he made ready to slam it shut again.

‘I’m so sorry to bother you, Professor,’ Harry said urgently. ‘I just wanted to show you my new pet.’

‘I’m not interested in your owl, Potter,’ Snape snapped.

‘It’s not an owl,’ Harry said quickly, jamming his foot in the door. ‘Look! It’s a runespoor!’

He brandished the arm with the snake on it. The three heads arched and hissed at the potions master.

Professor Snape recoiled in shock.

‘What the - where - ?!’

‘Hagrid got it for me,’ Harry explained. ‘It’s a late birthday present.’ He stroked the snake’s back gently and hissed back at them. ‘I’m a parslemouth, you see,’ he added carelessly.

The professor was struck dumb by this confession which Harry took to be a very good sign.

‘Might I come in, Professor?’ He asked, as politely as possible. ‘I’d like to get some advice on caring for a creature like this. I’ve never owned anything this magical before.’

Snape hesitated for a moment and then let the door swing open. He was shaking slightly.

‘Does Dumbledore know about this?’ He asked.

‘Yes,’ Harry said as he stepped into the office. ‘He said it would be alright. Runespoor’s aren’t
especially dangerous, are they?’

The professor bristled with irritation. ‘Not that dangerous!’ He repeated snarkily. ‘You do realise they grow to up to seven feet long?’

‘Oh, no! I don’t know that!’ Harry lied. ‘I suppose that might cause some problems.’

‘Do you even have any idea where you’re going to keep it?’ Snape demanded

‘No,’ Harry replied, enjoying himself now. ‘No plan whatsoever. I suppose I could keep in the castle somewhere, but it would have to be hidden.’

‘This is absolutely typical of Dumbledore!’ Snape exploded. ‘He knows students aren’t supposed to have exotic pets but of course he lets you have some ridiculous monster! Hasn’t even given a second thought about how it’s going to be housed.’

‘I suppose he thought I could control it alright.’ Harry said mildly. ‘I’m just glad it’s not anything worse. I know Hagrid has a taste for large and dangerous creatures.’

‘Utterly insane!’ Snape spat. ‘What’s his obsession with three-headed beasts, anyway?’

Harry could tell that this was winding him up, but he thought that was safe as long as Snape’s anger was directed elsewhere.

‘I’m thinking of calling them The Weird Sisters,’ He declared, setting the snake down on the desk. ‘Nona, Decima and Morta. After the Roman fates, you know. They don’t have their own names yet because they’re just babies.’

Snape glared at the writhing heads. ‘We ought to just execute it now before it gets out of hand,’ he said. Then he gave Harry a very nasty smile.

Harry felt a brief flicker of fear, but he quickly squashed it down. He told himself that Albus would never let Snape kill his pet and Snape would never dare to try.

‘Don’t say that,’ he said beseechingly. ‘They’re well-behaved little girls.’

He leant down to whisper to the heads, aware of Snape’s eyes on him as he did so. The sisters hissed back happily and then snapped their jaws at each other.

‘I suppose they might kill each other in good time,’ Snape said cruelly. ‘That right head looks viscous. It won’t last long. They never do.’

‘Morta,’ Harry corrected him. ‘That’s Morta now.’ He cocked his head at the Professor. ‘Did Albus tell you I could talk to snakes?’

‘No,’ Snape replied. ‘He didn’t.’

‘You must be surprised.’

The professor shook his head a little, eyes narrowed. ‘Nothing would surprise me when it comes to you.’

Harry was impressed by this insult. He turned away from the professor and hastily gathered his courage.

‘I’m sorry about what I said last time,’ he said determinedly. ‘It was very rude and completely
uncalled for. I don’t know if you can ever forgive - ‘

‘Oh don’t grovel!’ Snape exclaimed. ‘It’s so pathetic! I suppose Dumbledore taught you to apologise like that. It’s a wonder you aren’t throwing yourself at my feet and begging for absolution, you disgusting little wretch!’

Harry fell silent, unsure how to react. He steadied his nerves and then shot the professor a weak, watery smile.

‘I don’t know if Albus Dumbledore’s ever given a truly sincere apology,’ he said. ‘Not that he doesn’t have a knack for it. By the time he’s done apologising you’ll be utterly convinced that you were the one in the wrong all along and start feeling guilty about everything you’ve ever done in your life.’

Snape’s eyes remained dark and cold but Harry saw his lips twitch very slightly. He had obviously been on the receiving end of one of those cunning speeches before.

‘I’m not as good as apologising as Albus,’ Harry admitted, ‘or as calm and even-tempered. I do try my hand at a bit of false modesty, but I don’t think I pull that off that well either.’

‘No,’ Snape replied shortly.

The conversation lapsed after that, but Harry found the silence reassuring; It meant that the professor had nothing bad left to say. He stood still for a while, petting his snake, before changing the subject.

‘Do you know how to make a quickening potion?’ He asked.

‘Of course I do,’ The potions master snapped.

‘Well, would you be able to teach me?’ Harry asked. ‘I can provide the scales, after all, and it’s a useful little potion.’

‘I wouldn’t let you use it,’ Snape sneered. ‘It’s against the rules for teachers to give students mental stimulants, no matter how much they might need them.’

‘I know,’ Harry said. ‘I just want to make it. I told you I’m interested in potions.’

Snape fell silent again and Harry held his breath.

‘Very well,’ He said, at last. ‘If you’re quite certain you can control that thing.’

He showed Harry how to safely remove the scales and set a cauldron bubbling. Then he made Harry out his new pet away, in another little box, while they prepared the potion.

He was no less critical or demanding than he had been before, but Harry kept his temper this time. He nodded and smiled while shredding herbs and crushing beetles.

‘I used to make a lot of potions when I was younger,’ Harry told him, ‘before I could even do proper magic. Just simple stuff. Albus thought it was good practice.’

Snape grunted.

‘I suppose you don’t approve,’ Harry said. ‘I was never sure whether it was against the statute for secrecy. I used to think potions-making wasn’t real real magic and that anyone could do it if they had the right ingredients.’
‘A foolish assumption that many ignorant wizards have made,’ Snape said testily, ‘but all potions require some wandwork, not to mention a considerable amount of magical skill and intuition.’

‘I know that now,’ Harry said patiently. ‘I’ve been told my mother had really good instincts when it came to potions. I don’t think I’ve inherited much of that.’

He paused hopefully, but Professor Snape said nothing to this comment.

‘She was in your year, wasn’t she?’ Harry pushed on recklessly. ‘I heard you were good friends.’

He was sure that this would illicit some sort of response but Snape only glowered moodily.

‘Watch what you’re doing,’ he said sharply. ‘You’re making a mess of those roots. Slice them tip to stem.’

Harry did as he was told, disappointed that he hadn’t been able to provoke a more personal reaction. He supposed that Snape didn’t want to talk about Lily, so decided to change tact.

‘Do you ever wonder what the world would be like if there wasn’t any magic?’

Snape took a deep breath, like a parent whose patience was being severely tested.

‘Obviously, I’m glad to be a wizard,’ Harry said quickly, ‘but I lived as a muggle for a long time and I can’t help but wonder what wizards would be like if they couldn’t do magic. I mean Voldemort -’

‘Don’t say his name!’ Snape hissed.

‘Oh, sorry,’ Harry said, surprised, ‘He-who-must-not-be-named then, but that’s just the thing, he’s only called that because he’s a powerful wizard. What would he be if he didn’t have magic? I suppose he could have still been a killer or started a cult, but there’s only so much damage he could have done, especially when he was young.’

Snape said nothing.

‘Obviously I thought about that a lot because my life would have been so different. If there was no magic, my parents would still be alive.’

‘If there was no magic ...’ Snape said slowly, ‘there’d be no Hogwarts and your parents ... would never have met.’

‘That’s true,’ Harry said cheerfully, pleased that Snape was engaging in the thought experiment. ‘I suppose my father wouldn’t have existed at all. The Potter family would have developed quite differently. There’d be no such thing as purebloods and everyone would have gone to normal schools and had normal jobs. They probably would have ended up marrying completely different people. I suppose there might have been a Harry Potter at some point, but he wouldn’t have been me. My mother would have married another muggle and had children with them. I suppose that’s quite nice.’

He stole a glance at Snape’s face. The pale man was still frowning, but he didn’t look as annoyed as before. There was a wistful look in his eyes that Harry found incredibly gratifying.

‘Would you have existed, do you think?’ Harry asked him. ‘You’re pureblood, aren’t you?’

‘Half-Blood,’ Snape said shortly.

‘Maybe then,’ Harry said, ‘though you probably would have been very different.’
Snape’s face closed off again. ‘This is a ridiculous conversation.’ He muttered. ‘If you understood anything about the magical world you’d know that magic is an essential part of every witch and wizard. It’s not just a quality or skill we possess, it’s who we are.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Harry replied, ‘but I think it’s good to think about how things could have been different. Otherwise you can start to think you’re nothing without magic and that’s awful. I’d hate to lose all my powers, but if I did I’d still be me.’

Snape gave him a very queer look. ‘You talk far too much,’ he told Harry. ‘And it’s all nonsense.’ A pause. ‘I suppose Dumbledore’s to blame for that, though.’

Harry grinned. ‘Yes,’ he agreed easily. ‘He’s ruined me.’
Harry stood on the platform beside Hagrid watching nervously as students spilled out of the train. He had hoped to blend in with the rest of the first-years when they arrived but quickly realised that wouldn’t be possible. They were bound to spot him waiting for them and realise he wasn’t on the train.

‘Firs’-years! Firs’-years over here!’ Hagrid called out loudly, jiggling his lamp. ‘Hold up, Harry! Where’re yeh going?’

‘I’ll be right back,’ Harry replied urgently. ‘I just want to nip onto the train for a moment so I come out with the others.’

‘Yer mad!’ Hagrid said, shaking his head. Then he caught sight of a little girl dashing across the platform. ‘Hey, you! You’re a first year? Over here!’

Harry pushed his way through the crowd, jumped onto the last carriage and started running through the train. It looked quite empty but after a moment Harry ran into a pale, round faced little boy.

‘Oh! Sorry!’ Harry gasped. ‘I didn’t see you there!’

‘It’s okay,’ the boy mumbled. He face was very red and he looked as though he was about to cry.

‘Um, are you alright?’

‘I’ve lost my toad,’ the boy whispered, lips trembling. ‘I’ve looked everywhere and I can’t find him!’

‘Oh no!’ Harry said. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll help you look for him. We’ll have to be quick though.’

They walked up and down the carriage, looking under all the seats, but there was no sign of the toad. The sad, round-faced boy got more and more panicked.

‘We’re never going to find him now!’ He wailed. ‘He’s going to be stuck on the train all the way back to London! My gran’s going to be so mad!’

‘Let’s not give up yet,’ Harry said. ‘There must be something we can do.’ He thought for a moment and then slapped his forehead. ‘Of course! We can just use a locator spell! I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before!’

He quickly cast the spell and watched as his wand’s tip twitched like a dowsing rod.

‘It looks like it’s already hopped off of the train,’ he said. ‘I bet he’s gone into the lake.’

‘Oh no!’

‘No, that’s good! He’ll be safe enough there and he’s bound to come and find you later. Animals are smarter than you think.’

The boy looked impressed. ‘How did you do that?’ He asked, pointing at Harry’s wand.

‘Oh, it’s not that hard,’ Harry said. ‘Just a little trick a friend taught me. Come on, let’s get going now or we’ll be the ones left behind.’
They hurried off together, weaving through the trickle of stragglers.

‘What’s your name?’ Harry asked.

‘Neville,’ the boy said. ‘Neville Longbottom.’

Harry snorted before he could stop himself. ‘What an awful name! If I were you I’d keep that to myself.’

Neville looked hurt.

‘Sorry,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I’ve got an embarrassing surname too. Just call me Harry.’

‘Ok, Harry,’ Neville said.

Hagrid beamed at them both as they approached.

‘Well, looks like yer all here now so let’s go,’ he said. ‘Mind yer step now!’

He led them down a steep, narrow path round to the Great Lake. Harry kept looking around, trying to catch sight of the other students, but it was too dark to see anyone else properly.

There was a loud gasp as Hogwarts castle finally came into view. It was silhouetted against the moon and stars, turrets and towers piercing the indigo sky.

‘It looks amazing, doesn’t it?’ Harry whispered to Neville.

‘Yeah,’ Neville replied. His voice sounded a little wobbly, as if he was on the verge on tears again.

‘No more’n four to a boat!’ Hagrid called out, pointing at small fleet of boats moored by the shore.

Harry grabbed Neville’s arm and tugged him over to the nearest boat. They were quickly joined by a shy, lanky-looking boy and rather pushy girl with thick, curly hair.

‘Um, this is Hermione,’ Neville introduced the girl. ‘We met on the train. She tried to help me find my toad too.’

‘Have you found him then Neville?’ The girl asked. ‘You were ever such a long time. I was worried you were going to get left on the train. I told that man Hagrid to wait for you though and he promised you wouldn’t get into any trouble.’

She had a rather bossy sort of voice and said everything very quickly indeed.

Neville mumbled that his toad was still missing.

‘Oh dear, well I suppose he’s gone for good then,’ Hermione said sadly. ‘Never mind. I’m sure your gran will understand when you explain it all properly. I mean, it wasn’t your fault, was it?’

Then she turned her attention to Harry.

‘Who are you then? I’m Hermione Granger and this is Ron Weasley. I don’t know him that well though. We didn’t sit together on the train. He was in a compartment by himself most of the time.’

The red-haired boy looked quite annoyed to be introduced like this. He glared resentfully at Hermione but she didn’t seem to notice.
‘I’m Harry,’ Harry told her.

‘Harry what?’ Hermione demanded.

‘Just Harry,’ Harry replied.

Hermione frowned at him. ‘What’re you being so mysterious for? I don’t care who your family are. I’m muggle-born myself. Are you related to some terrible dark wizard or something?’

‘Something like that,’ Harry agreed.

They spent the rest of the journal in silence, admiring the view. When the boats eventually reached the harbour they clambered out gracelessly onto the wet rock. Harry had to grab Neville by the arm to stop him falling over.

‘Hang on,’ Hagrid yelled urgently, as they were scrambling away. ‘Does this toad belong to anyone?’ A dark lump was quivering on his shoulder.

‘Trevor!’ Neville exclaimed delightedly.

‘I told you he’d find his way back to you,’ Harry said, with a wink.

Neville grinned, hands clamped tight about the wriggling toad. ‘Thanks.’

They started up the castle’s steps, side by side. It was a long climb and they had to move slowly to stop themselves from slipping on the damp stone.

‘There’s exactly four hundred and fifty steps,’ Hermione panted behind them, ‘carved right out of the cliff. Helga Hufflepuff gouged them put herself with a sculpting spell. I read about it in _Hogwarts: A History._’

She sounded like a tour guide.

‘There used to be six hundred,’ Harry told her, ‘but the other hundred and fifty are at the bottom of the lake now. One of the early headmasters got drunk and fell down them one night and blasted half of them away on his way down so they had to be rebuilt. That’s why they’re a little wonky now and the ones at the bottom are so much bigger and wider.’

‘Really!’ Hermione exclaimed excitedly. ‘Where did you read that?’

She spoke very loudly indeed and several of the other students turned round to look at him. Harry noticed that they were eyeing him with suspicion. They obviously didn’t want another tour guide.

‘Oh, I don’t remember,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I think someone might have just mentioned it to me in passing.’

Hermione frowned. ‘Well how do you know it’s true then? It could have just been made up by someone!’

‘Maybe,’ Harry said vaguely. ‘People do make up a lot of stories.’

‘Well, you should check your facts before sharing them,’ Hermione snapped. ‘I don’t want to repeat something I’ve been told in class just to find out it was some sort of childish rumour!’

Her face had gone slightly red, perhaps because there were so many people looking at them now. Harry couldn’t help but be annoyed by her tone.
‘Alright, alright,’ he said aggressively. ‘I was just making conversation. I didn’t expect to be asked to cite my sources. Next time I’ll get you a whole page of footnotes and maybe that will keep you quiet for a few minutes.’

A couple of boys laughed at this, which made Hermione go even redder. Harry tried to catch some of their eyes but they all looked away hastily. Only one person met Harry’s gaze: a thin, blonde boy with a pale, pointed face. He smirked appreciatively at him, as if he’d done them all a favour, and his eyes glittered maliciously. He didn’t look especially nice, a little too smug and self-satisfied for Harry’s taste, but at least he had a sense of humour.

Harry smiled back at him and was gratified when, a moment later, the boy climbed up beside him.

‘Hello there,’ he said. ‘I didn’t see you on the train.’

‘I didn’t see you either,’ Harry replied. ‘What’s your name.’

Malfoy, Draco Malfoy,’ the boy told him. Surname first, Harry noted, like a proper eighteenth-century aristocrat. ‘What about you?’

‘I’m Harry,’ Harry replied. ‘Just Harry, if that’s okay, and this is Neville and Trevor the Toad.’

Neville smiled nervously but Draco barely glanced at him.

‘Why “just Harry”?’ He asked. ‘Who’s your family?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Harry replied. ‘I’m adopted.’

‘Oh,’ Draco said, frowning. ‘Then your parents ...?’

‘They’re dead,’ Harry said simply. ‘Its a long, tragic story that I obviously don’t want to go into right now, halfway up a cliff.’

Draco laughed uncertainly while Neville started up at Harry with wide eyes. Harry decided that it was time to change the subject.

‘Do you play quidditch at all?’ He asked Draco.

Draco’s face brightened. ‘Yes, in fact, I do. Father says it’s a crime if I’m not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. What about you?’

‘Oh, the same,’ Harry said, imitating Draco’s boastful drawl. ‘I’m going to be the youngest player for Gryffindor in over a century. It’s pretty much already decided.’

Draco didn’t know what to make of this. ‘Are you joking?’ He asked.

Harry grinned. ‘Maybe,’ he said teasingly. ‘You’ll have to wait and see. What about you? What position do you play?’

‘Seeker,’ Draco said shortly.

‘Me too!’ Harry said delightedly. ‘We’ll have to fight each other for a place on the team!’

Draco shook his head. ‘I’ll be a Slytherin,’ he said quietly.

‘Really? Well, that’s probably for the best. If one of us got picked over the other then we could never be friends. There’d be too much resentment.’
Draco considered for a moment and then smiled at Harry again. ‘I’m sure you’re right. I can be very competitive.’

‘What about you, Neville,’ Harry said, turning to the other boy. ‘What house do you think you’ll be in?’

Neville hugged his toad hard and shivered. ‘I don’t know,’ he mumbled sadly. ‘I’ll probably end up a Hufflepuff.’

Draco looked Neville up and down coldly. ‘Yes, that looks about right.’

Harry tutted. ‘Don’t be daft, Neville,’ he said. ‘You ought to be a Gryffindor, like me. Gryffindors are the most honourable and trustworthy.’

‘Gryffindors are the most arrogant and pig-headed,’ Draco countered. ‘Really, Harry, you ought to consider being a Slytherin. We’re the best house.’

Harry grinned. ‘I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I’m afraid I’m destined for Gryffindor. My family went there, you see.’

‘You’re so confident,’ Neville muttered enviously.

It was at this point that they reached the top of the stairs and Draco Malfoy decided to go back to check on his friends. Apparently they had fallen right to the back of the line and were moving slower than a couple of slugs.

‘See you later, then,’ Harry called out cheerfully.

They joined the rest of the students huddled on the landing. Once everyone was there, Hagrid strode over to the large, oak door and knocked three times. The door swung open and once and Professor McGonnagall appeared wearing emerald-green robes and solemn expression.

‘The firs’ years, Professor McGonagall,’ Hagrid said, gesturing at them.

‘Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here.’

She led them through the entrance hall and into a small chamber, just off of the Great hall. Then gave them a short speech about the Hogwarts houses. Most of the first years shivered their way through this, chilled from the journey and nervous about the ceremony.

‘Do you know are they going to sort us?’ Neville whispered, as soon as Professor McGonagall was gone.

‘No,’ Harry replied. ‘It’s supposed to be a secret. I don’t think it’s anything especially difficult or dangerous though.’

This opinion was obviously not shared by the rest of the first years who all looked utterly terrified. No one was talking much now, except for Hermione who was frantically going over all the spells she’d learnt, wondering which ones she’d need.

‘You know a lot of magic already, don’t you, Harry?’ Neville whispered anxiously. ‘You cast that spell on the train to find Trevor.’

‘I only know a few spells,’ Harry said quickly. ‘Most people don’t know anything yet.’

‘Hermione does,’ Neville said, glancing over his shoulder at her.
‘Well, it won’t make any difference,’ Harry said firmly. ‘You don’t have to do any magic for the sorting. It’s just about personality traits. Bravery and loyalty and ambition. Things like that.’

Neville still looked nervous. Perhaps he didn’t think he was brave or loyal or ambitious enough to qualify for any of the houses.

‘Don’t worry,’ Harry told him. ‘Everyone has a place here and all the houses have good and bad points. You really should try and be a Gryffindor though so we can keep each other company.’

Harry wondered again what form the sorting would take. He had often imagined that it would be some sort of lucid dream with choices that would test their character, but perhaps it would be something simpler, like a magic mirror, that showed the true shape of their souls.

He was distracted from his thoughts by the appearance of twenty or so of the Hogwarts ghosts that glided in smoothly through the wall. Several of the students screamed at the sight of them although none of them were particularly frightening.

Professor McGonagall soon reappeared and shooed them all away and then arranged everyone into a neat line. Harry and Neville were placed right at the back behind a large, dark-haired boy whose robes were too short for him.

Harry got a shock when the double doors were thrown open and he saw the great hall bright and bustling with life, illuminated with the light of a thousand candles. He was used to the place being practically empty, but suddenly it was crowded full with hundreds of students, their intent faces glowing white in the candlelight.

Harry ducked his head down as they approached the teachers, too embarrassed to meet anyone’s eye. He was especially careful not to look at Albus, although he was sure that the headmaster was stealing glances at him.

He waited impatiently while Professor McGonagall bustled about setting up a little stool in front of the line of first-years. On top of the stool she placed a very old and battered wizard’s hat.

Harry’s heart leapt with sudden recognition. He knew that hat! He had seen it on a shelf in Albus’s office! It had a distinctly battered base that resembled a frowning face. Harry had spent several afternoons pulling funny faces at it while Albus laughed. It couldn’t have anything to do with the sorting, could it?

As Harry watched the long tear at the brim at the hat opened up and it began to sing a cheerful song about its purpose and origins. Harry was thoroughly shaken. Everyone else seemed relieved to find out that all they had to do was put on the hat, but Harry was appalled to discover that he was going to be judged by an object that had spent the last six weeks spying on him.

Professor McGonagall stepped forward with a large roll of parchment and started reading out names alphabetically. Harry watched as each student walked up to the hat in turn and tried it on. Some only sat on the stool for a seconds, others took a little longer, but most were sorted very quickly indeed. In a minutes of moments half the students had left to join their respective tables.

Neville jumped when his name was finally called and fell over on his way to the stool. Harry crossed his fingers while he waited, but the hat took a very long time to decide over Neville indeed. When it finally shouted, ‘GRYFFINDOR,’ Neville ran off still wearing it and had to jog back to give it to the next student.

Hermione Granger had also been sorted into Gryffindor and welcomed him happily. Neville took his
place at the table and smiled up at Harry. Harry tried to return the smile but his face felt too numb. He was suddenly very nervous indeed. He knew it wouldn’t be long before it was his turn.

Draco Malfoy was sorted into Slytherin, just as he had predicted, and sauntered off eagerly to join his peers. He didn’t glance back at Harry, which made him feel even more alone.

Harry waited as McGonagall made her way through the rest of the Ms and the Ps until she finally reached, ‘Potter, Harry.’

Immediately the hall erupted into excited whispers. People at the far end of the hall started leaning over the tables, craning their heads to get a better look at him. Neville’s mouth fell right open and he and Hermione stared up at him with utter shock.

Harry walked briskly to the stool, eyes trained on the floor. The hat fell down over his eyes and he gazed deep into its black velvet interior.

‘Hello funny boy,’ the hat murmured. ‘I’ve been looking forward to looking inside your head.’

Harry wasn’t sure at first if the hat was actually talking out-loud or speaking directly into mind. He hadn’t heard it whispering to anyone else though so he thought it was probably the later.

‘Oh my, but this is a surprise!’ The hat continued. ‘So much passion and pride! I wouldn’t have guessed, from the way you behave. There’s talent too, oh my goodness, yes, and such a good mind. Incredible potential. So where should I place you?’

Harry waited anxiously, sweat prickling at the back of his neck. He didn’t know understand why the hat was drawing this out. Was it just playing with him? Why didn’t it just put him in Gryffindor? That was obviously where he belonged.

‘Really?’ The hat said. ‘You’re so sure? I think you would do very well in Slytherin. You could be great, you know, and Slytherin would certainly help you on your way to greatness.’

‘No!’ Harry thought back, panicked. ‘No, I want to be a Gryffindor! I’ve got to be a Gryffindor.’

He imagined how Albus would feel if he was sorted into Slytherin. He would pretend that it didn’t matter but secretly he would be disappointed. Harry wouldn’t be able to experience all those things that came with being a Gryffindor, the things that Albus had been looking forward to sharing to him.

And what about Professor McGonagall? She’d be so disappointed if he couldn’t play for the Gryffindor quidditch team. He didn’t want to let her down either. He was supposed to bring glory to Gryffindor house. It was what he’d always wanted.

‘Well, well, you’re certainly loyal,’ the hat murmured, ‘but are you sure I can’t tempt you? You’re not as much like Albus Dumbledore as you think you are.’

‘Yes I am!’ Harry thought back angrily. ‘How can you say that, when you’re peering into my mind? I’m his through and through!’

The hat laughed ecstatically, the sound echoing unpleasantly inside Harry’s head, and then yelled, ‘GRYFFINDOR,’ for all the world to hear.

Harry got up slowly, his legs trembling, and headed over to the Gryffindor table. He was sure Albus was applauding with all the rest, beaming at him with pride, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at him. He still felt like he failed him somehow.
The Gyffindors were all cheering wildly and thumping on the table. One boy - a prefect - actually got up to shake his hand and a pair of twins started up a taunting chant of, ‘We got Potter! We got Potter!’

‘Congratulations, Harry,’ said Nearly Headless Nick. ‘Not that I had any doubts, of course.’

‘Me neither,’ Harry said softly. It was quite true. He hadn’t had any doubts, right up until the moment of his sorting. Now he was riddled with them.

‘I’m Percy Weasley,’ the prefect said. ‘Delighted to meet you, Harry. And uh,’ he glanced over at the twins now elbowing their way over, ‘these are my younger brothers, Fred and George.’

‘I’m Fred!’ Said the first twin. ‘Can I shake your hand too? How absolutely marvellous!’

‘I’m George,’ said the second, taking Harry’s hand after Fred. ‘How spiffing to make your acquaintance! Such an honour, eh Perce? We’ll all have something exciting to write in our diaries tonight!’

Harry could tell that he was joking and laughed along gratefully.

The sorting was still going on, but most of the Gryffindors seemed to have lost interest. It was only when, ‘Weasley, Ron,’ was called for that the twins turned their attention back to the ceremony.

‘That’s our younger brother, Ron,’ Fred explained to Harry.

‘Oh yes,’ Harry said. ‘I met him earlier. Just - just briefly.’

‘Well, fancy that!’ George exclaimed. ‘Our little brother knows the great Harry Potter!’

‘We’re terribly worried he’s going to end up a Hufflepuff,’ Fred said sadly. ‘That would break our hearts.’

His fears turned out to be unfounded though because a second later the sorting hat shouted out, ‘GRYFFINDOR!’

‘Brilliant!’ Yelled George, clapping frantically. ‘Now if he can just avoid becoming a prefect the family honour will be completely assured.’

‘Excuse me,’ Percy said stiffly, ‘being a prefect is a great honour. If only you two could be appointed prefects too then it would everyone in the family.’

The twins clutched at their heads and wailed. ‘Oh the shame! The shame!’

‘We’ve got three older brothers and they’ve all been prefects,’ George explained. ‘Bill and Charlie were head boys as well.’

‘The shame!’ Fred repeated piteously.

Ron appeared at the table, his freckled face a little flushed, and collapsed into the chair beside Harry. ‘Hi,’ he said.

‘Hi,’ Harry replied.

He remembered that Ron has been one of the boys that laughed when he made his joke at Hermione’s expense. He hoped that he might be able to make him laugh again at some point. If his brothers were anything to judge by he seemed like he’d be good fun to have around.
The sorting ceremony concluded and Albus Dumbledore stood up to deliver his welcome speech. Harry’s stomach twisted in anticipation, but it turned out to be an very short speech indeed. So short, in fact, that many of the students were caught off guard by it.

‘He’s a bit mad isn’t he?’ Harry heard someone mutter.

‘Utterly bonkers!’ Someone else agreed.

Harry quickly turned his attention back to the plate in front of him, just in time as the feast magically appeared on the table.

‘Brilliant!’ Ron exclaimed. ‘I’m starving, aren’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed, loading up his plate with potatoes.

Unfortunately the talk about the headmaster didn’t die down quickly. Everyone started speculating about why he’d left the school seven years ago. There were some very wild theories floating around. Some people seemed to think he’d been kidnapped. Others believed that he’d been on a top secret mission for the ministry.

‘Where do you think he’s been?’ Ron asked Harry.

I dunno,’ Harry mumbled. He hoped Ron wouldn’t notice how tense he was.

‘I heard he went looking for you-know-who,’ Ron said. ‘They say he’s - well, you know.’ He suddenly went red.

‘It’s okay,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I’ve always assumed he’s still out there and Dumbledore’s always said so too. There’s been sightings of him in Albania, hasn’t there?’

‘Yeah,’ Ron agreed, gaining courage. ‘My dad works in the ministry and he reckons that Dumbledore went off following a lead.’

‘Maybe,’ Harry said uncomfortably. ‘I don’t think that would take seven years though.’

‘Mmm, perhaps not,’ Ron said thickly, through a mouthful of sprouts.

‘Besides, he wouldn’t have kept it secret,’ Harry said firmly, ‘especially not if he’d succeeded. So if you think he’s defeated Voldemort, once and for all, without mentioning it you’re just kidding yourself.’

Ron recoiled, his mouth gaping open and gravy dribbling down his chin. Harry cursed himself internally, wishing he hadn’t said anything. It had all come out a lot more intense than he’d intended.

‘Sorry,’ he said quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to - ‘

‘No, no, I’m sorry,’ Ron said quickly. He swallowed heavily and wiped his lips. ‘I shouldn’t have mentioned it. It’s just - wow - you really are the real deal, aren’t you? You even say his name.’

‘I shouldn’t,’ Harry said. ‘I didn’t mean to. I just forgot.’ He shuffled the food around on his plate. ‘I didn’t grow up around many witches and wizards so I’m not used to rules.’

Ron nodded eagerly. ‘Ahuh, ahuh, I heard you went to live with muggles.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed. ‘for a while, at least.’ He pulled a face. ‘I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.’
‘Oh, okay.’

The atmosphere became a little awkward after that. By the time the deserts appeared, the talk was all about their families and Harry was keeping his head very firmly down.

‘What about you Neville?’ Ron asked.

‘Well, my gran brought me up and she’s a witch,’ said Neville, ‘but my family thought I was all muggle for ages. My great-uncle Angie was always trying to scare some magic out of me...’

Harry listened in disbelief as Neville recounted several horrifying stories about his relatives nearly murdering him, culminating in one final anecdote about being thrown out of the window when he was eight. On this occasion, his magic finally had kicked in and he had luckily avoided death.

‘They were all so pleased when I got in here,’ Neville concluded happily. ‘They thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great-uncle Angie was so pleased he brought me my toad.’

‘What a wonderful gift to make up for nearly killing you,’ Harry said sarcastically. ‘I would have thought he could have at least sprung for an owl, given the circumstances, but I guess he thought your life wasn’t quite worth that.’

Everyone laughed loudly at this, but Harry wasn’t joking. He was hot with fury.

‘No seriously, Neville. What exactly would have happened if you hadn’t bounced that day? Because it seems to me like your family would rather you were dead than a muggle. Essentially, your great-uncle was just running a backwards version of a medieval witch trial. If you’re a wizard, you survive and everyone rejoices, if not you fall to a righteous death and everyone rejoices.’

A few people still laughed at this, but many more just looked uncomfortable. Harry was too worked up to care.

‘If I were you, Neville,’ he continued, ‘I would have torn up my letter from Hogwarts and gone to a local muggle school, just to spite them. You could have become an investment banker or something and bought a huge mansion in the country with a pool and a tennis court and sent them pictures every year, but never invited any of them to stay. That would have shown them. You any good at maths, Neville?’

‘Um, no, not really,’ Neville mumbled.

‘Oh well, something else then,’ Harry said vaguely. ‘A lawyer or a doctor or a policeman or a marine biologist or a shoe salesman. It doesn’t matter. The point is, that you could have had a perfectly happy life as muggle and whatever you chose to be would have definitely been better than being a stain on the pavement outside your grandmother’s house.’

There was stunned silence.

‘Not that I’m not glad that you’re here,’ Harry added, backtracking frantically. ‘I mean, obviously Hogwarts is amazing and you’ll be a great wizard. I’m just saying, you could have also been a great dental hygienist or landscape gardener, if you wanted to be.’

‘Right,’ Neville said weakly.

Harry decided to sneak a glance at the high table. Albus was deep in conversation with Professor Mcgonagall but after a moment he looked up and smiled. Harry returned the smile, feeling a lot better for it.
Albus got up again at the end of the meal to deliver some start-of-term notices and then had everyone sing the school song. Harry sung louder than anyone else and clapped when it was done.

Then it was time for bed and Harry was led through the castle with the rest of the first-years and up to the Gryffindor dormitories at long last. He found his trunk there, by his bed, just like all the other boys, and got changed alongside them.

‘I’m stuffed,’ Neville said wearily. ‘The food’s really good here, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, glad that Neville was still talking to him. ‘It’s brilliant.’

When he got into bed Harry found a lump under his pillow. He reached under and pulled out a very worn and bobbily soft toy dragon. Harry let out a little laugh and then buried deep under the blankets.
Harry had managed to avoid the short-tempered caretaker, Argus Filch, all during the long holiday but he finally fell foul of him just two weeks into term. Filch caught him heading up to the seventh floor and accused him of tracking mud up the stairs. Sure enough when Harry glanced back he saw that there was a trail of muddy footprints behind him.

‘Those aren’t mine though,’ he protested. ‘Look!’ And he turned up his heels for the man to inspect. He happened to be wearing a pair of fine dragon-hide boots which Albus had got him for his birthday and they had a distinct zig-zag pattern on the sole that didn’t match the footprints at all.

Filch, however, was still not satisfied. He started interrogating Harry on what he was doing up on the sixth floor in the first place.

‘You’re a first year aren’t you?’ He hissed. ‘You don’t have any classes up here! So what are you doing skulking about where you don’t belong?’

‘I’m not skulking!’ Harry replied.

‘Well, what are you doing then?’ Filch demanded. ‘You’ve got no business here! Clear off right now!’

‘I’m going to see the headmaster,’ Harry said.

‘Aha!’ Filch exclaimed delightedly. ‘I knew you were a troublemaker! You’ve been sent to the headmaster already!’

‘I haven’t been sent to the headmaster,’ Harry said angrily. ‘I’m just going to see the headmaster. It’s a friendly visit.’

The man squinted at him. ‘You can’t just go bothering the headmaster for no reason. He’s a very busy man. Now get out of here! Before I report you!’

‘Look,’ Harry said, losing his patience entirely. ‘I know the way to the office and I know the password so just leave me to it! I’m allowed to go see the headmaster whenever I want!’

‘Rubbish!’ Filch spat. ‘You’re up to something! I’m going to take you to your head of house right now!’ And he strode over and grabbed Harry by the arm.

Please Note: I’ve also just edited Chapter 11 (Portraits & Poltergeists) with some new content. There was a conversation about Albus’s sexuality which I’d originally cut, thinking I’d put it in later, but on reflection I think it HAS to happen early on.

I also changed the explanation about the portraits to be more in line with what JK says about them in her Pottermore short stories. It turns out I had it all wrong and although it doesn’t really matter it was still bugging me! XD
'Let me go!' Harry yelped. ‘For God’s sake - I’m his son!’

Filtch recoiled in shock. ‘What? You’re - What?’ Then he recovered himself. ‘Don’t be ridiculous! Albus Dumbledore doesn’t have any children!’

‘I’m adopted,’ Harry said, his face burning. ‘Obviously.’

‘Rubbish!’ Filtch said again. ‘Codswallop and pigswill! I’ve never heard such an absurd lie in all my years here at Hogwarts and I’ve heard some real whoppers, I can tell you!’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘What are you really hiding?’

‘Nothing!’ Harry insisted frantically.

It was at this point that Professor Snape appeared on the scene and Harry turned to him, in desperation.

‘Severus! Will you tell this please man who I am?!’

Harry instantly knew it was a mistake. He heard the words as they came out of his mouth and realised just how arrogant and self-righteous they sounded. Unfortunately there was nothing he could do once they were out. He just had to let them settle into the atmosphere, like a highly-poisonous gas.

For a moment, all three of them seemed to freeze in place, paralysed by shock and disbelief, and then Snape’s expression hardened and he took a step forward.

‘Dear me, Argus,’ he said, his voice soft and silky. ‘Have you not had the honour yet? I shall have to introduce to our new celebrity, Mr Harry Potter.’

‘T-That’s not what I meant.’ Harry stuttered weakly.

‘Harry Potter?’ Filtch repeated. He glanced down at Harry’s face, eyes raking over his forehead for the tell-tale scar. ‘He said he was Dumbledore’s son!’

Snape’s lip curled. ‘Really?’ He looked down at Harry who shrunk back pathetically. ‘Well, I can’t speak to that, but it seems rather extraordinary claim to make. I was under the impression that Dumbledore had no family. Perhaps simply being the ‘boy-who-lived’ isn’t enough for some people.’

‘He said he was adopted,’ Filtch said, gaining confidence. ‘I knew it was a lie, though! Whoever heard of such a thing!’

Snape’s smile widened. ‘Indeed!’ He gave Harry a mock-pitying look. ‘I don’t know what sort of relationship you imagine you have with the headmaster but throwing his name around like that certainly won’t get you out of trouble. I would have thought you’d have more dignity, but clearly I was expecting too much from you.’

‘I wasn’t in trouble!’ Harry muttered. ‘I wasn’t doing anything!’

He might as well have not said anything though. No one was paying any attention to him now.

Filtch still seemed quite determined to drag him off to Professor McGonagall, but Snape unexpectedly stepped in, graciously advising leniency.

‘There’s no need to be too hard on the boy,’ he said. ‘It’s true, he’s terribly arrogant and entitled, but
you can’t really blame him for that. He was raised to think he’s the centre of the universe. He’ll soon learn better.’

Harry was sure that Snape was only saying this because he knew that Professor McGonagall would have backed up Harry’s story, if asked. It was no act of kindness on Snape’s part.

‘You clear off then,’ Filtch said gruffly, releasing Harry, ‘but don’t let me catch you hanging around here again! I’ll be keeping an eye on you from now on!

Fuming, Harry ran off to the first-year boys’ dormitory to retrieve his invisibility cloak from the trunk at the end of his bed.

He threw it on and then headed straight back to the seventh floor. Filtch was still there, mopping-up the muddy footprints, and Harry walked right passed him unseen.

**

Albus greeted him with delight when he swept into the office, rattling the door on its hinges like a violent gust of wind.

‘I’ve been waiting for you to come visit me,’ he declared. ‘Why didn’t you come sooner? Have you been very busy?’

Harry pulled off the cloak and ruffled his hair. ‘It hasn’t been easy,’ he declared. ‘Filtch caught me on the way here and tried to stop me coming. Seemed to think I was just trying to make trouble.’

He related the events of the incident on the sixth floor. As usual, Albus received the story with a mixture of amusement and light disapproval.

‘I can’t believe you called Professor Snape by his first name, on top of everything,’ he sighed, ‘but never mind that now. Sit down and tell me all about your first couple of weeks. I want to hear everything.’

‘I’m sure you’ve already had a full report from all the teachers,’ Harry said.

‘Yes, of course,’ Albus replied merrily, ‘but I want to hear it from you too.’

He got up from behind his desk and came to sit next to Harry on the little sofa, pulling his legs up like a child.

‘How were your first few potions classes?’

‘Alright,’ Harry said cagily. ‘Snape said my last potion was “acceptable”, which I assume is the highest form of praise he’ll give out. He was pretty awful to everyone else, except for the Slytherins.’

He had hoped that the class would provide an opportunity to get closer to Draco Malfoy, but Draco sat with his Slytherin friends and spent most of the lesson whispering and snickering behind his hands. Harry couldn’t help thinking that they seemed a stupid, mean-spirited bunch and was no longer sure it was worth trying to make friends with any of them.

Harry stuck close to Neville instead, who needed a lot of help and was utterly terrified of Professor Snape. So far Harry had managed to stop Neville from doing anything too disastrous, but Snape still constantly brought up his shoddy work and clumsy ways in front of the entire class.

Albus nodded. ‘He’s more forgiving with his own students but he won’t put up with disrespect from
anyone. As long as you keep your head down and follow instructions then you should be fine.’

‘Hmm,’ Harry murmured doubtfully. ‘I always find some way to accidentally insult him. He’ll be out to get me in the next class.’

‘How are you getting on with the other students?’ Albus asked. ‘Who’re your friends?’

‘Neville Longbottom and Hermione Granger,’ Harry said. ‘I like Ron Weasley, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan too, but we haven’t spent that much time together.’

He had made a couple of good jokes that Ron had laughed at, but they hadn’t had a proper conversation since their first night together. Harry suspected that Ron was still a bit wary of him because his unexpected outburst at the welcome feast.

‘Miss Granger’s top of the class in everything, Isn’t she?’ Albus said, eyes glittering.

‘Yes,’ Harry said begrudging, ‘but I’m second-best in Transfiguration.’

He and Hermione had developed something of a rivalry, competing against one another in every subject. Hermione almost always came out on top but every now and again Harry regurgitated some obscure fact that Albus had taught him and earned a few extra points. This drove Hermione mad because she spent all her spare time trying to memorise obscure facts and knew that Harry definitely didn’t.

‘You don’t even care about earning points,’ she had complained angrily, after his most recent victory. ‘You’re always losing them for clowning around. I’m the only one that actually wants to do well for Gryffindor!’

‘Well, you care too much!’ Harry had responded. ‘Everyone already knows you’re the best student in the year so what have you got to prove? Points don’t even mean anything; they’re not like grades and test-scores. Even if you earn enough to win the house cup you don’t actually get anything. It’s just empty praise.’

After this Hermione had gone off in a huff and refused to speak to Harry for the rest of the day. Presumably because he had described praise as ‘empty’ and Hermione found it impossible to associate with someone who held such a radical ideology.

They only really made it up when Neville came to them for homework help and they were forced to work together to salvage his abysmal History of Magic essay.

Harry related all this to Albus, trying hard not to play down his part in the argument.

‘To be honest, it might be a bit of a stretch to call Hermione my friend,’ he concluded. ‘We’re always getting into little fights like that.’

‘I’ve heard you spend a lot of time in the library together.’ Albus commented. ‘She seems like the sort of person who’s sure to keep you on track with your studies, if nothing else.’

‘You see, you already know all my movements!’ Harry laughed. ‘She’s a nice girl, Hermione, but she’s also ... pretty uptight. She’d live in the library if she could and she won’t even talk when were in there. We have to pass notes.’

‘What about Neville?’ Albus asked.

‘He’s really nice too,’ Harry said, ‘but a complete basket-case. No confidence at all and really
‘I like him a lot, but I wish he’d gain a bit more confidence. He’s too nervous to joke around most of the time and he’s not interested in quidditch at all.’

‘Stick with him,’ Albus told him. ‘I’m sure he’ll come out of his shell eventually. The first term’s hard on everyone and I can tell he needs a friend.’

‘I know,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I’d never abandon him! I just wish I was closer to some of the other boys. I don’t have anyone who’s good for having a laugh with.’

Albus tousled Harry’s hair affectionately. ‘You seem like you’re settling-in alright.’

‘I guess,’ Harry said doubtfully. ‘I think everyone thinks I’m a little strange and people who don’t even know me still point at me and whisper when I walk down the halls. I thought that would be over by now.’

‘You’re famous!’ Albus said cheerfully. ‘People will always be talking about you. As soon as one rumour dies down another one starts up. You can’t escape it.’

‘Wow, thanks,’ Harry said sarcastically. ‘That’s really encouraging.’

‘No problem, anytime,’ Albus chuckled. ‘How are you finding sleeping in the dorms? Is it strange being in there with so many other boys?’

‘Yeah, a bit,’ Harry admitted. ‘I like hanging out in the common room, playing games and talking with everyone, but sometimes I find it hard having so little privacy. Sometimes I just want to be alone.’

Albus nodded. ‘I understand that. You have your father’s cloak though so you can disappear any time you wish.’

He plucked the invisibility cloak up off the floor and ran the silky material through his fingers.

‘I know you’re going to be alright, Harry. You’ve already made two good friends and done well in all your classes. I’m very proud of you.’

Harry smiled and then reached over to give his guardian a hug. ‘You’re my best friend,’ he whispered in his ear.

**

Harry had one more strange and unexpected encounter that week. As he was making his way to charms, he came across the Weasley twins, huddled around the statue of the veiled vampire, and happened to catch them muttering to one another.

‘Bloody thing!’ George was saying. ‘It nearly got me. Did you see?’

‘Where’d it even come from?’ Fred wondered. ‘It wasn’t here last year. As if this place didn’t have enough monsters already.’

Harry stopped in his tracks and then turned back to confront them.

‘Sorry, you - you haven’t been in the hidden passageway have you?’ He asked, gesturing at the statue behind them.

Both boys did a dramatic double-take.
‘How the hell do you know about it?’ Fred demanded. ‘Even we didn’t find out about it until third year!’

‘Who told you?’ George asked suspiciously.

Harry ignored both of these questions as he had a more pressing concern that he wished to address. ‘You didn’t hurt my pet, did you?’ He asked frantically.

Fred’s face turned the colour of a fresh stalk of rhubarb. ‘Your pet?!’ He spluttered. ‘Are you telling me that - that snake thing down there is yours?’

‘Yes,’ Harry said urgently. ‘It’s a runespoor. Is it alright?’

‘Is it alright?!’ Fred repeated. ‘Is it alright?! Yes, of course it’s alright! It tried to take a bite out of George though.’

‘Well, you probably startled it!’ Harry said defensively. ‘It’s only a baby, you know’

The twins exchanged a look and then each thrust an arm over his shoulder and pulled him in close. ‘Look, let’s just get this straight,’ Fred said softly. ‘You have a pet three-headed snake that you are currently keeping hidden in one of the school’s secret passages.’

‘Yes,’ Harry said, flustered. ‘That’s right.’

George closed his eyes theatrically, like a faithful Christian giving a silent prayer. ‘Harry, I think we’ve seriously misjudged you. I mean, we knew you were famous and everything, but other than I guess we assumed you were pretty normal.’

‘Perhaps with a couple of screws loose,’ Fred interjected.

‘Yes, a couple of screws loose,’ George agreed, ‘but no more than two or three at the most. Now, however, I see that we were wrong. You’re obviously an absolute nutter!’

Harry tried to protest but Fred spoke over him. ‘Not even we could have pulled something like this in our first year,’ he declared gleefully, ‘let alone in the first few weeks. It really is incredible.’

‘Frightening, but incredible,’ George agreed.

‘Look, it’s not like that,’ Harry said hastily. ‘Hagrid’s the one who gave me the runespoor as a birthday present. It’s not like I smuggled it in or anything. And I only put it in the hidden passageway temporarily. I didn’t have anywhere else to keep it.’

The twins weren’t interested any kind of explanation though. They seemed happy to think of Harry as a seriously deranged renegade with a heart set on chaos and destruction. ‘How about this,’ Fred said, at last. ‘We won’t tell anyone that you’re harbouring strange and exotic creatures if you don’t tell anyone about us using the hidden passages.’

‘Or tell anyone about the hidden passages at all,’ George added, ‘If you can help it. We’ve gotten used to having the run of the place and don’t want a bunch of first-years ruining it.’

‘Of course,’ Harry agreed. ‘it’s a secret! Obviously!’
The twins beamed at him then and slapped him on the back.

‘Brilliant, Harry! Well just let us know if you bring anything else freakish and fanged into the school! We’ll be expecting great things from you from now on!’

The whole incident left Harry seriously shaken, but once he had calmed down a bit he decided that there were probably worse things in the world than earning the respect of the two most infamous pranksters in the entire school.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to everyone who’s commented on this story. I’m so glad to hear people have been reading and enjoying it so far! The last chapter was very in-depth and closely followed the events of the first book, but I don’t intend to write THAT many chapters like that in future. I know that a lot of canon-divergent stories go over all the events of the books, showing how things happened differently, but I really don’t want to do that. If I don’t have a full ‘scene’ in mind with new interactions then I’m not inclined to write it! I pretty much envisage TWO more chapters covering the events of the first book and then I want to roll on! I really, really hope that won’t disappoint people.

I also love writing Harry interacting with different characters but this is, at its heart, a fic about Harry and Dumbledore’s relationship so most of the scenes will probably be with them. I have most of the major stuff plotted out already but I do come up with new things and change stuff all the time.

Please feel free to comment with any questions or feedback. I spend waaay too much time worrying about what my readers might be expecting from this fic so it’s good to hear what people like and what they don’t! I’ve removed the Grindlewald/Dumbledore tag for now, because I don’t want people to come looking for that and be disappointed. It will be a long time before any of that happens and it will only be discussions of the relationship and pensieve flashbacks.
It was the second week of October and the weather starting to turn cold. Harry spent a particularly enjoyable Herbology lesson preparing the bermulia plants for their winter hibernation.

‘Can you believe we’ve already been at school for a month and half?’ Neville asked as he wrapped a long, woolly scarf around their pot.

Harry, who had been at the castle for almost four months now, murmured his agreement.

‘I think I’m finally getting used to the place,’ Neville continued. ‘I found my way down to breakfast this morning without getting lost once.’

‘Wow,’ Harry grinned at him. ‘That really is progress. You didn’t get stuck in the stairs either.’

‘I know!’ Neville grinned back. ‘Aren’t you proud of me?’ He nudged Harry’s arm playfully.

‘Very impressed. Now will you help me with these little ... mitten things? I have no idea where they’re suppose to go.’

‘They go on the berries!’ Neville said happily. ‘See, that keeps them extra-warm!’

Herbology was also the only subject that Harry felt he could coast in. It was Neville’s best subject and he was glad to shoulder the bulk of the work for once.

When Professor Sprout came round to inspect their work she beamed at Neville ecstatically.

‘Wonderfully done!’ she declared. ‘You’ve even insulated the inside of the pot properly, leaving the roots space to grow. Take ten points for Gryffindor.’

Neville glowed under the praise, his face turning quite pink and Harry was happy for him. It was so rare to see him relaxed and self-assured.

Unfortunately it didn’t last. Neville had a really terrible time in transfiguration, unable to make any change whatsoever to the seed he was given, while the rest of the class managed to at least get it halfway towards a pearl, followed by an even worse experience in potions where, despite Harry’s advice, he ended-up churning his potion into a substance closely resembling concrete. Professor Snape had briskly magicked the mess away before giving Neville a failing grade and a long, scathing lecture.

By the time it was lunch Neville’s mood had darkened considerably.

‘It’s flying lessons this afternoon too,’ he said gloomily. ‘I wish I could just give it up and stay with
you instead. It’s obvious I’ll never get the hang it.’

Harry had graded-out after their first lesson so he didn’t have to attend any others. He usually spent his free period reading in the library or visiting his pets.

‘Flying’s really useful, though,’ Harry said. ‘You’ll need it get around when you’re older.’

Neville made a doubtful noise. ‘I’ll never travel anywhere by broom,’ he said. ‘I haven’t got the balance. I’ll just use floo power instead, like most people do.’

‘Don’t be silly! You’ll get the hang of it eventually. Everyone does.’

‘Not everyone. I’ve heard some people have to take the classes again in their second year.’

Harry had never heard of this happening before, as most students managed to scrape at least a passing grade, but he supposed that if it was going to happen to anyone it would happen to Neville.

‘I’ll meet you afterwards if you like and we can practice by ourselves,’ Harry suggested. ‘The pitch isn’t booked tonight.’

He had a suspicion that Neville might perform better without everyone watching him as he always floundered when under pressure.

Neville’s face brightened a little. ‘Yeah, that might be good. Thanks, Harry.’

‘No problem,’ Harry said, with a grin. ‘Hey, would you mind if I invited Ron Weasley as well? He’s pretty into flying.’

‘Sure,’ Neville agreed. ‘That’d be nice.’

Ron was delighted.

‘Fred and George told me you’d got your own broom, but I didn’t believe them. I mean, they’re always making things up and a Nimbus Two Thousand? That’s insane! Can I really have a ride on it?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said. ‘I’m going to try and give Neville some tips too, but he’s happier on a school broom.’

It was a truly wonderful afternoon. They spent nearly three hours mucking about together, racing back and forth across the pitch and throwing an old, battered ball around.

Neville was not nearly as hopeless as he had made out, although he wobbled quite a bit whenever he was holding onto the ball and didn’t dare accelerate.

‘You’re doing fine,’ Harry kept telling him. ‘Just keep your back straight and your legs crossed. If you start to fall off I’ll come and get you.’

This encouragement seemed to work and soon Neville was flying steadily. They were able to play together without much difficulty and Neville even took a turn by the hoops, trying to score a goal while Harry hovered about underneath, batting the ball back every time he missed.

Ron zoomed all around the pitch, really putting the Nimbus through its paces, before finally coming to a stuttering stop, sweating and breathless.

‘Watch out,’ He gasped. ‘We’ve got company!’
Harry ducked back under the hoops, ball under his arm, and squinted down at the ground. There were three boys walking out on to the pitch, one small and pale and two tall and broad. Harry recognised them as Draco Malfoy and closest friends.

‘Hold on a moment,’ Harry called out to Neville. ‘I’ll just go down.’

He threw the ball back to his friend and then swooped down towards the Slytherins, circling slowly just above their heads.

‘Hullo, Draco! Have you come to join in? It’s getting a bit late now.’

The light was just starting too fade, the sun dipping low beneath the trees, and soon it would be too dark to fly safely.

‘No,’ Draco replied, narrowing his eyes. ‘I’m just here to admire your broom. Come down so I can get a closer look.’

‘Alright,’ Harry agreed gamely.

Ron was hovering beside him now and he shot him an incredulous, exasperated look, but followed him down without a word.

‘I’ve just been letting Ron have a go. He’s a pretty good flyer. You can have a ride too, if you like.’

Draco glanced over at Ron who was still clutching the broom tightly in his hands, obviously not keen to let it go.

‘That’s alright,’ he said, lips curling. ‘I’ve ridden on a proper racing broom before, you know. Unlike some people.’

Ron flushed bright red to match his hair. ‘Oh yeah?’ He muttered. ‘What was it you said you had at home? A Comet Two Sixty? That’s hardly in the same league as a Nimbus.’

Draco’s sneer grew more pronounced. ‘And what kind of broom do you have, Weasley? I heard you and your brothers take turns pretending with an old mop.’

His bodyguards both laughed stupidly and Ron went even redder. Harry glared at them both until their laughter subsided.

‘Two of the Weasley boys are currently on the Gryffindor Quidditch team,’ He said coldly. ‘I think it’s pretty obvious that they have their own brooms and know how to use them.’

Draco scoffed. ‘That impresses you does it? It doesn’t take much to qualify to be a beater. I daresay a couple of trolls could do the job. Probably smell better too.’

Ron scowled. ‘You oughta watch your mouth!’

‘Oh, ought I?’ Draco replied, sounding amused. ‘How very frightening.’ Then he held out his hands. ‘Come on then, Weasley, hand it over.’

'I thought you weren't going to ride it,' Ron snapped, knuckles white around the broom.

'I'm not,' Draco replied in a weary tone of voice. 'I just want to look at it.'

Ron looked dubious. He glanced at Harry for approval before handing the broom over. Draco held it supisingly carefully and ran his hands all over it, from tip to thatch.
'It's got quite a curve on it,' he commented to Harry. 'The Nimbus's used to have a lot of trouble when it came to steering, engineered for speed rather than manoeuvrability, but I'd heard that they corrected that in the last few years.'

The dark-haired boy on Draco's left reached out to touch the broom as well but Draco elbowed his friend away.

'Don't you touch it, Goyle,' he snapped. 'You know how clumsy you are and we'll be for it if we damage Harry Potter's broom. Weasley's already watching us like a hawk. He'll run straight to Professor McGonagall if we leave so much as a dirty fingerprint.'

Goyle looked offended but Crabbe chuckled appreciatively.

It was definitely true that Ron was watching Draco closely. He obviously thought he was setting them up for something.

By now, Neville had joined them, having made a very slow and clumsy dismount a couple of feet away and he was also staring at the Slytherins with tense apprehension.

Draco however only seemed interested in Harry and his broom. He behaved as if the other boys were not there at all.

'How did you get it?' he asked curiously. 'First-years aren't supposed to have their own.'

'I got special permission,' Harry said. Then, unable to resist, he slipped into a Draco-like drawl. 'You know, connections.'

Ron started to laugh before hastily turning it into a cough. Draco continued to ignore him.

'I was thinking of getting another comet,' he said conversationally, 'but I probably will go for a Nimbus now. Everyone seems to agree that it's the best broom around.'

He hesitated for a moment and then reluctantly handed it back to Harry.

'I suppose you’ll be out here all the time now, flying. If I had my own broom with me then I’d make more use of the pitch but there’s no point with the school brooms. They’re slow and clunky. Can you believe they actually make us sign those things out? As if anyone would want to steal them!'

Harry was struck with the idea that Draco was angling for a private invitation to go flying together. He obviously didn’t like Ron or Neville at all.

'Actually I don’t think you can steal the school brooms,’ he said brightly. ‘Pretty much everything in Hogwarts is enchanted with a keepsafe charm. If you take it out of its proper place it will just find its way back again. Try taking some of the cutlery from the table if you don’t believe me. In a couple of hours it’ll disappear from wherever you’ve put it and reappear back in the kitchen.’

This was what he did whenever he felt himself floundering in a conversation, reciting quirky little facts like a walking encyclopaedia.

Draco raised his pale eyebrows. ‘Really, that’s ... very interesting.’

He glanced back at his companions. They both looked surly and impatient.
‘Well, I guess I’ll see you around then.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said quickly. ‘See you, Draco.’

He watched the Slythern boys retreat with a mixture of both relief and regret. He was sure the encounter could have gone better but it could also have gone a lot worse.

‘He’s a nasty bit of work,’ Ron said, as soon as Draco was out of ear-shot. ‘What’s he doing, sniffing round here, asking to see your broom? I thought he was gonna try and curse it.’

He cast Harry a sidelong glance. ‘You don’t think he’s heard about you joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team?’

This was still supposed to be a secret, as the Oliver Wood, the team captain, was hoping to surprise everyone at their first match, but Harry had told Ron and Neville.

‘I don’t know,’ Harry said. ‘I already hinted to him that I might be picked at the start of term, but I was just joking around. Boasting, like he does.’

Ron frowned. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way Harry but that was pretty dumb.’

Harry laughed good-naturally. ‘I know. I just get carried away sometimes.’

‘He likes you,’ Neville said, shivering. ‘You’re the only one he talks to properly. In Gryffindor, anyway. He’s horrible to everyone else.’

Harry felt a fresh stab of guilt. Draco had never picked on Neville right in front of him, but Harry was sure that he made jokes at his expense.

‘The Malfoys are all pretty rotten,’ Ron declared. ‘My dad said they were pretty deeply involved with you-know-who. They came back to our side once he disappeared, saying they were bewitched but I’m not buying it.’

‘Are you saying that Draco’s parents were death-eaters?’ Harry exclaimed. Then, seeing Ron’s blank expression, he clarified, ‘You-know-who’s official supporters, part of his inner-circle?’

‘Oh, right. I dunno. I think so.’

Harry found this revelation very disconcerting. He knew that a lot of Voldemort’s supporters were still out there but he had never thought of them walking them free. It was a frightening thought that he was at school with the children of his enemies.

‘Draco can’t help who his father is,’ Harry said firmly, as if to convince himself.

‘No, of course not,’ Ron said quickly. ‘He’s also a mean, arrogant little bastard, though and that is his fault.’

Harry couldn’t argue with that.

**

Over the next couple of weeks, Harry and Ron quickly grew a lot closer. Soon they were spending almost every evening together, chatting about quidditch and playing chess. Harry had spent so long daydreaming about being Ron’s best friend that it almost seemed inevitable.

Ron got along alright with Neville and could even tolerate Hermione’s presence, for short periods of
time. They often bickered and then lapsed into long, sulky silences, but Harry didn’t mind this too much. Hermione would just disappear behind a book and then Ron would talk as if she wasn’t there at all. It worked quite well.

One evening they were all sat together in the common room, swapping sweets and sharing gossip when the subject of Dumbledore’s seven-year sabbatical came up again.

‘Where do you think Dumbledore’s been?’ Ron asked Neville.

Neville shrugged. ‘I don’t know. There’s been all sorts of rumours but none of them seem likely.’

Unexpectedly, Hermione put down her book and addressed Ron excitedly. ‘I heard that he was working to infiltrate a pack of werewolves.’

Ron snorted. ‘How’d he do that? He’d stand out a bit, don’t you think?’

Neville giggled and Hermione frowned.

‘I think a powerful wizard like Dumbledore is capable of altering his appearance.’

‘What? Like making himself all hairy?’

‘No!’ Hermione bristled. ‘Don’t you know anything about werewolves? They look perfectly normal when they’re in their human form. I just meant that he could disguise himself as someone else. No one would know who he really was.’

‘Yes, but he couldn’t turn himself into a wolf, could he?’ Ron argued, quite reasonably.

‘He wouldn’t need to,’ Hermione insisted. ‘There’s lots of other ways he could earn their trust. He might even have assumed the form of a known werewolf. That’s possible, you know.’

Ron shook his head. ‘What do you think, Harry?’

Harry shifted about uncomfortably. ‘I don’t think Dumbledore would ever do anything like that,’ he said guardedly. ‘He’s a big supporter of werewolf rights. Anyway, I don’t know why everyone’s still talking about this. It’s not that big a deal.’

‘Of course it is!’ Hermione exclaimed. ‘He disappears from Hogwarts after almost forty years and no one knows where he’s gone? It must have been for something really, really important.’

Harry was quiet for a few minutes, considering, and then he made a decision.

‘I know where Dumbledore’s been.’

All three of them sat up in their seats.

‘You do?!’ Hermione said excitedly. ‘We’ll go on then! Tell us!’

Harry swallowed and lowered his voice. ‘Will you promise not to tell anyone else? I don’t want it getting around.’

They all agreed breathlessly. Hermione was perched right on the edge of her seat and Neville was staring at Harry with his mouth wide open.

‘Okay then,’ Harry took a deep breath. ‘He was ... with me.’
There was a startled silence.

‘What?’ Hermione frowned. ‘I don’t understand. He was ...?’

‘He was looking after me,’ Harry clarified. ‘He raised me.’ He glanced at Neville. ‘Do you remember what I said about my family? I went to go live with my muggle relatives for a few years but then Dumbledore came and got me and we sort of went into hiding. Just in case any of Voldemort’s supporters were still looking for me.’

He blushed a little. ‘So that’s where he was, for all those years. It wasn’t anything crazy or exciting.’

Ron gaped at him.

‘Are you kidding?! That’s way crazier than any theory flying around.’

‘Why couldn’t you stay with your relatives?’ Hermione asked. ‘Were you in danger there?’

‘In a way,’ Harry replied. ‘They were terrified of magic and used to lock me up whenever I did anything strange. I don’t remember that much, but apparently they were pretty neglectful. They hated me just like they hated my parents.’

Hermione looked horrified. ‘That’s awful! You were just a toddler!’

Harry shrugged. ‘They were a little crazy. It happens. I’m alright now.’

‘And Dumbledore raised you?’ Ron said incredulously.

‘Yeah,’ Harry laughed. ‘I suppose it must seem pretty strange. I don’t know why he chose to do it. I guess because he thought he was the best person to protect me, if it came to it.’

‘What was it like living with him?’ Neville asked curiously.

Hermione nodded excitedly. ‘Yes, what’s he really like?’

Harry laughed. ‘He’s alright. Very quiet. We get on pretty well.’

**

Harry was just starting to feel that everything was falling into place in his life when he had another encounter with Draco Malfoy that changed things for the worse.

He caught him fighting with a Hufflepuff boy. The boy was on the floor and Draco was standing over him with his wand raised.

Harry acted on instinct, drawing his wand from his pocket.

‘EXPELLEARMOUS!’

Draco’s wand leapt out of his hand and flew over to Harry who caught it neatly. Draco looked even paler than usual when he saw who it was who had interrupted him.

‘What’s going on here?’ Harry asked, looking at the boy on the floor.

‘He hit me with the Jelly-legs curse,’ the boy complained. ‘I wasn’t doing anything! He just said I was in his way!’
Harry raised an eyebrow at Draco. ‘Is that true?’

Draco frowned and then shrugged slightly. ‘I was only playing around,’ he said, shooting the boy a contemptuous look. ‘I would’ve let him go eventually.’

‘Would you?’

Harry performed the counter-curse and the Hufflepuff boy got shakily to his feet. He still seemed nervous around Draco and inched his way around him.

‘Thanks,’ he muttered at Harry, before fleeing the scene.

‘If you want to practice Jinxes you should find yourself a willing duelling partner,’ Harry told Draco.

Draco smiled uneasily. ‘Are you offering?’

‘Perhaps,’ Harry said. ‘If I see you picking on someone like that again.’

He held out Draco’s wand. There was a pause and then Draco took it from him, without meeting his eyes.

‘You think you’re pretty tough, don’t you?’ He muttered.

‘Not really,’ Harry said. ‘I can defend myself in a fair fight if I need to. I can see you prefer your opponents on the floor.’

Draco pulled a face. ‘What’s it got to do with you anyway? Do you have to go around trying to save everyone? Like that friend of yours, Longbottom. He must hate knowing that he’s such a charity case.’

‘I want you to leave off Neville too,’ Harry said sternly. ‘He’s not a charity case. He’s one of my best friends.’

Draco scoffed. ‘Oh, come on! I know you only hang out with him out of pity. And that Weasley boy too! It’s like you’re trying to surround yourself with the worst sort of wizards.’

‘Oh yes?’ Harry responded sharply, ‘and what exactly are the right sort of wizards? Purebloods? Ex-Death-Eaters?’

Draco recoiled a little. ‘I just meant ... people with standards and connections.’

Harry laughed in his face. ‘People like you, you mean?’

He knew this was a mistake but he was too worked up now to think about what he was saying.

Draco’s pale face flushed quite pink. He took a step towards Harry.

‘You should watch yourself, Potter. You don’t want me as your enemy.’

‘Don’t I?’

**

‘I need you to teach me to duel. Properly, I mean.’

Albus didn’t look up from his work, his quill scratched back and forth, across the parchment.
‘No you don’t. You’re not going to duel anyone.’

‘Well, no,’ Harry said uneasily. ‘Of course not. But what if someone else attacks me? I need to know how to defend myself.’

‘You know how to defend yourself,’ Albus replied coolly. ‘I’ve taught how to deflect and disarm.’

‘Yes, but I need more than that,’ Harry insisted. ‘Hexes and jinxes and things like that.’

Albus raised his head at last and regarded Harry with a steady look. ‘You don’t need to know those to protect yourself.’

‘Yes, but sometimes in a fight you need to attack as well as defend,’ Harry argued. ‘I don’t mean anything really dangerous,’ he added quickly. ‘Just little things to trip people up and slow them down, like practical jokes. You know how schoolyard duels are.’

Albus smiled. ‘I know the way students like to fight,’ he agreed, ‘but I’m sure you must have picked up enough spells by now to play the game as well as the rest of them.’

‘Yes,’ Harry said again, with a heavy sigh, ‘but please, won’t you teach me something too? Something that will give me an edge.’

Albus gave Harry a very severe look. ‘I have done all I can to give you an edge in the classroom; I don’t feel any need to give you an edge in the schoolyard, in every childish scrap and skirmish.’

There was a slight twinkle in his eyes as he spoke though, so Harry held his breath and waited, and sure enough Albus’s expression slowly softened.

‘I suppose I could teach you a few harmless little curses,’ he said mischievously. ‘I came up with a few myself, in fact, and I’ll admit that they’ve been very useful.’

Harry sat himself down gleefully, thinking that he’d won, but it soon became clear that the sort of curses that Albus specialised in were not particularly dangerous. They were, however, very creative and Harry couldn’t help but be drawn in.

Soon he was laughing along with Albus’s outrageous stories, hardly able to believe what he was being told.

‘The ear-worm curse is one of absolute favourites! It infects the target’s mind with a short, very annoying little tune that resurfaces every few hours. If you do it right it can last for days, weeks, months or even years.’

‘Do people even realise they’ve got the curse on them?’ Harry asked.

Albus grinned. ‘Not at first, but they always work it out. You have to hum the tune when you cast the curse, you see, and eventually the victim will remember that. Then they’ll come and beg you to take it off them.’

‘That’s so twisted!’ Harry exclaimed delightedly. ‘When was the last time you cast it on someone?’

‘About seventy years ago,’ Albus replied, ‘I put it on Rubert Brokerage and as far as I know it’s still on him. It’ll have grown quite faint by now of course, only resurfacing every few months. I hear he’s developed a liking for it. Played it at his wedding.’

Harry spluttered with laughter once more. He realised of course, that Albus was deliberately
distracting him but he didn’t really mind.

He considered telling Albus about his fight with Draco but decided against it. That was something he’d have to deal with by himself.
This chapter ... could probably use some work. The first scenes are very bitty and the last part is still quite rough. I would pick at things forever though if I could and I'd rather post now and come back to it later if I need to. I'm expecting this fic to be hugely long and go all sorts of places so I need to keep moving if I want to make progress!

‘How was your duel?’ Albus asked him the next time he saw him.

‘You know about that?’ Harry groaned. ‘We don’t really have any secrets do we?’

‘Not many,’ Albus agreed.

‘Then you must know it didn’t actually happen. Malfoy never turned up.’

‘Ah, that makes sense.’ Albus considered for a moment. ‘Who was it that proposed the duel?’

‘That’s debatable,’ Harry said glumly. ‘Probably me. My temper got the better of me. I’m glad he didn’t show up.’

‘Me too,’ Albus said. ‘Now I don’t have to punish anyone.’

Harry chuckled. ‘You were never going to punish me.’

‘No,’ Albus admitted, eyes twinkling. ‘But still, I’m glad.’

Harry flopped down onto the sofa. ‘If we really have no secrets perhaps you can tell me what’s hidden in the third floor corridor? Underneath the three-headed dog?’

Albus gave him a disapproving look. ‘The one corridor that’s out of bounds? The one I warned students not to enter under pane of death.’

‘Yes,’ Harry said mildly. ‘I assume it’s the secret item that used to be hidden in Gringotts. Won’t you tell me what it is?’

Albus smiled and shook his head.

‘Why not?’ Harry pressed, exasperated. ‘I won’t let on to anyone that I know.’

‘Ask me something else instead,’ Albus said softly.

‘Alright,’ Harry said eagerly. ‘Tell me about the mirror.’

‘What mirror?’

‘You know damn.well what mirror I’m talking about!’ Harry scoffed. ‘The mirror that shows the future!’
Albus raised his eyebrows. ‘You think it shows the future?’

‘Well, doesn’t it?’ Harry faltered. ‘I thought it did.’

‘Why, what do you see in it?’

‘What do you see in it?’ Harry threw back at him.

Albus shook his head. ‘No, no. You’re just fishing for clues. You tell me first.’

Harry squirmed. ‘You won’t laugh? I’m worried about it now.’

‘I won’t laugh,’ Albus promised solemnly.

Harry leant back and closed his eyes. ‘I saw myself but older and stronger. You and I were standing side by side and there was a crowd of people behind us cheering.’

He paused uncertainly. ‘It’s hard to explain, but somehow I could just tell that there’d been a big battle and Voldemort was dead. There was blood on my face and you had your arm around me. We were both smiling.’

Harry took a breath and opened his eyes. Albus was staring at him very intently indeed.

‘And you thought that was your future?’

‘Yes,’ Harry said sadly. ‘It’s what I always hoped would happen.’ He sighed. ‘What was it really?’

Albus smiled. ‘You said it yourself, it what you hoped would happen.’ He leant forward and adjusted his glasses. ‘The mirror of Erised shows us what we desire most in our hearts. I should also mention that our greatest desires are often linked to our greatest fears so it’s no great surprise that you see yourself living in a world where you have conquered Voldemort and are strong, whole and free.’

Harry breathed deeply and nodded. ‘And that you’re there with me, too. That we’re safe together.’

‘Yes.’

Harry sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes. ‘It’s so embarrassing,’ he mumbled. ‘What do you see when you look in the mirror?’

Albus cast his eyes down. ‘Well, that’s the interesting thing. You and I appear to have been subject to a very rare phenomenon.’

Harry blinked. ‘What do you mean?’

Albus looked up again, his bright blue eyes meeting Harry’s emerald green ones.

‘When you and I look in the mirror of Erised we both see exactly the same thing,’

**

On the day of Harry’s first Quidditch match he found himself overcome with an unexpected case of nerves.

‘I don’t know what you’re worrying about,’ Ron said, his mouth full of toast. ‘You’re the best played on the team!’
Harry appreciated the vote of confidence but he still couldn’t help worrying that he would embarrass himself in front of everyone. He felt even worse when he saw the crowd that had gathered in the stands.

‘It’s a big turn out,’ Fred commented, peering over his shoulder. ‘Bloody hell! Even Dumbledore’s watching!’

‘Seriously?’ George said, crowding-in next to his brother. ‘He doesn’t usually come out for this sort of thing does he? Perhaps he developed a liking for Quidditch while he was away.’

‘Maybe he was secretly acting as coach to the Wimborne Wasps!’

The team laughed.

‘He didn’t come to the last match though,’ Angelina commented.

‘Well, perhaps he’s only supporting Gryffindor,’ George suggested. ‘That makes sense, doesn’t it? McGonagall is always rooting for us.’

To Harry’s relief, this explanation satisfied everyone and made the team feel far more confident and motivated.

‘Come on then,’ Fred said, slapping Harry on the shoulder. ‘Time to show them what you can do!’

Harry still felt a little uneasy when he got onto his broom but once he was in the air all his fears faded away. He knew what he was going on his broom and was buoyed up by the cheers of the crowd.

In little less than an hour it was over and the crowd was screaming with delight. Gryffindor had won in a landslide.

**

Harry woke on Christmas morning to find the bottom of his bed almost entirely covered in brightly-coloured packages.

‘Are those all from Dumbledore?’ Ron asked, eyeing the pile with interest.

‘I would think so,’ Harry replied. ‘I don’t have any other family.’

‘Well, he really goes all out doesn’t he?’ Ron said, clearly impressed.

Harry nodded, slightly embarrassed, although he could see that Ron had plenty of his own presents. He watched as the other boy tore through one after another, sending paper flying.

‘Aren’t you going to open yours?’ Ron asked, as he uncovered a large box of chocolates.

Harry glanced back down at the pile. ‘I don’t know. I feel bad opening them when Albus isn’t here.’

‘Well he’s not going to come up to the dormitory!’ Ron said sternly. Then, after a pause. ‘Is that what you call him? Albus?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said shyly. ‘I mean, I usually call him Dumbledore now when I’m talking to other people. I didn’t mean to say his name just now. It just slipped out.’

Ron grinned, ‘It’s okay. I just figured you’d call him dad or maybe even grandad?’
‘Oh no!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘That’s too weird! I’d never ever call him that!’
‘But he’s your daddy!’

Harry threw a pillow at him.

‘Don’t!’ He laughed. ‘I’ll put a hex you if you keep that up! A really nasty one!
‘Alright, Alright!’

Harry slowly started unwrapping his presents while Ron watched with interest, chewing his way through a pack of toffees.

‘That is hideous!’ Ron exclaimed delightedly as Harry unwrapped an emerald green shirt with a black velvet collar.

‘No, this really isn’t that bad,’ Harry insisted. ‘I quite like it.’

‘What’s the pattern?’ Ron asked squinting.

‘It’s little prancing hippogriffs,’ Harry said, laughing. ‘Look, you can see the silver in the claws and hooves.’

‘Oh man!’ Ron chortled. ‘It almost makes me feel better about this thing!’

He held up a large woolly jumper.

‘My mum makes them for all of us,’ Ron said pulling a face, ‘and mine’s always maroon.’

‘It’s sweet,’ Harry said earnestly. ‘I like that it’s got a letter on it.’

He felt a couple more of the packages.

‘I usually have a couple of jumpers two. Yeah, this one!’ He unwrapped a dark green and navy blue jumper. Both of these were mercifully plain.

‘Oh those are all right,’ Ron said. ‘What else have you got? Is it all clothes?’

‘No, books and chocolate too,’ Harry said, picking at a few of the smaller packages. ‘Ah! A new set of quills! That’s good.’

Ron wrinkled his nose. ‘You’re as bad as Hermione!’

**

Harry spent a wonderful Christmas with the Weasleys but he did miss spending the day with Albus. What with one thing and another, he didn’t get to see him again properly until after the holidays.

‘You’ve been having fun,’ Albus said, when he tried to apologise. ‘I’m glad.’

‘Still,’ Harry said regretfully. ‘I should have come by sooner. The time just seems to by flying by.’

‘I’ve been happy to see you doing so well,’ Albus told him. ‘No more arguments with teachers or midnight duels. A solid group of friends and admirers. To think you were so worried at the start of term.’

‘I wasn’t worried,’ Harry protested. ‘I just felt like I wasn’t that close to anyone yet. I still think a lot
of people think I’m strange. They like me at the moment because I’m a Quidditch star, but I feel they could turn on me at any moment.’

‘You’re probably right,’ Albus said mildly. ‘People are fickle. You have a few very close friends now though so you’ll be alright, no matter what happens.’

Harry agreed and helped himself to a handful of chocolates.

‘What was Hogwarts like when you were a student?’ He asked. ‘Did you find it difficult to fit in?’

‘Oh yes! At first, anyway. I was a very strange child. Far stranger than you.’

‘I wish I could see what you were like then,’ Harry said wistfully. ‘I can’t imagine you as a child.’

Albus looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘You could know, if you really wanted to.’

Harry frowned. ‘What?’

‘I could show you a memory from when I was a child.’

Harry gaped at him. ‘That’s possible?’

‘With magic? Of course.’

Albus got up and opened up a tall black cabinet on the far side of the room. Inside there was a large stone bowl covered in strange engravings.

‘This is a pensieve,’ Albus said as he brought it out. ‘It’s a device that allows one to siphon off their thoughts and memories and then examine them at their leisure. If you wish, you can even relive old memories in their entirety, walking into them like a time-traveller, although naturally you cannot change any of the events.’

Harry was astounded. He peered down into the basin and saw that it was filled with a shining silvery liquid.

‘That stuff is your thoughts?’ He asked, skating his fingertips over the swirling surface.

‘Thoughts and memories, yes.’ Albus gently took hold of Harry’s hand. ‘Don’t touch it yet. You’ll get sucked in.’

‘What would I see?’ Harry asked curiously.

‘I’m not sure,’ Albus replied. ‘Probably all sorts of things jumbled together. It’s been a while since I used it.’

Albus drew out his wand and pressed the tip to temple. When he drew the wand away again it had a long silvery strand attached to it. Albus deposited it into the basin and the contents began to swirl more violently.

Harry saw a faint image flicker across the shining water. A view of Hogwarts Castle, as seen from the Great Lake. He gasped out loud, making Albus chuckle.

‘It’s good to know that I can still impress you, after all these years.’

‘Well, this isn’t really you. It’s the Pensieve. Unless you invented this thing I don’t think you can take any credit.’
‘A good point,’ Albus concedes, pulling out another thread of thought from his mind.

Once the bowl was brimming with fresh memories Albus took Harry’s hand again.

‘Are you ready?’ He asked.

‘Yes!’

Albus guided their clasped hands down into the basin until they touched the swirling, silver pool of memories.

Immediately the office lurched around them and then dissolved away entirely. It was a little like being dragged down into a whirlpool. Harry just had time to register how strange it was before he was free and gasping on a stone ledge.

**

They were standing just outside the entrance to Hogwarts castle, surrounded by first-year students. It was raining hard and all the children were soaked, their black cloaks slicked down with water and their hoods pulled up high.

Harry jumped back in alarm as one girl ran out in front of him, rainwater trailing from her long blonde plaits.

‘Don’t worry,’ Albus whispered. ‘You can’t actually get in their way. They’ll just float through you, like ghosts.’

‘Well I don’t want that either!’ Harry said, shivering. ‘Can they see or hear us at all?’

‘No,’ Albus said. ‘They’re just memories. Nothing we can do or say can affect them now.’

It was a very strange feeling to be standing in the middle of a storm and not feel the rain falling all around him or the wind roaring in his ears.

‘This isn’t what I expected,’ he told Albus.

‘No? How so?’

‘I thought we would see everything through your eyes. Like a vision or a dream. This is more like when Scrooge travelled back in time with The Ghost of Christmas Past.’

Albus chuckled. ‘Very much so.’

He pointed at the dark mass of students that were now swarming around the doors.

‘They’re heading in now. We better hurry up or you’ll miss me!’

‘How is that even possible?’ Harry grumbled, breaking into a jog.

They slipped in behind the last child just before the great doors slammed shut. The students huddled together, shivering from the cold, their robes dripping huge puddles onto the floor.

‘It was a terrible storm,’ Albus recalled. ‘One of the worst one in decades. It took us a very long time to cross the lake and one of the girls actually fell in.’

He pointed out an especially wet and miserable figure shuddering in the corner.
‘Who was she?’ Harry asked. ‘Do you remember.’

‘Oh yes,’ Albus replied. ‘Amelia Abbott. Very nice girl with a gift for languages. She ended up working for the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

‘What house was she in?’

Albus raised an eyebrow. ‘Surely you don’t want to ruin the surprise. We’re here to see the sorting.’

‘Really?’

Harry felt a surge of excitement. He started glancing around frantically.

‘Which one are you? Oh wait! - I see! - The red-head!’

A tall boy at the back of the crowd had just pushed back his hood and Harry immediately recognised his long, sharp nose and bright blue eyes.

Fascinated, Harry let go of the hand of the present-day Albus and moved towards the younger one. As he drew closer he overhead a couple of boys whispering.

‘Definitely a Slytherin,’ the first one said. ‘Don’t you know anything about the Dumbledores? His father’s a total blood-purist. Attacked a bunch of muggle boys who lived near him and almost killed them.’

‘Are you sure?’ The second boy replied breathlessly. ‘What about his mother?’

‘She’s completely mad,’ the first boy hissed. ‘Never leaves the house. Some people say she went mad after her husband went to Azkaban, but others say she was always a bit mad. Runs in the family.’

The Auburn-haired boy was close enough to the boys to hear them whispering, but he acted as if he did not. His eyes were fixed straight ahead and there was a sad smile playing on his lips.

Harry had seen this distant, dreamy look many times before, although never on a face so smooth and unblemished. He took a couple of steps forward and stared in wonder at the young Albus Dumbledore.

He was surprisingly handsome with thick curly hair and finely-sculpted features. His cheeks were still soft and boyish, rounded out with puppy fat, but his jawline was quite strong.

He looked a good few years older than he was, especially since he was so tall, although there was also something very young and vulnerable about him. Then again, perhaps that was just his dopey expression.

Harry only had a moment to admire him before an old man that Harry didn’t know came into the room and started jostling the students into a neat line.

Harry retreated back to his guardian, grasping for his hand once more.

‘They were talking about you,’ he whispered. ‘About your family.’

Albus nodded seriously. ‘I was expecting that though. People love to gossip and what happened to my family was big news.’

‘I thought your father died before you started school.’
'No. He died three weeks into the term. He was still alive when I started, although very ill.'

Harry found his eyes drawn back to the pale, auburn-haired. He didn’t look as if he was prepared to lose a parent.

‘I’m so sorry. That must have been awful.’

Albus squeezed his hand. ‘It’s alright. I had people to help me through it.’ He pointed at at the line of children. ‘You see see the boy in front of me now? He was my best friend.’

Harry watched as a short, spotty boy stumbled over his robes and was reminded forcefully of Neville Longbottom. The auburn-haired boy reached down to helped him up which earned him an bright, earnest smile.

‘Elphias Doge,’ Albus said warmly.

‘Why’s he look so green?’ Harry asked. ‘Was he sea-sick on the ride over?’

Albus chuckled. ‘No, he had just recovered from a bad bout of dragon pox. It was several days before his colour returned and the scars faded.’

‘Poor kid!’

They followed the long line of students into the Great Hall and Harry thought that they seemed a more energetic bunch than his year. They kept whispering to one another and jumping up to see what was ahead of them.

‘Your father wasn’t really a blood-purist, was he?’ Harry asked.

‘No,’ Albus replied. ‘He was just defending my little sister. She was attacked by a gang of muggle boys who caught her using magic. She was still young and couldn’t control it and they hurt her really badly.’

‘Why didn’t your father just tell the ministry that?’ Harry asked, shocked.

‘He didn’t catch them at the time,’ Albus explained. ‘He came after them later. I think most people would have considered it revenge.’

‘Still,’ Harry objected. ‘If they attacked his daughter then surely the ministry would have understood?’

Albus’s face was stony. ‘I don’t think so. In any case, my father didn’t want to give them the whole story. He was afraid they would want to interview my sister and she wasn’t well enough for that.’

Harry remembered Albus saying that his little sister had been sickly and he felt even more sorry for the auburn-haired boy that was shuffling his way into place, at the front of the hall.

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about that hat,’ he said suddenly, hoping to lighten the mood. ‘I made a complete fool of myself in front of it, pulling faces all those times.’

‘Well, it was very funny,’ Albus replied, ‘and the hat didn’t really mind. It rarely gets that much attention, outside of the sorting.’

They watched as the first names were read out and each boy and girl in turn walked nervously over to the stool. Harry kept marvelling at the thought that all these kids were now old men and women. It
seemed quite impossible.

‘It’s me next,’ Albus whispered urgently. ‘I remember I was so nervous.’

He didn’t look nervous though. He walked straight towards the stool and then sat down calmly, waiting for the hat to be lowered upon his head. There was only a moment’s deliberation before the hat called out,

‘GRYFFINDOR!’

Then the auburn-haired boy jumped up again and strode over to Gryffindor table.

Harry felt a twisting in his guts. ‘Did you ever doubt that you’d be a Gryffindor?’

‘Oh yes,’ Albus said. ‘I thought I might end up a Ravenclaw or maybe even a Slytherin. I am quite, cunning, you see.’ He grinned. ‘No one really knows where they belong until the time comes.’

Harry felt the knot in his stomach loosen a little. He thought about telling Albus what had happened with his sorting, but he didn’t quite have the courage. He didn’t want to admit that he’d had to argue his way into Gryffindor.

They watched the rest of the students as they were sorted and Albus pointed out some of the more remarkable students. It was interesting to see some of the last century’s most notable figures as podgy, dimple-cheeked youngsters.

Elphias Doge was also sorted into Gryffindor and sat down nervously next to the young Albus Dumbledore. The auburn-haired boy greeted him happily and as soon as the sorting was over they started chatting together animatedly.

‘What are you talking about?’ Harry asked.

‘Books,’ Albus replied.

‘I should’ve known!’

They moved over to the Gryffindor table and listened to the boy’s conversation for a while. It was strangely familiar because Albus had recommended a lot of these book to him at some point and they’d chatted about them in their own time.

‘Did you already know that you were gay?’ Harry asked.

Albus was surprised. ‘What makes you ask that?’

Harry shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I was just wondering whether you knew when you were my age, or if you only worked it out when you were older.’

Albus considered for a few moments. ‘I knew I was different,’ he said eventually.

‘Different how?’ Harry asked curiously.

Albus smiled and said, ‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Just as his younger self let out a furious exclamation.

‘No, that’s not right at all! If you’ve read the third book in the series then you know that the ring Diana gave him was a fake! She had the real one hidden in the graveyard all the time!’

‘Well, I know you were bookish,’ Harry said, rolling his eyes, ‘but that doesn’t really mean anything.
Lots of boys like to read. I like to read.’

‘You’re into books because I got you into books,’ Albus told him. ‘I was into books because it was just what I liked. It wasn’t something my parents particularly enjoyed or encouraged. My father thought they were a huge waste of money and often said I was too much of a dreamer.’

He smiled at Harry as if to say that this wasn’t a big deal, but the smile was a little strained.

‘I already knew that I was very different by the time I came to school but I soon realised just how different I was. I simply didn’t think like the other children.’

‘Well you’re a genius,’ Harry said sharply, making Albus laugh.

‘It was more than that,’ he said softly. ‘I knew a lot of smart, enthusiastic and quirky people and yet I still felt like I was different from them.’

‘Did you feel feminine, at all?’ Harry asked.

He was watching the pale, auburn-haired boy again as he chatted away. He kept playing with his hair, winding the curls around his fingers and then pushing them back behind his ears.

‘Perhaps,’ Albus admitted, following Harry’s gaze.

**

Just as Harry was started to enjoy himself the great hall started to dissolve around him and found himself shifting into a new memory. This one apparently took place in the Gryffindor common room, late in the evening.

‘When is this?’ Harry asked, glancing around frantically. He recognised some of the boys in the room and none of them seemed to have aged noticeably.

‘A couple of months later,’ Albus said vaguely. ‘I think it was early November, just after the first Quidditch match of the year.’

The auburn-haired boy was sat in the centre of a circle, glowing with confidence. He was in the middle of telling a joke and when he finished everyone else laughed loudly. The atmosphere was quite different from the sorting, where everyone had been wary and uncertain. Now all the Gryffindors seemed friendly and relaxed and comfortable with one another.

‘You seem happy,’ Harry noted. ‘Settled-in quickly? Made lots of friends?’

Albus grinned at him. ‘Just a few, good friends,’ He assured Harry. ‘Like Elphias, over there.’

Elphias Doge was sat cross-legged on the floor to left of Albus’s armchair. He looked a lot healthier now, with his skin clear and smooth, and he was staring up at the auburn-haired boy adoringly. Harry almost felt embarrassed for him, his admiration was so naked, but he was clearly not the only one captivated by Albus.

‘You were popular, weren’t you?’ Harry said, scanning the crowd. ‘Is this why you wanted to use the pensieve? To show off?’

Albus chuckled. ‘It is an especially good memory,’ he admitted. ‘It wasn’t always like this.’

Harry remembered that Albus’s father had died earlier this term and felt a sudden stab of shame. Albus must have had some very bad experiences indeed.
Harry glanced around the circle again and noticed that there were a lot of older students in the crowd, including some very good looking boys and girls.

‘Did you fancy anyone here?’ He asked.

‘No.’

Did you fancy anyone while you were at school?’

‘No, not really.’

Harry glanced up at him. ‘What do you mean?’

Albus looked uncomfortable. ‘I suppose there were a few boys I really admired and who I always wanted to impress. I’d hesitate to even call them crushes though.’

‘You didn’t get off with anyone then?’ Harry persisted.

‘No,’ Albus said firmly. ‘Even if I had done, that’s hardly what I’d bring you here to see.’

Harry laughed. ‘No, I suppose not.’

The group of Gryffindors started to play a game, going round the circle and taking turns to add lines to a story. At first, Harry found the rules a little hard to follow, but he still couldn’t help laughing along whenever someone added an especially ridiculous detail.

The auburn-haired boy dominated the game, pushing the others to speak and critiquing their contributions, and everyone seemed happy to have him in charge. They laughed at his little quips and jibes and waited expectantly whenever his turn came around.

Harry had never seen Albus quite like this before, so thoroughly alive and sparking with electricity. He often radiated an impressive aura of power and could make people fall silent with a glance, but that was not quite the same thing. The auburn-haired boy had a different type of glamour, something intense and earnest and exhilarating.

Harry suddenly felt an incredible longing to join the game and become part of the group, although he knew it was impossible. For the second time, he moved away from his silver-haired guardian and approached the strange, auburn-haired boy instead. There was a small gap on Albus’s left-hand side. Harry squeezed in eagerly, sitting down cross-legged on the floor.

For several minutes, the fantasy was absolute. He laughed and jeered along with the rest of the Gryffindors, following the story as it progressed. He waited impatiently for Albus’s next turn to come and laughed louder than anyone when he delivered his line.

Then the auburn-haired boy turned to him and said brightly, ‘Your turn.’

Harry felt his heart skip a beat, startled to find those bright blues eyes sparkling at him, and he almost forgot what he had been planning to say. The words were already there though, carefully composed in his mind, and he spoke them without thinking.

He was rewarded with a melodic tinkling of laugh, but not from the auburn-haired boy beside him. That boy was still waiting patiently for the girl behind Harry to take her turn.

It was the present-day Albus Dumbledore who had laughed, from his position across the room. When Harry looked up at him, feeling disoriented, he caught the last traces of the laugh on the old
man’s lips. He was smiling wide, but his eyes were filled with a strange, sad longing.

For a moment, Harry had the queer feeling that he was seeing his own expression mirrored on the old man’s face. Albus obviously wished, just as much as he did that Harry could have walked right into this memory and made friends with the auburn-haired child.

Harry glanced back at the auburn-haired boy and saw that he was smiling now too, but not at Harry, because he still couldn’t see him at all. To this version of Albus Dumbledore, he didn’t even exist.

Harry took a deep breath and then scrambled up off of the floor. Albus wasn’t smiling anymore. He could tell that something was wrong.

‘What is it?’ He asked.

‘I want to go,’ Harry said urgently. ‘I don’t like it anymore. It’s too weird.’

Albus didn’t argue. He just took Harry’s hand and pulled them out of the memory in a whirling rush of magic. Harry found himself back in the headmaster’s office, gasping over the shallow silver basin.

He let go of Albus’s head immediately and grabbed the edge of the desk to steady himself.

‘Are you alright?’ Albus asked. ‘It can be a little much, going inside another person’s memory. ‘I shouldn’t have suggested it.’

‘No,’ Harry said quickly. ‘It was ... I really enjoyed it, at first anyway. I just didn’t like having you not know me.’

He didn’t think he could articulate the other feelings, but of course he didn’t have to. Albus already understood.

‘It seemed so real for a moment, when you sat down in the circle. I could see you there, beside me. The two of us children together, talking and laughing.’

Harry swallowed again. ‘I forgot it was impossible,’ he admitted. ‘When you looked in my direction I thought you were really looking at me. I thought I was really there. Not just pretending.’

Albus reached out to take his hand again and this time Harry let him, squeezing tight.

‘I would have loved to have know you when I was younger Harry, but we were born too far apart. I’m grateful that I got to know you now and watch you grow up.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry smiled up at his friend and guardian. ‘Me, too.’

Chapter End Notes

Originally the whole pensieve scene was going to go in chapter 17, but it wasn’t going well so I cut it out and put in a bit with Fred and George instead. I thought it might seem a bit repetitive to have a sorting scene after a sorting scene and I wasn’t sure that I had captured the mood I wanted. Also I had no idea what sort of game the Gryffindors should be playing and couldn’t settle on anything! That’s why there’s sadly no actual dialogue/gameplay from them. I simply couldn’t write it! You have to imagine the banter instead.
The Forbidden Forest

The notes arrived at breakfast, in three identical envelopes. Harry opened his first and then glanced over at Hermione’s and Neville’s, to check that they were the same. They all said exactly the same thing, in a curly cursive:

Your detention will take place at eleven o’clock tonight. Meet Mr Filtch in the Entrance Hall.
~ Prof. M. McGonagall

‘It doesn’t look good does it?’ he groaned. He had almost forgotten about their detention. It was a shock to be reminded about it in this blunt, impersonal way.

Neville was very shaken. ‘What sort of thing do you think Filtch will make us do?’ He asked nervously.

‘I don’t know,’ Hermione said, biting at her bottom lip. ‘Nothing nice, I’m sure.’

None of them had ever had detention before, but Ron’s brothers had been in a lot of trouble over the years and he had a few words of comfort for them.

‘It’s usually just cleaning,’ he assured them. ‘Something really dull and difficult that Filtch wants doing.’

This made them feel a little better but they were still very subdued when they made their way down to entrance hall. Filtch was already waiting for them, along with Draco Malfoy. He glared at them when they arrived.

‘This is all your fault,’ he hissed at Neville, as soon as he got the chance.

‘I don’t know who you figure that,’ Harry hissed back. ‘You’re the one who wouldn’t mind his own business.’

Neville ducked his head down and started trembling. Harry waited until they were outside, in the dark, and then took his hand to reassure him. It was very hot and sweaty.

They walked across the grounds in silence, with Hermione, Neville and Harry on one side of Filtch, Draco on the other. As they approached Hagrid’s Hut, a booming voice called out to them.

‘Is that you, Filtch? Hurry up, I want ter get started.’

Relief flooded Harry. If Hagrid was in charge of their detention then he was sure it couldn’t be anything that terrible.

This conclusion was quickly drawn into question though, when it was revealed that they were going to go into the Forbidden Forest.

Neville moaned and Harry gave his hand a quick squeeze.

‘It’s alright,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve been in there before. We’ll be fine as long as we stick to the paths and Hagrid knows his way around.’

Draco shot Harry another glare. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about! It’s full of all sorts of dangerous monsters. We can’t go in there at night!’
He looked far more frightened than Harry had ever seen him, perhaps even more so than Neville, although he was trying not to show it. When he noticed Harry and Neville’s clasped hands he started jeering at them.

Neville ducked his head down and started trembling but he didn’t let go of Harry’s hand or back away from him, which Harry appreciated.

‘Back off, Draco,’ he said wearily. ‘Don’t you think we’re in enough trouble already without starting another fight?’

‘We wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for your little boyfriend,’ Draco hissed. ‘He just had to go running after you, didn’t he? Couldn’t bear to be apart from you for even one night?’

‘Oh please!’ Harry scoffed. ‘You’re so pathetic. I’m sorry you don’t have any real friends but that’s no reason to take it out on mine.’

‘You’re the one who fetched Filch, anyway!’ Hermione protested. ‘It’s your fault that we all got caught.’

She took Neville’s other hand and they all glared at Draco, who looked pale and furious.

‘Now stop squabbling you lot,’ Hagrid said gruffly. ‘I need you to pay attention. We’re doin’ dangerous work out ‘ere tonight. Something’s in ‘ere’s attacking unicorns. I found one dead week and there’s another one still wanderin’ around injured. We’re gonna try an’ find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery.’

That sobered them all up again. They grew even more sombre when Hagrid pointed out a trail of thick, silvery blood on the ground.

‘We’re gonna split up inter two groups and follow the trail in different directions.’

‘Who goes with who?’ Draco demanded, shooting the Gryffindors another dirty look. ‘I don’t want to end up alone with Longbottom. What if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?’

‘Who’d you want?’ Hagrid challenged, throwing Draco for a loop for a moment.

‘Fang,’ he said decisively. ‘I want fang.’

‘All right,’ Hagrid said grimly. ‘I hafta warn yeh though, he’s a bloody coward. So me, Hermione and Neville will go in one way an’ Draco, Harry and Fang will go the other.’

If Draco was annoyed by this decision he didn’t show it. He had grown very pale indeed though, so much so that Harry almost felt sorry for him.

‘You want to hold hands?’ He offered.

‘No,’ Draco spat, shivering. ‘Honestly, you’re such a creep!’

They walked in silence for a while, their eyes on the ground, and then the trail faded away to nothing.

‘What now?’ Draco demanded, still trembling.

‘I don’t know,’ Harry replied. ‘I suppose we could keep going. See if the trail picks up later? There might still be some splatters further up the path.’
'This is ridiculous,' Draco muttered. ‘This is servant’s work. We’re students. We shouldn’t be doing this sort of thing.’

‘It does seem silly,’ Harry agreed graciously. ‘Punishing us for being out of bed after hours by sending us out into the forbidden forest after hours.’

He brightened then as an idea struck him. ‘Want to see my treehouse?’

Draco’s pale, nervous face creased up into a scowl. ‘What?’

‘Come on!’ Harry laughed. ‘I’ll show you. It’s not far. We’ll be totally safe up there and we can have a look around and see if we can spot anything.’

Draco was still confused but he let Harry lead him back to the outskirts of the forest. He let out a raspy little cry when they reached the treehouse.

‘It is real! I thought you were joking or something!’ He moved towards the ladder, tugging uncertainly at the ropes. ‘Are you sure it’s safe?’

Of course!’ Harry said gleefully, jumping up. ‘Come on!’

‘This is so weird,’ Draco muttered. ‘How did this thing get here?’

‘I told you, it’s mine!’ Harry replied. ‘I brought it with me. Look,’ he pointed at the plaque on the door. The words ‘Harry James Potter’ were just visible in the pale moonlight.

Draco reached out tentatively the trace the letters. ‘Just when I think I’ve got you all figured out you go on and pull something like this.’

He was obviously impressed, despite himself. Harry grinned at him and reached out to grab his arm, eagerly pulling him inside.

‘I’ll show you around!’ He said. ‘There’s a chair and a swing and I think I’ve still got some sweets in the cupboard.’

‘Can’t you keep your hands to yourself?’ Draco complained, snatching his arm away, but he followed Harry inside and gazed around with wonder.

‘Here,’ Harry said, pulling out a big packet of toffees. ‘I knew that there was still some left. Go on! Take one!’

Draco hesitated for a moment and then took one toffee and unwrapped it delicately. Harry took a seat by the window and looked out over the dark forest.

‘How did you get this thing here?’ He asked, kneeling on the floor beside him. ‘I mean, smuggling in a broomstick is one thing, but this … this is unheard of.’

‘Magic!’ Harry said laughing. ‘Anyway, I told you that I had permission for my broom. I’m not such a rule-breaker as you seem to think I am.’

‘Yes, but you can’t have been given permission for this!’ Draco said gesturing wildly.

‘Couldn’t I?’ Harry challenged, eyes sparkling. ‘I told you I had connections. Hagrid, for instance. He knows his way around the forest. It’s a shame you think he’s so beneath you.’

Draco scowled and then scooted closer to him. ‘Can you see anything?’ He asked.
‘Not really,’ Harry muttered. ‘It’s too dark out there. Perhaps we should try casting a spell?’

‘No, don’t!’ Draco said urgently. ‘We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves. Let’s just hide out here until it’s all over.’

‘Coward!’ Harry chuckled.

He leant back against the wall and helped himself to another toffee. Draco followed suit, taking a handful of sweets and sucking his way through them.

‘Do you have anything like this?’ Harry asked him. ‘Back at your place? I heard that your family has some sort of mansion. There must be loads of land attached to that.’

‘There is,’ Draco admitted, ‘but we don’t really use any of it. It’s just for show.’

‘You practiced flying out there, didn’t you?’ Harry prompted.

‘Yeah,’ Draco agreed. ‘There’s lots of land for that and it’s all surrounded by trees.’ He paused. ‘I never thought to ask for a treehouse. I’m sure my father would’ve gotten me one, if I had.’

Harry smirked. ‘I’m sure. Your dad clearly spoils you.’

‘No more than yours apparently,’ Draco shot back. ‘Who are your parents anyway? You never said.’

‘Didn’t I?’ Harry said vaguely. ‘I told you I was adopted though.’ He pulled a face. ‘It’s complicated.’

Then he said, ‘I’m sorry for having a go at your Dad before. It was uncalled for.’

He mostly did this to distract Draco from asking any other questions about his family, but he also felt it was just good manners to apologise.

‘It’s alright,’ Draco replied. ‘I insult other people’s families all the time.’

‘I know,’ Harry frowned at him. ‘I think that’s wrong.’

‘Is that why you won’t tell me who your adopted parents are?’ Draco asked. ‘You’re afraid I might make fun of them?’

‘Perhaps,’ Harry replied. ‘Perhaps, I just like being mysterious.’

This made Draco laugh and Harry flushed with pride. He was just about to say something else when a scream tore through the air.

‘What was that?!’ Harry jumped. ‘Was that Neville or Hermione?!”

‘I-I don’t know,’ Draco stammered. He had gone pale again.

He leant out of the window, staring into the darkness.

‘I can’t see any green sparks,’ he said, heart-racing. ‘What does that mean? Do you think they’re in too much trouble to raise their wands?’

‘I - uh,’ Draco gabbled once more.

Harry jumped to his feet. ‘Come on! We’ve got to go out and find them!’
He tried grabbing at Draco’s arm but the other boy shrunk back against the wall.

‘No way!’ He groaned. ‘I - If there’s something out there then I want to stay right here.’

‘Oh, right here? In my treehouse?’ Harry mocked furiously. ‘Fine! Stay here if you want! I’m going to help!’

He left Draco huddled in the corner and headed back down the ladder and into the depths of the forest.

He shuddered as he walked, wishing he had his father’s cloak with him. He always felt a lot braver when he was invisible. He couldn’t tell which direction the scream had come from so he doubled back to the trail of blood and followed the route his friends has taken.

He had been jogging for about ten minutes when he heard a rustling in the bushes. He froze in his tracks and tightened his grip on his wand, heart hammering in his chest.

Something sleek and black emerged from the shadows. It moved like an animal, crawling and scuttling across the ground, but it’s limbs were long and thin. As it got closer, Harry saw - to his horror - that it was a human being creeping out on all fours.

It was wearing a long black cloak that trailed on the ground with a large hood pulled down over its face. It turned towards Harry slowly, and rose to its feet in a strange, jerky movement.

Harry stood still, paralysed by fear, as the creature advanced upon him. The hood slipped back, just a little, as it stumbled forward and Harry caught a glimpse of a bone white face with bright bloodshot eyes.

Sudden pain shot through Harry’s scar, as swift and intense as if someone had swung an axe into his skull. He fell to his knees and let out a scream so sharp and terrible that it was a second before he recognised it as his own.

The creature was hovering over him with one hand outstretched. Harry tried grasping for his wand, but the pain in his head was so terrible that he could barely move and he couldn’t stop screaming. It was as though he was possessed.

Just then, a shot was fired. The hooded figure reared back, like a startled deer and then glided away into the trees.

Hagrid appeared on the path, his gun in his hand and Hermione and Neville at his side. Hermione shrieked when she saw Harry and ran over to him at once.

‘Harry! Are you alright? Did it hurt you?’

‘I’m fine,’ Harry said quickly. ‘It just ... startled me.’

His throat felt hoarse from all the screaming and his head was still throbbing with pain. He swallowed deeply before trying to get up. Hagrid rushed forward to take his arm and help him.

‘We must’ve chased it towards yeh,’ he said shakily. ‘We jus’ caught it with the unicorn. Drinking its blood.’

‘It was horrible!’ Neville exclaimed hysterically. ‘It moved all wrong. Like its legs were on back to front!’
‘What was it, Hagrid?’ Hermione asked. ‘Some sort of dark monster? It looked a little like a banshee.’

‘No,’ Harry said firmly. ‘It wasn’t a monster. It was a man.’

He didn’t want to tell them that he had seen its face or that he had recognised it. For now his head was clear he felt sure that the smooth, white face he had seen was the same one that had haunted his childhood nightmares.

He knew, almost instinctively, that the creature under the cloak had been Lord Voldemort.
The pieces always came together eventually. Some fell into place slowly, each one barely making a difference, but the most important ones fell fast, revealing the picture quite suddenly.

When Harry heard what Hagrid had said to the stranger in the pub he knew that there was no time to lose. He set off at once towards the castle with his friends chasing after him.

‘Hold up!’ Ron panted, struggling to keep up. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Dumbledore!’ Harry panted back. ‘We need to tell him what Hagrid’s done. If it really was Voldemort under that cloak then he already knows how to get that stone.’

His scar was burning again and the pain was so intense it was almost blinding. He couldn’t think of anything except finding his guardian.

Ron and Hermione followed a few steps behind him, unable to match his furious pace. When he came to an abrupt halt, in front of the gargoyle, they almost smacked into him.

‘What is it?’ Hermione gasped. ‘Why are we stopping?’

‘This is his office,’ Harry told her. ‘I just need to give the password. Just wait a moment.’ He struggled to catch his breath. ‘It’s Caramel Hearts.’

The gargoyle remained where it was, its stony eyes staring up at Harry blankly.

‘Er - what’s wrong?’ Ron said, glancing over at Hermione. ‘Have you forgotten it?’

Harry frowned. ‘No. He must have changed it. That’s strange. He usually tells me when he does that.’

Hermione looked worried. ‘How are we going to get in then? Should we go and find someone else instead?’

‘No!’ Harry said urgently. ‘We don’t need anyone else. Just give me a second. I’m sure I can guess it. It’s always something sweet. How about Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum or Dragonsbreath Mints? Blueberry Sourballs? Turkish Delight?’

He listed as many sweets as he could, exhausting the entire inventory of Sugarplum’s and Honeyduke’s sweet shops. Ron and Hermione chipped in too, making their own suggestions, but nothing worked.

‘This is hopeless,’ Ron groaned. ‘Dumbledore must have changed his pattern. Is there any other way in?’

‘No,’ Harry said miserably. ‘I don’t understand why he would do this. Maybe - ‘

‘What are you three doing up here?’ A shrill voice demanded.

They spun around to find Professor McGonagall glaring down at them suspiciously.

‘Professor McGonagall!’ Harry exclaimed eagerly. ‘I just wanted to see Albus! Can you let us into his office?’
‘He’s not in his office,’ McGonagall told him.

‘He’s not?’ Harry blinked. ‘Where is he then?’

‘Halfway to London, I expect,’ McGonagall replied. ‘He received an urgent owl from the Ministry and flew off at once.’

Harry’s mouth fell open. ‘He’s - he’s gone?’

‘Yes,’ Professor McGonagall raised her eyebrows. ‘He should be back tomorrow. Whatever you wanted to speak to him can surely wait until then?’

‘But it’s very important,’ Hermione said, glancing nervously at Harry. ‘It’s about,’ she lowered her voice, ‘the philosopher’s stone.’

Professor McGonagall started back in shock, her face going white.

‘You know?’ She exclaimed. ‘How much do you know?’ Her eyes flew to Harry.

‘Not much,’ Ron said quickly. ‘Only what we worked out ourselves, but we think that someone’s going to try and steal it.’

McGonagall’s face tightened. ‘Well rest assured the stone’s very well protected. No one can get anywhere near it.’

‘But that’s just it, Professor,’ Hermione piped up, shooting another desperate look at Harry. ‘We think that someone’s found a way to get through to the stone, or past the first obstacle at least.’

‘Nonsense!’ McGonagall said sharply. ‘Now I suggest you all stop worrying about this and go out and enjoy the sunshine.’

As soon as she was gone Ron and Hermione turned to Harry, clamouring for his attention.

‘What are we going to do?’

‘Should we tell someone else?’

Harry wasn’t listening though. He took a couple of steps back and then slid down to the floor.

‘Harry!’ Hermione cried out urgently. ‘Are you alright? Is it your scar?’

Harry shook his head dumbly and brought his knees up to his chest. He could feel the tears starting in his eyes.

‘How could he just leave me?’ He whispered.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a frightened look. They had never seen Harry like this before.

‘Um, Harry,’ Hermione knelt down on the floor in front of him. ‘You heard what Professor McGonagall said. He was called away.’

Harry shook his head again and then buried it in his arms. ‘He didn’t tell me he was going. He didn’t tell me anything. He always leaves me a message.’

‘Well, McGonagall said it was urgent,’ Ron said, sounding very uncomfortable.
Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘Harry,’ she said beseechingly. ‘Harry, please.’

Harry knew that they both wanted him to pull himself together and come up with a plan, but he just felt too lost and hopeless.

‘I can’t,’ he whispered. ‘I just can’t think right now.’

Tears were trickling down his cheeks, scorching the skin on their way down and there was an ache in the back of his throat.

‘It is shit timing,’ Ron agreed resentfully. ‘Dumbledore leaving now, just when we really need him.’

‘Ron!’

‘Well it is!’ Ron huffed. ‘I don’t know what he’s playing at.’

‘I just don’t think that’s helping,’ Hermione snapped.

She was wrong though. Through the haze of his despair Harry processed what Ron was saying. It was too convenient to be just a coincidence.

‘It was deliberate,’ he muttered into his sleeves.

‘What?’ Ron said, bending down towards him. ‘What did you say?’

‘It was deliberate,’ Harry repeated, growing more sure of the fact as he said it. ‘Albus wanted Voldemort to think that it was safe to try and take the stone.’

He took a deep breath, wiped his eyes and looked up at them. ‘It’s a trap,’ he said firmly.

Ron gaped at him. ‘But that’s insane!’ He protested. ‘What if you-know-who actually makes it through to the stone?’

‘Maybe Dumbledore thinks that the rest of the enchantments are strong enough to keep Voldemort out?’ Hermione suggested. ‘Or perhaps, if it really is a trap, he’s put something in place to keep Voldemort down there.’

‘Well, what do we do then?’ Ron demanded. ‘Do we need to do anything?’

Harry was just wondering the same thing. If the plan was simply to lure Voldemort out or catch him then surely Albus would have told him about it. There had to be more to it than that, some part that he needed to play.

‘I don’t know,’ he murmured. ‘Dumbledore will be back tomorrow.’

Perhaps sooner, he thought. If the urgent message from the Ministry was faked then he might return at any time. He had a knack for disappearing and then reappearing precisely when it was most convenient.

‘I’ll send him an owl,’ he said slowly. ‘I’ll let know what we know and ask him to hurry back.’

Hermione nodded. ‘That’s a good idea. Do you think it will reach him in time?’

Harry shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, reaching a decision. ‘I’m going to go after Voldemort myself. Tonight.’
Dear Albus,

Please come back as soon as you can. I am sure that Lord Voldemort is going to try and steal the Philosopher’s stone tonight. He already knows how to get past Fluffy and he’ll probably be able to get through the rest of the enchantments too.

I expect you think that what you’ve got down there is tricky enough to keep him busy for a while but not forever. I hope we’ll be able to get to him before he reaches the stone and find out who’s been helping him.

I’m going to go after him myself to try and hold him until you arrive. I don’t know if this is what you want me to do but it makes the most sense. I wish you had just told me the plan before you left. I don’t understand why you didn’t.

I hope this is the right thing to do. Please forgive me if it’s not. I would forgive you too, if you’d overlooked anything or made any mistakes. I know you only want what’s right.

I love you with all my heart and soul, for now and forever.

Your Harry James.

‘You’ve written an awful lot,’ Ron said glancing over his shoulder. ‘Are you sure he’s going to have time to get through all of that? This is an emergency you know.’

Harry quickly folded the parchment up to stop his friend reading too closely.

‘This is Dumbledore we’re talking about,’ He said dryly. ‘He can read an novel in half an hour. It’s not going to take him more than a second to get through this.’

He folded the parchment again and then rolled it up into a tight ring and attached it to Hedwig’s leg. The snowy owl hooted at him softly, perhaps sensing that he was distressed, and nuzzled at his neck.

‘There’s no time for that,’ Harry said, even as he petted her. ‘I need you to find Albus as fast as you can and give him this letter. It’s very, very important.’

Hedwig hooted again and then took flight. Harry watched her go with a sinking feeling in his stomach. He almost wished he could fly away too and leave all these troubles behind him.

He turned back to Ron, his resolve hardening. ‘Look, about tonight - ‘

Ron held up his hand. ‘There’s no point trying to argue with me. My mind’s made up. If you’re going then I’m going and that’s that.’

Harry stared at him. ‘It’s not your fight,’ he said quietly.

Ron snorted. ‘And what it’s yours? Just because you-know-who gave you that scar? We’ve all got to fight him.’

Harry knew Ron was wrong. It was his fight. That was why Albus had left him here to face Lord Voldemort all by himself. It was something he had to do.

He was almost certain that he had gotten it right, but something still ate away at him. He wondered if Albus truly understood just how much he feared Voldemort.
Albus knew that he’d had nightmares about him when he was younger. Harry had tried to hide how bad it was, wiping away tears and swallowing the screams, but Albus wasn’t a fool. He knew that his little boy was terrified of the monster that had killed his parents.

What about now though? Could Albus have guessed that Harry currently saw that bone white face every night in his dreams? Did he know how he lay awake some nights, too scared to even sleep, with his scar aching like an open wound?

Harry hadn’t wanted him to know. He hadn’t even told him what had happened in the Forbidden Forest, although he was sure he had heard some of the story from Hagrid. He was too ashamed to admit how he had reacted. How the pain and fear had overpowered him completely.

He couldn’t quite believe that Albus would have left him if he had known the extent of his fear. Albus had always done everything he could to protect him. He would never hurt him or put him in danger.

Thinking about this made him feel sick and disorientated though so he quickly closed his mind to the subject, setting it aside like an unpleasant book.

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Harry had the impression that he’d been asleep for a very long time. His whole body had gone numb as if it had given up on moving for good.

He could feel someone stroking at his hair and whispering his name very softly.

‘Harry? Harry, darling? Are you awake?’

It took all his strength to open his eyes and look up at the man leaning over him. It was a couple of seconds before the pale, wrinkled face and bright blue eyes came into focus.

‘I knew you’d come,’ Harry said drowsily. ‘I knew you’d get me.’

He reached out clumsily and tangled his fingers in Albus’s beard.

Albus smiled sadly and took Harry’s hand in his own.

‘I wasn’t quick enough,’ he whispered. ‘I left you alone with him for too long.’

‘Did you get my letter?’

‘Yes, but not until later,’ Albus told him. ‘I was already on my way back by the time you wrote to me.’

‘I knew it!’ Harry sighed. ‘You were just in time. You saved me.’

Albus shook his head. ‘No, I left it far too late. You were in real danger down there. I feared for your life.’

‘Where am I?’ Harry asked, squinting past his guardian. ‘The hospital wing?’

‘Yes,’ Albus confirmed.

‘How long have I been here?’

‘Three days,’ Albus told him. ‘We’ve all been very worried.’
'Feels like longer,' Harry mumbled.

He glanced around and noticed a large pile of sweets heaped up on his bedside table.

‘Are all those from you?’ He asked Albus.

‘No,’ Albus smiled weakly. ‘Those are from all your friends and admirers.’ Seeing Harry’s confusion he explained, ‘What happened down in the dungeons is a complete secret, so naturally, the whole school knows. You are experiencing an incredible surge in popularity because of it, just in time for the end of term.’

Harry smiled back at Albus. ‘Are Ron and Hermione Alright?’

‘Oh yes, they’re fine,’ Albus assured him. ‘Terribly worried about you, of course. They’ll be very relieved to hear you’ve come round at last.’

‘I didn’t want them to come with me,’ Harry insisted. ‘I tried to stop them. I didn’t think I should risk their lives.’

‘You risked your own though,’ Albus said softly, caressing the boy’s cheek.

‘Well, yes,’ Harry replied. ‘Isn’t that what you wanted?’ His stomach twisted unpleasantly. ‘I thought it was.’

A pained expression flitted across Albus’s face. ‘I ... wanted you to have a choice.’

Harry relaxed a little. ‘Yeah, but you wanted me to face Voldemort. That’s what you wanted me to choose.’

Albus stared at Harry in silence, his bright blue eyes giving nothing away.

‘I don’t know what I wanted,’ He said quietly. ‘I suppose wanted you to be safe, but ... that’s not always as simple as it seems.’

Harry was starting to feel a lot more awake now and shuffled up on the bed, pushing the covers back a little as he did so.

‘How did you know that my touch would burn Voldemort?’ He asked. ‘That was a good failsafe.’

Albus smiled sadly. ‘Once again you give me entirely too much credit. I am afraid I didn’t anticipate that at all. I am not surprised to learn about it though.’

He explained to Harry about the protection this mother’s had given him through her death, tapping at his fingers as he spoke.

‘It’s in your very skin,’ he said softly. ‘Your mother’s love. Very old, powerful magic. Something Voldemort was bound to overlook as he has never understood love.’

Harry curled his hand into a fist, feeling the sores and callouses at his fingertips.

‘What happened to Quirrell?’

Albus dropped his gaze. ‘I’m afraid Professor Quirrell did not survive. His injuries were far too great.’

Harry swallowed, rubbing his thumb across the back of his hand.
‘You mean ... I killed him?’

Albus shook his head urgently. ‘No, darling. Lord Voldemort killed him. What he did to Quirrell weakened his body and when he left him he took the very last of his life from him. A fine way to replay the man who had done everything he could to save him, but then Voldemort has never shown much concern for his followers.’

Harry toyed with the sheets, which were very clean and warm and white.

‘Do you know where he’s gone?’ He asked.

‘Voldemort?’ Albus breathed deeply. ‘Into hiding again, I expect.’

‘In Albania?’ Harry pressed.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘I would think so. When he is at his most weak and vulnerable he retreats to where he feels safest. He knows Albania well, from travels in his youth, and there are areas which are very remote.’

‘The forest,’ Harry said softly, recalling the rows of tall, brittle trees. ‘I dreamt about it again while I was out. I saw him heading there, through the wind and the rain.’ He peered up at Albus intently. ‘It is real, isn’t it?’

Albus said nothing but his eyes betrayed him; they were full of fear and apprehension.

‘If you know where it is then we should go there,’ Harry insisted. ‘We should follow him to where he’s hiding and fight him there.’

Albus screwed up his eyes tight, perhaps to stop tears forming.

‘No, Harry, I’m afraid that wouldn’t do any good. As Lord Voldemort has no body he cannot be harmed or killed.’

‘So we can’t fight him?’ Harry said. ‘We can’t ... do anything to him?’

Albus shook his head solemnly. ‘No, we can’t.’ He considered for a moment, brows furrowed and eyes glistening. ‘I believe that ... when he was younger Lord Voldemort ... performed some very dark magic in an effort to make himself immortal. That is why he still survives in a spirit form even though his body has been destroyed.’

‘But - ’ Harry tried to sit up but Albus put a firm hand on his chest and pushed him back down.

‘Please stay calm,’ he whispered. ‘If you get too agitated then Madame Pomfrey will have me thrown out.’

Harry let out a breathy little laugh. ‘As if she could,’ he whispered back. ‘As if you’d let her.’

‘I would if I thought it was in your best interest,’ Albus said patting Harry’s chest. Then he turned serious again.

‘I know what you want you’re about to ask me and I’m afraid I am going to disappoint you yet again. I do not yet know how to defeat Lord Voldemort once and for all. I have spent many years trying to discover what binds him to this world, but as it stands I only have my suspicions, nothing we can act on at this time.’

‘Can’t I help you?’ Harry pleaded. ‘If you tell me everything you know then we can work together.’
Albus’s eyes misted over entirely and he had to push aside his glasses to wipe them dry.

‘No, my darling,’ he said. ‘My brave little lion. Your only job right now is to take care of yourself. You are too young to fight such a battle.’

Harry slumped against his pillow. ‘I just want it to be over. I want him to be gone for good.’

Albus smiled. ‘Of course you do. I know it’s very frustrating, but if we continue to fight those who would support Lord Voldemort though then we may be able prevent his return indefinitely. In time, he could become nothing more than a strange voice in a forest that no-one ever stops to listen to.’

Harry started nodding in agreement and then stopped because it made his head hurt.

‘What about the stone?’ He asked. ‘Is it safe?’

‘Ah, the stone,’ Albus said with a sigh. ‘I’m afraid it will need to be destroyed. I’ve talked it over with Nicholas and he’s agreed that it’s too dangerous to be kept safely anymore.’

Harry gasped. ‘You - you can’t destroy it though! What will happen to Nicholas and Perenelle? Are they just going to die?’

Albus nodded gravely. ‘They have just enough elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die.’

He reached for Harry’s hand again and gave it another squeeze. ‘I know it must seem very terrible, but you must remember that they have both had a good, long life.’

‘And what about you?’ Harry burst out.

Albus frowned at him, uncertainly. ‘I’m sorry? What about me?’

‘You won’t be able to use the stone either!’

Albus looked even more confused. ‘I didn’t ever intend to use the stone. What gave you that impression?’

Harry could feel his face heating up but felt that he had to finish what he had started.

‘I hoped that you would,’ he admitted, ‘so that you could live to see me grow old. I always want to have you in my life.’

Albus blushed too and looked away. ‘Put that from your mind for now. I intend to live for a long time yet. It’s not that unusual for a wizard to live to two hundred, you know.’

Harry was not sure he believed him. ‘Could you perhaps just pretend to destroy the stone?’

‘And keep it for myself?’ Albus exclaimed. ‘While my good friends die? No, I think that would be very wrong.’

‘It wouldn’t be for yourself though,’ Harry objected. ‘It would be for me.’

‘It is not up for discussion,’ Albus told him. ‘The decision has been made and I intend to follow it through.’

He started straightening the sheets around Harry, tucking him in tightly.
‘I think it’s best if you get some rest now. I promise that come back later and we’ll talk some more.’

He smoothed down Harry’s hair and stroked gently at his cheek.

‘Have a think about what you’d like to do over the holidays. We can go abroad, if you like. I’m inclined to spoil you awfully.’

‘Do you really have to go?’ Harry complained. ‘I’m not that tired. I’ve been asleep for days and days! Can’t you stay just a little longer?’

Albus smiled and shook his head.

‘No, darling. You need to rest and I have a lot of work to catch up on. Letters to write, portraits to argue with, you know the sort of thing.’

Harry sighed. ‘Alright.’ He let his eyes slide shut. I love you Albus, more than anything else in the world.’

‘I love you too, Harry.’

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Albus kept the smile on his face as he walked through the halls, nodding at the students and teachers that passed by. They all met his smile with wide, sincere grins.

‘Oh, headmaster,’ squeaked Professor Flitwick excitedly, as he emerged from his classroom. ‘I hear Harry’s woken up at last! How’s he doing?’

‘News always travels fast at Hogwarts,’ Albus commented. ‘He’s very well, thank you.’

‘Wonderful! That’s just wonderful!’

It was not until Albus was safely in his office, with the door closed behind him, that he let his smile slide off of his face.

He slumped down in his chair, ignoring Fawkes’s curious chirping, and dropped his head into his hands. The tears came freely then, trickling down his cheeks and dripping off of the edge of his long, crooked nose.

He would have never thought that he could love anyone as much as he loved Harry but he supposed that there was no limits to love, just as there were no limits to pain.

When he had felt Harry’s body fall limp in his arms, on the floor of that dungeon, he had thought that his own heart would stop beating.

He had fumbled desperately for a pulse and when he found it there, faint as a murmur, at the base of Harry’s throat, relief had washed over him in a great wave.

It was only for a moment though, before the fear and the worry set in.

Over the next few days, sitting patiently by Harry’s bed, Albus was given plenty of time to reflect on the situation. He couldn’t push away the thought that whatever pain he was experiencing now was just a taste of what was to come.

He had found himself returning to the mirror of Erised for comfort, something he had not done for years. He had thought that he had overcome the mirror’s allure entirely, that he was a stronger man
than he used to be, but he was wrong. He had only overcome one test and failed terribly at the next one.

He sat for hours at a time, staring longingly at the tall, handsome young man inside the mirror. Strong, healthy and victorious, the grown-up Harry stood shoulder to shoulder with his guardian, ready to embark on the great adventure of the rest of his life.

Harry could never know the true cruel irony behind their shared vision. While he merely wished and hoped for this future, Albus wept and mourned for it, for he alone knew what the mirror showed them was not just unlikely, but utterly impossible.
Harry was in trouble with Filtch again. This time for rollerblading through the corridors. The caretaker had never seen the muggle contraptions before, or a student at school over the summer, and was disgusted by the both of them.

He wanted to confiscate the rollerblades and have the boy locked up somewhere but when he appealed to the headmaster he was assured that both the boy and the skates were in the castle under his authority and Filtch was forced to slink off impotantly, like a cat that had just been de-clawed.

He still refused to acknowledge Harry's status as the headmaster's ward and constantly referred to him as 'the orphan,' talking about him as if he was some sort of feral child set loose in the school. In some ways, Harry supposed he was right, but it didn't seem polite to say so out-loud.

The rollerblades had been a gift from Albus, just one of many impulsive purchases from their recent trip to Paris. Harry had wanted Albus to buy a pair too, so that they could skate around together, but Albus had refused.

'I would look utterly ridiculous,' he said, 'and I think that's the only reason you want to get me into them. So you can laugh at me skidding around all over the place, beard blowing in the wind.'

'No!' Harry replied, giggling. 'No, that's not it at all! Well, maybe just a little. It would be quite funny. But mostly I just think it would be nice. And it's not like you're in robes. You've got trousers. It wouldn't look that silly.'

Albus had remained firm though. 'I haven't got the balance,' he told him. 'You'd spend half your time picking me up off of the payment.'

It was the only thing he'd denied Harry during their holiday. In every other respect he'd indulged Harry entirely, giving into his every whim. He let him drink wine at dinner and stay up as late as he liked. He even took him to a burlesque show one night, albeit a very tame one intended for tourists.

After a while, Harry had started making outrageous requests, just to see if Albus would grant them.

'May I go in and pet the tigers?' He asked, as they were wondering around the zoo.

'Be my guest,' Albus replied, taking out his wand and tapped the cage. ‘You can walk right through.’

Harry watched with satisfaction as his fingers slid straight through the iron bars.

‘They won’t bite me?’ He muttered.

‘Oh won’t they?’ Albus replied with mild surprise. ‘That’s good then.’
‘No, I mean,’ Harry frowned up at him. ‘You won’t let them bite me, will you?’

‘I can’t control wild animals,’ Albus declared. ‘By all means, feel free to go and play with the tigers but you have to deal with the risks.’

He gestured at the nearest beast which had just opened its mouth wide for a long, toothy yawn.

‘I mean, I’m sure I could re-attach any limbs you lose. After a time, anyway.’

Harry sighed and took a step back. ‘No, thank you. That’s alright.’

Albus smiled at him. ‘You see, freedom always comes with consequences.’

‘Yes, I understand your point,’ Harry groaned. ‘No need to hammer it in. You can never resist imparting a lesson.’

They went to all the usual sightseeing spots, as well as some more obscure attractions, and wherever they went Albus bought Harry bags full of treats and souvenirs. Harry quickly realised that his guardian had not been joking when he said he intended to spoil him. By the end of the holiday, Harry found himself with an entirely new wardrobe of clothes, a small library of books and a huge pile of french sweets.

On their last day in Paris, Albus took him to the wizarding quarter, which was three times the size of Diagon Alley and contained, in addition to hundreds of bewitching little boutiques, the largest magical toy shop in Europe.

Beaumont’s Trésorerie was filled with fantastical flying machines, prancing and dancing dolls, strutting soldiers and battling knights. Albus liked the train sets the best and followed them all around the store as they chugged over the floors, the walls and the ceilings. Harry preferred the little figures which walked and talked and he spent a long time admiring the miniature quidditch players flying around on replica brooms.

Albus bought him an entire team, along with the balls and accessories and paid to have them shipped straight to Hogwarts. The second Harry had taken them out of the box though the golden snitch had flown out the window, leaving his tiny seeker at something of a loose end. Now he did nothing but streak back across the flat, wooden pitch while the rest of the players tossed the qwaffle around.

Harry had sent his friends dozens of postcards, as well as sweets and souvenirs, but when he got back there was nothing waiting for him in return.

He tried not to be too hurt about it. He understood that his friends were probably very busy with their families and for all he knew, they might be on holiday too and weren’t sending or receiving any mail at all.

Still, he couldn’t help being just a little disappointed. Especially as not even Neville had written to him and he had earnestly promised to do so at least once a week.

He skated all over the empty school, trying not to think about his absent friends, until he was completely exhausted. Then he collapsed on the stairs, took off his boots and socks and headed back up to the empty Gryffindor dormitory.

**

Except, it wasn’t empty. When Harry walked into the dormitory he found a strange creature sat on his bed.
It looked a little like a goblin, except smaller and softer. It had none of the sharp, sly features that usually characterised goblins and it was wearing nothing but a dirty cloth tied loosely about one shoulder.

Er ... Hello? Said Harry nervously.

The creature looked up excitedly. It had the biggest eyes that Harry had ever seen and they bulged out of its head a little when he saw him.

'Harry Potter!' The creature exclaimed, in a very high-pitched voice. 'Dobby has been wanted to meet you for so long, sir! It is such an honour!'

'Thank you,' Harry replied uncertainly. 'Are you here to see me then?'

The creature nodded its head enthusiastically, its large, bat-like ears flapping against the sides of its face.

'Oh yes, Harry Potter, sir!' It squeaked. 'Dobby has come to see you on a matter of great importance! I fear your life is in grave danger!'

'Okay,' Harry said weakly. 'I suppose I better sit down then.'

Since the creature was currently occupying his own bed Harry took Neville's, sitting down cross-legged on top of the covers.

'You say there's something dangerous coming to ... um ... attack Hogwarts?'

'Yes, indeed, sir!' The creature replied with a small shiver. 'Something truly terrible!'

'What?' Harry asked eagerly.

The creature assumed a tortured expression and started twisting its ears around in its hands. 'Ah, sir, Dobby cannot say! Please do not ask!'

'Right,' Harry muttered. 'Um ... look, I don't mean to be rude, but how did you get here exactly?'

He was acutely aware that no outsiders were supposed to be able to enter the school uninvited, let alone the Gryffindor common room or dormitories.

'Dobby apparated here, sir!'

'You apparated?' Harry frowned. 'No one can apparate into Hogwarts though. It's magically protected.'

'Dobby is a house elf, sir!' The creature told him. 'He can apparate wherever he wishes!' Then he bit at his bottom lip and started twisting his ears about so violently that it looked like he might actually pull them off. 'Not supposed to, of course. My master would be furious if he knew I was here.'

'Your master?' Harry repeated.

Dobby nodded miserably, still tugging manically at his earlobes. 'House-elves are enslaved to their human masters and bound to do their bidding.'

He gave his ears one last yank and then let go of them suddenly so that they snapped back into place with an unpleasant slap.
'But Dobby had to come here today, Harry Potter, sir. He had to warn you about the terrible trouble coming your way!'

'Look,' Harry said patiently. 'I think the best thing to do is to come with me and talk to the headmaster. Whatever the trouble is, he'll be able to help.'

He didn’t suggest this because he was particularly perturbed by Dobby's warnings, but because he believed Albus was far more likely to get a straight answer out of him than he was. The clever old wizard was especially adept at drawing information out of people.

Dobby's eyes bulged out so far that Harry was afraid that they might actually pop out of their sockets.

'Professor Dumbledore?' He exclaimed in a rapturous tone. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head forcefully. 'No, no! Dobby cannot possibly! Do not ask it of me!'  

Harry was surprised. The creature looked terrified. 'Don't you like Dumbledore?' He asked.

'Oh - but, of course!' Dobby said quickly. 'Professor Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster that Hogwarts has ever had! Dobby has heard stories of all the good he has done.'

Harry frowned. 'Then why?'

Dobby slid forward on the bed, feet dangling over the edge. 'My master,' he whispered. 'He would not ... approve.'

'He doesn't approve of you being here at all though,' Harry pointed out.

Dobby started chewing at his lips, the very picture of distress. 'My master is ... he does not ...' He mumbled disjointedly, through the gnashing of teeth and sucking of flesh.

Then, very suddenly, he hurled himself forward and started banging his head against the bedpost. The sound of bone cracking against wood made Harry flinch with alarm, not sure which one of the two was more likely to split open.

'Hey, hey!' Harry yelled urgently, grabbing at Dobby's arm and pulling him back. 'What are you doing?'

'Dobby must punish himself!' The little creature panted. 'He almost insulted his master!' He shook one hand free and beat at his own head with his fist. 'Oh, please do not ask me about him, Harry Potter! Do not make me go to Professor Dumbledore!'

'Okay,' Harry said hastily. 'Okay! We don't need to go to Dumbledore. We'll just stay here and talk.'

The elf fell against the pillows with a little sigh. His eyes fluttered and he stared up at Harry with a sad, serious expression.

'Dobby would not have come here unless he had to. He has heard tell of Harry Potter, as well as Professor Dumbledore, and knows much of his greatness. He cannot allow him to come to harm.'

Harry shifted about uneasily. 'You keep saying I'm in danger, but you can't say from who or what?'

Dobby nodded sadly.

'And you won't go to Dumbledore either?'
Dobby nodded again.

'Then ... ' Harry raised his hands in a desolate gesture. 'What do you want me to do?'

Dobby's eyes lit up with excitement. 'You must leave Hogwarts at once! You must go far away and hide.'

Harry stared at Dobby dumbly for a few seconds and then let out a little laugh. 'Leave Hogwarts? But I can't! It's my home! Besides I haven't anywhere else to go!'

Dobby blinked uncertainly. 'Have you not ... relatives?'

Harry laughed again. 'Surely, you don't mean the Dursleys? I haven't seen my aunt or uncle in over eight years. They'd never let me in the door.'

Harry would never try either. He had no wish to ever see the neat, little surbaban house ever again.

'Well, Harry Potter must go away somewhere!' Dobby insisted, looking ruffled. 'Perhaps his friends would help him?'

'I wouldn't count on it,' Harry muttered 'They haven't been in touch for a while. I suppose they are still my friends, but they're not about to invite me into their homes.'

Dobby looked strangely sheepish. 'Your friends are not as cold as they seem,' he said quietly.

Harry stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

The elf fidgeted for a moment and then reached into his torn toga and pulled out a thick wedge of envelopes. Harry immediately recognised his own address scribbled out in Ron and Hermione’s handwriting.

'You’ve been taking my letters!’ He exclaimed furiously.

The elf cowered. 'Harry Potter must not be angry with Dobby. He did it for his own good!'

Harry was already fumbling about for his wand though. Before the elf had time to try anything else he pointed it at him and yelled, ‘Accio Letters!’

The fat cluster of envelopes tore themselves out of Dobby’s fist and flew right into Harry’s waiting hand.

Harry quickly locked them away in his trunk, not taking any chances. When he looked up again he was surprised to find the elf cowering at the end of the bed, a pillow held over his chest like a shield.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I just wanted my letters back.’

To prove his point he pocketed his wand again and held out his bare hands in front of him.

Slowly, Dobby lowered the pillow. ‘Wizards are very unpredictable,’ he murmured.

‘I would say House-elves are more so,’ Harry countered. ‘Would you like to explain why you stole my letters?’

Dobby looked away. ‘Dobby didn’t steal them,’ he said petulantly. ‘Only borrowed them, for a while. Dobby thought that if only Harry believed that he didn’t have friends at Hogwarts he’d find it easier to leave.’
‘That’s ridiculous,’ Harry exclaimed. ‘This is my home. I belong here.’

Dobby gazed up at him desperately. ‘But you must leave! You must! It will not be safe for you here.’

‘Look,’ Harry said, losing his patience at last. ‘It doesn’t matter what you say to me. I am never leaving - HEY?! WHAT ARE YOU - ?!’

Dobby had just jumped up from the bed and fastened one hand tight around Harry’s arm. Harry tried to throw him off, but a second later there was a loud crack and he found himself hurtling through the air.

He came out somewhere very hot and empty and fell to his knees in the dust. He disliked travelling by side-along apparition at the best of times, but being taken somewhere by force left him shaken and nauseous.

‘Dobby!’ He gasped. ‘Where have you taken me?’ He blinked around at all the dry soil and sparse, papery bushes.

‘Somewhere safe,’ Dobby replied.

Harry coughed and spluttered, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. ‘Dobby ... this isn’t safe! This is the middle of nowhere! You’ve got to take me back!’

He reached out for Dobby but the elf jumped back fast, his eyes bright and wide.

‘It is only for a little while,’ Dobby assured him. ‘I will be back.’

Then, with another terrible crack, the house-elf disappeared.

**

It took Harry a little while to stop panicking and decide what to do next. He took out his wand, performed the four-point spell and started heading north. He had no idea where he was going. Whichever way he looked in there was nothing but dirt and rocks, but he vaguely hoped that if he kept walking in one direction he’d eventually reach some form of civilisation.

‘If I can just get to some people then I can get out of here and get in contact with Albus.’

He had only been walking for about half an hour when the sun began to set. This worried him. It had been early morning back at Hogwarts.

‘Goddamn it Dobby!’ He spat. ‘This is literally the other side of the world, isn’t it?’

He couldn’t help talking out-loud, even though he was alone. He thought he might go insane if he didn’t.

‘If I ever get my hands on that house-elf again, I swear I’ll - I’ll - ‘ but he couldn’t think of anything appropriate. Dobby was such a pathetic creature that he wasn’t sure he could bear to hurt him any worse than he had been already been. For all he knew, Dobby was already punishing himself in some gruesome way, for both disobeying his own master and betraying his hero.

It grew colder as it got darker and after another hour of walking, without any change in scenery, Harry gave up and sat down on the ground, lighting himself a small fire.

‘I’ll just wait here,’ he told himself. ‘Someone will come and find me, eventually. I’m Harry Potter, after all. If I go missing, people are bound to look for me.’
The minutes crawled by, like insects in the sand. It was a whole hour later when a large owl suddenly appeared, bright white in the moonlight. It swooped low, announcing its arrival with a loud hooting, and dropped a large letter into Harry’s lap. Harry frantically tore the envelope open and scanned through its contents.

**

_Dear Mr Potter,_

_We have received intelligence that you have performed the four-point spell and fire-making charm in the vicinity of the Great Victoria Desert, Australia._

_As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside of school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction Of Underage Sorcery, 1875, paragraph C)._  

_We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity which risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offence, under section 13 of the International Confederation Of the Warlocks’ Statute of Secrecy._

_Yours Sincerely,_

_Mafalda Hopkirk_

**

Harry glanced back up at the sky and saw, with horror, that the owl was already beating a hasty retreat.

‘Wait!’ He yelled furiously. ‘I need to send a response! I need to send a letter to Albus Dumbledore!’

The owl took not the slightest notice. Clearly it was keen to get back to wherever it had come from.

‘I’m not here by choice!’ Harry screamed at it, at the top of his lungs. ‘I’ve been kidnapped! Do you understand?!’

It was too late though, the feathery little messenger had already vanished into the blackness of the sky.

**

Harry was sat cross-legged by the fire, scowling grimly into the flames, when there was another resounding crack, Albus Dumbledore appeared wearing long scarlet robes and an agitated expression.

Harry leapt up at once, relief flooding through his body. ‘Albus! I was afraid you’d never find me! It’s been hours!’

Albus fixed him with a stern glare. ‘Do you have any idea how terrifying to receive a letter saying that you’ve just performed illegal magic on the other side of the world?!’ He demanded. ‘I just was in my office, minding my own business, when I was informed that my ward was not at Hogwarts, where he should be, but in Australia of all places!’

‘I’m sorry!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘I didn’t mean to come here, you know! I tried to tell the Ministry owl that came to me. I was kidnapped!’
He stared gabbling desperately, explaining what had happened. Albus quickly held up a hand, halting his progress.

‘Alright, calm down,’ he said quietly. ‘We’ll sort all that out later. The important thing is that you’re safe now.’

He stripped off his cloak and draped it around Harry’s shoulders. It was only then that Harry realised that he was shivering, despite the fire, teeth chattering in his skull. He clutched at the ermine-fur collar and leant against his guardian.

‘Why did the ministry just send a warning?’ He whined. ‘Why didn’t they send someone to come get me?’

‘Oh, don’t talk to me about the inadequacies of the ministry!’ Albus said irritably. ‘I had to get in touch with a friend just to find out exactly where you were.’

He reached under his arm and pulled out Harry’s *Nimbus Two Thousand*. ‘Come on, let’s get back home,’ he said, handing him the broom.

‘Are we going to fly back to Hogwarts?’ Harry asked.

‘No, darling.’ Albus extended one hand. ‘We’ll apparate to Hogsmeade and then fly to the school from there, if you think you can manage it?’

‘Yes,’ Harry replied, grasping his guardian’s hand. ‘Please, just get me out of here!’

**

Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape were both waiting for them in the courtyard.

‘You found him, then?’ Snape said, sounding a little disappointed.

‘Yes,’ Albus replied. ‘Eventually.’

‘Safe and sound too,’ Harry added grumpily. ‘Thanks for asking.’

‘How on earth did you end-up in Australia?’ Professor McGongall demanded. She seemed rather frazzled. Harry couldn’t help but feel touched by her concern.

‘Apparently he was kidnapped by a house-elf,’ Albus said mildly. ‘I haven’t gotten quite all the details yet. I hope to get to the bottom of it by the end of the day.’

He wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulder, pulling him protectively to his side.

‘Right now, I think a trip to the kitchens is in order. You must be rather hungry.’

Harry could not deny this. At that very moment his stomach growled loudly. He had not even had breakfast at the point he was spirited away.

He had never been to the kitchens before and so he was astounded when Albus lead him into a large, hot room filled with several dozen house-elves. Like Dobby, all them had pointy, bat-like ears and large, bulbous eyes, but they looked a lot calmer and better dressed.

‘What would you like to eat?’ Albus asked him. ‘Just a sandwich or something more substantial?’

‘Er ... ?’ Harry hardly had any time to consider before a house-elf appeared in front of him,
brandishing a tray filled with bread, meat, cheese and fruits.

‘Oh,’ he said, startled. ‘Thank you. Yes, that will do fine.’

The elf bowed low, beaming at him, apparently delighted to have cut short his deliberations.

‘House-elves pride themselves on anticipating the needs of their masters and serving them quickly and efficiently.’ Albus told them.

‘So, abducting random schoolchildren is relatively unusual then?’ Harry asked, popping a grape into his mouth.

‘I would say so,’ Albus agreed, with a smile. He turned to the nearest house-elf which was still hovering closeby. ‘We’d actually like help with something else too.’

The elf looked delighted. ‘What can we do for you, Headmaster?’

‘I would like to know if any of you are familiar with a house-elf called Dobby?’

The elf looked disappointed. ‘Not me, sir. I’ve never heard the name.’ She glanced around frantically. ‘I will ask the others though.’

‘Please do.’

In a few moments, all the house elves had gathered around them, chattering excitedly. Unfortunately, none of them knew which house Dobby worked in, although a couple thought they remembered the name.

‘I am sure he works with a very old wizarding family,’ one elf declared. ‘I just which I could recall which one.’

He was almost in tears at not being able to help more. In compensation he went and grabbed another plate-load of food and laid it down in front of Harry.

‘Deserts,’ he squeaked. ‘Strawberry shortcake, jelly and chocolate brownies.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry said quickly. ‘You’ve been really, really helpful.’

The elf sniffed loudly, unconvinced, and bowed so low that his nose almost touched the floor.

**

‘They’re all rather cringing,’ Harry said as they left the kitchen. ‘Dobby was the same, though. Perhaps even worse.’

‘He did manage to defy his master,’ Albus remarked.

‘Yes, but he kept having to punish himself for that,’ Harry said. ‘I almost felt sorry for him. Until he kidnapped me, I mean.’

He shot his guardian a worried look. ‘What if he tries that again? He seemed pretty determined to get me away from here.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Albus told him. ‘I’ll come up with something. Just leave it with me.’
I need to give credit for a joke in this chapter, which is based on a Mitchell and Webb sketch. The ‘Oh won’t they? That’s good!’ exchange at the zoo comes from one of the shady businessmen with a cardboard sign sketches. I can’t remember whether it’s the one where he’s charging a fiver to throw yourself off a cliff or to swim with sharks (in the cage with you) but the guy says something like ‘and I won’t get hurt at all?’ And he’s like (surprised) ‘Really? That’s good!’ That sort of thing really tickles me!

I don’t know how many of my readers are in the UK, but if you’ve not heard of the show check it out. I’m a big comedy fan, which won’t surprise anyone.
Practice

Chapter Notes

Warning: Discussions of masturbation, though nothing really explicit, just slightly more suggestive than anything else seen so far. I thought it’s probably worth a bit of a heads-up.

Please let me know what you think of this chapter! I know it’s been a while since I updated but other projects and real life (?!?! got in the way a bit! I’m looking forward to speeding along with this fic though. Third year is where I’ve probably got all the best stuff, so I’m keen to head there, but we mustn’t forget about Tom Riddle’s diary!

Harry examined the small, silver ring closely. It was quite plain with no decoration other than a fine groove on either side of the band, but it glittered strangely under the light.

‘So this is going to keep me safe?’ He asked doubtfully.

‘Not exactly,’ Albus replied. ‘Believe me if I could create a magic ring that would keep you safe from all harm, I would do it. Unfortunately such a thing is outside even my powers.’

He reached across the desk, took the ring from Harry and threaded it gently onto his index finger.

‘This ring will just let me know when you are in danger and allow me to find you, wherever you are.’

Harry held up his hand, flexed his fingers. He could barely feel the ring on him, it was so light and smooth.

‘It’s part of pair,’ Albus said, showing him the matching ring on his own hand, ‘connected by magic. Even if we’re thousands of miles away from each other, the rings will still be able to speak to one other.’

‘How does it work?’ Harry asked.

‘I’ll show you,’ Albus said, drawing his wand and pressing the tip to the silver band.

At that moment, Harry felt his own ring grow hot in his hands and looked down to see that it was now glowing a bright gold.

‘If you touch your wand to your ring then my ring will burn just like that, to let you know that you need me. Then if I want to bring you home to me I just have to say the summoning spell.’

Albus turned his hand round and closed his fingers into a fist.

‘Return,’ he declared loudly, to show how it was done. Then he lowered his voice and explained, ‘I dispensed with the Latin to make it as simple as possible. It’s not as if you’re going to cast the spell by mistake, as you can only do it if you’ve been called.’

‘And you’re calling me now?’ Harry asked, staring with wonder at his glowing ring.
'Yes,' Albus said.

Harry closed his hand into a fist and called out, ‘Return!’

Nothing happened.

Harry looked up at his guardian in confusion. ‘It didn’t work,’ he complained. ‘Why didn’t it work?’

Albus shot him a disappointed look. ‘I’m already here with you,’ he said pointedly.

‘Oh, right,’ Harry said, feeling very stupid.

‘There’s another way you can call me, if you don’t have access to your wand,’ Albus continued, skating over Harry’s humiliation. ‘Just say my full name out loud. Go on, try it.’

Harry unfurled his fingers again and spoke clearly into his ring, as if it was a telephone.

‘Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.’

Albus smiled and showed him his glowing ring. ‘Good. So if you’re kidnapped by any monsters, dark wizards or just misguided house-elves then all you have to do is call me and I’ll fetch you home.’

‘Will the ring apparate me to you then?’ Harry asked, frowning. ‘I didn’t think that was possible.’

‘No, it’s not apparation,’ Albus told him. ‘It’s a different kind of magic.’ He toyed with a strand of his long, white hair. ‘I’ve told you about port-keys, haven’t I? Well it’s similar to that, although not quite the same.’

He took Harry’s hand in his own, touching their rings together with a little clink. Immediately both rings cooled down again and returned to their usual silver colour.

‘They’re goblin-made,’ Albus told him. ‘Cut from the same piece of silver almost six hundred years ago. They were enchanted so that they could never truly be separated. Sometimes they ended-up on opposite sides of the globe, but they always found their way back to each other.’

Harry barely had time to digest this information before Albus continued.

‘I had to modify the charm upon them, so that they could carry their masters with them and respond on demand. It’s very strong magic, but it won’t last forever, so we should only use the rings in real emergencies. No calling me just because you’re feeling too lazy to walk down to my office.’

Harry snorted. ‘I wouldn’t do that.’

They separated again and Harry turned his hand round and round, trying to get used to his new piece of jewellery.

‘It’s quite pretty,’ he commented, ‘but I suppose I’ll have to wear it all the time?’

‘Yes, I think that would be best,’ Albus confirmed. ‘It’s very unlikely you’ll be abducted while in your bed or taking a bath, but if you are you’ll feel pretty foolish if you end-up leaving your ring behind, and I imagine you’ll be feeling foolish already, given your state of dress.’

Harry chuckled appreciatively.

‘What about duelling, though?’ He asked. ‘You still need to teach me how to duel.’
Albus sighed wearily. ‘We have been over this already. ‘You know enough defensive magic to be getting on with.’

‘It’s not enough!’ Harry complained. ‘I need to learn more offensive spells if I’m going to keep finding myself in danger. Which, apparently, I’m bound to.’

Albus shook his head.

‘You think that learning dark curses will make you feel safer,’ he said quietly, ‘but it won’t. You will still panic when the time comes and the more dangerous magic you know the more likely you are to get yourself hurt.’

‘Then teach me how to stay calm in battle,’ Harry countered. ‘Help me practice. You know I’m going to have to face Voldemort again, sooner or later. I’d feel a lot better about it if I had some sort of experience.’

Albus leant back in his chair and fell silent for a long time. Harry forced himself to stay quiet too, so that his guardian could consider the matter properly.

‘I will think about it,’ Albus said eventually. ‘It’s not an entirely unreasonably proposition, but if we are going to practice duelling then it will need to be done the right way and under the right conditions.’

He ruffled Harry’s hair affectionately, as if he was a toddler or a puppy.

‘Now run off and play for a while. Skate down the stairs and knock over all the suits of armour and leave me to worry about the serious matters in this world.’

**

A whole week passed before Albus brought up the subject of duelling again and Harry was beginning to lose his patience. The holidays were almost over now and he was afraid that he wasn’t going to get a chance to practice at all.

Then one morning Albus coolly announced that he’d cleared out one of the old dungeons and that if Harry was still interested they could practice duelling down there.

Harry almost choked on his bacon. ‘What, today?’ He exclaimed in disbelief.

‘Yes, unless you have something better to do?’

‘No, no,’ Harry said quickly. ‘Can we go right away?

He was impressed when he saw the room that Albus had prepared. It was almost the size of the great hall and had been stripped right down to the bare walls and floor.

‘I thought it would be best to have a big, empty space to practice in,’ Albus explained. ‘At least, at first. Later on, it would be a good idea to bring in some large boxes or cauldrons to duck around and use as cover. You’re unlikely to ever be in a duel where there are no obstacles in your way.

Harry was buzzing with excitement. He couldn’t wait to get started.

‘What spells will we be using?’ He asked. ‘Will you teach me how to send my opponent flying or pin them to the floor or something?’

Albus quickly made it clear, however, that they were not going to be using any offensive spells. In
fact, they were not going to be using any real duelling spells at all.

‘I think it’s best if we just use tickling charms,’ he said. ‘That will give us something harmless to try and avoid and struggle through if we get hit. It’s a good substitute for debilitating curses.’

‘I’m sorry, are you telling me you brought me down here to have the magical equivalent of a pillow fight?’ Harry asked incredulously.

‘Yes!’ Albus beamed. ‘That’s a very good analogy! In fact, that reminds me. We ought to fortify the walls and floor a little.’

He waved his wand in the air and, to Harry’s disgust, several hundred large cushions scattered themselves along the dungeon’s walls.

‘Don’t you think that’s a bit excessive?’ Harry complained. ‘I’m hardly going to fall over and crack my head just because I’ve been hit by a tickling charm!’

‘Ah, that’s your first mistake right there!’ Albus said eagerly. ‘You assume duelling is all about casting the worst spell. Half the people who lose duels do so because they panic or hesitate or fall over. Clumsiness is the biggest killer of all.’

‘Really?’ Harry replied. ‘People end up getting killed because they just fall over or drop their wands?’

‘Yes!’ Albus insisted emphatically. ‘Most of what a duel is about is just tying to get your opponent off their feet and their wand out of their hand! If you can knock them out and disarm them, it’s all over! It doesn’t matter who they are!’

Harry could see some sense in this, but still couldn’t help but be suspicious that his guardian was just trying to fob him off with some childish imitation of duelling.

‘Well, let’s just get on with it!’ He declared. ‘You can lecture me while we duel. That will save time.’

Albus went over the spells that they were going to use once more, making sure that Harry understood them all, before beginning.

Harry was surprised to discover that fighting with something as inane as ticking charms could still be tense and exciting. Albus was so quick and powerful that he found himself running around at full tilt, desperate to avoid getting hit and get a good clean shot himself.

Most of the time Albus struck him with mild spells which only made him squirm or stumble a little. Sometimes though, when Harry was getting too close, he struck him down with a tickling charm so strong that it made him double over and shriek with laughter.

‘You have to keep running and fighting even when you’re hit,’ Albus told him. ‘Even if I cast a really strong spell you need to try and fight it.’

‘But if I’m in a real duel my opponent won’t be trying to tickle me!’ Harry objected, tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘No,’ Albus agreed, ‘they’ll be trying to break your legs or slice you open, or most likely of all, torture you with the cruciatus curse. You’ll need to learn to push through pain and discomfort, force yourself to get up and carry on.’
Harry found it difficult to take in such a serious warning while being assaulted by a thousand tiny tickling fingers. The situation would be enough to turn anyone goofy.

Setting aside the question of whether the mock-duel was actually good practice, he had to admit that he was having a lot of fun. There was just something so exhilarating and ridiculous about running around and casting ticking spells on each other. It reminded him of the few times that he and Albus had played together when he was little.

Harry rarely managed to get a hit on Albus at all, but whenever he did he desperately tried to press his advantage, casting wave after wave of spells. Albus creased up, eyes starting to water, but never lost his concentration.

They were both laughing and out of breath, circling around each other frantically, when Albus hit Harry with a spell that was ... different. It felt a lot like a tickling spell, in the way that it made his skin prickle and his body spasm, but a lot more powerful and intense.

Harry slid down to the floor immediately, overwhelmed by the sensation, completely losing any will to participate in the duel. It only lasted for a second or so, before fading away, but it was a bright, warm moment of pure pleasure.

‘What was that?’ He gasped, with a renewed hiccup of laughter.

Looking up at his guardian he saw that the man was wearing a strange, guilty expression. He glanced down at his wand as if it had acted without his permission.

‘I didn’t mean to cast that,’ he said quietly. ‘I was just searching for similar spells and cast it without thinking.’

‘It’s okay,’ Harry laughed. ‘It didn’t hurt.’

Albus grimaced. ‘I know it didn’t hurt. It’s meant to feel good.’

‘It did feel good!’ Harry declared happily. ‘Will you cast it again?’

‘No,’ Albus replied, caught somewhere between frustration and amusement. ‘It’s not supposed to be used like that at all.’

‘What’s it for then?’ Harry asked.

Albus regarded him uneasily. ‘It’s a spell for lovers,’ he said. ‘Suffobelle Malliacious. It’s supposed to feel a little like being covered in kisses.’

Harry was astonished. ‘I didn’t know that there were spells like that!’

Albus raised his eyebrows. ‘Human nature being what it is, there’s actually quite a lot of them. Sensory spells is what they’re usually called because they’re designed to enhance or replicate specific physical sensations.’

‘That’s insane!’ Harry declared, sitting up straight and hugging his knees to his chest. ‘Will you teach me some?’

‘No, of course not!’ Albus said sharply. ‘What on earth makes you think I’d do that?’

‘Well you taught me about silencing spells and stuff,’ Harry said reasonably. ‘Is this really that different?’
Albus frowned uncertainly. It was only very rarely that he was lost for words, but this was one such occasion. Harry could tell that he was really struggling with the question, the conflict clear in his face.

On the one hand, there was nothing wrong with Harry wanting to experiment in this way and Albus had made it clear that he was comfortable with him having a sexuality. On the other hand, this was not exactly something that a parent could easily teach a child.

‘You don’t need to show me anything,’ Harry said quickly, going a little pink. ‘Just tell me the spells and I’ll practice them by myself.’

Albus teetered on the edge for a long time before finally giving in.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I suppose it won’t do any harm. I know the older boys swap tips like this all the time. The only difference is most of them are fake.’

He knelt down on the floor in front of Harry and gently took hold of his arm.

‘I’ll show you a few simply sensory spells by casting them here,’ he said, tapping Harry’s arm with his wand. ‘Obviously, you would usually cast them somewhere else, but I’m assuming I don’t need to spell out all the details for you.’

‘No,’ Harry replied, tittering nervously. ‘I understand.’

He listened carefully as Albus pronounced each spell and shivered as his skin alternatively moistened, tingled and writhed across his bones in a fluid wave of movement.

Albus removed each spell almost immediately, allowing Harry only a second or two to witness their effects. He obviously felt that it would be indecent to prolong the demonstration any longer than was strictly necessary.

Harry repeated the words, without his wand, and Albus corrected his pronunciation until it was perfect.

On the whole, it didn’t feel that different from learning any other type of spell. It was only the knowledge of what these spells were for that made it awkward and embarrassing.

‘Thank you,’ Harry mumbled. ‘I really appreciate it.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ Albus said meaningfully, before straightening up again and dusting off his robes.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s have another match before we call it a day. You should concentrate on blocking this time, as well as dodging. You can block almost all spells, as long as you’re quick enough.’
Dear Harry,

I’m so glad to hear you’ve got our letters at last! I was wondering why I hadn’t heard from you since you got back, not that I’m complaining. The books you sent over from Paris were fascinating and the chocolates were delicious!

I’ve been reading up on house-elves and I have to say everything I’ve learnt has been pretty awful! Did you know that house-elves are bound in slavery by magic and it’s almost impossible for them to disobey their master’s orders? It almost makes me glad that Dobby managed to get away and kidnap you, except that he almost got you killed!

I’m sending you a book I ordered from Flourish and Blott called Magical Societies. It’s supposed to go into detail about all the different magical species and their distinct communities, but there’s only a few pages on house-elves and the way it talks about them is absolutely disgusting. It says that they’re a “naturally subservient race” that’s “perfectly suited to serving the needs of witches and wizards in their homes.”

The author, Magnolia Greene, is supposed to be a serious anthropologist, and she writes a lot about discrimination against werewolves, but she doesn’t seem to be that concerned with the rights of house-elves. She describes their relationship with humans as “symbiotic” and “mutually beneficial,” as if they actually get something out of cooking and cleaning the houses of wizards - all while sleeping in rags in their cupboards and basements!

Did you know that house-elves can’t even get married and all their children are considered the property of their masters? Greene talks about generations of house-elves being passed down through wizarding families. It’s sickening!

I’m not even clear on how house-elves form relationships with other house-elves. They’re not allowed to do anything without their master’s permission.

I’ve been trying to find out how this enslavement thing all started, but it seems like it goes so far back that no one knows for sure. Greene subscribes to the theory of some sort of ancient pact or treaty, between elves and humans, where they actually agreed to become our slaves. Personally, I think it must have been some kind of trick, possibly even dark magic, because who would ever sign up to be a slave? Perhaps you could ask Dumbledore about it? He knows practically everything.

Ron and I are going to be in Diagon Alley next week, picking up ours school things, and I was wondering whether you might be able to meet us too? Let me know.

Love from,

Hermione

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Harry smiled as he came to the end of the letter. At his side, Hedwig hooted, asking for a treat. The Weird Sisters uncoiled themselves, from behind the tree, and hissed at her aggressively.

‘Nasty, smelly owl. We ought to eat you.’

‘Play nice now, Morta,’ Harry hissed back. ‘You’re all my girls, remember.’
By now the three-headed snake had grown too large to stay in the castle and Hagrid had found it a permanent home in the Forbidden Forest. It only came out during the holidays, when all the students were gone.

Harry sat under the tree for a little while longer, enjoying the last of the sunshine and flicking through the book that Hermione had sent him, before saying goodbye to his pets and heading back to the castle.

He was halfway across the lawn when he heard someone call out his name.

‘Harry Potter! As I live and breathe!’

Harry looked up to see a tall, handsome wizard advancing upon him. The next thing he knew the stranger was pulling him into a tight hug, as if they were old friends.

‘I heard that you were staying at Hogwarts over the holidays, but I never dreamed that I would run into you like this!’

Harry gasped and spluttered, trying to get the man’s hair out of his face. Over his shoulder, he saw Albus approaching with a bemused expression on his face.

‘The timing is indeed remarkable, Gilderoy,’ he said. ‘If only we had left my office a few minutes earlier or later we would have surely missed Harry entirely.’

The handsome wizard laughed, tossing his blonde curls about.

‘The headmaster said that it wouldn’t be appropriate for you for sit in on our little meeting,’ he told Harry, ‘but I’m sure he won’t mind us taking like this now, especially since everything’s all settled.’

He leant in confidentially, straight white teeth glittering.

‘You see, I’m going to be your new Defence against the Dark Arts Teacher next year!’ He laughed again, at Harry’s startled expression. ‘Yes, that’s right! Me!’

‘Oh,’ Harry exclaimed limply. ‘Wow.’

‘Can’t believe your luck, can you?’ Grinned the stranger. ‘I’ve got another surprise for you too. I’ve left a complete set of my books for you back in Dumbledore’s office. All signed, of course!’

‘Ah ... thank you.’

‘I can see that Harry is overwhelmed by your generosity,’ Albus said. ‘It would probably be best if we left him right now, so that he can recover himself.’

‘Of course, of course,’ The blonde man chuckled, clapping Harry on the shoulder. ‘It’s natural for people to get a little star-struck around around me. Happens all the time.’

**

‘Do you think he’s a fraud?’ He asked Albus, a little later that day.

By then he was halfway through Marauding with Monsters and although he was enjoying it immensely he was struggling to reconcile the events described with the pompous, empty-headed narcissist that he had been introduced to.

The headmaster hummed thoughtfully. ‘I’m not sure. It is possible to achieve great things and also be
a vain, self-involved fool.’

Harry grinned at him. ‘Yeah but if he’d really done all the things he said he’d done then he would be one of the most powerful wizards of our generation.’

‘I have to admit that is unlikely,’ Albus said frowning. ‘Speaking as one of the greatest wizards of our generation myself, I don’t that Gilderoy is capable of quite such impressive feats.’

‘Why’d you hire him then?’ Harry demanded.

Albus sighed. ‘I’m afraid it’s getting harder and harder to fill the position. People are starting to say it’s cursed.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is cursed.’ Albus replied simply. ‘No one has lasted more than a year ever since I rejected Lord Voldemort’s application.’

Harry almost dropped his book. ‘What?!’

Albus raised an eyebrow at him. ‘There’s no reason to be quite so surprised. Voldemort was obsessed with uncovering all the secrets of Hogwarts and he’s always dreamt of holding a position of authority over young, promising witches and wizards.’

‘Well, yes but, cursing a job seems rather petty doesn’t it?’ Harry pointed out.

‘A madman does not restrict himself entirely to torture and genocide,’ Albus replied. ‘Lord Voldemort is just as capable of petty grudges as he is immense atrocities.’

Harry digested this. ‘What about Lockhart though?’ He asked. ‘Do you think he has any talent whatsoever?’

‘He must have done some research in order to write those books,’ Albus said thoughtfully, ‘and if actually he made up most of the details, well then, that’s almost more impressive. After all, anyone can simply do a thing, but lying about it takes real imagination.’

Harry stared at him. ‘Is he qualified to be a teacher, though?’

‘Oh no,’ Albus declared happily. ‘Absolutely not, but he’s quite harmless and you must admit that that’s an improvement on last year.’

Harry wasn’t sure whether to laugh or not so he decided to change the subject.

‘I got a letter from Hermione,’ he told Albus. ‘She wants to meet up in Diagon Alley next week. Do you think we can go?’

‘Of course,’ Albus replied. ‘We already have most of your books, thanks to Gilderoy’s kind donation, but it will be nice to spend the day with your friends.’

‘Hermione’s got a lot of questions about house-elves too,’ Harry said, quickly summarising what his friend had written.

Albus nodded thoughtfully.

‘I can recommend some books which go into the history in a little more detail, but there’s still a lot of debate about the matter.’
‘What do you think?’ Harry asked curiously.

‘Me?’ Albus leant back in his chair. ‘Personally, I believe that Miss Granger is right. Early wizards probably bound elves to them in a cruel, underhand way, but it is also true though that elves are naturally very loyal, nurturing creatures who enjoy hard work. Communities of wild-elves, which still exist in many parts of the world, devote themselves to serving the plants and animals in their territory. It’s what gives them purpose.

Knowing this, I think it makes sense that the early elves chose to serve witches and wizards instead. A human being’s needs are far more complex and ongoing than that of, say, a stream or a mountain, and more importantly they’re able to acknowledge and appreciate they’re help given. In short, they’re able to reciprocate in the relationship. They’re able to love their caretakers in return.’

Harry considered. ‘So, if a house-elf has a bad master, who doesn’t appreciate what he does for him then could he try and betray him?’

‘Exactly!’ Albus agreed. ‘I’m quite sure that this is what has happened with your - er - friend, Dobby. He was mistreated so badly that he no longer identified with his masters. In fact, he re-aligned his loyalties with a complete stranger - you.’

‘He kidnapped me though!’ Harry protested. ‘He almost got me killed!’

‘Well, you are making the mistake of assuming that elves think and feel as we do,’ Albus said with a slight glint in his eyes. ‘They have quite different priorities.’

His face became distant and dreamy for a moment.

‘There’s a very famous case of a community of wild-elves caring for a forest for thousands of years. When humans tried to enter the forest and cut down some of the trees they attacked them quite viscously, sabotaging their equipment and transporting them all around the world. Twelve muggle men were injured and fourteen more killed before the ministry finally got involved. Now the forest is hidden by magic and no one enters it without permission.

Harry was stunned. ‘They killed people over a bunch of trees?!’

Albus smiled at him. ‘Well, they are quite beautiful trees.’

**

They met up with Harry’s friends in Diagon Alley the following week, as planned. Ron and Hermione ran over to greet Harry, with a hug and a slap on the back, while their families looked on fondly.

It was rather strange to see everyone together, in the same place. Hermione’s parents, who were both muggles, seemed to really appreciate the opportunity for a one-to-one with the headmaster, and spent most of the morning talking to him.

The Weasleys were a little more reserved, obviously not used to seeing the headmaster like this, and addressed him more formally than was necessary. Even the twins appeared to be on their best behaviour, not laughing and clowning about as they usually would.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ Ron whispered to Harry. ‘I had to tell them that Dumbledore was looking after you during the holidays. I didn’t say that he was your full-time guardian though.’
Harry nodded. ‘That’s okay.’

‘They sort of think he’s looking out for you for your own protection,’ Ron continued quickly. ‘I think Fred and George are more impressed than anything.’

‘Seriously, it’s fine,’ Harry said. ‘You don’t need to keep it such a secret from your family, not now anyway. I just don’t want it getting around the whole school.’

Ron relaxed significantly.

‘I’m sure Mum and Dad already have some idea already. Dad remembers the upheaval at the ministry when you ran away. Apparently everyone was really worried.’

They had a great time wandering around the shops together, buying quills and parchment and spare robes. Harry related what Albus had told him about house-elves, which infuriated Hermione and made Ron sigh in frustration.

‘My mum’s always said she wishes we had a house-elf,’ he told them, ‘but all we’ve got is a ghoul in the attic. These days, it’s all rich, old wizarding families who have house-elves.’

They tried to get into Flourish and Blotts, but the place was absolutely heaving with people. They soon realised that this was because Gilderoy Lockhart was doing a book signing.

‘We can actually meet him!’ Hermione shrieked with excitement.

‘I’ve already met him,’ Harry told him. ‘He’s honestly not that great.’

Hermione was not about to be dissuaded though. Mrs Weasley offered to go in with her and Ginny and pick books up for everyone. Fred and George disappeared into Gambol and Japes while Albus took everyone else for ice cream.

‘So what’s the deal with Lockhart then?’ Ron asked, licking chocolate sauce from his hands. ‘Has the really fame gone to his head?’

‘I can’t imagine what he was like before he was famous,’ Harry replied. ‘It’s like he has no identity beyond that.’

He took a handful of extra sprinkles and added them to his own ice cream.

‘Albus thinks that he might be a bit of a fraud but he’s mostly harmless.’

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Harry had a lot of time to reflect on exactly how harmless Professor Lockhart was when he was lying flat on his back on the quidditch pitch. One arm limp at his side.

‘Well, Gilderoy,’ Albus said softly. ‘I think you’ve really outdone yourself this time.’

His voice was quite calm and quiet but there was a steely quality to his words that made everyone shiver. Lockhart himself went very pale and looked away.

‘I think the best thing to do now is to get Harry up to the hospital wing,’ Albus said. ‘Madame Pomfrey will be able to get those bones regrown, although I am sure it will be very painful.’

Harry sneaked another glance at his limp, deflated arm and had to suppress a moan of horror and disgust.
‘Why didn’t you stop him,’ he complained as Albus helped him up. ‘I called out for you!’

‘I’m afraid I was not quite quick enough,’ Albus replied. ‘I am just one old man and Professor Lockhart, in his eagerness to assist you, performed his magic very swiftly indeed. No doubt those fine reflexes served him very well when he was battling Vampires and Trolls, but here they have proved your downfall.’
'I hate this holiday,' Harry declared bitterly. 'You ought to have cancelled it, what with all these attacks going on. It’s in bad taste.’

He was still reeling from the recent ordeal, shuddering and shaking, like a shell-shocked soldier. He cringed worse than ever when he remembered Ginny's pale, stricken face. His humiliation was nothing compared to hers.

‘I think it’s a nice distraction,’ Albus said pleasantly.

Harry noticed that the headmaster's office had also been decorated to celebrate Valentine's Day. He assumed that this must have been Albus's choice as many of the other teachers had declined to participate. The pink streamers and lacy hearts were not quite as lurid as the rest of the ones draped about the rest of the school, but they came pretty close.

'You shouldn't indulge Lockhart either,' he grumbled, picking at a fuscia bow. 'I know you think it's funny, but it's a real nuisance for the other teachers and students.'

'Oh, don't get all sulky about it,' Albus said sternly. 'I know it was embarrassing to be given a valentine in front of everyone, but there was no malice involved.'

He reached over to pluck the ribbon out of Harry's hands before he had a chance to thoroughly mangling it.

'Anyway, I have no reason to deny a reasonable request from a member of staff. If they would like to run an extra-curricular event or put up seasonal decorations then I don't see why I shouldn't let them.'

Harry looked up at his guardian in disgust. 'You really think all this is reasonable?’

Albus chuckled. 'I actually thought it was a pretty good idea when Gilderoy first brought it to me. But then so many of his ideas seem good in theory and prove disastrous in practice. The duelling club, for instance.'

Harry groaned.

'Quite,’ Albus agreed. ‘As I recall, we were both excited about that and disappointed in how that turned out.’

‘I was stupid to ever think it would be good duelling practice,’ Harry muttered. ‘Lockhart just wasted the whole time boasting and showing off, like he does in class.’

At least no-one ended up seriously injured,’ Albus commented. ‘We have enough students in the hospital wing already.’
Harry snorted. ‘Marcus Flint sent Ernie MacMillian flying across the hall with a levitating charm. He hit the wall so hard I thought his spine would crack.’

Albus waved his hand dismissively as if a broken spine was nothing to get concerned about. There had only ever been half a dozen meetings before the duelling club was disbanded. No one wanted the responsibility of supervising Lockhart.

‘In any case, Valentine’s day seemed like a perfectly harmless holiday.’ Albus continued mournfully. ‘Of course, I didn’t anticipate that the celebrations would involve my own ward getting wrestled to the ground by a couple of dwarves and being sung a song about his dark hair and dreamy eyes. That was just an added bonus.’

Harry glowered at the old man, but he couldn’t stop his lips from twitching.

‘What did you think Lockhart was going to do?’

‘Ah well,’ Albus leant forward eagerly. ‘I thought he would set up something with the morning post, so that students could send each other little notes and gifts by the school owls. In my time we had a tradition of sending roses to each other and everyone would look forward to seeing how many roses they would get. There were two colours you see, yellow for friendship and red for romance, so almost everyone got at least one.’

‘Some people must have ended up with none though,’ Harry said, thinking of Millicent Bullstrode and several other especially ugly and unpleasant Slytherins. ‘That must have been pretty awful for them.’

‘Yes,’ Albus sighed. ‘That’s was the only downside. I think a lot of people sent roses to themselves, of course, which rather defeated the point. It all got very competitive, especially amongst the Gryffindors and Slytherins. That’s partly why it was stopped.’

‘Draco would probably have sent himself a whole bouquet,’ Harry said meanly. ‘He wouldn’t want to take the risk of appearing unpopular. Did you receive many?’

‘Oh yes,’ Albus said happily. ‘In my last year I received more than anyone else. They were mostly yellow though. I didn’t have many admirers.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘I suppose that’s better than dwarves with fairy wings but I still wouldn’t like it.’ He paused. ‘I don’t think I’d get many roses.’

‘Oh yes you would,’ Albus replied. ‘You’d have roses from all your friends.’ His eyes glittered a little. ‘I’m sure Miss Weasley would send you a rose too, along with a nice little poem.’

Harry blushed. ‘Please, don’t tease.’ He groaned. ‘It’s so embarrassing.’

Albus grinned, eyes still shining. ‘You’re sure you don’t like her at all? She’s a very sweet girl.’

‘What? Are you serious?!’ Harry spluttered in indignation. ‘She’s a first year! And Ron’s little sister!’

Albus hummed. ‘Yes, but things change. She won’t be a first year forever. You might find that you have something there.’

‘No,’ Harry said firmly. ‘Never. I just don’t like her like that.’

Albus regarded him curiously. ‘Is there anyone you like yet?’
Harry felt himself blush again. ‘No, not really.’

‘Well, there’s no rush. I just don’t want you to be put off the whole idea of romance by this week’s events.’

‘I know.’ Harry prodded at a fat, crimson heart edged in white lace. ‘Have you ever been in love?’

‘Oh yes,’ Albus said brightly. ‘When I was very young and foolish.’

Harry was surprised. ‘What happened?’

‘What usually happens to young, foolish love affairs: tragedy and heartbreak.’

Harry waited for him to elaborate, but Albus fell silent, a teasing smile playing on his lips. Harry wasn’t fooled by his easy expression. He knew that Albus preferred to speak about his most devastating experiences in a light, jovial tone, camouflaging pain and discomfort with irony and bravado. He had to pick his questions carefully if he wanted more information.

‘How old were you?’ He asked.

Albus hesitated for a moment. ‘Seventeen,’ he admitted.

‘Wow,’ Harry grinned. ‘You weren’t joking. It really was some tortured teenage romance.’

The image of the handsome, auburn-haired boy floated back to the surface of Harry’s mind. That was the person that had fallen in love and had their heart so dramatically broken.

‘Was it someone at school? In your dorm?’

‘No,’ Albus said sharply. ‘I told you, there was never anyone at Hogwarts. I kept that part of my life very private back then.’

‘Then where?’

Albus looked down at his hands, obviously debating whether he should answer and how much he should say.

‘It was just after I left school,’ He said, eventually. ‘I met him back home, in Godric’s Hollow. He was there visiting his aunt.’

These were all safe, simple details. Harry tried to think of something similarly small to fill the gaps.

‘Where was he from?’

‘Abroad,’ Albus said vaguely. ‘He was a year younger than me and went to Durmstrang. I’ve told you about Durmstrang, haven’t I?’

Harry nodded. ‘That’s the school that’s got a reputation for the dark arts isn’t it?’ He grinned mischievously. ‘Was he a bad boy?’

Albus smiled weakly. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘He was a very bad boy.’

Harry gave him a steady look. ‘Seriously Albus, what happened?’

Albus lowered his eyes, examined his hands. His face was pale and drawn, deep shadows forming underneath his eyes.
'I mean, you don’t have to talk about it if you really don’t want to. I’m just curious.’

‘Of course you are,’ Albus said softly. ‘It’s not that I don’t want to share with you. It’s just difficult.’

He raised his eyes back up to Harry’s face. They seemed especially bright and blue, like a couple of clear glass marbles.

‘I never talk about this. Not to anyone’

Harry waited impatiently, forcing down the questions and comments that desperately wanted to break out of his mouth.

Albus took a deep breath. ‘I told you a long time ago that my little sister died in an accident. The truth is she was killed during a duel. She wasn’t fighting, of course, she just got caught in the middle of it.’

Harry felt his whole body go cold. ‘You mean, he killed her?’

Albus looked away again. ‘No,’ he said softly. ‘I was never sure who cast the curse. It could have been any of us.’

‘Who was fighting?’ Harry asked.

‘Myself, my brother and him.’

It occurred to Harry that Albus hadn’t said the boy’s name yet and this realisation sent a fresh shiver down his spine.

‘Who was he?’ He asked. ‘The boy you fell in love with? The one who fought with your brother.’

Albus blinked rapidly, tears clinging to his lashes. ‘I’m worried you’ll judge me when you find out,’ he whispered.

‘Is he someone I’ve met?’ Harry asked. Albus shook his head. ‘Someone I’ve heard of then? Someone I’ve read about?’

‘I think you’d recognise his name.’

Harry waited. When Albus stayed silent, spinning his silver ring round, Harry reached out and took his hand.

‘I would never judge you,’ he assured him.

Albus smiled weakly. ‘You might, once you know everything, but I want you to understand.’ He took another breath. ‘The boy I fell in love with was Gellert Grindelwald.’

Chapter End Notes

This is a short chapter because it’s been a long time since I’ve updated and I want to get something out. I plan to follow up on this discussion about Grindelwald/Dumbledore next time though.

I’m aware that this is quite a ways through the year. In the book, Riddle’s diary is
already in Harry’s possession by this point, but I’m taking a very slight liberty by having him not get/look at it yet. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t have in this version of events, but I think it’s okay to delay things by a short time only.

There are a few things which haven’t happened in this reality. Obviously, Harry and Ron did not fly the car to Hogwarts, as Harry is already there and so Dobby wouldn’t block the barrier. This means that Ron’s wand didn’t break and he also didn’t receive a Howler.

Draco did not set a snake on Harry in Duelling Club, because in this version of events Snape already knows that Harry’s a parslemouth and wouldn’t want to expose him, so he doesn’t tell Draco that spell. As a consequence, duelling club lasts a little longer than in the books and no one thinks that Harry is the heir of Slytherin.

Apart from that, I think pretty much everything is the same. You know, just different in small ways.
Hard Candy

It took Harry a long time to process what Albus was telling him. It just seemed impossible that his guardian could have had an affair with one of the darkest wizards of all time. It was almost as bad as falling in love with Lord Voldemort; utterly disgusting and unthinkable.

‘But he was your enemy!’ Harry exclaimed eventually, once he had regained his tongue. ‘You fought him! You defeated him! It’s what you’re famous for!’

Even if Harry hadn’t spent half his childhood studying wizarding history, he would still have read about their famous duel somewhere. It was referenced whenever Albus was mentioned, in books, essays and newspaper articles. It was even on the back of his chocolate frog card.

‘That all came much later,’ Albus assured him. ‘By the time I challenged him to our duel we hadn’t each other for several decades. No one had any idea we’d ever met each other before, let alone been friend and lovers.’

Harry wrestled with this silently for a few moments. He had always seen Grindelwald as a forerunner to Lord Voldemort and identified with Albus in his triumphant defeat of him. The story of the great duel had always thrilled him, making him feel as though he and his guardian were linked with parallel destinies.

‘So ... you had no idea what he was like?’ He pressed. ‘No idea what he was going to become?’

Albus looked uncomfortable.

‘I would like to say not,’ he said quietly. ‘I certainly never believed he could be truly cruel, but I’d been lying if I said I had no idea what he was capable of. He was outspoken in his views and incredibly ambitious.’

Harry goggled at him. ‘How could you be with him, then? How could you even give him the time of day? You’ve always spoken out against the dark outs and those who practice them. You’ve always stood up for muggle rights.’

His voice crackled, like an old wireless, as he remembered everything he’d read about Grindelwald.

‘Grindelwald and his followers killed hundreds of innocent people. They talked about muggles as if they were animals, a lesser race that they had the right to rule over.’

He was reciting all this as if it was a lesson he had, at his guardian’s request, but it was nothing so bland or simple. It was an hard accusation.

Albus shook his head forcefully. ‘I was never part of that, Harry. You know that.’

‘But you let it happen!’ Harry threw back at him. ‘It was years before you confronted Grindelwald!’

Albus breathed deeply.

‘It’s true,’ he admitted. ‘I waited far too long before stopping Grindelwald. I was afraid to face him, afraid of what he might say. I couldn’t bear to hear the truth about my sister’s death.’

He fidgeted with his robes.

‘I suppose it was my fault either way. Aberforth always thought so. We never really spoke again
after Ariana’s funeral. He made it clear that he didn’t consider me family anymore.’

Harry continued to frown at Albus, although his anger was quickly fading.

‘I know you would never have done that on purpose,’ he said. ‘You’re not a killer.’

Albus shook his head. ‘Intentions don’t count for much when you make a mistake like that.’

They both sat in silence for a short time and then Albus got up from behind his desk and sunk down to his knees, in front of Harry.

‘You’re right to question me, Harry. I should never have trusted Gellert. I closed my eyes to his darker side, convinced myself that he really didn’t mean all the things he said.’

Harry felt a knife twist in his heart. Of course Albus had seen the best in Grindelwald; he saw the best in everyone.

‘I’m sorry for being so harsh,’ he whispered. ‘I don’t really blame you for any of it. You were just a boy.’

Albus cupped Harry’s cheek in his hand. ‘You’re just a boy,’ he observed, ‘and you would never do what I did.’

Harry felt himself blush under the man’s cool fingers. ‘I don’t know ...’ he muttered.

‘I do,’ Albus replied.

He traced Harry’s cheek with his thumb before drawing away gently.

‘Come sit down with me on the sofa,’ he suggested. ‘We should get comfortable if we’re going to talk about something so terrible.’

Harry got up unsteadily and stumbled across the office, pausing only to shove some large heart-shaped cushions out of his way before sinking into his usual place. Albus sat with his legs tucked underneath himself, like a child, and hugged a cushion to his chest.

‘You have to understand I was a very different person when I was seventeen and the world was a very different place.’

Harry nodded patiently.

‘I only went home out of a sense of duty, to care for my sister while my brother finished school. It was my choice, I had insisted, and yet I still resented it. All my school life I had been told that I was destined for greatness, that I was the most promising Wizard of my generation, and suddenly I was languishing away in my small home town.’

He smiled in that sad, pained way that made Harry’s heart ache in sympathy.

‘When Gellert turned up there, after being expelled from Durmstrang, it felt like fate. We had both been banished from society but we were still able to make plans for the future. We talked about travelling together, searching for rare magical treasures, and making wondrous discoveries.’

Harry felt himself blush again. These were the sorts of things he used to fantasise about doing with his guardian himself, when he was much younger.

‘We did talk about politics,’ Albus continued. ‘I wish I could tell you that we didn’t, but that
wouldn’t be fair. The truth is we both dreamt of changing the world and taking power for ourselves.’

Harry was unable to stop himself from recoiling.

‘I know, I know,’ Albus said, throwing up his hands. ‘I only wanted to be in charge to do good things though. I believed in liberating the lower magical races, in improving the lives of wizards and muggles alike. I thought Gellert did too.’

‘That’s madness!’ Harry spluttered. ‘You can’t take over the world without hurting anyone. It was always going to be violent!’

‘Intellectually, I accepted that,’ Albus replied, ‘but I never really faced the reality. I just told myself that we would only do what was necessary and that everything would be as peaceful as possible.’

Harry stared at him, in disbelief.

‘I was very young and foolish,’ Albus restated forlornly.
Bittersweet

They spoke about it for a long time, until the windows went dark and the candles ignited themselves. Harry could tell that it was very difficult for Albus to go over his past like this, dissecting it in detail, but he seemed to feel that a thorough autopsy was necessary.

In time they settled into a familiar rhythm and everything became much easier. Harry asked his questions tentatively, when the time seemed right, and Albus answered them with the same careful consideration.

'Gellert already had a small group of followers by the time I met him,' Albus confided. 'A gang of boys at school who admired and obeyed him. Such things were not uncommon at the time. There were lots of little clubs and societies, both official and unofficial. Gellert's group were all preoccupied with practicing the Dark Arts, of course, exploring the most difficult and extraordinary forms of magic, but they were also fiercely political. They considered themselves revolutionaries. Gellert filled them with ideas about reforming the wizarding world and ruling over muggles.'

'Did he tell you all this?' Harry asked.

'Some of it he told me,' Albus replied. 'Some of it I found out later. I couldn't stop myself from investigating and filling in all the gaps. I suppose I still saw myself in him, even after everything that had happened. I had to try and make sense of our shared history.'

Harry nodded thoughtfully. 'I can see that. It's very like you. How else would you respond to a devastating, personal tragedy, except by doing research?'

He imitated Albus's light and airy tone in this comment, his pitch-perfect performance adding another layer of irony that he knew his guardian appreciated.

'You must have done a good job,' he continued. 'I've never heard any of this before. It's not mentioned in any of the history books.'

'Well, most people aren't interested in writing biographies of evil men,' Albus observed. 'At least, not until long after their death, when most of their crimes have been forgotten.' He considered for a moment. 'The same goes for very good men. People don't want their heroes and villains to be tainted by humanity. Too many details can make them seem too complicated, too real, or - worst of all - too normal and mundane.'

Harry smiled appreciatively. This was the sort of talk he liked best. Albus's wry observations always stuck with him and he would still be mulling them over several days later.

'I understand that Gellert's group had a lot of clashes with a particular boy in the year below,' Albus continued. 'I think they originally intended to recruit him, as he was also very bright and talented, but he became more of a rival. He criticized Gellert openly and tried to convince his followers to abandon him. At least, that's what Gellert told me. I don't know how much of that is true.'

'Why, what do you think really happened?' Harry asked curiously.

'Well, I know that there was an ongoing dispute which eventually escalated into a full-blown attack on the student in question. That much was confirmed by the school. What I can't be sure of is the real nature of the conflict and Gellert's motivations.'

He frowned a little as he peered back though the mists of time and scrutinized his own memories. His
pale, lined face screwed up in concentration.

'I can't help but think that Gellert tried to present the incident to me in the way he thought I'd find most understandable or reasonable. It was also very early in our acquaintance and he wanted to please and impress me. He was cultivating an image of himself as a powerful, intelligent rebel and the story he was told me certainly fit that narrative.'

Albus fidgetted absently with his hair, running his fingers through it in a gesture that Harry recognised from the visions in the pensive; a sweet, slightly effeminate habit from his youth.

'Gellert presented the disagreement as an entirely ideological one,' Albus continued. 'I am sure that he thought I would find an intellectual dispute between two strong, ambitious wizards appealing, given my bookish ways and acute sense of self-importance.'

'You don't buy that though?' Harry pressed, leaning forward eagerly.

Albus shrugged his shoulders. 'I wouldn't be surprised if the argument was far more personal or petty than he made it out to be. He certainly wouldn't have liked it if a younger student was jeering at him or calling him names. He might have decided to simply exact revenge on the little brat, without any grand reasoning or justifications.'

That sounded very likely, to Harry's way of thinking. It was the sort of thing a Slytherin student would do and from what he understood Durmstrang was like an entire school full of Slytherins.

'There might have been something else to it though,' Albus mused. 'I know that he and Gellert often argued in class, as well as in the hallways, and they had more than one point of contention. The boy's father had written to the school on several occasions, complaining about the History of Magic teacher, and he almost succeeded in getting him removed. Gellert would have been enraged by that. Carlus Dahmer was his favourite teacher and a great mentor to him.'

Albus glanced down at his hands, squeezing the tawdry, heart-shaped cushion.

'Gellert never said so, but I always suspected that he and Dahmer had had some sort of relationship.'

Harry's stared at him. 'You mean ... a sexual relationship?'

Albus hesitated and then nodded. 'Yes.'

'But - but he was his teacher!' Harry exclaimed. 'He must have been so much older than him! Gellert was just seventeen, wasn't he?'

'He might have been even younger when it started,' Albus replied grimly. 'I didn't say it was a healthy relationship. Dahmer was incredibly possessive of Gellert, obsessed with trying to shape and mould him into someone truly great. He tutored him privately and taught him a lot of arcane and obscure magic.'

Albus fidgetted again, the heart in his hands pulsing in a limp, lacklustre way as he crushed the velvet.

'It is difficult to judge though; it was such a different time.' He gave Harry a very hard look. 'Homosexuality was still illegal back then, at any age and under any circumstances.'

'Not for wizards though, surely?' Harry protested.

'Of course,' Albus replied, sounding amused. 'The wizarding world might have its own laws
Harry was surprised and embarrassed. 'I thought Wizards just did whatever they wanted. I mean, as long as they're not hurting each other or drawing too much attention from muggles.'

'Well, there are many wizards who believe it should be that way,' Albus acknowledged. 'The most extreme amongst us think we should have no laws at all and just work everything out with magic. There are few wrongs, they argue, which cannot be righted with a spell and few disputes that can't be settled with a duel.'

Harry pulled a face. 'Seems a bit medieval.' He studied Albus’s face carefully. ‘You don't believe that, do you?’

'Oh no, no,' Albus said quickly. 'I think restrictions and regulations are very important. People can't possibly be expected to police themselves. In my ideal world there would be plenty of rules and structure, but everything would be a great deal fairer.'

'Would you still have the wizarding world be subject to muggle law though?'

'Well, that's the real question, isn't it?' Albus said, looking pleased. 'Should we consider ourselves part of the muggle world or entirely separate from it? And if we are part of their world then must we also be subservient to it?'

Harry waited, his eyes wide open and his heart beating fast.

'In my youth, I earnestly believed we needed to take control of the muggle world and have a single system of government,' Albus told him. ‘Anything else seemed impossibly flawed, doomed to failure.’

Harry considered pointing out that both the muggle government and the Ministry of Magic had somehow managed to weather through another century since then, without collapsing, but sensed that this would open up a fresh avenue of debate and he didn’t want his guardian to get side-tracked.

'And now?' He pressed.

Albus's mouth tightened a little.

'I no longer believe that wizards should be in charge,' he said slowly, 'but I do still think we ought to try and assimilate with the muggle world. Segregating ourselves constantly hiding our magic isn't good for us, and it would be better for everyone if there was real co-operation.'

Harry had not been expecting that. He slid back on the sofa, displacing a few more cushions.

'Does that really suprise you?' Albus raised his eyebrows. 'You know I think it's vital to understand and work with muggles more closely, as well as to improve relations with the other magical races.'

'Yeah, but that's not the same thing as wanting to, I don't know, abolish the statute of secrecy and try and live together in harmony.' Harry objected, shooting Albus a stern look. 'I thought you'd learnt your lesson and given up trying to take over the world.'

'Oh, I have,' Albus assured him, with a genuine chuckle. 'I am a realist, above all else, and don't trust
myself to engage with politics directly. The lesson I've learnt is that if you have too much power and too much ambition then you can quickly lose sight of the true cost of it all. It's much safer to try and influence things slowly and peacefully, one small change at a time. It's not always effective and you have to face up to a great many losses, but it's better than gambling with lives on a larger scale.'

'Is that why you won't be Minister of Magic?' Harry asked, recalling Albus’s frequent refusals of the post.

'Yes,' Albus smiled. 'You remember what I told you? That I'm just not suited for positions of power?'

'I thought you were just pretending to be modest,' Harry said, 'or saying you didn't want to deal with all the backstabbing or drama. I didn't realise that you were telling me that you were a ruthless meglomaniac with a tendency towards radical ideologies.'

Albus laughed at this, as Harry had hoped he would, and Harry took the opportunity to make his next move.

'What about Gellert?' He demanded. 'Did he share your opinions? Did he think that the wizarding world needed to open itself up in order to survive?'

'It was the cornerstone of every argument,' Albus said, his smile fading. 'He used to insist that it was necessary to help both the wizarding and muggle world, to save them from themselves. He also spoke about liberating the so-called lesser magical races and protecting them from further manipulation and abuse.'

Albus looked solemn and pensive and suddenly much, much older.

'Now, of course I wonder whether he was just mirroring my own opinions back to me, telling me what I wanted to hear. I have no doubt that he had some genuine ideals, he certainly truly believed that wizards had been in hiding for too long and that our current system was unjust, but I think his own ambition was always the driving force.'

His attention strayed back to his hands, his head drooping down and his long eyelashes shielding his brilliant blue eyes from view.

'I was far too unguarded with him,' he said softly. 'I gave him far too much of myself.

Harry frowned at him. 'What do you mean?' He muttered. 'Sex?'

Albus shook his head fiercely. 'No - no - I meant my thoughts, my ideas. The truth is that even though we were only together for a very short time I helped him more than anyone else. I gave him all his best arguments and his greatest slogans. I taught him how to earn people's trust, in a way he couldn't before. I taught him how to manipulate people.'

'Don't say that,' Harry urged. He cast around for something else to say that would be sweet or comforting and forced a smile. ‘I think you're giving yourself far too much credit. From what I've heard, Gellert Grindelwald was already pretty powerful and manipulative.'

Albus also assumed a strained, artificial smile; an imitation of Harry's imitation.

'One of the hardest things about being supremely intelligent is having to watch what you say all the time. Words have power, just as spells do, and a well-formed phrase can cause as much damage as the deadliest curse.'

He held Harry's gaze steadily, even as his voice began to shake.
'The worst torture I’ve ever had to endure was hearing my own words being used to justify genocide. Once by Gellert Grindelwald, in his steady rise to power in the twenties, and then once again, over fifty years later, by none other than Lord Voldemort.'

Harry could see it all as clearly as if he’d shoved him face-first into the pensieve. Those great and terrible men delivering their speeches, weaving a web with their wise, well-chosen words.

He moved closer to Albus, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

'Isn’t not your fault,’ he whispered. 'Ideas are bigger than people. You can’t control them, once you let them lose into the world.’

Albus smiled up at him weakly. ‘That’s very clever. Is it one of mine?’

‘No! You just want to take credit for everything.’ He tugged playfully at Albus’s beard. ‘You need to learn to accept your own insignificance in the grand scheme of things.’

Albus laughed softly and wrapped his arms around Harry, pulling him into a warm embrace. Harry leant his head on his shoulder and tried to remember what else he had wanted to ask.

‘Who was the boy Gellert fought with? Was he alright, in the end?’

‘Jonah Meyer,’ Albus said, recalling the name with ease. ‘He was quite alright. Unharmed, in any case. Durmstrang wouldn’t say what he did to him, no doubt thinking it would harm the School’s reputation, but I’d be willing to bet it was the cruciatus curse.

Harry shivered. ‘You can’t be sure though,’ he murmured. ‘It could have been anything.’

Albus hugged Harry tighter. ‘No,’ he said softly. ‘I am quite sure, because that was what he used on my brother.’

There was a cold, uncomfortable silence.

‘That’s ... awful ... ‘ Harry whispered. He knew just how bad the cruciatus curse was supposed to be; The most terrible torture you could imagine.

‘I never believed that Gellert could truly be cruel,’ Albus whispered back. ‘Not until that moment, anyway.’

Harry sat up again and examined his guardian’s face.

‘Do you still have feelings for him?’ He asked bracingly. ‘Do you wish things could have been different?’

Albus shook his head. ‘No. I don’t feel anything for him anymore. I just wish I could have seen him for what he was much sooner. If only I had my sister might be still alive, but I was too blind and selfish. That is my real regret, the one that still haunts me.’

He looked away again, a wistful expression coming over his face.

‘I still dream about him sometimes,’ he admitted. ‘In the way you dream about people that you used to know and haven’t seen for years. Sometimes he comes to fight me and other times he comes looking to reconcile, but it’s all the same in the end. We can’t change what’s already been and there can be no real resolution when there’s been so much pain and betrayal.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Harry murmured.’ He hesitated for a moment before saying, ‘He was the love of your
life though, wasn’t he?’

Albus shook his head again and wrapped his arms back around Harry, looking his fingers together at the small of his back in a tight cat’s cradle of love.

‘You’re the great love of my life,’ he told him. ‘My most precious child.’

Harry blushed scarlet. ‘You’re a daft old bastard,’ he muttered, even as he leant back into his arms.
I want to give a huge shoutout to all my subscribers and thank you for your patience. When I first started this story I tried to update about once a week but that’s grown more and more difficult. I’m currently trying to develop a better writing schedule and I promise I will continue to inch this fic forward, one chapter at a time!

It was Harry who shoved forward and fished the small leather-bound book out of the puddle of water while Ron hissed frantic warnings from his position flattened against the bathroom wall.

Despite all the magical mishaps Harry had experienced over the years he still believed that nothing in Hogwarts could truly hurt him. He certainly wasn’t afraid of a battered old book that had been abandoned in a girl’s bathroom.

‘Some books can burn your eyes out or scramble your brains though,’ Ron gabbled desperately. ‘My dad told me about some really nasty ones that the ministry’s confiscated over the years. Like, *Sonnets of a Sorcerer*. Everyone who ever read that spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And *The Endless Tale*, which no one could ever stop reading!’

‘I don’t think that this book is anything like that,’ Harry said, turning it over in his hands. ‘Look - it’s a diary. Almost fifty years old. Do you think someone was trying to get rid of it because of what’s written inside? It’s owner must have been around during the first attacks.’

The Diary was very soggy but otherwise unharmed from its brief journey through Moaning Myrtle and the Hogwarts plumbing system.

Harry quickly cast a warming spell over it to dry out the pages. None of them seemed to be lose or torn, which gave him hope that the book had been enchanted somehow to be resistant against damage.

‘Do you really think it’s safe?’ Ron asked, taking a cautious step forward.

‘Only one way to find out,’ Harry replied, cracking open the spine.

His heart leapt when he saw the name written on the very first page: T M Riddle.

‘Look!’ He exclaimed excitedly, shaking the book at Ron.

Ron squinted down at the old faded handwriting. ‘T M ... Ruddle?’

‘Riddle!’ Harry said impatiently. ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle!’

He waited for Ron to react to this earth-shattering news but his friend’s face remained blank.

‘So ... who’s that then?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’ Harry yelped. ‘Voldemort! LORD VOLDEMORT!’
Ron recoiled, his mouth falling open in shock. ‘You - you’re joking.’

‘No! That’s what he used to be called before he became Voldemort. I mean, you didn’t think that was his given name did you?’

Ron blushed. ‘I dunno, maybe? Wizards have some pretty unusual names sometimes.’

He took another step forward.

‘So what’s it say? Has it got instructions on how to get into the Chamber of Secrets? That would explain everything, wouldn’t it? Dumbledore said he thought that Voldemort was the one who opened it the first time.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said eagerly. ‘If he wrote down how to do it then someone else would have been able to take over for him.’

He started to flick frantically through the book but every single page was blank.

‘He must have protected the contents by magic,’ he said sadly.

Ron deflated a little. ‘Do you think Hermione might be able to work out how to get into it? Or Dumbledore? He must know loads of spells for unlocking things and revealing secrets.’

‘Maybe,’ Harry said thoughtfully. ‘We should go show it to Hermione anyway and see what she thinks. Do you think Madame Pomfrey will let us back into the Hospital Wing?’

She didn’t want to, as visiting hours were long over by, but she eventually relented when Harry started pleading with her, claiming that they still had a very important homework assignment they had forgotten to pass on.

‘Just for a minute then,’ she said briskly. ‘Then you’ve got to go!’

Hermione was surprised to see them again but very pleased when they told her what they’d found.

‘That’s incredible!’ She exclaimed. ‘Lord Voldemort’s one diary from when he was at school! You’re absolutely sure it’s really his?’

‘Yes, it’s got his name in it,’ Harry insisted, opening it up and showing Hermione the first page. ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle. That’s what he was called back then.’

‘I never knew that!’ Hermione replied. ‘Though, of course, I knew he couldn’t possibly have really been born “Lord Voldemort. I mean, that’s just ridiculous!’

Ron let out a rough little cough, turning red as he did so, but Hermione didn’t seem to notice.

‘I’m surprised you never came across the name in any of the books you’ve read,’ Harry commented. ‘Isn’t it mentioned anywhere?’

‘No,’ Hermione replied, ‘but then most writers won’t even refer to him by his adopted name, even in the most serious texts. It’s all “he who must not be named” or “you-know-who”, as if they’re addressing children. It’s absurd! How did you find it out anyway? Did Dumbledore tell you.’

‘I suppose so,’ Harry said, struggling to recall when he’d first learnt Voldemort’s real name. ‘He definitely mentioned it when we were discussing the Chamber of Secrets. Apparently back when he was Tom Riddle Voldemort was a real teacher’s pet. Prefect and head boy and winner of loads of prizes and awards. So no one suspected him apart from Dumbledore.’
'Mental,' Ron muttered.

'It’s a good thing you’re able to get all this information from Dumbledore,’ Hermione said brusquely. ‘There’s so much that you just can’t find out from books. We’d still be running around in circles if it wasn’t for his help.’

Harry and Ron exchanged a brief look, alarmed to hear Hermione disparaging books in this way. Her recent falling out with the Hogwarts Library must have been more serious than they had realised.

‘Well, I guess most people don’t want to hear what Voldemort was like as a child,’ Harry said. ‘Especially as he seemed so nice and normal.’

He remembered what Dumbledore had said about nobody wanting biographies of great heroes and villains. He was most certainly right about that.

'It looks like the diary comes from some place on Vauxhall Road,’ Hermione noted, spotting the address printed on the back cover, ‘but I doubt it exists anymore. Isn’t strange that Voldemort would buy a diary from a muggle newsagents? You would think he’d shop in Diagon Alley for something as important as this.’

‘Well, he was raised as a muggle,’ Harry pointed out, ‘and grew up in a muggle orphanage. He probably didn’t have that much wizard money at the time.’

For the second time that day, Ron’s mouth fell open and Hermione let out a little gasp of surprise, leaning forward in the bed. If she’d still been in possession whiskers Harry was sure that they’d be twitching right now.

‘That’s fascinating! I always assumed he was pureblood! After all, he was always going on about the superiority wizards.’

‘No, he was half-blood,’ Harry told her. ‘I agree, it’s a little weird. No one seems to remember that now. He probably tried to keep it quiet, once he rose to power.’

‘Yeah!’ Ron agreed. ‘He wouldn’t want anyone knowing where he came from.’

Hermione took out her wand and started tapping the diary, trying every spell she could think of to try and get it to reveal its secrets. Unfortunately the pages stayed quite blank, refusing to yield to Magical persuasion.

‘Maybe he just never wrote in it,’ Ron said wearily. ‘Maybe it’s just a coincidence. I mean, Voldemort must have owned dozens of books and quills and bits of parchment when he was at school. They can’t all be enchanted with dark magic.’

‘Why’d someone try to get rid of it then?’ Hermione threw back at him. ‘There must be something about this diary that makes it worth hiding or destroying.’

She turned to Harry.

‘Are you going to take it to Dumbledore? I’m sure he’ll have a better idea how to get into than I do.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed. ‘I’ll go see him first thing tomorrow. It’s too late tonight.’

This wasn’t quite true as Albus usually stayed up very late and his door was never closed to Harry, but for some reason Harry didn’t want to share Riddle’s diary with him just yet. He had a strange urge to keep it to himself and try and work out how to read it on his own. He felt sure he could solve
the puzzle alone and if he did then his guardian was bound to be all the more impressed.

Besides, there was just something about the book that called to him. He felt a queer connection to it, as if it was something that had been owned and cherished by his own parents, rather than his mortal enemy.

**

Harry waited until late that night, when all the other Gryffindor boys had fallen asleep, before pulling out the diary again. He illuminated his wand tip so that he could see properly and cast a silencing spell around his four poster bed.

Then he made his first real attempt at breech the book’s defences by leaning in close and whispering to it in parseltongue. He was sure that if Voldemort had really been the heir of Slytherin and wanted his diary to be found by his successor then the language of snakes must be the key to unlocking it.

He hissed as many phrases he could think of, all along the lines of, ‘open up’ and ‘tell me your secrets’ and ‘the heir of Slytherin commands you,’ but the book took not the slightest bit of notice.

Harry was severely disappointed. He couldn’t see how else he was supposed to prove his worth to the diary. After straining himself for almost half an hour, trying to think like Voldemort did, he happened upon the idea of spilling his blood upon the diary’s pages.

Voldemort was obsessed with blood purity and might very likely expect any successor to prove themselves in this way. Harry did not actually have the blood of Salazar Slytherin running in his veins but his attempt to gain access might still elicit a reaction.

He scrabbled around in his bedside table for the silver knife he used in potions and ran the blade down the length of his palm. Blood rushed to the surface in a thick crimson line. Harry squeezed his hand into a tight fist, forcing out more blood, and let three large drops onto the open diary.

For a few moments the blood sat upon the surface of the paper without doing anything, and then - to Harry’s delight - they started to sink in until they were quite gone. The diary had accepted his offering, drinking up his blood like a thirsty vampire, and Harry waited impatiently for it to respond.

It soon did, in the most unpleasant way imaginable. New words forming right out of Harry’s own bright red blood.

‘Who is this?’

Harry felt a little shiver run down his spine. He quickly gathered up a quill and ink and scribbled out a response.

‘Harry Potter.’

He used black ink from a new bottle and the words sunk into the page and vanished away, just as his blood had done, but when the diary responded it was still in the crimson red of Harry’s first offering.

‘Hello, Harry Potter. How is it you come to have my diary?’

The politeness of this greeting unnerved Harry somewhat. He sensed predatory intent behind the pleasant words, perhaps because he knew their author, or perhaps simply because they were rendered in blood.

For this reason, he decided to lie.
'Someone gave it to me.'

The reply came much quicker this time. Harry’s black words didn’t have time to dry before three crimson letters burned their way onto the page.

‘Who?’

Harry had to think fast. He couldn’t bluff his way through this, pretending to know who had last had the diary. Voldemort surely knew the truth better than he did and any wrong moves would give him away.

‘I don’t know,’ he wrote. ‘They just left it on my bed with a note.’

As soon as he finished writing he realised he’d made a mistake. No one but a Gryffindor would be able to gain access to his dormitory. Voldemort would surely know this and realise that he was lying right away.

Sweat broke out on Harry’s skin and his hand started to tremble. His anxiety only worsened as the seconds ticked by and the diary failed to respond.

Almost a full minute passed by before new words finally appeared on the page.

‘How strange. What did the note say?’

Harry frantically tried to come up with an answer to this, unsure whether it was safer to be vague or to double-down in his story.

‘Not much,’ he wrote teasingly. ‘It just said that this book is dangerous and that I ought to destroy it.’

This ought to make sense, given what he knew of the diary’s last owner. They had obviously thought it was dangerous and had tried to dispose of it themselves. When lying, it was best to stick as closely to the truth as possible, while adding just enough to try and turn the situation to one’s advantage.

There was another long pause before the diary responded.

‘Do you intend to try and destroy this diary then, Harry Potter?’

Harry’s heart started pounding in his chest, fear and excitement coursing through his body.

‘Perhaps,’ he wrote, forcing himself to hold back and keep things simple. The less he said now, the better.

‘If you do, you might find it more difficult than you expect. I’ve worked hard to preserve my memories safely. This book cannot be destroyed by any ordinary means.’

Harry gripped his quill tightly, his heart thundering in his chest.

‘I am no ordinary wizard.’

The next reply came quickly, the handwriting frantic and untidy, as if the writer was stabbing at the page.

‘No, I can see that, Harry Potter. Please, tell me how is it that you are able to speak parseltongue? I thought only true descendants of Slytherin were blessed with such a gift.’
Harry recoiled in shock. How could the diary know he was a pastelmouth? Could it heard him speaking, after all? Surely not, or it would have answered him.

‘I'm not a Parselmouth,’ Harry wrote quickly. ‘Where did you get that idea from?’

The next words etched themselves hard into the page, each letter thick and bold.

‘Do not lie to me.’

Harry swallowed, unable to do anything but stare as more and more words scrawled themselves across the page.

‘I can see what you are. It is all here, in your blood. I can see that you are not a descendant of Slytherin and yet you have the gift of Parseltongue. You have many extraordinary powers, Harry Potter, that you should not. Can you tell me where you obtained them all?’

Harry became aware that he was cursing under his breath, in panicked little gasps.

‘Shitohshitohshit!’

He slammed the book shut and frantically jammed it into his bedside table drawer but he couldn’t set aside the notion that words were still scrawling themselves across the pages unseen.

The diary was a living thing, nourished by Harry’s blood, and could not be stopped so easily. Harry lay awake in the dark, thinking about it, unable to get to sleep.

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