Harry's name comes out of the goblet and he's had enough, he's sick of pretending to be stupid, he's sick of constantly fighting against the whole world. It's time to step up and take control of his life.
"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore called again.

Harry's stomach sank, and he thought his dinner was going to come up. Just like his First Year all over again. Malnourished, half-starved and the shortest one in his year, he had always struggled with the rich Hogwarts feasts.

Harry stared horrified around the hall lit only by the blue flames of the Goblet of Fire. It was dead silent, Ron was gaping at him, and Hermione was frowning slightly, as the noise rose to a dull angry bussing, like hornets.

She poked him in the ribs.

He jumped and couldn't hold back a flinch. He growled mentally at himself in irritation. It was always harder after the Dursley's. Even after being back for 2 months, with food, company and relative kindness, it was still hard to get used to being back to normal. To get used to not having to be hungry every minute of every day, not having to be on the lookout for the next blow, not having to over analyse every single little thing anyone says, for a potential threat.

"I didn't" he stuttered dumbly.

The hall sounded like a dull roar, now, people standing up and training their necks to get a better view. Someone dragged him up and pushed him towards the head table. He squirmed out of their reach. He didn't like being touched, even by his friends.

He looked at Dumbledore imploringly, half hoping...

"Up here if you please, Harry," Dumbledore said and Harry's heart sank, of course not.
Just one year, he thought, just one year, I want a normal school year, where I can actually study, and not have something try to kill me.

It felt like a very long way from his spot at the end of the Gryffindor Table, up to the head table

"Through the door," Dumbledore repeated when Harry reached him. Harry's heart sank, he didn't know why he had hoped Dumbledore might have dismissed him, he should have known better by now. But his heart still sank.

They're going to make me compete anyway. They going to sit back while this thing, for older wizards and witches, for adults, tries its level best to kill me. Again! Just like they have done every single year here while something tries to kill me.

He walked through the door but didn't really hear the other champions question him or complain while Bagman explained. All he could think of was how much taller they were. All of them, he was only fourteen and yet was still the size of a first year, and he may be a closet bookworm but they knew so much more then he did, they probably also had the advantage of growing up around magic.

He was dimly aware of Professor Moody saying "someone was hoping he'd die," and of Mr Crouch saying "he has to compete," all the while Harry was shaking his head and saying, "I didn't do it," and getting ignored.

He didn't remember how he got back to the tower but was bowled over by the wall of noise and people. It took him an age to escape, by the time he did, not a hint of Ron or Hermione, he was sweaty and shaky with anxiety, and just wants the reassurance of Ron or Hermione's friendly face and to go to bed.

He finally made it upstairs and was released to see Ron lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

"Where've you been?" Harry said.

"Oh hello," said Ron in an odd strained sort of voice.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry flopped down on his bed and pulled Dudley's old too small shoes off.

"So," Ron said, "congratulations."

"What d'you mean, congratulations?" said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

"Well... no one else got across the Age Line," said Ron. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use - the Invisibility Cloak?"

"What? The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have.. I didn't..." said Harry slowly.

"Oh right," said Ron. "I thought you might've told me if it was the cloak... because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it? But you found another way, did you?"

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "What would they do that for?"

"I dunno," said Harry, not wanting to sound melodramatic and say, "To kill me," and not wanting to
say it out loud, to make it real.

Ron's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

"It's okay, you know, you can tell me the truth," he said. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know why you're bothering to lie, you didn't get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's, that Violet, she's already told us all Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don't have to do end-of-year tests either..."

"I didn't put my name in that goblet! I didn't! I wanted a quiet year without someone trying over and over again to kill me!" said Harry, starting to feel angry, "I didn't do it, I want nothing to do with this stupid tournament!"

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, in exactly the same sceptical tone, "only you said this morning you'd have done it last night, and no one would've seen you..."

"What? I was joking, I didn't mean it! I want nothing to do with this stupid thing! You have to believe me!"

"I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're doing a really good impression of it," Harry snapped finally.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you'll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something."

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet curtains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would believe him.

He grabbed his things and slipped into the bathroom a hollow sensation in his gut. He was so sure Ron would believe him Ron and Hermione were the only people who had always been there. The only people he could trust, his first ever friends.

Sure; Ron could be hot-headed and talk without thinking, sure he could get jealous and persuasive sometimes. Sure, he teased Hermione endlessly about her dedication to study in such a way that had Harry long ago deciding it was safer not to show his own love of book and learning, he didn't want to lose his first ever friend, not over something so silly as his passions. Sure; Ron always tried to distract him from doing his homework, but he had always been a good friend. Hadn't he?

But the more Harry thought about it the less convinced he was. He was quick to start fights, especially with Malfoy, he was judgmental. Was he really a good friend? Or was Harry blinded by his sheer desperation and relief to have a friend that he didn't see Ron's faults?

He got into the shower and sat down on the floor letting the hot water flow over him. Washing away the sweat and tension that pooling like dread in his gut.

And Hermione brilliant Hermione. She was brilliant, and he envied her easily expressed passion and love of books and knowledge. But she could be bossy, and sometimes he felt she looked down on them. She would order them around like she was their mother or a teacher, she would scold and scorn them for not studying but when he did well she got jealous. She always assumed he was stupid.

Sure, he actually liked books, he loved them, hiding in the library had kept him safe as a child, nicking Dudley's unwanted books and reading them in the gloom of his cupboard has been his only
entertainment as a child, they had been his only, solace, his only friends and companions, his only escape from his own living hell. But it had just been so ingrained by the Dursley's, too dumb himself down - to keep himself safe from his relative's rather - that by the time he realised he could learn and read as much as he wanted while he was safe at Hogwarts, the teachers thought him stupid. He has made a tentative friendship with Hermione who prided herself in getting top marks in everything. He hadn't wanted to jeopardise that. He'd tried to pick up his grades but between Ron always trying to get him to skive off, and Hermione's look of disappointment when he got a spell before her or did better on a test, (not to mention Snape accusing him of cheating,) he quickly realised it was safer and more peaceful just to keep dumbing himself down here too.

So he put off his homework, and did ruff shod jobs of it with Ron, and stayed up late in the safety of his bed curtness to read and study alone late into the night by wand light, where his intelligence was safe and hidden. Was he so desperate for friends that he made himself into someone he was not? Was he really prepared to let himself and his education suffer, and potentially die for it, for just for a friend or two who if they honestly cared for him, would support him? He wasn't sure anymore.

He remembered back in his second year when choosing electives, Hermione's had been so happy to go over her notes on all the different subject with him that she even held off Ron's teasing of them. When she talked about them, they all sounded so good, even muggle studies sounded interesting when she talked about it like that. But when he said maybe he would ask McGonagall if he could take them all to she'd rounded on him and said, "now harry, you barely pass your classes as is, don't you think you'd be better off with one or two?"

"Are you saying I'm too stupid to handle it, Hermione?"

"No! No! Not al all its just..." But she trailed off, as Ron cut in, "you can't take all the classes mate, I need you to take divination and care of magical creatures with me, so we can have a free ride and play chess in all our breaks! You can't take them all."

He had felt so cowed by it, it took him till the last day of term to muster up the courage to ask Professor McGonagall to take them all, ever since the incident in his First Year when she had dismissed him over and over again, he hadn't felt he could talk to her.

But the more he thought about it the more he desperately wanted to try all the electives last year, especially Runes, Arithmancy and creatures, but McGonagall has said he wouldn't be able to handle them all, and even so Dumbledore had insisted he take divination and creatures so he could only pick one other.

"You don't manage nearly as well as Miss Granger Potter, it just wouldn't be a good idea."

He left her office fuming and cursing himself for needing friends enough that he let himself play dumb. He had got the same books as Hermione's though and studied them at night.

He'd even managed to use them to embed the runic magic into this trunk to get it to shrink at the tap of a wand, to be feather-light, so he was able to keep his school things with him last summer. he was working on an invisibility charm for it too but hadn't finished it yet, or the lock picks he was working on. He really should do some extra work on the warding book bill had recommended over the summer, if someone was trying to kill him. He got out of the shower and got dressed. Resolving to write to Bill and Charley for advice in the morning, and serious. He had enjoyed meeting them over the summer. He'd enjoyed hearing them talk about their jobs and their interest's, and they'd even recommended some good books on the sly and told him to write. Their knowledge would be useful this year. He should write to Sirius too. And Professor Lupin. He may not have contacted harry at all since leaving Hogwarts last year, but he was a friend of his parents, maybe had some advice, he had been an exigent fence against the Dark Arts Teacher.
He'd work something out, he'd survived until now with little but his own wits, he'd manage. He didn't want to die.

Chapter End Notes

Please Kudos or Comment to let me know if you enjoyed it.

Also don't quite know exactly how many chapters this will be, but I'm estimating 30 at the mo, I don't like the little question marks.

A slightly more in depth disclaimer:
None of the recognisable, characters, dialogue, plot points, places or names belong to me. They are the property and copyright of JK Rowling and Bloomsbury Publishing (there are more publishing houses that do her work internationally, but that's the one she publishes under down on my end of the globe)

Some bits have been taken from the original (and brilliant) books. Mostly from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, but also on occasion I will reference or quote the others as well. (But nothing has been intentionally taken from Cursed Child or the Fantastic Beasts screen plays, as I haven't actually read those ones)

I am not going to individually quote and reference every one as I am not profiting in any way, and this disclaimer should cover it. That and a lot of the bits I have included from the original work have been tweaked a little or expanded on a little, leaving some bits in italics and every few words not in italics is too irritating to the reader.
Harry writes some letters, asks for help for a change, and faces Hermione

When Harry woke up the next morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and anxious. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him - only to find that Ron's curtains were shut and it was still ridiculously early.

He got up and got dressed into Dudley's cast-offs, ignoring the familiar feeling of shame and disgust at having to wear them under his school robes, and thought wistfully of one day having his own clothes, that were not so big they fell off him.

First, he wrote to Bill and Charlie. He'd met Ron's brothers over the summer at the Quidditch World Cup. He desperately hoped that they would believe him and not shun him as Ron had. They had been interesting to talk to, always seemed happy to share stories of their time at school, and of their jobs. He couldn't believe that they had been happy to talk to their kid brothers dorky friend. But they had, Bill had told him about curse breaking, the subjects he'd had to study to get there, and the training and study Gringotts had put him though.

"It was hard work, but brilliant and worth every minute. It's great fun," Bill had told him. And Harry wished anew that he had managed to talk his professors into letting him take Arithmancy and Runes as well. Bill had recommended some great book to him though, and Harry had already borrowed them from the library and was halfway through, if not finished most of them. And Charley always had a story about some creature or other, especially Norberta. They had both offered harry a lot of sound advice, it was really novel having an older not-horrible person to talk to and get advice from. They'd both told him to write to them any time. He hadn't felt brave enough before now, not wanting to waste their time, but he was pretty desperate now. He needed all the help he could get, and maybe if he got to them first, be for Ron, they would turn him away. The two letters were pretty similar:

"Dear Bill,

Sorry it's taken me so long to write before now.

I honestly was worried you'd think me wasting your time. I'm sure you have more important things to
do than write to your brothers’ friend. But something happened, and I'm pretty desperate for some advice.

If you haven't heard, Hogwarts is host to the Triwizard Tournament. Cedric Diggory is the Hogwarts champion, but last night after all three contestants were chosen, a fourth name came out. Mine.

I didn't do it. I didn't enter, I promise you! I want nothing to do with it but no one will believe me, not even Ron! (sorry, I know he's your brother.) I don't know what to do. I don't know how to get out of it and everyone says I have to compete as it's a binding magical contract. I don't even know what that is? I've never read about them, and I'm more well-read than people think. I was hoping that in your work for Gringotts you might know something about them? Or have any advice on where I could look? Please help. I don't know what to do, I don't know what the tasks are going to be, and I'm 3 years behind everyone else, and I'm desperate to learn as much as I can about everything, in the small hope of it helping me not die in this thing. Moody said that's why I was entered, so someone can kill me. Thoughts?

Thanks for the book recommendations, by the way, I'm most of the way through the last few, the ones on the Egyptian hieroglyphic's were fascinating, it was the only one in the library on Egyptian runes. Can you recommend any more? The history of the Pictograms and how their development changed their magical uses was fascinating, especially how they flowed through to the Muggles and the Rosetta Stone. Any other book recommendations? The first lot were brilliant. I actually have loads more to say about the others, (I made notes!) I'll tell you more about what I thought of them later if you like, (I did have a few questions about that Panama Ingot Curse one book mentioned) but I want to get these owls off fast, I'm writing to Charlie too. I don't really have many adults or anyone outside of school I can ask.

Sorry to bother you

Thanks in advance,

Harry

PS how'd the Romney Dig go? Any cool curses?"

"Dear Charlie,

Sorry it's taken me so long, to write before now.

I honestly was worried you'd think me wasting your time, I'm sure you have more important things to do than write to your brothers' friend. But something happened, and I'm pretty desperate for some advice.

If you haven't heard, Hogwarts is host to the TriWizard Tournament. Cedric Diggory is the Hogwarts champion, but last night after all three contestants were chosen, a fourth name came out. Mine.

I didn't do it, I didn't enter, I promise you, I want nothing to do with it. No one will believe me, even Ron (sorry) I don't know what to do. I don't know how to get out of it and everyone says I have to compete as it's a binding magical contract. I don't even know what that is? I've never even read about them, and I'm more well-read than people think. I've written to Bill to, maybe he knows about them, through Gringotts. I was hoping you had some advice on if not how to get out of it, then on not dying in it. You've worked with all sorts of dangerous creatures and situations. Any advice? Or book recommendations to help me stay alive? Please help. I don't know what to do, I don't know what the tasks are going to be, and I'm 3 years behind everyone else, and I'm desperate to learn as much as I
can about everything, in the small hope of it helping me not die in this thing. Moody said that's why I was entered, so someone can kill me. Thoughts?

Thanks for the book recommendations, by the way, I'm most of the way through the last few. I enjoyed reading about the baby dragons, it was especially interesting how their growth and development are affected by whether they grew up orphaned or with their own kind. It was fascinating. Any other book recommendations?

That first lot were brilliant. I actually have loads more to say about them, (I made notes!) I'll tell you more about what I thought of them later if you want, (I did have a few questions about that Hebridean Black one book mentioned) but I want to get these owls off fast. I don't really have many adults or anyone outside of school I can ask.

Sorry to bother you

Thanks in advance,

Harry

PS I meant to ask, has Norberta laid her eggs yet?"

With those written, he also writes a quick note to Sirius, and after some hesitation, Professor Lupin. He may not have made any effort to contact Harry since he left, but Lupin was still a friend of his parents and had been a brilliant teacher, maybe he could offer help, after all, he wasn't their teacher any longer.

He stopped by at Professor McGonagall's office and knocked on the way back from the Owlery.

She opened the door, bleary eyes, but fully dressed.

"What do you want Potter?"

"I need to make up for 3 years of bad marks and catch up to the seventh years so this thing sons kill me."

"It's too early for this Potter. You'll be fine, and we can't offer you any help anyway, you know this. Visit the library for a change, and maybe get Miss Granger to do some revision with you."

Harry sighed disappointment swelling, but thanked her and left.

The castle was still quiet so he pulled his invisibility cloak out of his pocket and went outside. It was cool out. If he was going to survive he needed to be in shape, he was skinny as a rake and had hardly any muscle despite his previous quidditch playing. He started out going for a run along the edge of the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, but by the time he got around a good bit of the lake, he was a punting, aching, ball of sweat but he felt better. His head was clearer and he knew what he had to do. Sod the teachers, sod Ron, he needed to study and learn and get smarter, no-one was going to help him (well maybe Hermione) and he may as well get used to it because it had always been him against the world. So he would study and train hard. But first, he needed a shower and breakfast.

Hermione met him outside the portrait hole after his shower.

"Hello," she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. "I brought you this... Want to go for a walk?"
"Thanks," said Harry gratefully, a slight weight lifting off his shoulders when she didn't immediately reject him.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn along the edge of the forest. Past where the Beauxbatons carriage was, its blue and gold gilding glinting in the weak Scottish Sun. They munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

"Well, of course, I knew you hadn't entered yourself," she said when he'd finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. "The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody's right Harry... I don't think any student could have done it... they'd never be able to fool the Goblet, or get over Dumbledore's -"

"I know, its last year all over again, but have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted. Hermione hesitated.

"Erm... yes... he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well... no, I don't think so... not really," said Hermione awkwardly.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not really'?"

"Oh Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said despairingly. "He's jealous!"

Harry sighed, I thought so"Jealous? But seriously, he could use his brain, what there to be Jealous of? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he? And end up died"

"Look," said Hermione patiently, "it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault," she added quickly. "I know you don't ask for it... but - well - you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you're his best friend, and you're really famous - he's always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many..."

"Great," said Harry bitterly. "Really great. Tell him from me I'll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he's welcome to it... People gawping at me everywhere I go... just because my family was brutally murdered"

"I'm not telling him anything," Hermione said shortly. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"I'm not running around trying to make him grow up! I'm sick of it. I'm so sick of people stabbing me in the back." Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. "Maybe he'll believe I'm not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or -"

"That's not funny," said Hermione quietly. "That's not funny at all."

She looked extremely anxious, "Harry, I've been thinking - you know what we've got to do, don't you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron and the rest of the world a good kick up the -"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. . . . It's almost as if he expected something like this to
happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me -"

"I've already written to him,"

"Really? Well done," she said in surprise

"I'm not stupid you know," he said flatly, suddenly too tired to be angry or to lie.

Gods he was so tired...

"Well, that's not what I..." She stuttered.

"I know I don't do well in class, but I actually am pretty smart. Really. The Dursley just beat it into me not to do better than Dudley, and Dudley is stupid. So I had to be stupider so it wasn't taken out on my hide." Literally, he added mentally, "by the time I realised I could read here as much as I liked and to be as much of a nerd as I liked, and was allowed to get good marks if I wanted... Well, you were top of the class and enjoying it. Ron was picking on you for it, and nagging about skiving off all the time, and how much he hated books and studying. Then that one time I did try to do well, I really liked potions when I first came here, it was the class I was looking forward to most. But Snape was calling me a cheat and it was just safe to keep pretending to be stupid. But I'm not. I'm not stupid. I may not have your perfect memory, but I bet I could give you a run for your money if I bothered."

Hermione just looked at him, stumped.

"You mean to tell me, you've been deliberately getting bad marks?!" She shrieked

He winced but nodded.

"Because Ron is a prat and you were... you were scared of losing our friendship?" She continued, scandalised

He nodded, scuffing the toe of his too small shoes in the dirt, "you two were the first friends I ever had." He said kicking his foot abruptly as dirt got into his socks through the holes in his ratty shoes.

She looked torn between sad and happy, "you're my friend Harry, my first friend. I know what that's like Harry, that fear. But friends trust each other and are there for each other. I'm sorry you didn't feel comfortable letting your intelligence out. I'm sorry I didn't see it and wasn't a better friend. I'm sorry if I acted like you were stupid, or needed babying. Really, I didn't mean it that way. I admit I do get competitive when it comes to my marks but I would never choose school over my friendship with you. Truly." She said earnestly looking him in the eye. He squirmed, he'd heard about mind reading, but it was Hermione so he met her gaze, surely he could trust her.

"Let me in, let me get to know the real Harry, I've always wanted someone to study with and talk about books with and have long complex debates about whose theory is right only to find we were both wrong and come up with a better one," she said all in one long breath, much like she had on the train when they first met.

He laughs at that, "sounds nice, lord knows I'm going to have to study hard this year to make it out alive, it's for 7th years. And I know jack shit"

"Language Harry!"

He shrugged, "its not as if I've ever been any good at this magical world thing, no matter what I read it still doesn't make sense, it's so frustrating, I'm not stupid, really I'm not, but there's just so much
that's confusing or doesn't make sense!"

"We'll work on it, I'll make a stuffy plan, we'll go back to basics, I know you still struggle with the theory and it's important. And we can go over some runes and Arithmancy, I know you were interested in it back in Second Year."

"I nicked you course book list at the start of 3rd year, I got my own copy, I've been self-studying, all of the classes except muggle studies, and they wouldn't let me drop Divination so..." He admitted.

"Oh! Brilliant Harry! I'll go over my notes with you. Maybe the professors will agree to let you do an independent study for it, give you the assignments and exams for it! And then mark them for you. I'll ask them." She paused, "would you like me to ask them, Harry?"

He is so relieved he hugged her. She was surprised, pleasantly so, she knew he hated being touched. But She hugged back gently so he didn't feel trapped. She was careful to let him go as soon as he started to squirm.

"Thanks, Hermione." He said, his voice a little wobbly.

"Anything Harry, you're my best friend."

"You too Hermione, you too."

Chapter End Notes

I honestly wasn't sure which way to do with Hermione. it could have gone down the 'she's also a crap friend route' but Harry needed a person in his corner, especially when the rest of its out to get him. And I like Hermione.

I have some more ruffed out, I may manage to get it polished for tomorrow, if not the following day.

Comments and Kudos always welcome

:)}
Plots start to make themselves know... and weird things are going on

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione talk, and try to make an action plan, they get side tracked, and dark plots start to reveal themselves. Weird things are going on...

This one is for Serenagold. Thank you.

Chapter Notes

I sincerely apologise for any spelling errors. I’ve worked really hard to catch them all, but I am Dyslexic and I just can’t do it. So I’m very sorry if it irritates you. Please be patient with me, I’m trying my best.

It occurred to me some may appreciate trigger warnings, so I’ve put a bunch in the end notes incase they’re needed.

Happy reading!

Edit: just updated some spelling and grammar ect

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione went to her dorm and brought her bag down full of all her books and notes, and they commandeered an old dusty classroom, by the kitchens.

"Right we are going to go right back to basics and draw up a schedule. With a solid bass, everything will be much easier." She said, pulling out her books and some parchment.

"Thanks, there is still so much that doesn't make sense." Harry admitted, "It doesn't seem to matter how much I read, somethings just don't make sense, it's as if I'm just missing something." He continued absently picking at steam in Dudley's shirt, "I'm not stupid. I'm really smart. I may not have your 'magic memory,' I'll never be able to quote verbatim from a textbook I have to work to remember things. Just looking at a page, and reading it was not enough. I have to actually understand something and why it was so, to remember it. And there's just much just didn’t make any sense. And I read! All our books, and any other ones that seem related, or any that just seem interesting! I spend more time hidden behind my bed curtains reading by wand light than I do sleeping. But It was as if I'm just not getting something. It was so frustrating Hermione. It's as if it was just out of my reach and I should be getting it. I'm now I'm not stupid but it shouldn't be that hard, but something is just...."

He let out a grunt of frustration and balled up his mostly blank parchment. Tossing it in the air he incinerating it with a jab of his wand.

"I didn't realise Harry," Hermione said concern colouring her tone.
"Having to balance genuinely not understanding completely, (no matter how hard I try, and no
matter how much I read) with making sure grades were not too high while wanting to make sure I
knew it and felt comfortable with it, is hard. Gods, Hermione, it's so hard. I'm so tired. How many
times had I reviewed the essay's over and over again to get them perfect, and then only to have to
scribble down a half-assed answer the second before with Ron, to make it seem like I was average
and not caring... I'm so tired, it's getting too much. I just... why can't I do it? I love learning, but
nothing makes sense. It's like shoving my head against a brick wall, and even if it does make sense I
have to pretend it doesn't because it's not flipping safe. I'm never safe." He finished at a whisper,
head on the desk, breathing hard.

He jumped when Hermione put a hand on his shoulder and he nearly fell out of his chair.

"Sorry, sorry, I forgot!" She exclaimed.

"it- it's fine," he said forcing himself to take a breath, his hands shook.

"Maybe after pretending all this time... maybe I am Stupid...just like they said..." He admitted lowly

"Oh Harry, no" Hermione said, moving slowly so as to telegraph her movement this time, she took
his hand gently in her own, "you're not, I know we all must act like it but now you've said something
so much makes sense, truly you're not. Something odd is going on. I'm sure of it. Maybe if we
review the basics it will help."

He took a shuddering breath.

"there's more to being smart than books and O grades," she said giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

He nodded and took another shuddering breath. She was right, of course, he could beat anyone on
street smarts, people smarts, real-world smarts. Lord knows he had spent enough time when it was
only his understanding of people and being able to predict them that had kept him safe. Or not really
safe but alive. He had spent enough time on the streets out in the real world to know what it was like,
how to survive and what it took. None of his peers could say the same. They wouldn't last a night
out on the streets, it took more than book smarts to manage that, to the Dursley's disappointment. But
understanding the real world didn't necessarily make him the smartest and most intelligent in an
academic setting, just that he was capable of stubbornly not dying yet...

He thunked his head down on the desk in front of him, balling up another bit of parchment that was
his failing plan, or lack thereof.

'Start again with your first-year books,' he thought 'start with the basics get a solid foundation and
work your way up. Frustrating however it may feel, taking the time to start at the start and really
work it out, master the basics was the best, most surefire way to succeed in tackling the more
advanced topics needed to surviving this blasted tournament.'

And anyway Hermione seemed to be on his side now. She said she would help, he wasn't alone, and
Bill and Charlie would reply soon. And hopefully, Sirius, though it had taken ages last time.

Maybe he could stop playing dumb. If Hermione was on his side and not going to get jealous, and
Ron had already abandoned him, what need did he have to play dumb, to blend into a sea of
monotony?

But why did he have a niggling, heavy feeling in his gut that it wasn't safe...

"We'll go all the way back to the start, you'll see Harry," Hermione said cutting off his spiralling
thoughts, "it will make sense. Do you want to revise the basic spells as well for first year onwards as
"Er no? But maybe just a quick review later? I'm good at spells, with physical things, things I can do with my hands. The combination of muscle-memory paired with the verbal component suits me. I had to deliberately hold back so as not to draw attention in my spell casting. It was actually as fun as it was an irritation. It was fun to work out how to get it wrong and get away with the lie. Sometimes I practised minimising the incantation or silent incanting or near-silent incanting, so it that it genuinely took longer."

"Really? That's brilliant, that a useful skill harry. Silent casting is meant to be really advanced, as is minimal casting! We should defiantly keep working on it if you've already started! Will you teach me too?" Hermione clapped her hands in excitement, and continued like a train barreling downhill, "but for now we'll start with the theory. Did you read the Muggleborn guide to basic magical theory?"

"The what?" He said blankly.

"The Muggleborn guide to Magical Theory. It was in the Wizarding introduction book list we got given," she said eyes wide

"What introduction book list...?"

"You weren't given it? But there's so much in there that's so important!" She cried, pulling out books, and then a flourish and blots owl order catalogue.

"No wonder nothings making sense! You can borrow mine, for now, we'll work through it, but you might want your own. I know you like annotating your books, and I don't" she said.

"so there really is something missing? I'm not stupid?" He asked in shocked disbelieve.

"Oh, Merlin no harry!" She said as she pulled out a battered old book list.

"The books on the list covered the basics of magic, your magical core, health - how wizards and witches differ from muggles, meditation and the mind. It also covers the absolute basics in all our subjects here, that most wizard raised would learn as children. There's also a general one that goes into some of the subjects not taught here. The books also go over laws, jobs, services in the magical world, how society works and the government, it even looks at basic cultural history, the religion one was fascination. The social structure and rules are fascinating as well, it's not like the muggle world, it's a like going to a totally different country!"

"I think I better get a copy of these..." He said as it dawned on him, horrifyingly, how much he didn't know, how much had been kept from him.

"How much is your budget?" She said pulling out the catalogue and order forms.

"Erm... I don't actually even know how much is in my vault, just that there's a lot... I think? At least it seemed that way when your short and never even had a single pence in your life... It has to last me through school and until I get a job" He said awkwardly, "I never really got a chance to ask, Hagrid was there, and then Mrs Weasley and then something always came up in that week I was in Diagon in our third year..."

"We'll right an owl to them, surely they'll have a statement or something, then we can figure out what you can afford. Didn't you get a proper introduction though? The Heads of Houses normally visit all the Muggleborns and explain everything" She said getting out a quill and ink, and drafting up the letter for him.
"No... my relatives knew but didn't bother explaining, they didn't want me to go. Hagrid made them, took me to Diagon Ally, we got mobbed. I didn't even know what the 'boy-who-lived' was... then he took me back to the Dursley's and they locked my stuff up."

"Wow Harry. That's really odd, I don't want to jump to conclusions but it looks like you've been deliberately kept in the dark... But we'll sort it out. Look over that will you?" She said, passing over the letter she'd drafted.

Harry read the letter to Gringotts, but hesitated before signing his name, "This is going to sound super stupid, but did the info pack show you how to use quill because I still struggle, I don't want the Goblins to think I didn't make an effort or don't care, just because my writing is atrocious."

"Of course," she said kindly and started showing him how to do it.

And so they studied. Harry practised writing with a quill after Hermione had shown how to hold it properly, and the right angle.

"there's also a trick to how much ink you load it with, and how much you tap off against the ink well" she'd demonstrated, "and how often you need to re-cut them, and at what angle you cut" she'd continued, "there's a book in the list, that talks you through it, with examples and diagrams and exercises. It goes right through normal note taking script, nice cursive scripts, and even various different types of elegant and elaborate calligraphy."

Hermione started working through the basics with Harry and going over the most important aspects of the introduction pack. It was made abundantly clear by dinner time, that there was a lot that Harry didn't know. Not through lack of trying, however, almost as if it had been deliberately kept from him.

"Honestly there should be spares in the Library but I when I went to reference one last year, I'd left mine at home, Madam Pince said they didn't carry them anymore." She said letting out a huff of frustration.

They were so engrossed in studying Hermione's introduction texts that they worked right through lunch and most of dinner.

"Oh gosh," Hermione said looking at the time, we've missed lunch and the start of dinner! How did we not notice?"

"Huh? Oh, don't really notice being hungry anymore..." Harry trailed off

Hermione looked at him in askance, concerned.

"You don't notice the difference when it's a constant, that's all," he mumbled.

"But I thought, because you here, and foods not withheld here like your relatives..." Hermione said confused.

"Not like my relatives no...." said Harry slowly starting to put their books away.

"but... I'm sensing a but here..."

Harry sighed, "I don't want to complain or anything, it's not like I'm not getting three meals a day. Really I'm grateful, but between exercising and using magic all day, and food doing weird things in the great hall all the time. I spend more time hungry than not. I'm just tired all the time, it's sometimes hard to even think straight, I can't seem to concentrate on it, it slips away before I can even try and do something about it. I really just want some red meat or some greens, or some chocolate especially..."
after quidditch practices but it never seems to be an option. There just never seems to be enough to go round. But it's fine don't worry doubt it. It's nothing"

"Harry that doesn't sound fine. Why don't you just put more on your plate though? There's always plenty of food on the tables. Ron certainly eats enough for about 4 people. And I've been raging at you for years to eat more."

"I can't"

"What?"

"Remember back in our first year when I kept trying to have seconds or to have dessert? And it would vanish" he asked.

"That sounds... worrying Harry but I can't remem..." she trailed off and pinched her nose as if she had a headache.

"You okay?" Harry asked

"Yeah I just got a headache suddenly but it seems to have passed. What were you saying?"

"Hermione, are you okay? We were just talking about... you don't remember?" Harry said fear sparking in his gut.

"Of course, I think so... what were you saying?"

"I was talking about being hungry a lot, even here and food in the great hall acting weird. But just for me." Harry said again frowning at her in concern.

"Odd I could have sworn it had stopped... I can almost.. but I don't." She rubbed her eyes, wincing

"are you okay?"

"It's just a bit hard to focus, it's just slipping..." She trailed off, "say it again."

"I think someone's trying to manipulate what I can eat to keep me weak and unhealthy, to keep my pliable." He said flatly, trying and failing to keep the fear out of his voice.

"First year!" She said having a moment of clarity.

"Yeah, it started in our first year. I was skinny and starved when I got to Hogwarts. I was so excited about being able to have meals like the real kids and to have sweets but they made me sick. Even on the train,"

"Really? She cut in, "you never said-"

" Of course I didn't tell anyone, I wanted to be normal"

"Oh, Harry."

"I wasn't used to eating much so I was sick after the feast and realised I couldn't eat much or it made me sick. McGonagall noticed-"

"Professor McGonagall harry"

"No Hermione, Professor is a term of respect, and respect is earned, not blindly given. She hasn't
earned it. Yes, she's smart and isn't a bad teacher compared to some, but she's let me down, time and time again. I asked her for help this morning she turned me away. Didn't even really listen. It's not the first time."

"but-" Hermione cut herself off, "it goes against everything I was taught, but I get I can understand where you're coming from."

"that's all I can ask, anyway she dragged me to Pomfrey, who muttered about having avoided this if I'd just come for the first year Muggleborn check in like he was meant too."

"We all got them," Hermione cut in, "we needed shots and medical history for future reference, did you not get one?"

"No, hadn't even heard about it and I said that so, I tried to ask McGonagall but she had left. So Pomfrey just said basically what you just said. She told me to come back on the weekend for it, and that it was weird that I'd missed out. She swishing her wand in a complicated pattern and then glared at it, mumbling, 'that man, I'll hang him by his whiskers' and something else I couldn't make out." Harry continued, "She gave me a potion, green and brown one, and said, 'here, take one teaspoon before every meal, it will help you eat again, its a nutrient potion too. Never thought I'd see the day, actually, need it here. It was designed for treating famine in third world countries... She said she'd talk to the elves for me, and to come back on Sunday for your shots and a proper check up."

"That doesn't sound too bad" Hermione commented

"It got worse." He said bluntly, "I'd been dreading it, I hate doctors, I was terrified that she would see..." He trailed off, "that she'd know about the Dursley's, people finding out just brought trouble before. But when I did go, she had no recollection of my visit at all. Told me to stop wasting her time, when I was clearly fine. I even asked about my shots, but she dismissed me. It did sew a seed of doubt though. Why didn't she remember it."

"Harry, that's...."

"mmhm," he agreed, "I finished the potion it helped loads. I noticed there was less put on my plate, and less rich foods around me, having been to see her. More bland ones, it helped, I wasn't bringing it back up as often as I had at the start. She said to have snacks in-between classes, nuts and fruit and things to make up for the tiny meals. I didn't notice at first but whenever I took something from the table for later and put it in my bag, it was never there when I went back for it. It kept vanishing."

"And the food kept vanishing off your plate! When you then tried to have seconds in the hall, to make up for it" Hermione said remembering.

"Yeah, not straight away but yeah. I'd almost managed to work my way up to managing all of my small meals in the hall, sometime around Christmas. I'd finally started putting on some weight. I was so pleased to finally have some padding on my bones, my stomach wasn't even that sunken anymore. It wasn't a lot but it helped. I was still hungry a lot though. So I figured if I couldn't eat between meals as she'd said, I could have seconds. I'd just have to learn to eat more in one go as everyone else did. But then the food started vanishing from my plate. I could put vegetables and meats and a small helping of food on my plate the first time, but never much or it would vanish, and only if I took the healthier options. But as soon as I went for seconds or deserts, it would vanish. I even asked Ron to put some on my plate, in case it was just me. But it vanished when I tried taking some from Ron's plate it vanished halfway to my mouth. I even plucked up the courage to ask McGonagall about it, but she got an odd look in her eye and said not to be silly."

"I really thought it had stopped..." She trailed off looking a bit dazed.
"Please don't forget again!" He pleaded taking her hands and looking at her straight in the eye, "please, I don't want to keep struggling on my own, please I need you in my corner!"

"I... I'm scared Harry, somethings going on. Somethings making me disregard it. Keep talking." Her voice shook.

"Well it didn't stop, I just learnt not to ask for more than it lets me. I'm used to being hungry all the time. Its all I've ever known. It was so novel that first train ride, to be able to have sweets and chocolate. It was so nice, and it tastes so good Hermione, I finally understood why Dudley liked it! And I'd been so pleased to finally manage to get some padding on my bones. I was still skinny as hell but was finally filling out a bit, almost normal looking. But I figured it's just how it is 'cause I'm a freak. Freaks don't get to eat, we don't get nice things. It won't even let me have gravy or anything like that, let alone treacle tart. It smells so good, I want to try it one day Hermione. It's as if someones keeping me on Dudley's fancy weight loss diet."

"That's ridiculous Harry! You're so skinny, the last thing you need is a weight loss diet. And you're not a freak!"

"I know. Gods I'm so boney I hate it, Hermione I want to be normal! I hate being so skinny! I'm cold all the time, and everything hurts when I fall over, there's no padding, I break at the drop of a hat and snap things. I've actually been trying to gain some weight, but between the tables here and the Dursley's I'm doomed to be a short skinny shit forever!"

"Oh Harry," she moaned out, "That is very odd harry, and very worrying. Why didn't I notice before"  

"Why didn't we notice? We would have picked away at it as we did with The Stone. It's not like us. How did we not notice? Someone controlling you like that, keeping you hungry all the time, like your relatives... how did no-one notice."

"I've always been hungry, never been able to have a proper meal in my life... its nothing special. And it's not like the Dursley's, I got 3 meals a day. Mostly."

It's not like the Dursley's I'm not being starved, I get three meals a day, but its never enough. I'm always hungry and also trying to recover from whatever injury I have, or got over the summer of being starved. It's just. Don't worry about it, forget I said anything."

"That's not okay, now I think about it, yes you are fed, but now I think about it, it was never very much, and never overly nutritious, tiny portions and never any red meat, few green vegetables, like you said, and never any sweets, or even that wide a range of food. I never really noticed before. How I missed it. I don't know. It is it's really odd, and we never noticed, we let it slip aside, that's weird!"

"I don't know, every time I mentioned it people seemed to just forget. Like Pomfrey with the health check, she'd been muttering about whiskers or something but I don't know." Harry replied

"Harry you don't think..." She trailed off

Harry shrugged, wondering if she meant Dumbledore, but not wanting to say it, he had learnt that the walls had ears. How else would anyone know he had finally been starting to get to a healthy weight back in our first year. He'd been talking about it in front of the Fat Lady's portrait, and how nice it was to be able to have as much chocolate as he wanted. How he was sure if he wasn't careful he'd end up as big as a house. He'd been joking of course, but maybe the portraits had heard and told Dumbledore, or maybe it was McGonagall.
A sick feeling of dread coiled in his gut.

"Your right I guess, but every time I try and sort it, it slips away. It's made me really think that... but maybe... maybe something made us" he paused, thinking, "made us... not forget, like with Lockheart, but more make us forget it was important. Maybe it was made to slip our mind, and to be picked back our minds. It's not as if we didn't have more important things to do, like the stone, the basilisk."

"Why bother though, who is going to that much to control you through what you eat. Its a bit extreme, why bother, " Hermione asked thinking aloud, "and who..."

"We need to go-" Harry said suddenly cutting her off and looking around

"What?" Hermione said surprised.

"We've been alone all day, someone might come looking, or be keeping tabs on us, there are no portraits in this room, but I don't think it's safe to talk here..."

"Harry that's a bit.."

"It's not paranoia if someone really is out to get you..." He said flatly packing their books and things away, "please Hermione."

"Of course" she acquiesced after a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:
Child abuse
Body image issues
Weight issues
Food
Grownups being controlling manipulative assholes and neglectfully oblivious.

I worked really hard on this chapter I hope you liked it. I have another one, that I'll post tonight, I need to spell check it again before that one goes up.
I know it may seem odd or extreme but it's necessary and will may sense later. I wanted to look at the abuse of, and manipulation of Harry from a slightly different direction from what's normally done in these things.

Yes Minerva is not the best teacher in this one, though it will be looked at again later. (Sorry Minerva lovers, I like her too, but this story needed less adults around able to help. It will be talked about later. She may get redeemed later but no promises.) A lot of grownups in a position of power over him have been outright neglectful, or are being maliciously controlling. I know it might seem extreme, definitely more so that in cannon, but that's the way the cookie's crumbling at the moment.

Also I'm not body shaming, Harrys just bitter and angry and venting, when he makes
those comments.

Also fun fact:
There is a trainee service dog in the waiting room of my Dr’s office as I write this. He's adorable and also hilarious. He's not terribly impressed at being left in the foyer while his human is with the doctor. I'm trying desperately not to laugh at his antics. It's not very conductive to writing 'anxious-mess/angry!Harry scenes. But gods it's put a smile on my face :)
Happy Reading people.
The House Elves

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione visit the House Elves, and try and sort out what's going on

Chapter Notes

Edited: just to update spelling and grammar ect.
I had this bit all sorted, it had taken me a whole two days to get this chapter right, without being too obvious or villainizing the wrong characters. I'd finished it and was going to post it at lunch yesterday, and then I had an idea! So then I had to re-work the whole thing!
Happy Reading

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The house elves might know about it... if somethings going on," Hermione said later as they were catching the end of dinner in the hall.

"Huh?"

She pointed to his plate and surreptitiously cast a charm around them, to stop eavesdroppers.

"Let's go to the kitchen and ask the elves. If we can't ask witches and wizards, maybe we can ask elves, they have different magic from us, just look at Dobby."

"Thought you didn't like house elves."

"Oh I don't like it when they're badly treated, used and abused. I think they're brilliant, but it's okay here, I've gone and talked to them. Some, like Dobby, are treated like slaves. I want to change the laws one day so they're treated better. I'd try and free them all. Slavery is wrong, they need our magic to survive, that's why they bond, it's a symbiotic relationship. Symbiotic is when-"

"I know what that means Hermione," Harry said gently.

"Oh sorry, Harry I-"

"It's fine, you're used to me playing stupid.

She nodded but continued, "Anyway they bond to wizards and get magic from them, and in return, they do cooling and cleaning and things, they have a really fascinating culture, and do genuinely enjoy it. But there is a lot of room for abuse of the system, that's what S.P.E.W is going to work to change. But they do the cooking and cleaning and send the food to the tables. Let's go to the kitchens we'll talk to the elves, maybe they know something."

"Okay, maybe I can get more than a measly bowl of rice while we're at it."
Hermione led the way down to the kitchen and showed him how to tickle the pear to get in. He'd never been to the kitchens before. Immediately many heads turned to look at them and froze in motion. It was like being surrounded by hundreds of Dobby statues.

"Is it always like this...?" Harry murmured to Hermione

"No..." She said concern colouring her tone.

"You is not being here sir!" A young elf said, coming barreling towards them.

"Huh?" Harry said.

"You is not meant to be here. We is not allowed to be helping you, sir," the elf said grabbing his neighbour's saucepan and trying to hit himself over the head with it.

"Stop that!" Harry said grabbing the pot.

The elf started wailing and was dragged away by another.

"What can Tippy be doing for young Sir and Miss?" An older house elf wheezed in a high pitched squeak. She had tennis-ball like pale blue eyes, long ears with tufts of white poking out and was wearing a neatly pressed tea towel with the Hogwarts crest on it.

"Hello Tippy, we wanted to talk to one of you, as something strange is happening to Harry at the table... I think....he's not being able to eat enough." Hermione trailed bending down to talk at their level.

Tippy wrung her hands together, her big eyes welling, "Tippy can't! Sir and miss, we is not allowed. You should not be being here Harry Potter sir." She yanked on her batlike ears, "Tippy wants to be feeding Mr Harry Potter up miss, you is much too thin," she said poking Harry's boney hip accusingly, "but we is not being allowed." She sniffed

"Why not?" He asked.

She bit her lip and shook her head.

"You were ordered to and you can't tell me anything?" He asked recognising the behaviour from Dobby, his heart sinking.

"Tippy can't sir." Tippy almost wailed tugging painfully at her ears.

"Stop! Please don't hurt yourself," Harry cried bending down and gently taking her hands, "it's not your fault. You have your orders, it's not your fault, I'm not mad. I understand. I thought you said it was okay here, that they were not miss treated?" He asked turning to Hermione.

"I thought it was. But I guess they're bound to the will of their master whether they like it or not, we'll just have to make a system that allows them to have their own free will too. And to protect them from needing to self punish. We'll work on it harry." Hermione replied somewhat forlornly.

Tippy tugged one of her hands frees and tapped a finger against his knuckles thoughtfully.

"Tippy can't sir..." She said carefully, no longer crying, "Tippy wants to sir. We" she gesticulated widely around the room, "is wanting to help yous very much, but we is not allowed, sir." She sniffed again, blew her nose on her Tea Towel and vanished the mess, before looking at him, her teary eyes peering at him with sudden seriousness, "Tippy can't... Tippy can't be helping Mr Harry
"But maybe someone else could!" Hermione exclaimed picking up on what the elf was not saying.

Tippy beaming again, but said "Tippy can't say, miss, Tippy can neither confirm or deny miss" while tilting her head down in an ever so slight nod, before she pointed to the back of the kitchens.

"Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter!"

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as a squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff and would have knocked him backwards if not for Hermione catching him.

"D-Dobby?" Harry gasped and the elf hugged him so tightly he thought he heard ribs creak.

"It is Dobby, sir, it is!" squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel. "Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!"

"I didn't realise you were here Dobby, or I would have come sooner," he assured.

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of happiness.

"You is too kind sir,"

He looked almost exactly as Harry remembered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the bat-like ears, the long fingers and feet - all except the clothes, which were very different.

He was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cosy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children's soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what're you doing here?" Harry said in amazement.

"Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!" Dobby squealed excitedly. "Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!"

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, and he seized Harry's hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them, was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed. "Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky had not taken care of her clothes at all.
"Hello, Winky," said Hermione.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilt out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. "Winky, don't cry, please don't..."

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over Winky's sobs. "Er - yes please, but Tippy said the elves here weren't allowed to feed me," said Harry.

Dobby tugged on his lip, "technically Dobby is being paid to work at Hogwarts now but he is not bonded to a master, so he could be breaking the rules a bit sir if he wanted too..." He shuffled his feet.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked distracting Dobby as he served them tea.

"Only a week. Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily.

"Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very difficult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed -"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow.

"Dobby has travelled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing.

Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they said, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid. Harry Potter... Dobby likes being free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite increase in the volume of crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed to sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay face-down on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea. Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! Hogwarts! So Dobby and Winky
came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better."

"Good on you Dobby! I meant to ask you Dobby, Hermione told me about how house elves need to bond to someone in order to keep their magic, I was wondering if you're doing okay? Not being bound, it's not killing you?"

"Dobby is doing well Mr harry potter sir, Dobby will be needing to bond eventually but he is doing okay at Hogywarts, he is, it has lots of magic it has, Hogywarts is liking Dobby she is, she be helping me in the meantimes."

"I'm very glad Dobby I was worried," Harry said, bracing himself as Dobby flung himself at his middle and hugged him tightly again.

"Dobby could tell you about why Mr Potter sir is not being fed, but not heres, it is not being safe. There is ears"

"What, what are you...?" He trailed off, his head starting to hurt, "oh, I remember, oh ouch."
He moaned, "it's going again... don't... stop, please!"

"don't fight it Harry Potter sir. It's safer to forget," Dobby squeaked, patting his elbow.

"I can't it's important! I feel it's important I can't... can't figure it out."

His mind started to get a bit fuzzy... his head ached. What had he been saying... he tried to remember and falls with the pain of it.

"Trust Dobby Mr Potter sir. It's safer to forget sir. Trust Dobby to remember it for you's. Later Harry Potter sir Dobby will tell you."

"Gods it hurts! okay, Dobby" Harry all but sobbed.

He lets go, the pain builds then fades as if it had never been, "What am I doing here... What were you saying, Hermione?"

"Hmm?" Looking confused for a moment, "Oh we were visiting Dobby" she said, "and Winky."

"Ah of course," he said a little confused but dismissing it.

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying you, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but she sat up glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so
low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"

"We is going now Harry Potter sir," Dobby said suddenly looking shifty.

"Why?" He asked suspiciously, "didn't we just get here?"

"No sir, we is going now sir, trust Dobby sir!"

His wording struck Harry as important, for some reason. He couldn't work out the significance, however.

"You's is going young sir and miss," Tippy came back, and helped Dobby herd the young Witch and Wizard towards the door. She paused when they were at the closed portrait hole, "you is kind sir, we is not forgetting it."

Harry frowned, feeling a bit hazy but said, "I don't... I'm not sure...." He winced, "But either way you deserve kindness and decency. We are not so different you and I."

The old elf beckoned Harry down to her level. He bent down and she gripped his ear in a firm bit gent grip and whispered "if Tippy was to be telling... Which Tippy is not!" She looked sternly at him and he nodded somewhat indulgently.

"Then Tippy would be saying young master Harry Potter," she looked resolutely at Dobby as she said that, despite still gripping Harry's ear, "Harry Potter is needing his own house elf. To be feeding him up and looking after him. If Tippy was telling, which Tippy is not..." She turned her head back to Harry and glared when he nodded earnestly, "then Tippy could be telling (but Tippy is not) that all the elves in Tea Towels is bonded. We is bonded to Hogywarts though Professor Whiskers sir. Well most of us. But Tippy cannot be telling sir. Cannot being telling Mr Harry Potter sir, that an elf bounded to him, could be helping him, sir, get around Professor Whiskers bad words sir. Tippy not being telling though, Tippy is a good elf," she continued slowly, in case he was a bit slow to catch on, still looking resolutely at Dobby. Dobby nodded hard, his bat-like ears flapping. Tippy turned back to Harry and raised a wizened eyebrow.

Thankfully Harry wasn't slow, 'the elves of Hogwarts couldn't help, the ones that were bound to Whiskers,' he thought, nodding at her in silent acknowledgement of what she was saying. 'He needed the help of his own elf to avoid 'whiskers' manipulations, as only an elf could help against other elves who were being forced to comply. But all but Dobby and Winky were bound. And the Hogwarts elves could not talk to him, but could talk to other elves.'

"Thank you Tippy."

"You is not thanking Tippy, Sir and Miss, Tippy is be saying nothing, to you sir," the elf said sternly before finally letting go of his ear and adding, "Tippy is very sorry that we is not being able to help you. We is very sorry."

"Its okay Tippy I understand. I'm sorry your orders disagree with your desires and morals, it not fair on you. One last thing Tippy, could you say where could I find a house elf and how to bond with one?" Harry asked

"Winky needs a family Harry Potter sir," a voice squeaked on his left.

"Dobby?"

"No sir, Dobby is sorry sir, but Dobby likes being free too much sir. Dobby could work for Harry Potter sir, but he does not want to bond yet sir, so he could not keep Harry Potter sir safe, but Winky
could sir. But not here sir, ears sir," he said grabbing his hand and pulling him out of the kitchens, with a worried and concerned Hermione behind them.

Chapter End Notes

It's kinda fun writing House Elf speech. Please don't be disheartened by the Elves inability to help Harry. I'm not bashing on them. Everything happens for a reason ;P

Hope you enjoyed it! It took ages to get it just so! Let me know what you think.
Dobby stopped just at the end of the hallway and pulled them aside behind a pastry.

"You is going to the seventh floor Harry Potter Sir. To the Come and Go Room, sir, or the Room of Requirement!"

"Why? What is it?" said Harry curiously.

"Because it is a room that a person can only enter," said Dobby seriously, "when they have real need of it. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker’s needs. Dobby has used it, sir," said the elf, dropping his voice and looking guilty, "when Winky has been very drunk. We is hiding her in the Room of Requirement and we is founding antidotes to Butterbeer there, and a nice elf-sized bed for while she is sleeping it off, sir. . . . And Dobby knows Mr Filch has found extra cleaning materials there when he has run short, sir. It is the most amazing room, sir. We be safe there sir."

"How many people know about it?" said Harry.

"Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir."

"Brilliant where is it on the Seventh floor?" Harry asked.

"Its the blank wall opposite the tapestry of the dancing trolls-"

"The one with Barnibus the Barmey teaching them Ballet?" Asked Hermione.

Dobby nodded. Walk past three times thinking of a safe place, and go through the door that appears. We is talking there sir, don't be seen." The elf finished with a pop.
"Come on," Harry said, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak from his pocket.

"When did you start carrying that everywhere?" Hermione said checking it covered both their feet.

"After the goblet, figured it may be safer," Harry said and they left the tapestry and went up to the seventh floor.

"His one?" Harry asked quietly, after making sure the corridor was empty.

Hermione nodded, "I think so."

They were interrupted by a pop, and they both jumped as Dobby appeared.

"Harry Potter sir?" He whispered.

Harry poked his toe out from under the cloak and wiggled it while a moth-eaten troll paused in his relentless clubbing of the would-be ballet teacher to watch.

Dobby giggled, nodded and beckoned them to follow him, as he walked back and forth turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank stretch of wall, then at the man-size vase on its other side.

A small highly polished door had appeared in the wall. Harry and Hermione looked at it slightly wary. Dobby seized the brass handle, pulled open the door and went through it, beckoned them to follow. When they approached, it wiggled, grew a bit taller so as to let them in, before swinging shut behind them.

It was a small and cozy room, lit with flickering torches like those that illuminated the dungeons eight floors below. There was a large fire on one side, crackling merrily surrounded by three armchairs; two wizard sized ones, and an elf sized one for Dobby.

The walls were lined with wooden bookcases, and instead of chairs, there were a few large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far the adjacent wall carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a small Foe-Glass.

"These will be good for studying on," Harry said, enthusiastically, prodding one of the cushions with his foot, "we can spread our books out properly instead of cramming them all onto a small table.

"And just look at these books!" said Hermione excitedly, running a finger along the spines of the large leather-bound tomes. "A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions... The Dark Arts Outsmarted... Self-Defensive Spellwork... Advanced Defence Against the Dark arts... Healer's Helpmate...wow...” She looked around at Harry, her face glowing, “Harry, this is wonderful, there’s everything we need here!”

"A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration... Advanced Potion-Making..." Harry read out, "Animagus and Metamorphmagus an introduction...Protection Charm Your Mind: A Practical Guide to Counter Legilimensy oh and some on the Triwizard history as well, look! Triwizard Tragedies, oh and the complete standard book of spells set, and all of the Muggleborn introduction books! Everything we need for both the basics and to help us work on the more advanced things!"

"Wow, Guide to Advanced Occlumency, just what I was struggling to find earlier...The decline of Pagan Magic could be interesting, Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes, maybe I may actually stand a chance in this thing! Magical Mediterranean Water-Plants and Their Properties, don't know how that will help but you never know, Where There's a Wand, There's a Way, definitely! And A Legal Compendium. This thing may actually be survivable with all of these books! Look..."
Curses and Counter-Curses, I wanted to get that one on my first trip to Diagon Ally!" Harry exclaimed, pulling it off the shelf, "Hagrid wouldn't let me,"

"Oh Harry, this is brilliant, we stand a chance with all of this! Look Powers You Never Knew You Had and What To Do With Them Now You've Wised Up... maybe that could have something useful." Hermione exclaimed.

"Harry Potter sir," cut in Dobby beckoning, "its time for you to remember."

"Dobby?" Harry asked going over and sitting in one of the squashy armchairs.

"We is safe from eyes and ears Harry Potter sir. Bad things are happening sir, Dobby only just found out sir. People plotting no good things for Harry Potter sir. They be ordering the house elves to do things, sir. Things that won't help you, sir."

"Dobby I don't..." He trailed off his head starting to ache.

"We have been ordered not to tell you, not to help you, sir, Hogywarts elves are devastated, it goes against everything we believe but we is ordered. We have to obey. But if you had your own elf, they would be bonded to you sir and could help you, sir. You is needing it, sir. And we is needing a new master to sir!" Dobby babbled.

"Dobby..." Hermione started, "are you saying, someone, is ordering you all around, to use you for the plots to control and hurt Harry?"

"And the only way you can help get around it is if, I have my own bonded elf?" Harry asked.

Dobby nodded miserably.

"Do you want or need to bond Dobby? I would bond with you if you need it? If you wanted it. You are the first elf I ever met and you are my friend." Harry said earnestly, "if you think its what's necessary I believe you."

Dobby let out a wail, "Harry Potter sir, is too kind, too kind to poor Dobby! But Dobby can't sir, Dobby wants too, but Dobby can't sir, he is not ready."

"That's okay Dobby, I understand, your last master was horrible, I understand wanting to be free and enjoy it as long as you can. But Dobby if you need ever decide that's what you want, or need, I promise to treat you fairly and kindly and to let you go whenever you want, just say the word, your my friend first Dobby."

Dobby flung himself at Harry's knees and sobbed, mumbling incoherently.

"Harry just pet him on the back and water for it to pass.

"One day Harry Potter sir, Dobby would love to be your Elf sir, but Dobby is not ready. But sir..." He trailed off.

"What is it Dobby?" Asked Hermione kindly.

"Harry Potter needs and elf sir, and Winky needs a family, she won't bond to Hogywarts as she wants a family again, to look after." Dobby said twisting his fingers, "Winky needs help, sir. She is not coping with being free."

"If that's what she wants Dobby, then of course. I want you lot happy."
"but it’s complicated sir. She still has to keep promises and ties to how old master, he didn't free her properly, just mostly sir. I was freed properly from my old master, but she wasn't she was freed, with the intent for her to still be bound to keep his secrets, so she can’t give it up but she needs a new master so could you take her and look after her and let her look after you but let her keep her old secrets sir" Dobby said all at once, looking very worried.

"That doesn't sound fair on her, but of course she can keep her old masters' secrets, their not my business," Harry said.

Dobby beamed at him, but then said, "but sir.. Dobby isn't sure sir, but what if they be hurting Harry Potter sir?"

"Well what if its like what Tippy said, maybe she could tell you, or tell you what you need to keep me safe, (I could employ you Dobby if you wanted me. Then you could work for me if you wanted, I'd love to have you, and you could still be free, like you deserve!) And then I wouldn't be at risk from her secrets, and she could still keep them."

"Really Harry Potter sir! You would trust Dobby with that?" Dobby asked wide eyes.

"Of course, You’ve proved time over that you can keep me safe even if you can’t tell me what it is. Admittedly it hurt sometimes, but you tried so hard, with the constraints you had, and this time you'll be able to explain why a bit, just promise not to try and send me home. I don't have one."

"Dobby will sir! Dobby will!" He squeaked, his big eyes pooling, "Dobby is getting Winky, sir!"

"I think you did a very nice thing, Harry," Hermione said

"I like Dobby, and if Winky needs a master to be healthy, and I can do that and make sure she's not being abused I will," Harry said as Dobby popped into the room with a very drunk and teary Winky.

"Winky sir!" Dobby said.

"Winky do you want another family?" He asked, nearing on the floor next to her.

She hiccuped, "Winky is a discharged elf. My poor Mr Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her... oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" She started sobbing again in a ball on the floor.

Hermione's eyes welled and Harry patted her on the knee and said to Winky, "I'm sorry this has happened to you Winky, you didn't deserve it. And while I don't know the whole situation, I don't think you deserved dismissal as you were obviously a dedicated and good House-elf. But he did free you, and while he may still need you, you have been dismissed. It is harsh but it's the truth. I'm sorry about it, but while I cannot help you get your job back I can offer you another one. Dobby tells me you want a family, that's why you won't work for Hogwarts, you want to look after someone. As you did with Crouch. I can offer you a safe place to work, someone to look after, and I won't treat you badly, I promise. If you will have me, I would bond with you Winky." He said earnestly.

Winky stopped sobbing, and looked up, "you is wanting Winky?" She hiccuped, "even though Winky is a bad elf?"

"I don't think you're a bad elf, and I do want you if you'll have me?" He said biting his lip.

She hiccuped, "I is wanting a family, but I is having one, but they is not wanting Winky," she let out a sob, "they is not coming back for Winky is they?" She asked.
"I don't think so no, but I know what that's like, my family don't want me either." He said shakily.

"You is needing Winky, sir?" She asked seeming a little less distraught.

He hesitated, but the desperate look in her eyes made him tell the truth, "yes Winky I need you. I don't like admitting my weaknesses, but I do need you Winky, I need the help only a house elf can provide, and I'm not remembering things, people are trying to kill me and make my life difficult and I'm not safe, and its scary and I desperately need someone on my side to help me. I'm sorry I'm just one person, not a big happy family like you deserve, and I'm sorry I have so many problems and issues, but I really need your help if you'll have me. You to Dobby, if you want to work for me, I would be honoured to have you. Both of you." He finished his breath coming in short gasps.

Winky put her hands on his knees and looked him in the eye sternly, "you is taking a deep breath Young Master Harry sir, you is having Winky now. You is not needing to panic."

He let out a shuddering breath, "thank you, thank you."

Hermione slipped from her chair and cautiously took his hand. When he didn't jump, startled, she squeezed it reassuringly, "you not alone, Harry, you have us, me and Winky and--"

"-Dobby too sir! Dobby will work for you, sir!" Dobby squeaked jumping up and down.

"Thanks, guys i... that means a lot, I don't think I can do it on my own," Harry said.

"Winky must be saying sir, Winky... Winky kept secrets for her old master, Winky is freed, but Winky is still bound to keep them, and Winky knows things, sir, Winky knows they is dangerous secrets, but Winky can't tell though." Her eyes filled and she went to bash her head on the wall, but he grabbed her.

"No! You will not punish yourself, you will not hurt yourself. My elves do not self punish, and they do not harm themselves, or each other in self-punishment!" He added remembering how devious Dobby could be if he wanted to, "Your important, you are worth so much, you are worth being looked after and looking after yourself. Which means getting enough sleep, getting enough food and nourishment as well, as per your needs, I don't know that much about House-elves yet, but you will treat yourself well, it's important to me. So no punishment. If you really think you need punishment, come to me, we can talk about it, and work out something fair that we both agree on."

Their eyes welled and he was almost knocked over under the force of two House-elves hugging the life out of him.

"Winky is bound by Old Masters' promises and bound despite being free. Old Master didn't do it properly just the cloths with the intent of Winky being bound to keep his secrets still. It can't be broken yet, it takes a year to wear off sometimes longer depending on things, or if... if he dies" she let out another sob, "They is having bad things planned, but Winky can't warn you, sir!"

"Can you tell Dobby? You old master didn't tell you to keep it from House-elves, did he? Can you tell Dobby how to help keep me safe from whatever Crouch is plotting?" Harry asked carefully.

"Winky tipped her head to the side, "Winky things so... if Dobby promised not to tell, we is getting around it maybes."

"That sound like a plan. What do you think?" He asked looking from Dobby to Winky who eyed each other.

"Dobby is working for Mr Harry Potter sir, now." Dobby squeaked.
"How much is the headmaster paying you Dobby, we should sit down and work out an agreement," Harry said.

"Later sir," Dobby said as Winky spoke up.

"Winky is bonding with you Young master Harry, Winky will be having you if you will be having her." She squeaked.

"I will-" he started intending on asking how one bonded to a House-elf when a wave of magic travelled up winks hand and into his own.

"Oh!" He said understanding. "oh."

Her magic was warm, like what he imagined a loving hug would be like, and he thought that even if they were not near each other he would always be distantly aware of where she was vaguely in the back of his awareness.

"Young master Harry sir!" Winky exclaimed eyes wide! "You is not well! And there is so much Winky can now be telling you! Winky be keeping you safe from other elf magic!" She clicked her fingers and he felt something tingling wash over him. He shuddered, it was like water being blown off him.

"You is needing to remember now Harry Potter sir," Dobby added in, "in the kitchens you are forgetting, Dobby promised he would remember for you, and remind you Harry Potter sir!"

Harry and Hermione winced, couching their heads suddenly, their minds foggy.

"Winky is doing it, Young Master Harry sir, she being making you remember and it not hurt sir" she squeaked.

He winched at the pitch, "Hermione to please, Hermione too."

Winky touched a finger to Harry's head, and Harry felt something funny in his mind. Like something was putting a sieve through his thoughts it to filter out the silt. Some of the fog was clearing. He remembers, it hurts. Winked swayed briefly.

He remembered the food disappearing, trying to ask about it, house elves crying as they had to turn him away, sobbing apologies. He remembered trying to talk about it, but it was slipping away, he remembered forgetting in the kitchens earlier that day.

"Young master remembers now. Yous sleep now, sir"

Gods, he's tired.

"You is safe now, Winky be looking after you." She squeaked, as she and Dobby levitated them onto beds that hadn't been there a moment ago.

he mumbling out a thank you, Winky patted his hand, before he couldn't stay awake any longer. The last thing he remembered before he fell asleep was, 'Thanks Hogwarts,' and a warm feeling in return.

Chapter End Notes
For those of you who reviewed, thank you, I really appreciate it.

Some Trigger Warnings:
More talk of adults being irresponsible asses. (Well its implied that they are anyway)
House-elf self-punishment
House-elf masters who are ass's (controlling)
Lack of self worth (everone)
Brief mention of food being withheld
Harry woke to soft, if not high pitched voices.

"Tippy is so grateful to Dobby and Winky! Tippy and all the other elves were starting to disappear that we would never be able to help Young Master Harry Potter. Not with Whiskers forbidding it so, and ordering such horrid things. Whiskers is a bad, bad man."

"You should not be insulting your master, Tippy!" Winky squeaked.

"Whiskers doesn't care what we call him, as long as we is obeying and keeping up his image of kindly grandfather!"

Winky made a huffing noise, and Tippy continued, "Whiskers it telling us back in first-year after Madam Poppy be telling us what to feed young master. She is saying, small bland meals, only little bits, as he's been sick for so long, slowly build him up. But then Whiskers finds out and says, no! Just small bland meals, he is to be hungry and weak, and not healthy. No sweets, nothing not strictly lean and healthy, nothing fatty or with sugar, no desert not even fruit salad for dessert, no juice, no drinks other than water. He needs Harry Potter weak and pliable!" Tippy let out a sob, "and we is realising Hogwyarts is not what it once was! It is not so much the safe Haven for House-elves that Mistress Helga made it to be!"

"Don't worry, I hated it too, it was like being back at the Dursleys except at least here I got fed a bit. I don't blame you though. I'd free you all, and take you on myself if I could," Harry croaked sitting
up, "lots of dangerous things are going on here, in the supposedly safest place in Brittain. He's meant to be the greatest wizard alive, but he'd done some questionable things, and by the sounds of it my suspicion of him not having my best interests at heart seem to be true. I'm mad, or I will be when I'm not so tired, but not at you"

Tippy squeaked and made to pop out but Harry said, "wait, please wait!"

Tippy looked at him, her eyes narrowed despite their wetness.

"I wanted to thank you, all of you, for doing your best, and to remind you it's not your fault, none of you." He said fervently.

Tippy's eyes grew as wide as saucers and she popped away.

"Did I offend her?" He asked

"No sir," Dobby said, climbing up onto the end of Harry's bed, "we is getting overwhelmed by wizard kindness some times sir, we is not used to it, sir. She is pleased but overwhelmed, so she is going back to work, sir."

"What time is it anyway?" He asked as Hermione stretched in the bed next to him and rolled over, pulling her pillow over her head.

"Nearly curfew sir, but you is having time." Winky said, "and don't you worry, young Master Harry Potter sir, we is looking after you now. You is not being hungry or starved again sir."

He slumped in relief, "thank you... just... Thank you. And you know you can just call me Harry right?" He said

"No sir, we can't sir." Winky said as if it were obviouse, shaking her head and looking horrified.

"Why?" He asked incredulously, "it's my name. If we are bonded we're kinda like family right? Or at least friends. I'd like to consider you friends, even if I don't know you that well yet Winky."

"Winky wants family too sir, but it's not right sir. You is kind, you is family, but you is still Young Master Harry sir." Winky said sternly.

"Erm if that's what you want, okay," he said not quite understanding but willing to go with it. Winky nodded.

"Right, Now what?" He asked.

"Now you be clothing Winky sir, with a uniform sir." She said.

"Can you dress like the Hogwarts elves? So no-one knows your not working for Hogwarts, I don't want anyone knowing you work for me. Not because I'm ashamed but I don't want to upset anyone until I know the lay of the land, so to say."

Winky nodded thoughtfully, "Winky is just not telling Whiskers we is finding other work, sir. I is asking Tippy for Hogwarts Tea Towel, sir." She popped away and reappeared a moment later in a neatly pressed Hogwarts tea bowl. She looked much happier and healthier already.

"Anything else we need to do to bond or is that it?"

"Nothing, sir, that's it. Though your magic feels funny sir, not moving right. Winky be thinking on
"What?!" He exclaimed.

"Winky be thinking on it young master, Winky thinks on it and get back to you sir," she popped away.

"Dobby? What about you?" He asked after a long moment.

"Dobby is getting a Galleon a week sir, and a day off per month," he said with a grin.

"I can match that if you want Dobby," Harry said, "at least I think I can, I hope Gringotts replies soon... oh... I forgot," he trailed off.

Pop! "Winky can be taking it, sir!" She squeaked clicking her fingers to get the letter out of the pocket of his robes before popping away again.

"Thank Winky," he murmured in belated surprise.

"Well Dobby, would you like to work for me?" He asked.

"Yes, Mr Harry Potter sir! Yes!" He squeaked, shaking Harry's hand so hard, his whole arm moved.

"A Galleon a week then, and a day off per month. It's going to be a pleasure working with you. But like I said before, no punishment." Harry said sternly.

Dobby nodded as Hermione sat up.

"Who ran me over?" She mumbled darkly.

"Winky fixed whatever made us keep forgetting. Do you remember?" Harry asked concerned.

Hermione was quiet for a bit, then "yes. I do. I remember our conversations. I remember dismissing your concerns about food being weird in the hall. I remember that despite the fact it was weird and that I wouldn't have dismissed it, I remember doing so. That was odd. I remember the fact that every time I noticed it, it would somehow slip my mind." She stopped for a moment.

"I don't think it was an Obliviate though," Harry said.

"No, maybe a Confundus and/or some kind of compulsion spell or potion. We'll have to look into it and make sure it doesn't happen again."

"I think we should look into mind magic, maybe that can help us defend ourselves," Harry suggested.

"Where did you hear about that?" She asked incredulously, "it's not very common."

"I've wondered before if Snape could read minds or Dumbledore. Snape seems to just know things, and Dumbledore's eyes seem to go right through you, especially when they twinkle. So I looked it up in the library. Legilimancy is mind reading, (well not technically, but it's basically mind reading) and Occlumency is defending and protecting the mind. There are some books here. I think we should give it a go. I don't want anyone in my head." He said with a shudder.

"Your right Harry. I wonder if we can borrow books from the room..." She pondered.

"Yes Harry Potter's Grangy miss, you can, but you is needing to take them back after, they is being
borrowed from elsewhere in the castle sirs and miss," Dobby said.

"Gods I still feel a bit muddled, and there's so much still to figure out," Harry said suddenly getting up and pacing.

"I know," Hermione said moving to the armchairs in front of the fire.

"Tea Sir and Miss," Winky said popping back in, with two steaming mugs, "Ginkgo Biloba Tea, for mental clarity, to wash away the last of the fuzzy-head magics."

"Oh it smells brilliant, thanks Winky," Harry said taking a deep breath and feeling the last of the fogginess fade away as he sipped it.

"We need to finish our conversation from this morning, on the food in the hall. We need to figure out who and why, and how to counteract it without drawing more trouble," started Hermione.

"We need to plan on getting me healthy. I want to talk about why it wasn't safe in the kitchens and figure out where is safe and where isn't. The walls seem to have ears. I think it's the portraits reporting back, and I want to set out a plan for the tournament and work on figuring out who did it and how to counteract whatever they have planned for me," Harry continued.

"And we need to research the tournament, the contract requirements and the tasks so you can prepare for them. We should also look into any loopholes we can exploit." Added Hermione.

"Agreed"

"Well continuing from this morning," she started pulling out a quill and parchment, "that explains why we always let it go. We were magicked in some way to constantly dismiss it. Something made us leave it alone, and push it to the back of our minds."

"Why would he bother though?" Harry asked, "We know from the House-elves it was Dumbledore, but why? Was it really all for control of me?"

"What does he want though? He wants me to be a certain way, act in a certain way, study certain things, probably wants me ignorant and isolated too judging by my lack of preparation for the Wizarding world and continual imprisonment with my relatives. What does he want?" He started pacing again.

"There must be something he knows that we don't. Something about you." Hermione said.

"Maybe it's also got to do with Voldemort. He never did tell me why Voldemort came after my parents, though... now I think about it. Mum was protecting me. He was after me, wasn't he? Not them. And that reason is probably why Dumbledore wants to control me. I don't know what it is, but it's important to him for his goals. Whatever they are. I wonder what he wants though" he persisted.

"I don't know Harry. Why use food and your health? Why does he want you in such poor health it doesn't make sense." Hermione said, "why not just use potions and spells to control you. Why resort to these other physiological tactics.."

"Potions and spells that's a good point. I wonder if he has used them. We'll need to research it and figure out how to tell, and then undo them if they are there. I wonder if that's why I forgot about reading. I read all my textbooks before I came to Hogwarts. I read them all, cover to cover. I may have only understood half of it but I read it, went over and tried my best to remember it and I should've known the answer to Snape's questions. It was odd that suddenly I'd forgotten it." He pointed out.
"We'll have to look into magical forms of manipulation," Hermione said, adding it to her list.

"He's been controlling me for too long. He sent me to the Dursleys, never checked once, always sent me back, despite me getting down on my knees and begging for anywhere else. He chose my classes. I'd asked McGonagall for all of them when she said no, I asked for Runes and creatures, but McGonagall said Dumbledore had insisted on divination, and wiped Runes from my schedule."

"So food was just another way to do that, another aspect of your life to control, and use over you," Hermione said, "keeping you hungry will stunt your development, magical and physical. It will keep you weak, impair your thinking and learning. It's almost as if he's setting you up to fail. Whatever it is he wants you to fail at..."

"and it was so nice, to be able to eat anything at all, compared to the Dursleys that I didn't even pay too much attention to being hungry all the time, even here. At least here I didn't have to wonder if I'd get a meal every day. I knew I would; just not much. I guess it made me see him and the Wizarding world as this wonderful place, and as my saviour. It would make me trust him. It did, I would have followed him everywhere."

"What changed?"

"I..." Harry stopped, "I showed him proof that it wasn't safe at the Dursleys. He said that I must have been exaggerating and just sent me back, anyway."

"Oh Harry," she said but restrained herself from hugging him, "I don't know why he suddenly started controlling your food though, it was fine till Halloween in our first-year..." She wondered.

"I... I think he didn't want a fat saviour. He didn't want a fat lazy kid," he spat, his disgust at the headmaster evident in his voice, "He spies on us, with the portraits I think. I joked once to Ron in front of the portrait hole, about how much I loved being able to eat chocolate here. How I could eat whatever I wanted and not have to focus on if I'd get food tomorrow. I could eat lots of vegetables and fruit here as well as chocolate, all things I'd never had before, never been allowed before. The Dursleys wouldn't let me have anything 'too good for the freak.' I'd joked... I'd joke that I'd end up as big as a house with so many good foods and no-one yelling at me." He finished self deprecatingly.

"So maybe... So maybe he controlled my diet, subtly. Never in person, probably didn't want to do the dirty work and didn't want to risk dirtying his image. Not when he had hundreds on practically invisible helpers bound to his every whim. So he starved me, not obviously, but just enough to leave me hungry more often than not without realising it. Not like the Dursleys. It wouldn't do to have me prefer it there, over here. No. Just enough to make me weak and pliable. So that I couldn't think straight more often than not, making me more impulsive. He did always offer me lemon drops and sweets in his office, so I'd associate him with good things, along with Hagrid having fed and rescued me from the Dursleys on his behalf. He wanted me to depend on him, trusting and idolising him."

Harry plopped down on his armchair at the end of his rant, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Harry?" Hermione asked gently.

"I'm so tired of being hungry all the time and tired all the time. I want... I want to be able to feel full at the end of a meal for a change. Gods even just once. So I know what it's like to have enough to eat. So I know what it's like to go to sleep on a full stomach not a painfully empty one or one so unused to food I was queasy. I want to be able to have a butterbeer and chocolate frogs whenever I want. I want to try treacle tart and have seconds of lasagna and that lamb stew you love. It smells divine, I've never been aloud spicy food. I want to be able to have pancakes for breakfast every once in a while like normal kids. Ron had pancakes, bacon and waffles every Sunday morning. I've never
been allowed that. Only toast and I'm sick of toast. And Cornflakes I hate Cornflakes. I want to be able to have a glass of milk for breakfast. Dudley did all the time. Even the First Years here get it. Never me though."

"We'll sort it out," Hermione consoled, "with Winky and Dobby on your side, they can make sure you're fed. Probably in such a way that no-one will even know anything has changed. They are brilliant."

Harry nodded.

Hermione carefully took his hand. Even though he knew she was there he still flinched at the contact but allowed it anyway. He didn't always like it much but she meant well, and it made her feel better.

"I'm scared," he admitted quietly, "scared I'm not going to live to grow up. To be free. Gods I'm never going to be free! I'm so scared all the time. What's the point? What's the point of trying hard in school and fighting for a future when I don't have one. Everyone is trying to kill, use and abuse me. I don't have a future. So what's the point in trying? I'm scared... scared of never having freedom, scared of having no control over my life. But I'm also scared that if I do ever manage to be free of these chains that I won't know what to do with it. I'm so tired. So tired! I'm tired of constantly being punished for existing. I didn't ask for it. I didn't ask to be born. Gods, Hermione, it's not my fault. Please! It's not my fault I exist," he moaned, "I half want to run away and never come back. Half want to burn all my bridges because I only really have myself. There's never been anyone else. I've never been safe or loved or been able to trust, I'm too broken, and what's the point? What's the point, Hermione? What's the point of trying any more? It's never enough and Gods I've had enough."

"Oh Harry," she cried, sobbing now, "I'm going to hug you now," she warned him, "and you're going to hug me back okay?" He nodded but still jumped when she touched him, but he allowed it and pressed his face into her shoulder as Hermione sobbed into his.

"It will be alright Harry, it will be, really." She repeated it, over and over like a mantra as she clung on to him securely. Her voice muffled in his shoulder, and he wondered if she was saying it to reassure herself, or him.

"It will be okay Harry and if it's not okay, it's not the end yet. That's not good really, but it's something."

He pulled away after a moment and accepted a handkerchief from Winky who had reappeared with a tray.

He passed it to Hermione who wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Harry took another sip of his still hot cup of tea, holding it in both hands under his chin. Inhaling its subtle scent. Enjoying its comforting warmth.

"You is eating now, Young Master Harry sir," Winky said sternly to him, putting the tray on his lap. "You is not having enough at dinner sir."

Harry snorted in derision and took the bowl from her. It was steaming and smelling mildly of spices he didn't recognise. He grinned, "thanks Winky."

"You is taking potions too sir!" She said, holding out a spoon filled with that same green and brown potion Madam Pomfrey had given him back in his first-year.

He swallowed it, and Hermione giggled wetly when he made a face at its foul taste.

He took a mouthful of stew and moaned.
"This is brilliant!" he exclaimed, hand over his mouth.

"Harry!" Hermione teased, "eat then talk."

"Nah, it's too good," he stopped to swallow then said, "I've never had anything like this before. You're a god among elves Winky"

The elf went scarlet but beamed before popping away.

"We should plan. It will help." He said while he ate.

"yeah..." Hermione echoed, but they sat in silence for a time, listening to the crackle of the fire.

"We need to find out what the contract says I think," Harry said.

"I don't know how we can research the tournament contract, or the rules and loopholes I looked in the library already it's only past tournaments and not the legal bits," she said sounding a bit lost.

"s'okay, I asked Bill, he might know. If not, maybe we can write to the Ministry or something. I'm sure you can think of some sort of brilliant way to word it so they do what you want. Though it may draw attention."

"I can't believe they would let you compete in a binding magical contract, and be bound, without your consent. That's nuts. And then to deny you the contract you were bound too, that would be wrong on even more levels, so I'm sure we can get a copy somewhere." Hermione said

"You have way more faith in the Wizarding world than I do, Hermione."

"I know," she sighed, fiddling with the edge of her parchment.

They sat in silence for a moment while Harry slowly worked his way through his stew.

"I know it feels like a lot now Harry, but let's just go over what we have to do and make an action plan, even if it's just where to start. We'll feel a bit better with a plan," Hermione said.

Harry nodded around his spoon. Swallowing he said, "Your right. Winky, Dobby, do you want to join us? Your input would be appreciated."

There was a pop, and Dobby and Winky joined them again. A second elf sized armchair had appeared at some point, and they sat.

"So we have food and nutrition sorted," Harry started.

"Winky and Dobby be sorting you out sir, we is looking after you!" Winky squeaked with confidence.

"Thanks, that's good. I've started running. That should help too, both my stamina and spell casting but also in getting fit and healthy. I need to put some strength into my muscles or lack thereof.

"Oh really? You started running?" Hermione cut in.

"Yeah, round the lake. It's refreshing and relaxing as it is hard and exhausting. It gives me time to think, but also not too much time, as I need to concentrate on not keeling over," Harry snorted.

"Can I come?"
"Sure, portrait hole at six, we can shower and change in the quidditch locker rooms."

"That's early... but it sounds good. Are we even allowed out that early?" She asked.

"Dunno got the cloak though."

"True," she agreed, "Winky, you mentioned Harry's magic was all funny. What did you mean?"

"Winky isn't knowing miss, it felt different from Master Barty and young Master Barty. But Winky be asking one of the elder Elves. They is saying that illness and bindings can be affecting flow of magic. You is needing a healer. But not Madam Poppy, she is covered in the same magic that made yous forget. So she can't be trusted either, not safe" Winky explained.

"Goblins at Gringotts may help, old master had to go there once, after a bad box got him," Dobby said, a sly smile on his face at the memory.

"The soonest we can sneak out is a Hogsmeade Weekend, and we just had one, if the next ones not before Christmas then we'll have to go over the Christmas holidays," Hermione said, "can we wait that long?"

"Winky thinks so..."

"Until we find out where is safe," Harry said, starting to feel a bit more in control now they were working on a plan. "Let's meet here to study. Maybe sometimes we could have meals here if Winky and Dobby don't mind, and it doesn't make extra work for them? We know it's safe here, from being overheard and we can discuss, plan and practice safely."

"I agree, I'll add concealment Charms and privacy wards to our list of things to do."

"It be no troubles at all Sir and Miss," Winky said clapping her hands in excitement.

"Now after all this, I think we should definitely look into manipulating of the mind and methods of manipulating and controlling people. Magical means. I'm sure there's a book here. I'll take with me and read up on it. You take one of the mind magic ones and read it. Then we can share tomorrow. We'll get more done that way," Hermione said scribbling down notes on the parchment.

"We know Dumbledore's been controlling you," she continued, "so we need to make sure we don't let on and if he is a mind reader, we probably need to subtly avoid him (and Snape) or just not look them in the eye. It's always been said that the eyes are the window to the soul."

"Can you two not tell him your employment has changed?" Harry asked, "it's not that we regret it, or that we are ashamed and want to hide it, but if people knew then it would draw attention I don't know if we can afford." Harry said.

The elves thought about it a moment and nodded, "Tippy be knowing though. She be Head-elf, sir." Dobby said, "she be knowing everything sir,"

"Would she be telling anyone?" Harry asked.

"Dobby doesn't think so, sir, but I could ask her not to. Maybe that be enough? She likes you. She feels bad still." Dobby said.

"Right then! We'll work on morning runs, studying here when we can, and I'll look up controlling magics and their counters. Harry will look up mind magic, and we'll both work on tournament history to try and predict the tasks and how to prepare. We also need to work on a study schedule I
should think. So we can get you caught up with all the Muggleborn introduction texts. I'll draw one up for you later If you like." Hermione offered.

"Please, I'd appreciate it. There's just so much to do. Let me just spell the list, so no-one can read it." Harry said showing her the spell Bill had shown him for letters.

"Neat! No problem. We should probably head back now, it's almost curfew."

They slipped under the clock with their books. Winky and Dobby popping away to the kitchens while Harry and Hermione went back to Gryffindor tower.

"And Harry?" Hermione paused later, on the bottom step to the girl's staircase, "it wouldn't matter."

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"It wouldn't matter if you were fat, or skinny. As long as you're happy and healthy, I wouldn't care. And you shouldn't either. It does not matter what the rest of the world thinks. All that matters is your opinion and if you're happy. Screw what he says. Screw everyone. As long as your happy Harry, that's what matters. So don't worry about it. Just be happy and healthy. That's the goal I think. So you could get tattoos all over your face, or grow your hair and dye it pink or anything really. It doesn't matter because you're my best friend. And you're a good person. Furthermore, I don't care what package you come in. It's your heart that I value. It should not matter what we look like, or if we are pretty or attractive or not. Not when it should be the content of our character's that is seen." She said looking at him earnestly.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said taking her hand and giving it a squeeze, "I... I agree. Thank you. I'll see you in the morning. 6 o'clock okay?"

She nodded and went up the stairs to the left, and he went up to the right.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings:
Emotional meltdown.
Harry gets very upset and spirals a bit. Though I guess it could be interpreted as him being suicidal (he's okay though and its short)
Adults being manipulative assholes (again, still)
Boded image (and unspoken insecurity)
Okay so, you could interpret some little bits as fat shaming. BUT thats not the intention. (Harry is sarcastically mocking the Wizarding world and Dulbledore for the opinions he things they would have, and how they would judge him if he got fat. He's angry and venting and pissed off at people, (again, though rightly so)
I know weight is a sensitive topic, not trying to shame or disrespect (that goes for this whole work, harry's been so physically less then healthy for so long, its going to come up again) I like discussing the things we as a society don't talk about enough, but I try and always be considerate and respectful (of at least give you the heads up when I'm not.
(*smiles sheepishly, gets off soap box*)

Thanks for you patience and understanding, I appreciate it.
Happy reading!!
Harry woke bright eyed and wide awake, as usual. Hermione was less awake, blearily rubbing sleep out of her eyes as she joined Harry under the cloak.

The Fat lady was fast asleep in her frame when they crept out of the portrait hole and down through the castle. It was dark out, freezing but the air was blessedly still. Harry shed the cloak as soon as they got near the lake folded it up and put it in his pocket. They broke into a run immediately to keep warm, their breath clouding in front of them.

"Gods, I don't know why I thought this was a good idea," Harry huffed some time later.

Hermione snorted, equally puffed, "because you're an awful person, that is a glutton for punishment, and had to drag me into it too!"

"you asked to join me!" he puffed back with a half laugh.

"True... it's good for us, or so we're told. At least the cold is encouraging us to keep moving," she said.

"I know, I should have picked this up as a hobby in summer," Harry moaned.

"We could be in front of the fire with a book right now," Hermione added.

"Yes..." Harry said, "Winky promised a hot cuppa afterwards though."

"Lovely,"

"She's brilliant. She's managed to remove some of those horrible stains from Dudley's old tracksuits and repair some of the damage to it he did. Much better than I managed and I'm good with needle and thread. She even cast some kind of warming charm on it. It's cold, but I'm not freezing my nuts of like I was yesterday."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, "that's good though! It means you won't be freezing all the time. I noticed you shivering despite it not being that cold, or being in front of the fire." Hermione replied

"yeah, it's one of the reasons I hate being so god damned skinny," he said, "no insulation. Doesn't matter how much I rug up, I'm always cold. especially when I'm tired. Or hungry."

"Which is always."

"Which is always," he agreed, "not anymore though," he cast a furtive glance around, but it was too early for anyone to be out yet, "not with Winky and Dobby on side. At least, not hungry anyway. I'll still probably be tired all the time, but food should help."
"still having nightmares?" she asked worriedly.

"No worse than normal, but yes, I've perfected my silencing wards. The sound comes in, but nothing gets out. So I won't wake anyone up anymore." he replied in what Hermione thought was a worryingly blasé tone.

"I started looking into the Occlumency book last night." Harry said changing the subject, "It starts with meditation to clear the mind. It's different for everyone. The idea is to meditate and still your mind. You can't stop thinking or feeling, but you can meditate to get your mind to a more still state and push it all to the back. It makes harder to get into. It's different for everyone. Some just push it all away and can stop thinking and feeling. Some focus on a single thing, some use meditation to enter some kind of trance sort of thing. But I didn't really understand that. It said though that meditation is the first step to a greater understanding of your mind and magic, that that was crucial to Occlumency," Harry explained. "I tried it last night. It didn't go too well, but I felt a bit calmer afterwards. If we manage the meditation properly we can progress to becoming familiar with our minds. We can become aware of where it exists and feel the edges. Become aware of what's you and what's not so you can recognise what's not you, and therefore intruders.

It has exercises to work on after you get the basics to help you become aware of your mind and what's others. It helps to have someone who is a Legilimens but it tells you how to do it so maybe we can practice on each other. It also gives exercises to become more familiar with your body and your magical core, your magic within you and its channels. That helps you become aware of it and channel it to different things, like the mind. But I would also think that being aware of your own magic quite intimately would let you tell if there was foreign magic on you or controlling you. You could then channel resistance if you had greater control over your internal magic, like mind magic. maybe we should look into wandless magic." he added on a side note.

"we should, I'll add it to the list, but for now keep telling me about mind magic, it sounds fascinating," Hermione puffed in reply.

"It is fascinating! In the more advanced section, it talks about how to push out intruders, how to make defences, hide your mind and that sort of thing. it even talks about the extremely advances stages where you can hide things, but also hide the fact you're hiding things."

"that sounds fascinating! I can't wait to get started, can I read the book once you've done?"

"course you can. but you're right, it is fascinating, I can't wait to get started. as soon as I thought mind reading might be a thing, I've felt kind of unsafe, it will be so good to get on top of this and have one less thing threatening us," Harry agreed.

"Thanks. If we plan on going to the Roon of Requirement tonight after tea," Hermione said, "we can maybe put aside some time before curfew to practice meditation then. its quiet up there, and we can be comfortable. I've done a bit of meditation before, its big in the muggle world, as is yoga, that can be a form of mediation. It's also good for strength and flexibility, maybe we should try that, or maybe tai-chi,"

"What's that?"

"A slow martial arts, it meditative, I tried it once but I'm not very good at it," she admitted.

"Never thought I'd see the day," he teased

"Oh hush you!"
He grinned but kept grinning.

They finished their run near the quidditch pitch and Harry let them into the Gryffindor lock rooms.

"There's only locker room per house and I don't have the password for the other ones, I can wait out here if you want to go first though," Harry offered, trying not to shiver now he wasn't moving.

"Don't worry about it Harry, there are separate stalls if I remember correctly, that's enough. You're not about to do anything inappropriate and neither am I." Hermione reassured him.

He sagged in relief teeth chattering and all but sprinted into a stall and under the hot water, Hermione's laugh following him.

They showered quickly, Hermione telling him about the book she'd started studying last night.

"So there are a frightful amount of different ways to control a person, not all of them illegal," she started over the noise of the showers. " Some are illegal, some which are spells, curses really, that you can't block. Some you can learn to fight off, like the Imperious curse. It didn't say how though, but you can through off the Imperious curse, so maybe it's like that. Pity we can't practice throwing that one off without having to actually cast it. You can also use compulsion spells to control a person or potions, or a combination of both. using the two together makes it harder to get rid of and detect. It is doable though. Obliviate is used sometimes, someone is more susceptible to suggestion, spells and potions immediately afterwards. There's a spell to detect Obliviate's as well, though there isn't a way to break it without a trained mind healer. Well, you can try, but it's not recommended. It's meant to be really hard, potentially do an incredible amount of damage and can really screw you up. Though it said you can sometimes break it with Occlumency if you know your mind and magic well enough to sense something wrong or foreign magic. Someone wrote a note in the margin saying 'potion,' so maybe there's a way to break it with potions. I'll have to look into it. We should probably check if it's necessary first. We have enough on our plates to research at the moment, without extra that's not immediately helpful. Gods, I can't believe I'm saying that!" She said turning her water off.

Harry let out a snort of amusement from his stall on the other side of the room, "I can't either! We can come back to it later. It's horrible how many ways there are to control other people. Are they ways to detect these methods?" Harry asked getting dressed, thankful that Winky seemed to have put warming charms onto his uniform as well.

"Yes," Hermione replied, "some have detection spells; some have potions, some have counter-charms, some have antidotes and some have both. there is also an all-encompassing purging potion. It's pretty horrible, and it's pretty hard on the body too. It strips all potions from the body completely. Some spells are anchored in a potion though and they do need the purging potion plus a counter-spell. It depends on what spell was used. There is also a potion to strip all spell's, and foreign magic from a person. It's equally harsh on the body and your magic as well. It cautions that not all spells on a person are harmful, that the potion can risk your health, especially on a minor. Its also illegal to brew and use as there are some spells placed on a minor by the ministry to track them, like the trace. The potion wasn't in the book, and I don't know where we would even look."

"It might be worth looking into those two purging potions though," Harry said stepping out of his shower stall, rubbing his hair dry.

Hermione sighed and bit her lip, "I... yes it does make sense. but it also depends on if we need it first. I, unfortunately, don't dought we will have some kind of something on us."

"We'd probably need a pass to the restricted section though," he said, " slipping a ratty beanie over his damp hair to ward off the cold."
Their conversation was interrupted by Winky popping in. "You is needing this young master Harry sir, Miss Grangy miss," she said handing Harry a spoonful of potion and a tall glass steaming glass, while Hermione got a large hot mug of tea.

Grimacing at the potion, Harry took a cautious sip of the drink. It looked like liquid fruit oatmeal. "Smells good, what is it Winky?" he asked.

"Winky is making a smoothy for after your run, sir, but it is too cold for an icy one. So Winky is making you a hot oatmeal, banana and apple smoothy sir!" she squeaked excitedly.

He took a sip, "brilliant thanks!"

"It is giving you some nutrients before breakfast, Winky is also putting some Vegemite on the table for you sir."

"Don't you mean Marmite Winky?" Hermione asked.

Winky shook her head, "No miss, it is different miss, similar but is not Marmite. Winky is not liking Marmite miss. Vegemite is good for you sir, Winky is having an Australian cousin, sir, he showed it to me, better than nasty marmite sir. They is being very odd down there, sir, very odd. But they is making this very good spread sir. The muggles in the world war I used it, sir. When food was sparse. It is having lots of good things in it sir. just put a little on sir, with some butter, it will be better for you than the jam so. Winky be sneaking in much good things sir, to squash the Bad Wiskers plan. She be thwarting him, sir. You is being healthy in no time sir, Winky be looking after you sir, and he is not even noticing!" She clapped her hands excitedly then popped away before Harry could thank her.

"You know, I think we may manage this, especially with those two helping," Harry said.

They went up back up to the castle, slipped under the cloak and back up to the Gryffindor common room. It was empty still. Dobby popped with there school bags and popped away their sweety cloths and towels before they could stop him.

"You know you don't have to do that Dobby, we can pick up after ourselves," Hermione said concerned.

Dobby went wide-eyed and horrified, "please don't miss! We is liking work miss, we is liking looking after our master's miss, and you is Harry Potter's Grangy miss. So we gets to be looking after you too miss!" He replied popping away.

They sat in front of the fire and despite it being empty still, Harry cast a silencing charm around them to keep from being overheard. Just in case.

"I worked out a schedule, and a list of what we should look into," she said, "have a look and tell me what you think."

Shifting his armchair a bit closer to the fire, Harry had a look. It was busy, but then her schedules always were. She had scheduled in plenty of time to get things done. It actually made Harry feel a bit better about it all, now he saw how structured it was. Time for catching up on the basics, time for homework, time for research and more advanced study, time for defence and protection training, she'd thought of everything.

"Your brilliant, this is brilliant, you've even put in a bit of time for relaxing," Harry said beaming at
"We're going to have so much to get done, we'll need to work really hard, but to get the most out of ourselves we need to relax to, if we work ourselves to the bone, we won't be as effective. Relaxing is important too. I figured without quidditch this year, you will probably want some time to fly, I know you really love it."

"I didn't think of that," Harry admitted, "we may need to make lunchtime working lunches, or at least a quick lunch then study. It may help to use that time to revise things, but we could have lunch upstairs in the Room of Requirement," Harry suggested.

"Good idea, but not dinner, dinner should stay work free, I think, and we can't abandon Ron completely. Even if he is being a prat."

When Harry said nothing, she continued, "Maybe only reading a book at breakfast, maybe the next chapter of our textbooks or something to prepare for class." Hermione agreed standing up.

Vegemite, it turned out, was odd, but okay. In fact, it was the nicest thing about breakfast in the great hall that morning. It was very salty and it took Harry a few bites of toast before he figured out how much to put on it. Much preferable than the glares everyone was shooting his way, the whispering and Ron angrily stabbing his sausages on Hermione's other side.

"It looks gross, it smells weird, but it's actually not bad," he quietly after another mouthful, "its saltie, but kinda nice."

He offered Hermione a bite.

She chewed slowly before, murmuring back, "my first reaction when I saw it was, ew, but your right, it actually isn't bad. I'm glad..." she trailed off reluctant to say the Elf's name within earshot of others. "That she," she finally settled on, "warned you not to put much on though I can see how awful it would taste if you put too much on. I wonder where she got it from? I don't they don't sell it here"

"Don't know, I'll have to ask later though, I might have to get a jar to take back to the Dursleys over the summer if it's really that good for you."

He really was sorry the weekend was over, not that it had been nice or relaxing. But he could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at classes. Breakfast alone had made it clear that the rest of the school, like the Gryffindors, thought that he had entered himself into the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

Honestly, he should have been surprised, not by the Gryffindors, they had always believed what they wanted of him, as did the rest of the school. They'd always been fickle and had turned on him at the drop of a hat on numerous occasions already. Just look at first and second year. It wasn't all that surprising their reaction, but it hurt all the same.

Things did not improve after breakfast. Not that he really had thought they would. The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to prove that. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory. Diggory was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley, with whom Harry normally got on with very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray. Harry had to grit his teeth and bear it when they laughed rather
vindictively when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face.

Ron wasn't talking to Harry either, just glaring at him when he caught Harry's eye. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, Harry avoided making eye contact. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him - but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House. When had an adult ever actually took his side of things, or at least been fair?

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too. It was the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer... Half the Triwizard champions have died... how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er - yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution, like. Harry - you come here an' help me with this big one...

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, "So - yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected him, "I'm not the Hogwarts Champion Hagrid, Diggory is the real one, I'm just stuck in it as a reluctant extra."

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh - an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

"Wish I knew who did do it," said Harry bitterly, "or how to get out of it."

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colourless, they had developed a kind of thick, greyish, shiny armour. They looked like a cross
between giant scorpions and elongated crabs - but still without recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

"Where'd you get these things anyway? They're not in our textbooks, I've never even heard of them." Harry asked somewhat horrified and yet curious.

Hagrid looked a bit shifty. "well... erm... they're a mix between Manticore and Fire crab."

"Wow... how'd you bread them?" Harry asked reading between the lines, "how on earth did you get them to bread without eating each other?"

"What do y' er think of em?" Haggard asked avoiding the question entirely.

Harry laughed, "honestly Hagrid? I think they're quite possibly one of the weirdest, ugliest things I've ever seen bar none, except quite possibly my cousin. But while I think they're going to eat us, I can understand the appeal and why you like them. They are... in a fashion, fascinating." Harry said after a moment.

Hagrid beamed before, "they won't harm you, Harry, not while I'm here. Yer know that. Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?"

Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his classmates certainly weren't; every now and then (with an alarming bang that made Harry jump,) one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

"Ah, I don' know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. "School champion... everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn' it?"

Harry didn't answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him. . . that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the grounds, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

He was incredibly grateful over the next few days that he had so much work to do to keep him busy, and had taken up running. It kept him busy and distracted and did wonders for cooling down his temper and giving him an outlet when he got to mad at the world. It was just as well, as the next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. It was like his second year all over again though. The stairs the whispers, the snide comments and glaring. Even the occasional hex in the hall if there were no witnesses. At least back in his second year, Ron had been on his side. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school's behaviour if he could just have had Ron back as a friend. But he wasn't going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn't want to. Not when we would just drop him again next time something horrible happened to Harry that Ron was jealous of. As much as he missed Ron, and wanted him back, Harry was tired of people turning on him. He didn't think he could forgive that. He wasn't sure he wanted it to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

Herbology on Monday morning, showed him that though the Hufflepuff had a reputation for being kind and fair. It didn't extend to him, or to believing him. He could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, he supposed though, even if he didn't like it. They had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins - he was highly unpopular there and always had been because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. It also probably didn't help that he let Malfoy antagonise him so much. Now that was food for thought. Maybe he should start ignoring the blond prat... Slytherin couldn't all be horrible if he didn't antagonise them... But they did seem to take delight in hexing him in the back.
The fact that Trelawney had predicted his death 4 times in divination after lunch didn't help his mood. But neither did the Ravenclaws who had taken to joining the Slytherins in their hexing of him. Some of the hexes they used were devilishly difficult to undo or find the counter-charm for, he was very grateful to the Room of Requirments seemingly endless supply of reference books. He had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Diggory. He was wrong, however. While he hadn't had any classes with them directly that day, he learnt in the halls that most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name. They had even resorted doing as the Slytherins had, hexing him in the corridors. He'd had to spend a good hour after class, in the Library, looking up the counter-charms to get rid of the hex that had caught him. He was grateful for the first time in his life, that one of Dudley's favourite childhood activities was Harry hunting. It meant he had had a lot of practice hiding, running and dodging. A small part of him wanted to yell and rage at the unfairness of it all. He'd never done anything to his peers. Yet they turned on him at the drop of a hat. What had he ever done to them? But the older part of him, the smarter, cynical side of him, knew that of course, they would turn on him. People as a whole were both moronic and were neither good nor trustworthy. That's just how it worked. If you weren't useful, people turned on you.

There was also, Harry supposed a touch self-pityingly, the fact that Diggory actually looked the part of a champion. People were fickle like that. It didn't surprise Harry that they liked Diggory more. He exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and grey eyes. It was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Diggory or Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Diggory to sign their school bags one lunchtime. Next to that, Harry didn't stand a chance. Not when he was short and skinny enough to look like he should still be in primary school. Not with his taped up shoes, ratty oversized clothes, impossibly hair and ugly glasses. Diggory was also pretty well liked by the school. Not like Harry, who they turned on whenever the wind seemed to change. Not that Harry actually wanted them to like him. He didn't want extra attention and hangers-on. No, he just wanted to be treated with simple human decency for a change. Was that really too much to ask?

Apparently so.

Meanwhile, there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him,(still angry that he hadn't used her to send the letters. He'd spent History of Magic on Tuesday morning, with earplugs in to block out Bins's stupor-inducing voice so he could actually get some sturdy done. He had gotten through the Hogwarts: A History the day before. He understood why Hermione liked it now. The Castle's History was fascinating. He was trying to get through Everything you need to know about everything: a students primer. But Hermione kept elbowing him sharply in the ribs trying to get him to pay attention.

"Stop it!" He had hissed, "I'm trying to study!"

"Pay attention!" She hissed back.

"He puts me to sleep, I've already read that chapter in the textbook, give it a rest and let me get some work done." He snapped back.

She glared at him disapprovingly, "well don't come to me begging for notes when you panic at exam time."

"I don't need them, he only talks out of the book!" Harry replied furiously.

In transfiguration that same morning, harry half hopped that Mcgonagle may actually notice that he got his Switching spell right on the first try. He supposed she must be so used to him taking ages and playing stupid that she had stopped bothering with him.
The week didn't improve from there. The only bright patch was that between not bothering to hold back in class and no longer dumbing down his homework he was getting it done a lot quicker. Not having Ron there to distract him every five seconds also helped. Harry spent a lot of time that week, in the room of requirement working over the primer and going through his old textbooks again. It was amazing how much more he understood now. Everything just made sense. He'd worked through the Meditation book too, 'The Mindful book of Meditation'. It certainly helped with his Occlumency studies. It had gone into a lot more detail on how to meditate and bring his mind and magic into stillness and harmony, how to clear his mind. He was actually really enjoying it. He hadn't managed to get as anywhere with feeling his magic though. He could still his mind to an extent. But he could feel his magic. Even with his wand, he felt a slight tingling in his wand hand, but that was it. Channelling specific amounts of magic had always been guesswork for him. Meditating on it though, it felt constantly just out of reach, like there was something blocking him. But it was relaxing, so he kept going. He also learnt a bunch of nifty study and stationary spells in the 'study and stationary spells and charms: a Ravenclaws guide.' In fact, now that everyone was churning him, he had several quiet afternoons in front of the fire I the Room of Requirement reading his textbooks, with a cup of Winkey's hot-chocolate.

The respite the room provided was probably the only thing that kept him going that week. Even Hermione was starting to grate his nerves a little, constantly trying to get him to talk to Ron and makeup.

By the time he had finished classes on Friday and had removed the days Hex - only one actually, he was getting better at expecting them, and therefor dodging them and blocking - he was just about ready to sleep for a week. But he curled up in an armchair in front of the Fire the room had provided and opened up the assigned reading. Winky popped in with a cup of tea and a sandwich, that helped a bit.

It only took him an hour or two to finish the homework he had for the weekend, much quicker than it would have taken a month ago. It was surprising how much easier it was now he had got the basics and understood them. It was surprising again how much quicker he could write his essays when not dumbing them down, it used to take him at least another draft or two to get them suitably stupid.

"Wow, Harry this is actually really good, it's concise but still answers the topic in a suitably in-depth analysis. Well done." Hermione had said when she joined him later. He'd been too tired to argue with her that it was fine, as is and that he didn't think it needed a look over. He'd just handed them over.

"Thanks, it's much easier now I've read the class Primer. There was so much that I didn't know. I've started revising my previous textbooks too and it makes so much sense now. It's like everything is clicking into place. It's brilliant. Now that I finally understand the theory, I've been going back over all our old spells as well while revising all my old textbooks. They are so much simpler now that I understand the theory. I didn't exactly struggle with spell work before. But now I can get most of the first through third year spells silently, and some of this years. Some of them I can even manage to pointcast. Though that takes more practice and concentration. It's such a relief to know it wasn't just me being an idiot, there really was something missing." He had confided.

"I'm glad Harry," she said smiling, "check this for me will you?" She asked, handing him her Runes work. He grinned, he loved Runes.

It was also a lot more fun and engaging now that he had spoken to Professor Babbling and Vector about independent Study for their classes. They had agreed to meet up with him one night a week to check his progress in his self-study of their subjects and to give and collect his homework for the week. He was glad that he had done it. It was much more interesting with the extra reading and
lecture notes. He loved Runes, and Arithmancy was brilliant too. So logical, and he could see himself using it to combine spells, Runes and potions to create things. Actually, that's what he should do for Hedwig. Combine protection spells, with some notice me not rune wards and maybe some protection potion to make her a collar, so he could still use her to send mail regularly. He pulled out a bit of parchment and start scribbling down notes.

He dragged himself back to the room after dinner, to finish revising the last of his old spells and textbooks. And had forced himself to work all the way through 'Magic’s Real: what to now you know the extraordinary is really ordinary, a Muggleborn's guide.' It was long, and his eyes were already aching from working all day, but he used one of the new study spells and spelled the book to read aloud to him while he took notes. The book was fascinating. It talked about the basics of how the magical word was structured, the ministry and the government and the class system. It sounded similar to the muggle feudal system in the medievals. It talked about the statute of secrecy, why it was there and the exceptions to the rules. It explained the education system OWLs, NEWTS and available post-NEWT Mastery studies. It explained different communication and transportation options, basic places, how to get there and what survives they provided; St Mungo's Hospital, the ministry visitor entrance, Nockturn, Diagon and Hookturn Ally's and Hogsmeade to name a few. It even discussed jobs in the wizarding world and what they wore. The thing it didn't cover, though it mentioned, was the bank, and social classes and etiquette. But he'd get to those books next.

He was so engrossed in his study that by the time he had finished the book and was writing up the last of his notes, that Dobby had to poke him to get his attention just before curfew. Harry started violently, dropping his book and springing to his feet, his arms over his head.

"Harry Potter sir! Dobby is Sorry sir!" The elf squeaked.

Harry blinked.

"Oh, it's okay Dobby. What time is it?" He asked

"Almost curfew sir! Harry potters Grangy has already gone back to the Tower sir!" the elf replied.

Harry looked around startled, he hadn't noticed Hermione leave. He picked up his book, and put it and his completed notes away in his bag. Donning the cloak, he hurried back to the tower.

He pulled the cloak off as the Fat Lady was letting him in, but stopped dead.

Most of Gryffindor was spread out around the room, watching Ron and Hermione shooting themselves horse at each other.

They were so busy yelling at each other, Harry couldn't actually understand a word they were saying.

"What are they arguing over this time?" He asked Ginny.

"You," she said succinctly.

"What?" He asked.

"How could you take his side!" Ron shouted, not giving Ginny a chance to reply.

"I'm not you're being a prat!" Hermione yelled back.

"You are, you're always with him, you haven't played chess all week with me, it's study, homework, Harry. All the time! You're letting him control you!"
"What?" She shrieked!

Then he rounded on Harry, "It's all your fault!" He screamed.

"You leave Harry out of this Ron!" Hermione hollered back.

"He's stealing you from me! Your my friend too, but you've gone and sided with him. The great prat! I haven't seen you all week and you're always whispering to each other." Ron snapped back at her before turning back to yell at Harry.

"Ronald Weasley! How dare you, treat me like a possession!" Hermione shrieked.

"Enough!" Harry cut in, fed up.

They both turned to him in surprise.

"I don't control who Hermione associates with Weasley," Harry said coolly, "I apologise if you feel I have been monopolising her time. Hermione is, of course, free to spend as much time as she likes with whoever she wants. Hermione thank you for your assistance, I have enjoyed studying with you. You are of course my friend and are welcome to join me whenever you like. Now, I have a headache, I'm going up to bed. Hermione, thank you for your company studying, but don't feel you have to spend all your time with me. Weasley, try to talk about your problems in a civilised tone, yelling hardly solves anything." Harry finished icily. He was heartily sick of Ron's attitude.

He stalked up the stairs, leaving a stunned Gryffindor behind him.

Hermione follows him up the stair's a short way, throwing up a silencing charm around them, looking guilty

"Harry I-" she started

"You can spend time with him too. It's okay." He reassured her.

"Your both being so stupid and it's taking me in two." She said sniffing Horsley.

"Now you know how I feel when you bicker all the time," Harry said gently.

"That's different, you being stupid, just talk to him. He'll get over it."

"Maybe but it's a little too late."

"You mean you won't forgive him"

"No," he said shortly

"He's your friend!"

"Yes, he was but I don't forgive being staled I the back and abandoned."

"But harry!"

"I do not forgive, and I do not forget. Fool me once shame on me, fool me twice, you won't fool me twice."

"Boys!" She huffed storming off.
Also, No insult meant to any other Auzzys', I'm from Down Under as well, I'm not hating I promise. <3
I do also love Vegemite, couldn't resist putting it in. It's perfect for harry's situation. It kept me going for a whole month when I was too sick to manage anything but Vegemite toast. It's the bees knees, seriously some magical stuff, (and way better than Marmite!)
Harry woke up bleary eyed the next day for their run.

"Sorry for snapping at you last night," Hermione said as they sneaked through the Castle under the cloak and onto the grounds, "I was frustrated."

"It's fine, it happens," he said putting the cloak in his pocket as they reached the lake's edge.

"I won't abandon you, but I won’t abandon Ron either," Hermione explained worriedly as they broke into a run.

"Didn't expect you to Hermione, as I said, I am grateful for your help and friendship, I enjoy spending time with you, but you can be friends and spend time with whoever you want. It's your choice, I would never try and control you like that, your my friend," Harry replied calmly.

She let out a huff of relief, "did you even sleep?" She asked suddenly looking at the dark rings under his eyes, "you went to bed early."

Harry snorted, "Na... You know I don't really sleep well, not really, so I stayed up reading. I figured if I was going to be awake or sleeping badly I may as well get something productive done. It was late though, even by my standards. I have finished some of them."

"Oh, which one did you get through this week?"

'I've read, 'Hogwarts: A History,' I understand why you like it so much now, it was really interesting. I had no idea about half the stuff it talked about in there. The founders' story was much more detailed than I thought, and the explanation of the workings of the castle and its magic was brilliant. I'll have to re-read it later in more detail later. I also got through 'Study and Stationary Spells and Charms: a Ravenclaw's Guide.' That one was especially useful, I had no idea there were so many charms and spells to help with homework. I liked Tales of Beatle the Bard, it was a bit of fun, early one morning when I'd been woken up. Never got kids books growing up. I also got through
'The Mindful Book of Meditation.' It's great. I started it as soon as I'd done with the Mind magic book from the room of requirement, it had really helped. I'd never tried meditation before. It was hard at first, but I'm was getting the hang of it now. I really liked it. The more I practise, the closer I get to being able to feel and find my magical core. But I just can't get it, it was almost as if something was blocking it. I'm doing all the steps, but it's odd.

"How so?" She asked, "the book said was really important for connecting with and grounding your magic so that you can use and channel it more effectively. It's important you persevere with it, Harry."

"I know, I'm not slacking on it, Hermione, honestly," he puffed out slightly annoyed, as they rounded the edge of the lake, "I'm just having trouble with it. You tried it yet?"

"What about the meditation is giving you trouble though? I've been practising it, it's hard to clear my mind, but it's easy to feel my magic, a warmth in my chest. It's nice."

"Ah, it's the opposite for me, stilling my mind I can manage now I know how to do it. It's less emptying your head, and more, being aware and the present moment. It's about clinging on to whatever thoughts pop up. It's feeling my magic, I'm having trouble with, it's like it's not there." He puffed out, as they rounded the bend.

"That's so odd," Hermione said, "have you read 'Controlling Magics and Their Counters' yet? I don't remember there being something on it but it may help? Maybe someone has done something to your core. There are spells and potions to block abilities."

"I've started it, but I've been focusing on the primer. I want to get that and the 'Magic is Real' one does this weekend." He said. "I even went over that Wizard's health book, to see if anything in there may tell me why it may be hard to get at. But it only said squibs can't feel their magic like we can, because they don't have enough of their own to use, they don't have a magical core like we do. But it can't be that, I can do spells okay, and I can feel other magic, no problem, just not mine." Harry puffed out

"What do you mean, feel other magic?" Hermione said incredulously.

"Well, I can feel the wards when I enter Hogwarts, and when I ward my bed. I can feel magic in the air when I'm around wizards. Wizard places feel different. I don't know how to explain it, magic just feels different, like a soft buzzing, like its alive."

"Harry, you can't feel magic, it's not alive, we don't feel magic outside of our selves," Hermione said slowly.

"You mean that you can't feel anything different when you step into, say Hogwarts or Diagonally, than you do when you step into a muggle supermarket?" Harry asked incredulously.

"No of course not, no one can 'feel' magic, not outside of the body anyway. It doesn't work like that."

"I can," he said confused.

"Don't be silly Harry," she dismissed, "if you can't feel your own magic, how on earth can you feel any other type of magic, one that doesn't exist out of the body in the way you're implying!"

"But it does exist out of the body, look at spells and wards."

"Yes but not in an alive way, it's not sentient, it doesn't exist out of the body by itself. You can't feel
Hermione explained exasperatedly.

"Hogwarts is sentient," he replied with feeling.

"It's a building Harry! It's not alive."

"Haven't you ever noticed the stairs change sometimes if you're in a hurry and they might move to help you get there in time."

"Don't be silly harry. They're in a random pattern, they don't move to help you. It's a random quirk the founders programmed in to keep us on our toes." she dismissed.

Harry frowned. He had always had a low-level awareness of magic. Even when he didn't really understand it. He had always known that his aunt's house felt a little funny, and later he had learnt that it was magic, it was the wards. Diagon Ally felt similar, as did Hogwarts, they were magical.

Harry had also always had a similar low-level awareness of the energy of those around him as well, it wasn't always magic, but it was something similar. there was an energy in every living thing, they felt different. As a child, that awareness often manifested as being able to quickly and easily read others body language, and a vague awareness of their moods. Some people, like uncle Vernon, just felt dangerous, prone to being loud and violent, while Dudley felt sluggish most of the time. But there was also an undercurrent of a potential threat, in the way the energy vibrated around him. Aunt Petunia felt sharp and shrill, not aggressively dangerous the way his uncle did, but more subtle, more sneaky, dangerous. Most adults felt dangerous, and nearly always made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Some were worse than others, they may have looked harmless at times, but something about them just felt off. He always tried to listen to those feelings, though it had been harder at Hogwarts. There was so much magic, it was so 'loud,' so much energy, so much magic, calling to him, it sometimes drowned out how people felt individually. It was as if since he arrived at Hogwarts that sense of how people felt, had been deafened or something. He loved magic though, it felt alive, and energetic, wild. He couldn't fathom not being able to feel it. It was overwhelming sometimes, stepping into a magic heavy place after being away from it all summer, but normally it helped him. Magic rich places often seemed to lend him a bit of energy when he was bone tired. Hogwarts seemed to wrap her energy around him like a protective cat. Even if she did feel dormant, like a cat sleeping in the sun just waiting to be woken. He may not have been able to feel his own - he knew she tried to nudge him along sometimes, but he always stopped feeling it when it interacted with his - but he could feel her wrap the magic around him like a soft warm breath of air. She still felt saturated with magic, old and wise. He couldn't fathom not being able to feel it. That was what made not being able to feel his own magic, or other magic interacting with his own, so puzzling. All he can feel of his own was a cold empty sickly sensation. It dulled things. Hogwarts tried to reach out to him, he could tell, sometimes when he was alone and meditating, he could feel something, but as soon as magic tried to interact with his own, he can't feel it quite right, it was as if he were blindfolded. Potions were similar. He knew the ingredients held magic, he could feel that. But as soon as he tried to infuse them with his own, as one was meant to, he couldn't feel anything. It was so frustrating. Even trying to moderate or channel his own magic in spells was less the control one should have after 4 years of training and more wild blind guesswork.

"Harry?" Hermione said a little worried.

"You really can't feel it? How alive Hogwarts is? You can't feel the magic?" he asked incredulously.

"No," she said.

He was distracted from replying when he saw something moving out of the corner of his eye. He turned and stumbled to a halt, nearly making Hermione run into him.
"What's up?" She asked.

"What's that?" He asked pointing to the strangest looking creature he'd ever seen. If he had had to give it a name, he supposed... he would have called it a horse? Though, there was something reptilian about it too. It was completely fleshless, it's black velvety coat clinging to its skeleton, of which every bone was visible. Its head was dragonish, it's pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from its withers - vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the early morning gloom in the shadows of the forest, it looked eerie and sinister.

"What Harry? There's nothing there." Hermione said puzzled

"No, that horse, Can't you see it? Between the Oak and the Elm? It's black, skeletal and has bat-like wings. White eyes."

"No Harry, I can't" Hermione grabbed his elbow. He flinched at the touch. She frowned at the familiar reaction but didn't say anything.

There was something strangely fascinating about it. It was oddly beautiful. He took a step closer to it. It didn't move away but turned it white eyes to stare at him.

He took another step closer, slowly. Hermione called his name softly, but he ignored her. How could she not see it? He felt strongly drawn to it as it let him go right up to it. He offered it a hand cautiously.

It snorted, steam rising from its nostrils in the cold morning air. Its boney skin was surprisingly soft, covered in a fine layer of black velvety down. And it's boney frame hid surprisingly strong sinus muscles. He stroked it's nose for a moment before an odd, shrieking cry echoed through the trees like the call of some monstrous bird. The creature, whatever it was, looked up suddenly, back into the trees. It looked at him one more time, nosed at his chest briefly, then disappeared into the trees. Leaving a slightly dazed Harry behind.

"Harry?" Hermione called again, "Harry what's wrong?"

"There was a creature here. Some sort of horse I think, you couldn't see if for some reason. I said hello, but then something called it back into the forest." He said jogging over to her.

They continued around the edge of the forest, but Hermione looked very worried, glancing over at his every few meters as if he were going mad.

"I'm not crazy it was there, and so is magic. Maybe it's like the Basilisk, only I could hear it because I'm a Parselmouth. I'll look it up and tell you about it later on okay?"

"Okay Harry," Hermione agreed, sounding shaken, but relieved.

They ran into Hagrid on the way back from the Quidditch changing rooms, as he was coming out of the forest.

"'ello you two, yer up early!" He called.

"Hello Hagrid," Hermione said

"Oh! You might know!" Harry exclaimed excitedly.

"Yeah? What'cha after Harry?" He asked, his beetle black eyes cringing as he smiled fondly at them.
"Harry saw something in the trees this morning, on our run," Hermione said.

"I could see it, skeletal and horselike, with wings. Hermione couldn't see it though. They were pulling the carriages this year too, but no-one else could see them then either. Ron thought I was nuts. But it let me touch it this morning, so I know I wasn't just seeing things."

Hagrid nodded at him, "Yeah … yeah, I', not surprised you'd be able ter see 'em, Harry," he said seriously, "Thestrals,"

"What are they?" Harry asked curiously, "I didn't notice them in 'Fantastic Beasts'."

"No, they're not in there, they're in the 'Monster Book' though. Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em in here. They aren’ unlucky like many think. They’re dead clever an’ useful! Course, this lot don’ get a lot o’ work, it’s mainly jus’ pullin’ the school carriages unless Dumbledore’s takin’ a long journey an’ don’ want ter Apparate. But the only people who can see Thestrals, are people who have seen death." Hagrid said seriously.

Harry frowned, "why couldn't I see them at the end of the second year then? We took the carriages to the train at the end of the term, that's the first time I would have encountered them. I saw my mum die, why did I see the Thestrals before now."

"You were probably too young to understand it, Harry. You saw it but maybe didn't really understand what it meant till now?" Hagrid suggested.

"Oh..." Harry said, "the dementors, I couldn't remember that night, till the dementors. That's when I remember it. It was just sound at first, but then I saw it. In my dreams, her dying. That's why I can see them now, I can remember it now, I understand it now." He murmured.

Hermione squeezed his hand gently.

"Come down to me hut Monday after class," Hagrid suggested, "we can have a cuppa, and I'll take you to see them if you like? I'll be going in to check on them again then. They'll be foaling soon."

They farewelled Hagrid and went up to the Room of Requirement to have breakfast while Harry prepared for the tournament.

Harry spent most of the weekend sprawled in front of the fire in the room of requirement reading 'Everything you need to know about everything, a students primer." It was amazing how much made sense now that the very basics were being explained. He was amazed at how much he had missed. Especially when he then went back and read his first, second and third-year texts. everything just seemed to click into place. It was painfully obvious now that a lot of the basics the teachers had assumed they all knew. They hadn't reviewed or gone over it. It was assumed that half the class had been raised knowing it and therefore didn't need a refresher, and the other half had been giving an introductory packet that explained it all. Know having the basics, it made such a difference. And he noticed he was having a lot less trouble understanding the theory he had previously struggled with now he had the basics.

He trudged up to the dorm room after curfew, avoiding a Malfoy like grin from Ron, and crawled into bed. He forced himself to finish off 'Magic’s Real: what to now you know the extraordinary is really ordinary, a muggleborn guide.’ It was long, and his eyes were spreading aching from working all day, but he used one of the new study spells and spelled the book to read aloud to him while he took notes. The book was fascinating. It talked about the basics of how the magical word was structured, the ministry and the government and the class system. It sounded similar to the muggle feudal system in the medievals. It talked about the statute of secrecy, why it was there and the
exceptions to the rules. It explained the education system OWLs, NEWTS and available post-NEWT Mastery studies. It explained different communication and transportation options, basic places, how to get there and what survives they provided; St Mungo's Hospital, the ministry visitor entrance, Nockturn, Diagon and Hookturn Ally's and Hogsmeade to name a few. It even discussed jobs in the wizarding world and what they wore. The thing it didn't cover, though it mentioned, was the bank, and social classes and etiquette. It was 3 in the morning by the time Harry had finished. He thought he might finally be exhausted enough to probably sleep without nightmares.

They spent most of Sunday reviewing all the spells in the repertoire so far. Now that the theory made sense, it was a lot easier, to go over the first three and a bit years worth of spells. It was tiring, but by the end of the day, Harry could cast the first and second-year spells silently, he was also surprised by just how many spells were in their books that they didn't look at in class. Harry's theory was that if he wasn't going to as advanced as the other champions he could at least be highly familiar with the spells he did know, and be both highly competent at them, but also very familiar with how they could be used. Harry and Hermione actually had a lot of fun, trying to outdo each other on who could come up with the most uses and the most outlandish uses for different spells.

He spent a good few hours before bed meditating and doing the introductory exercises to get a feel of his magic. He worked through all the children exercises, but still didn't have any luck. Harry was so tired when he finally got to bed, he didn't get any nightmares.

On Monday morning on their run, Hermione said, "So did you get any sleep this weekend? I know you wanted to finish that list. And you were already tired before."

"Not much sleep no, that's pretty normal, you know I have trouble sleeping. I've always had nightmares. It's a bit more intense lately but nothing new," he hedged knowing better than avoiding the question, but not wanting to discuss the string of persistent horrid dreams. It was like second-year all over again. He didn't normally have nightmares about the Dursley's this far into the school year. They'd normally petered off by now. And he hadn't had nightmares about Second Year since Christmas of the year before. But the shunning of the school seemed to bring everything back. The Dursleys, his uncle's belt, his aunts frying pan, Harry hunting, the basilisk, voices in the wall, being hexed in the back in the corridors. He'd even started having nightmares about the dementors, his parents being murdered, Quirelmort and the unicorn in the forest dying from back in First Year. It was a wonder he was getting any sleep at all.

"I finished most of the books," he continued, changing the topic, "I haven't even started the Gringotts one or the Pureblood culture and Wizarding etiquette one. They can wait for the moment, etiquette and banking won't help me not die I don't think. But I am mostly caught up except for those two. I can just focus on working ahead now. And figuring out how to keep us safe, and who's manipulating us. I have just started to read that book you summarised about the different ways to control and manipulate people, 'Controlling Magics and Their Counters'. So I can start practising the detection spells. I think we need to work on Occlumency. It's clear someone is doing something fishy, but we cannot afford to find out before we can protect that knowledge. So work on that, and protection spells and things.

agreed."

"Sounds like a plan, we'll make a start after our homework tonight."

"Oh, I wanted to ask you what you thought of potions actually. Even after the primers, it doesn't make sense."
"What do you mean?" Hermione said perplexed.

"The primer, in the Potions section. It helps but not enough."

It had helped, it explained exactly what chop and dice and what the difference between crushing, powdering and grinding was and why they were important. He had spent an hour practising with herbs and vegetables Winky lent him from the kitchens. The primer also explained to him how to activate the ingredient's magic through by using disown magic, subtly during the preparation and how to infuse the potion with magic with his string (widdershins or deosil, direction matters.) It also showed what colour was what. Lemon Yellow and Buttercup Yellow were vastly different as was Sea Green and Peacock Green.

"It tells you the basic important things, but it doesn't explain why things react the way they do. Just the things you need to know, like colour shades, and ingredient prep. I want to know why a boil cure will explode if you don't take it off the fire before the snake fangs go it. It doesn't say what ingredient does what and why. I have been trying to make a table of correspondence with all the ingredients and their different reactions to different things. It would help me understand it better, and compensate when Malfoy or his goons toss something in my cauldron. It also doesn't talk about the effects of different preparations, or storing and how much magic to put in and how to feel the potion. And I know that matters, it has to, different potions feel different. But the book just looks at the importance of magic in preparation, and stirring, and using your magic to infuse and power the potion. It kept me up till about 2 am. It's the only subject that doesn't make perfect sense now that I have done the introduction books."

"Hmm, I never really thought of the why's behind steps in potions. I just figured it was like maths, 2+2=4. It didn't really matter why I guess as long as I did it in the right steps, like an algebra equation. I can see how it would frustrate you though. You might find another book in the library about it though. I think potions are equations harry. Or that's my understanding of it." She suggested as they ran along the edge of the forest instead of the lake.

"Hmm, I'll check the Room out later, that seems to be good for finding books."

They started their homework at lunch so they could spend some time with Hagrid after class that day. Two Thestrals gave birth while they were there. Hagrid got Harry and Hermione to help him, help the Thestrals through it. It was both horrifyingly disgusting, but beautiful and brilliant all at once. Harry loved every minute of working with and caring for the strange animals, even if it was bloody.

"Can I come and help you in the forest with the animals more often Hagrid? That was fascinating, I really like animals. I'm up early? I'll work hard and be useful, I promise," he begged, feeling more excited and curious than he had in a long time, "I like animals, they don't lie like people, treat them right and they treat you right. What you see is what you get. Please, Hagrid, I'll be really useful, you won't regret it."

Hagrid chuckled, "yer remind me of Charlie Weasley ye do, talking like that. Didn't know you liked animals that much Harry?" He asked.

"I've always like animals. I enjoy your class, I just never really had a chance to do more, never thought to ask, was never allowed to ask question's at the Dursleys," he mumbled looking at his feet,

"I don't really now I could ask, but I don't know what this year doing to bring. I need all the help and knowledge I can get. Hermione has been reading up on the past tournaments. But there is always one creature based task. I want to prepare for it and have as much experience with different animals as I can if I want to survive. I don't know what it will be, and I can't as for help on the tasks, but I can at least try and learn all I can about animals, and asking to learn more about them in general, isn't asking
for help in the tournament," Harry grinned, "at least this sort of study and preparation is enjoyable." Harry explained with a happy grin, that Hermione couldn't actually remember seeing on his face in much too long.

"Alright," Hagrid said, "you come at dawn, and I'll take you with me on my rounds in the first. Some things happen at night, but we'll see how we go."

"Thanks, Hagrid!" Harry said.

"We can move our runs to the morning or evening as needed to work around your schedule Hagrid," Hermione offered.

Harry was trudging up to the Owlery later the following night. He was under the cloak, it was well after curfew. He figured if he was up after curfew already, he may as well take a moment to see Hedwig. He had some of her favourite treats in his pocket. Maybe he would be able to persuade her to forgive him. He'd missed her, her warm presence was soothing. He'd been insanely busy all day. With was a good distraction. He had spent a good few hours that morning with Hagrid that morning after his run with Hermione, looking after Hyppogriff with a sprained wing. He'd managed to perfect the Protago and the Point Me spell that afternoon after he had finished his homework. He was toying with using Latin, to direct the spell, that usually was only meant to point North. It would be so good if he could just ask it to point out where something specific was. He thought it would work, he just needed to work on his Latin. He was pretty good with languages, but he hadn't managed to get it to do anything except point north or spin confusedly.

Hedwig was easily spotted up in the Owlery. He was surprised she wasn't out actually. He pulled the hood of the cloak off his head and whistled softly to her. He held up an arm.

He'd really missed her. He didn't often get mail, but she nearly always intercepted his mail or somehow just new when people needed to write to him. It was very rare for him to get mail not delivered by her. He hated the fact he couldn't use her to send letters all the time. He wanted to be mad at Sirius for pointing it out, but he was right. She was too obvious, too easily spotted and tracked. He'd have to come up with somewhat to protect her, maybe give her a Notice-me-not charm? One that maybe only worked on wizards? Though not having his relatives noticing her would be good... And maybe something to keep her safe from tracking spells. He wondered idly if it was deliberate. He hated to think bad of Hagrid, he had given Harry Hedwig, his first ever present. But was it deliberate? She was the most noticeable owl in the owlery and there were hundreds of them, she was the only Snowey. It had not even taken him 5 seconds to find her amongst all the owls there. Even when half of them at least were out hunting.

Hedwig landed on the sill next to him, instead of his outstretched arm. She watched him coolly, her golden eyes luminous in the dark.

He got up and went over to her, but she snapped her beak when he went to touch her. He tried holding out an owl treat to her. She turned her back reproachfully at him and didn't move from where she was perching.

"Still mad at me huh?" He said wistfully, soft so not to disturb the other owls.

She ignored him.

"It's not my fault. Your one of my best friends. I love you dearly, your my very favourite owl, my very favourite of any and all avians, even Fawks." That got her attention. He held his arm out again.
She gave a reproachful hoot but glided over to his arm and accepted the treat delicately from him.

"Your brilliant, I know it, you know it. Me not sending you is not at all a reflection on you or your ability," he whispered to her, I know your the best. But if I send you with a letter everyone will know. People are nuts here. There obsessed with me, and someones trying to kill me. Again. People are trying left, right and centre to manipulate me. Everyone knows your my owl. I love you, but I don't trust them not to use you to get to me. You're so beautiful, but it also makes you stand out, so people could track you very easily. It's not a criticism!" He hurried, "I don't want you hurt. You are too important. I also don't want everyone knowing my business. It's not that I doubt you or don't trust you. I know if you had to you could totally throw off a follower or fight of someone trying to steal your mail. I don't want it to be necessary. I will always choose you first and for most, but at the moment, people are out to get me and thereby you. It's not safe." he cast a furtive look around and cast a privacy ward, "I wouldn't even put it past Dumbledore or whoever is trying to kill me, to put spells on you or try and hurt you to keep track of me. It wouldn't even surprise me if he orchestrated Hagrid giving me you in my first year. I would change it. I'd always choose you. Any day. But I just need to be careful until I can come up with a way to keep you safe and something to let you not be recognised if we don't want it. Okay? I couldn't bear it if you were hurt."

He stroked her back as she nibbled gently on his ear, before ruffling her feathers and shifting on his arm. He carried her closer to the window and lifted his arm so she could glide out of the window into the night to hunt.

He went back to the common room after that. He knew he could study there infant the fire, but he went up to his bed and pulled out his books. While he had spent a lot of time by the fire with Hermione, books spread out all around them on the floor doing homework, it was more comfortable on his bed. It was warm (Winky had charmed it, she drew runes into the posts and charged them with elf magic) and it was quiet. He had done wards. And it also was a bit safe when he got too emersed. There were wards he had cast, proximity alerts, silencing and privacy charms. A stinging hex if he didn't want to be disturbed.

He fell into a routine quickly over the next couple of days. He would go for a run early in the morning with Hermione before breakfast and often snuck out earlier to help Hagrid out in the forest, or in the evening before curfew. Harry and Hermione would join Ron for breakfast in the great hall. Hermione would try to make them talk to each other, it would be awkward and unpleasant. Or she and Harry would quiz each other on the reading for class from the night before and revise ahead. At lunch, Harry would often sneak off to the Room of Requirement. It was easier eating lunch up there away from prying eyes, where winky could give him a full meal, as opposed to smuggling snakes into his bag or pockets between classes. Sometimes Hermione joined him up there for lunch, sometimes she had lunch with Ron in the great hall. Homework often was done straight after class, though sometimes he stayed with Hagrid depending on what animals he was working with that afternoon. Harry and Hermione would have dinner in the great hall with Ron. It was often strained. Then they would go to the Room of Requirement to finish homework and study for the tournament. He had started going through old tournament tasks and using them as practise tests. They would work out how they would have solved one, and prepared the spells accordingly. It wasn't much but it might come in handy. It was scary, but also fascinating, and he was amazed at how much he was learning. Harry had started frantically going over every defence spell he could get his hands on. It was slow going, the more above his grade he went the longer it took him to master them. The flameproofing spells were especially difficult. They had started looking at them when in revising old task, they kept coming across fire elemental creatures, Firecrabs, Ifrit's, Kitsunes, Thunderbirds, a Hellhound and a Cherufe (though how they imported that one all the way from Chile he didn't know). Flameproofing spells seemed a sensible thing to learn after that. They were however notoriously fickle and hard to rely on. It was much better to wear flame-resistant clothes or inscribe thins with runic arrays. But who knows it may not be the first task. They went back to the common
room at curfew and do individual reading they'd set themselves. They'd tell each other about the next morning on their run. When not doing homework they started moving on to more advanced spells.

They hadn't forgotten Occlumency though. They continued to practice in the evenings, often in the privacy of the Room of Requirement. Harry was much better at clearing his mind than Hermione, but he was having a lot more trouble getting a feel for his magic.

They had carefully started tentatively practising Legilimancy on each other so they had something to practice Occlumency on. It was difficult and felt strongly intimate, but neither of them had managed to slip into the other's mind. They weren't sure if that was their lack of prowess at the spell or the ability at Occlumency. Harry thought he had felt heroines magic once though. They had both been meditating, holding hands. Harry had as normal, tried to sink deep into himself, to find his magic, but all he could feel inside was a tangled black knot. Writhing. Hermione helped him through some of the exercises, and he can actually feel something in his fingertips as if he was holding his wand. It was amazing. It feels odd though. But the more he pushes the further away it seems. All knotted inside. When Hermione suggested trying Legilimence on her, so he can feel hers, he was hesitant. Neither of them was sure how good they were at Occlumency, and it felt horribly intimate, he didn't want to invade her privacy. But she was his best friend, he trusted her, and she him. So he took her up on her offer, trusting that she wouldn't have suggested it if she hadn't been okay with it.

It's a strange spell. Looking straight into Hermione's eyes, and casting the spell, willing his mind, his magic to touch hers. He doesn't expect it to work the first time. Not when he can hardly feel his own magic and any attempt he made at feeling or controlling over the amount of magic he used was more a fluke that fineness. He could do magic, there was no doubt about it, but he couldn't feel it inside him, just a tingle in his fingers when he did a spell and a strange power inside that he's subconsciously aware of but slips away whenever he tries to focus on it inside him.

But he managed it, he slipped into her mind and it was odd.

The book was right the human mind is complex and not at all like a book to be perused at will. It was horribly intimate and he could feel Hermione; what she's feeling, the slight chill of her skin from not having a jumper on, her slight anxiety about what they're doing, her burning conviction. He caught flashes of images, thoughts and words, memories. But she seems to draw him in, down and suddenly he's surrounded by fire. It's hot but not threatening. It's warm and he can feel her revel in it. That was her magic. That's what it felt like, to feel it inside you. It's alive and part of her and singing in every cell of her being, louder and brighter than any external magic he had ever felt. It's like home, and safety and family all at once and it's wonderous.

He pulled away, hiding his eyes. He'd never felt anything like it before. Never felt home, or safety, or warmth like he did when he felt what she did with her magic. It left him aching and lonely and he wondered if that was what family felt like if that was what people found when they had religion and a god, something bigger than them to believe in, to be certain of.

Hermione didn't touch him, knowing that more than ever, at that moment, he wouldn't have coped. She sat close though and humped softly, under her breath. It was a bit soothing but doesn't ease the painful ache in his chest, the emptiness in his soul. now he's tasted it, he suddenly understands how wrong he felt inside.

"Is it always like that?" He asked hoarsely.

She nodded, "I wasn't always aware of it at first, but yes, it's always been there. Everyone with magic feels something like that."

"Everyone has that?"
"Yes, Harry your's felt...." She trailed off tears in her eyes now.

"It's like it's blocked...." He trailed, "the books didn't talk about it, but I think someones tied it up, shut it away, bound it, made it all messy and tangled and sick inside. I can use it but not feel it, control it or really channel it. I can feel other magic, but not my own. Most people don't still have accidental magic but I do. I think it's a miracle I can do anything at all, not being able to feel it. It felt so..." He trailed off pressing a hand to his mouth to stop whatever embarrassingly raw painful sound was trying to escape.

He hunched in on himself. A soundless howl of agony escaping him before he can catch it, quench it.

Magic, it had felt so... so warm, so whole. Gods, he'd never felt anything like it. Never felt so whole, so complete like that. And yet, he hadn't, it wasn't him, it wasn't his magic. It was her's, it was but an echo of what it really felt like, what it would feel like if he'd truly had it. He hadn't known how right it could feel inside or how wrong, he realised, he felt inside by comparison. Gods he felt so alone. So empty and cold. So painfully empty and cold and wounded, and everything felt wrong and it was never going to end! He moaned, rocking back and forth slowly, his hands pressed over his mouth hiding the silent scream that his mouth contorted into.

He hated her then. In that moment, as tears slid down his cheeks unbidden, faster than he had ever thought possible; in that fleeting moment, he hated her. He hated her for showing him what he didn’t have. For showing him what was broken inside. For showing him what he was missing, and what being whole felt like. Because until that moment he hadn’t been aware of how much it hurt. Now he could feel his soul crying out in pain and anger at how wrong it all was inside. He was so empty. And so cold. It was agony. He’d always been lonely, so lonely, he had always been alone. But he had caught a shadow of what warmth and safety felt like. What love felt like. What home felt like. And now he knew, he ached for it. he ached to feel whole and alive inside. But it was out of reach. He felt like he’d never be able to find it, not warmth, not safety not that warmth of having something bright and special inside that meant he'd never be alone.

And he hated her for that. For taking the bliss of ignorance away.

But it wasn’t her fault, he reminded himself, mentally yanking himself out of the spiral of despair. He’d figure it out. He wiped his eyes furiously but they would stop leaking everywhere, he thought furiously. The tears just kept pouring out of him. He would figure out what was wrong, he'd fix it and if he ever found out, who had done this to him, he would tear their world apart. He would tear them down and laugh while their world burned like his was, like his did. May the Gods have mercy upon their soul for he shall have none.

A blanket appeared around his shoulders. He flinched violently but pulled it tighter. It was warm. Wink must have done it. It thawed something painful and frosty inside, and he bit down hard on his fist to stop another sob, as the small kindest seemed to hurt. Dobby handed him a cup. It spelt of chamomile. He sipped. It was soothing and he felt his eyes slipping shut, sleep pulling him, even as he cried.

He slept.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning:
Harry has an emotional melt down.
References to past abuse - reference to his aunt and uncle, it eludes to the ways that they have abused him (emotional and physical abuse)

Don't think I'm bashing Hermione in this chapter, with her dismissal of Harry. She’s very logical and believes in books and things she can see. If it’s not in a book, logical or something she has proof of she’s a skeptic. This was in the books too in how she treats Luna.
Owls are received, plots are revealed, plans are created and Harry starts to show a hint of backbone at people who are assholes.

Chapter Notes

The good news is I am now a few chapters ahead, so I have some wiggle room if like gets challenging, so posts should be regularly once a week.
Bad news is I'm not giving you an extra one today (sorry-not-sorry 😊)

Happy reading.

He woke up feeling considerably calmer. It still hurt, sleeping hadn't changed anything, but he felt a bit less like he was drowning under the weight of it all.

"You okay?" Hermione asked worriedly.

He nodded not feeling brave enough to say anything yet.

"That was..." Hermione trailed,

"I know... oddly intimate, I feel like I was intruding..." Harry continued.

"Me too... your magic through..."

Harry nodded, squeezing his eyes shut briefly, "feels fucking wrong? If yours is what it's meant to be like?"

She nodded.

"Nothings ever simple is it?"

"so theirs something wrong with it. Like it's tied up. It's all wrong, it's so wrong Hermione..." He stopped taking a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

It did remind him though, of the conversation they had had down by the kitchens about someone possibly controlling them with magic. They had started working on protecting themselves from future attempts now. They had spent the previous Wednesday night pouring over books in the Room of Requirement looking up the diagnostics spells. They practised casting them on each other, trying to figure out if anything was wrong with them. It was not exactly healing magic, but it's not normal either. It was like channelling their own magic, through their wand into another, like Legilimancy. They were not very good at it yet. It required more finesse than either of them really had yet, the spells were well above Fourth Year level. Harry and Hermione's cores not yet matured enough for the level of finesse and control. But they did manage a general diagnostic and learnt that yes,
something was wrong. There were spells and potions on them and Harry's diagnostic was so muddled and confusing that they knew that whatever it was, it was big. Things were starting to click into place now, Harry thought. And it was not painting a pretty picture. They needed a more advanced diagnostic to work it all out though, so they could work on undoing whatever had been done to them. They hadn't mastered it yet, but they had started learning low-level protection wards and charms. Harry had started making runic bracelets too. He'd been trying to use different runic arrayed, carved into leather bands, coupled with some potions and spells, to help protect them from future manipulative magic. It wasn't finished yet, and the Arithmancy to combine all the aspects was proving devilishly difficult. He hadn't even tried activating the Runes yet, worried he had calculated something wrong and it would blow up in his face. But it was something, and he was making progress on it. It would be dead useful if he got it right.

"Come on," Hermione said, breaking him out of his thoughts, "let's go back to the tower, I'm knackered."

He woke early the next morning not feeling at all rested, his sleep having been plagued by the feel of Hermione's magic, and disown being snatched away from him.

Hedwig was perched on donna covered feet when he woke. He blinked owlishly at her and wondering how she'd flown through his hangings. She gazed at him. He blinked and put his glasses on. She came into slightly less blurred focus. She had letters clutched to her beak. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and took the letters from her, pulling out an owl treat for her from his trunk.

Harry opened Sirius's letter first.

"Harry

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky in case the owl is intercepted - we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose. They must be very clever to outsmart Dumbledore. Be on the lookout, be on your guard.

I've sent an owl to Dumbledore. He has no idea who did it and has tried everything he can to get you out of the tournament. He'll keep an eye out for whoever entered you. Don't worry, he'll make sure your safe."

Harry snorted derisively and had to stop himself from crumpling the letter in anger. More Dumbledore. Everything went back to him, didn't it.

"I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

Sirius"

His relief at being able to talk to Sirius was drowned out by anger at his godfather and at Dumbledore. Not only should Sirius not be back in the country. He didn't want his only remaining family getting caught because of him. Plus did he really need to go blabbing to Dumbledore again? He had written to his godfather, not Dumbledore, but his godfather had gone and written to Dumbledore before saying anything to Harry. He hadn't even asked his permission first, before
blabbing to the headmaster. Just like over the summer.

And, since when had Dumbledore ever kept him safe? The door to the third-floor corridor back in his First Year had been locked with a simple First Year spell for Christ's sake. First years had stumbled apron it and managed to get through all the traps. Dumbledore certainly hadn't kept him safe from the rest of the school shunning him, hexing him. Not back in his Second Year, and not now. None of the adults who were meant to be keeping him safe had ever stepped in when the student body turned on him.

Harry remembered how angry he'd been over the summer too when he'd gotten Sirius's reply. That too had talked all about Dumbledore.

"Harry" it had started.

"I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumours that have reached me here. Dumbledore agrees with me that your scare hurting after a dream like that is very worrying, he's as worried about it as I am. If it hurts again, goes straight to him. He says he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement. He's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius"

He had felt a bit betrayed then too. He let out a huff of frustration. He was sure Sirius had meant well, but... He shoved Sirius's letter into his trunk, and into the small box he kept all the letters he received in.

It all came back to Dumbledore. Dumbledore had paced him at the Dursley's and had kept him there. Never checking on him, never listening when Harry begged not to be sent back. Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to get him and possibly manipulated things to keep Harry ignorant. Dumbledore had given Hagrid Harry's vault key? How did he get it? He had forced the House Elves, to keep Harry on a diet, to keep him skinny and weak. Was it Dumbledore behind Madam Pomfrey suddenly forgetting about his checkup and shots back in his first year? Surely if she was as good a Mediwitch as everyone claimed, she would have noticed something wrong with Harry? She should have noticed the Abuse. But she didn't.

Then there was the fact that Dumbledore told the whole school about the third-floor corridor back in his First Year, which was practically asking for trouble. He then hadn't even bothered to ward it, an age line would have been perfect. But he didn't. All the clues had fallen into Harry's lap, and somehow Harry had thrown all caution to the wind and went tearing after it, not thought to his own safety. He never would have poked is nose into trouble like that before Hogwarts, at the Dursley's it would have ended up with a hiding, and being locked in the cupboard with no food for days. That wasn't like Harry at all. It was so stupid.

And 12-year-olds had solved the mystery of the chamber of secrets, what was in it, and how to get in. How could Dumbledore not have known? He'd been aware of it for 50 years. He lived in the Castle. How had he not found out? And, how had he not known a powerfully evil object has been in the school. Surely the wards would have told him? Had he really known and done nothing? With everything Harry was starting to see, he would put it past the manipulating old nut. But why? Was it a test for Harry? What was he aiming for? And then there were all the signs on spells and potions on Harry that the Headmaster would have had a chance to place.

The Headmaster seemed to have fingers in every part of Harry's life, and not at all in a good way.
Harry shivered. how on earth was he going to untangle himself from Dumbledore and keep himself safe? Everyone looked up to Dumbledore, he had a lot of power. And what was Harry? A nobody. With no family or adult to have his back, and no one to stand up for him against powerful malicious adults.

He shivered, pulled his blanket tighter around his shoulders and tore Bill's letter open, hoping desperately for some good news, advice, anything.

He was disappointed. It talked about day to day, non-confidential things at the bank and how his trip back to Egypt went. He'd even asked if Harry had had a chance to try out that spell he'd shown him over the summer. Nothing important.

Harry enjoyed it anyway, he liked talking to Bill, but he had really been hoping he would have left some sort of advice.

Wait a minute, he thought.

Bill had shown him and Charlie a nifty Egyptian spell that hid a message behind another. A few hard to pronounce Egyptian words would cause the message you wanted to hide, to sink into another bit of parchment, and could only be revealed with the correct counter-charm, that was equally difficult to pronounce and almost unheard of in most English speaking circles. Once the message was hidden, you then wrote a carefree decoy letter over the top. The counter charm would swap them over, and reveal the true letter. He'd been so excited to try it out when Bill had first shown him and Charlie.

Harry hurriedly pulled out his wand and started tracing it over the letter in the complex letter-lock counter-charm. He grinned as the writing faded out then back in to reveal an altogether different letter:

"Harry

That's very odd and very worrying. Especially considering you're being forced to compete. Your guardian should have stepped in and stopped it, you're a Minor. You can't agree to magical contracts like that without guardian permission. Especially as the age requirements, were woven into the goblets settings. At the very least a vow or oath of some kind should have gotten you out of it, you should not have, in any way, been made to compete. Very odd, that no one did. I'm fishing around Gringotts for a copy of the contract, hopefully, that will shed some light on what's going on. I'll need you to authorise me to act in your stead in Gringotts though. The Goblins normal only give out copies of contracts to the person, or their guardian if they're a minor, and they take privacy and confidentiality very seriously. I don't know who your magical guardian is, so I can't ask them. (You should ask them to show you their copy, they would have gotten one.) As I said before most contracts would have needed your guardian's permission to bind out you to one... or at least have you compete in one. If you sign the form enclosed, the Goblins will let me have access to your account details and talk to your account manager for you. They may be able to help you out. Your family was very wealthy and they like to help the clients who make them rich. (Crude but true, goblin culture is different from ours. It revolves around gold and blood, they're a warrior race)

I can grab a copy of the contract for you, once you've signed the form. We'll figure it out, Harry, I promise.

Also, I don't know if you've ever seen a form like this before, but in layman's terms, basically, it lets me act as your voice and representative in the bank, similar to your guardian but with less authority over your gold. This lets the Goblins tell me what I need to know to help you sort out your accounts, and ask questions in your stead. I promise I won't abuse your trust, Harry. But it's the only way for me to get the contract for you without know who your guardian is. I'm guessing yours don't know
either or they would have least looked at it with you, it's terribly negligent of them... anyway, if you sign the form, it will automatically go straight to Gringotts, but it will leave you (and me) a copy of it, for our records.

Sorry about Ron, he's being a jealous prat, he'll get over it eventually, he always does.

Hang in there, we'll sort this out.

Bill"

A wave of relief flowed through him. The relief he thought Sirius's letter should have brought. and didn't that say something about Sirius? But Bill's letter had almost raised more questions than it had answered. What guardian? As far as he knew Petunia had never even been to the banks, and if she'd gotten a copy of the contract (why would she bother) she would have burned it sooner than sitting him down and explaining it. Though if someone actually needed a guardian's permission to enter him, he thought angrily, she certainly would have given it, if it meant him dying. They would love to get rid of him.

And what vow or oath. He had said he hadn't done it, why hadn't that been enough? Did that mean to say his guardian, whoever it was, could have gotten him out of it? And if they didn't why not? What were they trying to gain in making Harry compete in a tournament that would kill him? That someone else entered him in to try and kill him. Unless it was his guardian who entered him, who wanted him dead. Gods! How many people were out to get him!

He hoped some of the introduction books would explain it, he was very confused. The more he read the more he realised he didn't know. He wasn't too sure which book would cover contracts and vows though.

He sighed and signed the form Bill had sent him. It glowed gold before flashing away, leaving him a grey copy of it. He recast the letter-lock charm on it stowed it in his trunk.

Charlie's letter was the same as Bill's, in that it talked about day to day innocuous things. It just talked briefly about a game of pick up Quidditch they'd held on the reserve, nattered on about schedules being changed around and how he was working to a different part of the reserve now.

Harry repeated the counter-charm he had used on Bills letter. The text changed, to reveal:

"Harry.

Hang in there mate, officially I can't say anything. You'll be seeing me this year though. (Read between the lines and burn this letter once you read it. I'll lose my job if anyone finds out I've even said that much. Before you feel bad, while I love my job I care about you too. So it's worth the risk. I'd hate for something to happen to you when I could have helped. So don't feel guilty Harry, I know you will.)

I can't believe (well I can and that sucks) that you were entered into the tournament. You'll have to be very careful. I'd start going over the advanced defence against the dark arts and care of magical creatures (if you catch my drift, again burn this letter)

I don't know much about magical contracts other than the usual, and I don't know what kind they used. Bill may be able to find out for you though. See if you can find out what kind of contract it is and if you can get a hold of it. (Again Bill may be able to help if you can't ask your Magical Guardian. Bill's better at contracts than I am. He deals with them loads at Gringotts. Check exactly what the contract says though, then you might be able to find a loophole to exploit or maybe just
focus on surviving and not winning.)

I'll do some looking for you and send you a list of book recommendations in my next letter. But I'm not big on reading, I'm more of a doing person, but you'll want to look at the book I'm going to send you later tonight, when I get back to my cabin (I'm on lunch break at the moment, out in one of the back fields) I know some good ones on dragons you might like (again please burn the letter)

Charlie"

Again, contracts and magical guardians. Wait... What!?

Harry re-read the letter. Charlie worked with dragons. Charlie was coming to Hogwarts this year. Probably with work. He would lose his job if anyone found out he'd told Harry that, no one was meant to know. He would be coming to Hogwarts with work. Dragons. By the Gods, one of the tasks was dragons. He was glad he was sitting down or he thought he would have fallen over. Dragons, he had to face a dragon. Norberta had been hard to handle and she had been a hatchling. Gods he was going to die, be burnt alive, and leave only a pile of soldering bones.

If only it was a snake or something, that he had to deal with. He could just ask it nicely. Although dragons were reptiles, maybe they were related and could speak Parseltongue too? Or maybe dragons used a something similar, like a Dialect. That may work. If Charlie was bringing dragons, maybe he could sneak down beforehand and test it out. That was an idea. He would need back up plans but that was a start. He'd need to look into different breeds, maybe Charlie could hint which ones were being brought. He'd been to look into fire protection, and what could slow it down or subdue it. Maybe that fire potion that Snape had used to protect the Philosopher's stone. Potions may be slightly more reliable than fireproofing charms. That or something to let him be quicker. Outrunning Dudley had always worked but he didn't think he could outrun a dragon, and they could fly.

Fly. He could fly. He was good at flying. He liked flying. He could probably out fly a dragon. He'd have to practise, maybe get Fred and George to put him through his paces with some bludgers. He could probably persuade Madam Hooch to let him use some of the practice ones. He could probably get Dobby to charm some for him, like the cursed bludger from his second year. That would be good practice for escaping a dragon and fire. He'd have to figure out how to get his broom to the task though... He only had his wand when he went in... But that wasn't to say he couldn't summon it. They were doing summoning charms at the moment. He could summon his broom and use that to get past the dragon if talking didn't work. He'd have to look into fireproofing his broom though. Maybe coating it in a potion? Or maybe there were some Runes, he could add. But this was a start. A good one. He had to work on summoning charms, he'd actually struggled with it the last lesson, he'd been so distracted. But it was doable. It was a plan. He could work with that.

He paused long enough to crumble Charlie's letter up, incinerate it with a flick of his wand and vanish the ash before he got up going down the common room with Hedwig. He had some time yet, to write back to them, before his run.

"Sirius,

I'll be there and I'll make sure the common room is clear. Please stay safe, I would hate it if anything happened to you because of me. You really needn't have come back here just for me. It's not worth you getting caught and locked up again.

Schools crappy at the moment, they all believe I did it, and have taken to hexing me in the corridors, do you know any food wards or any sort of shield spell I can cast and wear? I've taken to using the cloak between classes. That ever happen to you at school?
Harry

PS - I was writing to you, not Dumbledore. It was the same with over the summer, would you mind not tell him every time I write to you? You're my godfather not him, it's your advice that I'm after.

He didn't want to piss Sirius off, he didn't want his only family angry with him or abandoning him, but he couldn't not say anything.

He wrote to Bill next.

"Bill,

Thank you so much! I'm really grateful for your help, though your letter honestly raised more questions than it answered. But thank you for looking into the contract. I signed the form. Don't worry I trust you, you've been really kind to me, and honest.

You probably know by now that I was raised muggle. Problem was, I didn't get the introduction pack, I didn't even know it existed. Hermione only just lent me her set. So I don't really know anything about anything yet. I'm working on it, but I didn't know (still don't haven't got that far yet) about contracts, or vows or magical guardians. So if there was a way to get out of it with a vow, I didn't know. I would have taken it, I swear. As far as I know, I only have my Muggle Aunt as a guardian. Petunia has never even been to our bank, and if she'd have gotten a copy of the contract (why would she bother?) she would have burned it sooner than sitting me down and explaining it. I didn't know it existed before I got my Hogwarts letter. She didn't tell me anything. Though if someone actually needed guardian permutation, she would probably have given it if it meant me dying. They would love to get rid of me. She hates my guts. It's why I went into the wizarding world so ignorant. If I need a wizard guardian though or have one, I have no idea who it is. McGonagall might know though. I'll ask. I didn't know I'd need a magic one, and if I have one, they've never introduced themselves. With all the times I've nearly been killed at Hogwarts if he is aware of me, he's not going a great job. He probably does not have my best interests at heart, if my Hogwarts experience so far is anything to go by.

Really, thank you for agreeing to look into it. I'm still trying to find my feet here, and need all the help I can get. The more I study the more I realise I don't know, I'm pretty out of my depth still. (Working on it though.) If contracts are the goblins area, I would greatly appreciate any help either of you can offer me.

Also what the hell is an account manager? I don't have one as far as I know. I've only got my trust vault and there's not enough in it to bother having an account manager for... (Sorry, that was rude of me.) All I know is Dumbledore's had by key before I got my letter. He gave it to Hagrid back in my first year when he asked Hagrid to get make sure I got my letter and take me shopping. Griphook took me to my vault. All Hagrid said was that it was what my parents had left me and if I was careful and didn't spend anything unless I really needed it, it should last through school and maybe long enough to get a job. And I have been really careful, my aunt and uncle certainly won't pay to make sure I'm okay. I have been careful where ever I can, but I don't think it will stretch to the Muggleborn intro books there are loads of them. Hermione also said there was a further reading list as well. Anything you can tell me about my account/manager etc would be greatly appreciated. Do the goblins do bank statements or anything? I'm working through the books, so I should be a bit better informed then. Hopefully, I'll be able to get my head around it.

Sorry, it's a bit rambly,

Thank you so much
Harry

Taking a sip from the hot breakfast smoothy, Winky had popped in with, he was about to start Charlie's letter, when there was a tap on the window. He got up to let the owl in. It was a tired looking barn owl, holding a square package.

Freeing the owl of its burden he offered it an arm to perch on, but it soared right back out the window. He opened the package and took out the letter that was sitting on top of a thick, well worn leather-bound book.

"Harry,

Please don't let anyone know you have this book. No one, not even Ron and Hermione (I know you're not talking to Ron at the moment, he's being a prat, I'm really sorry. He'll get over it eventually, he always does.)

This is the book I used to study and take notes in over the course of my training here at the Sanctuary for my Masteries. There are notes for a Care of Magical Creatures and Dragon Keeping. It's only available to those who have an apprenticeship in the field. While it's not illegal for you to be seeing it. It's highly frowned on, and we'll both get in trouble, so keep it secret, please. I've charmed the cover to just be plain dragonhide. Please take good care of it, I know you will, but it's pretty special to me. It should help you prepare for you-know-what. (Burn this letter too.)

I know most of the dragon books in the library are breading them and laws. They won't help you much. I can't tell you what breeds we're bringing because now that we need a fourth, we need to reevaluate who we're bringing. I'll hint at it when I can. But know they won't be any breeds not in this book.

Take care, hang in there. Owl me anytime, questions you have, or even if you just want to vent, I mean it, anything at all.

Charlie."

Harry burnt the letter, his throat aching. They were being so nice to him. He really didn't deserve it. He didn't open the book now though. He desperately wanted to but put it carefully in his trunk under his invisibility cloak, before noting a quick reply.

"Charlie,

Thank you. I'll take good care of it, I promise! I-

Thank you.

Just thank you.

Harry"

Harry looked up as Hedwig hopped over to him across the doona and clicked her beak at the letters, and held out her leg.

"You know I can't send you," Harry sighed, "I want to, you know that. You're the best, but you're also my only family, I would hate for anything to happen to you because they wanted to creep on me. I'll work something out, some sort of charm or rune scheme to keep you safe and noticed when
it's necessary. Okay?"

She held out her leg again.

"Hedwig, I can't," he moaned, his heartbreaking for her.

She snapped her beak and looked at him as if he was an idiot.

He paused at that, thinking for a moment, "What? You're want to take them to the owlery for me?"

Hedwig hooted as if to say, "well obviously who else is going to pick suitable stand-in for me?"

"You're the best"

She nuzzled his cheek. He sighed in relief he was forgiven and handed her the letters.

"I know it sucks, but I'm glad you understand. I know you'll pick good choices. Join me for breakfast? There'll be bacon?"

She hooted again fondly, took his letters in her beak and glided back out the window.

"I got a reply from Charlie, Bill and Sirius!" He told Hermione as they ran around the edge of the forest a short while later.

"Brilliant, what did they say?" She asked.

"Bill's looking into the contract for me, he is puzzled that I was forced to compete, apparently most contracts would have needed mine or my magical guardian's permission. Does one of the books in the intro pack cover magical guardians and contracts? I haven't finished them yet"

"Contracts, yes," she explained, "'Gringotts: A Goblin written guide to help idiot wizards get it right or at least less wrong...' I enjoyed the title of that... goes into it, but vows I thought were in the 'Magic's Real.' Maybe it is the etiquette one though, it's probably considered a tradition or something. Guardians are also in that one but they're basically the same as normal guardians but look after your best interests in the magical world. McGonagall is the magical guardian of all the Gryffindor muggleborns. She also acts in loco parentis for the other Gryffindors if needed too though. She might know your guardian."

"Great I'll read those ones tonight. Yeah, I'll ask her later on."

"What did Charlie say?"

He looked around hastily and cast a silencing charm around them.

"Dragons! One of the tasks is dragons!!!"

"Oh my gosh. They wouldn't!" She exclaimed.

"They would. Really," Harry said drolly, "they used a Cerberus in our first year, that was only hidden by a first-year unlocking spell. That's after they told everyone where it was. It was practically asking for someone to pock around and get killed. Anyway, remember on the platform in September? Charlie said he may see us sooner than we thought. That's what he meant! He knew then what was happening and that dragons would bring him to Hogwarts for one of the tasks."
"What are we going to do?" She squeaked horrified

"Well there are dragon books in the library, and Charlie said he'd send me a book," Harry hedged, deciding it was better not to tell her he had a super-interesting book, that he couldn't let her read. He had too many other seemingly impossible things to deal with right now, he didn't want to add an argument with the only persons still talking to him, to the list.

"I figured I'd just try talking to it though." He continued, "they might have a similar dialect, or just speak snake language, they're related after all. They'd probably be there before the task. I can sneak out and test it beforehand. Or I can try outflying it. I'll look up some more fireproofing spells, and see if there is an adaption of the flame-freezing spell that works on Dragon fire. There is also that fireproof potion Snape used in his riddle to protect the stone. We're learning summoning charms at the moment. I was too distracted last the other day to get it right, but with a bit more practice I should be to summon my broom from the tower, as long as I leave the window open. Or I could probably leave it nearby, depending on where the task is held."

"Wow, you have it all planned out, well done!" She said looking very pleased, "we'd best get to work on our fireproofing then."

"Just as well I've already started the spells," he said.
Chapter Summary

Harry starts prepping for the task, his teachers notice he's doing better in class, and Harry talks to Professor Flitwick about his mum.

Chapter Notes

For the Chapter 9 reviewers, (especially my regulars) thank you for your comments. I have enjoyed them immensely. This ones for you.

CHAPTER TEN!! THIS IS SO EXCITING!

Study was just about the only thing that kept Harry going over the next day or two. There were so many things in his life right now that were out of his control or things he was discovered to be downright terrifying that it better to focus on books and learning. Better to knuckle down and to study harder than he had ever studied before as opposed to panicking about things he couldn't control. Or panicking about the things he didn't like when he was already working on changing them. Such as how much he should but didn't know because people had kept it from him. He was loving it though. Reading kept him busy and distracted but it was also so empowering learning and stimulating his break and not holding back anymore. He'd forgotten how much he had enjoyed it, to just read and immerse himself in the world of books and learning, and not having to hide it. He had forgotten how liberating it was to let himself be smart. To embrace it.

He spent most of his time jumping between studying old tasks and preparing for them, preparing for the dragon and studying ahead. He was practising fireproof charms and fireproofing his robes. He knew it could be done. He knew Madam Malkin's sold potions masters robes that had a range of magic on them to protect against various explosions and substances. He was using Arithmancy to work out how he could use both Runes, spells and a flame proof potion on his robes to hopefully help protect him in the task. The rune side was okay, he knew which Runes would be helpful but there were so many to combine and such a large area to work with, he was thinking he may have to look into sigil magic, which was a little bit more flexible, but just as complex in its own way. Then there was the Arithmancy itself he needed to use to make sure he could combine all the elements properly and in its most effective manner. It was proving challenging, but he was relishing the cool logic of the maths, especially when everything else seemed too abstract. As for the Flameproof potion, there were several, but none specifically for dragon fire. It was rather frustrating.

Harry also perfected the summoning charm. If he was going to face a dragon, he wanted to be able to summon the means to escape it and outfly it. Without any distractions or people trying to surreptitiously hex him, he got it on his first try. He even asked the room for a very long space so he could practice summoning things over long distances. It came up with a long thin hall about twice the length of the great hall, and after a couple of goes, Harry could summon the book he'd been using as practice all the way across the room.
He also worked more on basic wards and other protection spells to help him against both Dumbledore and whoever was trying to kill him. He didn't know enough yet to do proper wards, not like what Bill worked with. Warding took more than just skills in Runes and Arithmancy, it also needed quite a lot of finesse he was coming to learn. Finesse Harry just didn't have, not when he couldn't feel and control the amount of magic he used. It had blown up in his face a few times already when he wasn't careful. But he was learning and had mastered some of the basic ones. And he was getting better at automatically throwing up a shield spell when he thought he felt anything behind him. He was getting better at it and could now shield his back, and dodge out of the way when people tried to hex him in the back. Only the older students were getting him now, he'd managed to block or dodge any hex from his year and younger all week. Though he was getting increasingly jumpier as the days went past, with people hexing him without any warning. He was starting to jump and draw his wand at any sudden movement or noise. It was exhausting being aware and vigilant all the time. He was starting to feel as paranoid as Moody. Moody had the right idea though with constant vigilance. Of course, it wasn't paranoia when there really were people out to get you.

He'd started studying ahead, trying to cram as much from his borrowed copy of the 5th, 6th & 7th-year textbooks as he could. It was harder working on the more advanced spells though, at it took a lot more time. But it was fun too. It was more tiring and took a lot more concentration. It was nice to have to work for it. He hadn't managed to get them silently but he could cast them softly, without having to shout. He'd even managed to practice the Switching spell from transfiguration after dinner. Winky had got him some eggs from the Kitchens and he had practised transfiguring rocks and things to switch out with a real egg, in case he had to use that idea in the task.

Now that he had stopped holding back in class though, his marks had soared. Between no longer holding back and now understanding the material, things were coming quicker and easier. He had even started getting O's on his homework and answering questions in class, to Hermione's pleasure and mock competitiveness. It was a huge release to be able to just focus on doing well in class. He still held back in his spellcasting a bit, not wanting to stand out too much, and he did keep trying discreetly to keep working on silent casting.

The change in his work ethic was being noticed though. He wasn't sure whether to be pleased, offended or worried. He didn't really want the extra attention, it was bad enough having his peers staring at him all the time, making him jumpy.

Snape had called him a cheat when he had handed back their homework back and gave him detention. Harry had been given a pop-test in the detention and told to brew something from memory. He did okay, not perfect but okay, especially considering he hadn't actually brewed the potion before, just read about it. The fact he had remembered the ingredients and the method, was something Harry was inordinately pleased about. He took great pleasure in Snape's momentary look of surprise.

Professor Flitwick, when Harry raised a hand in class to voluntarily answer a question, had been so surprised he squeaked and fell off his stack of books.

McGonagall gave him a test at lunch on Thursday. Harry just filled it in without a word. When Professor asked about the change he just said, "this thing is going to kill me, I have to do better if I don't want to end up dead. No-one else is going to do anything about it."

She seemed to just look at him a long moment but left it at that.

Professor Moody was one of the few teachers who doesn't care about his improvement along with Binns didn't seem to notice. Which lead Harry to the conclusion that he wasn't actually aware of his
students that much at all. He tested that out when he stopped halfway through his homework essay and started writing about Lord of the Rings instead, even going so far as to reference the Silmarillion and the Lord of the Rings appendix in his footnotes. To his incredulity he still got an E, he hands even stayed within the required length, he had ended up 3 inches too long.

So History was put aside as a bust, and not worth paying any attention to. Hermione wasn't pleased, but they had started self-studying. He even wrote to the WEA for the curriculum on their OWL subjects. He'd received quiet the packet, and not just on his subjects either. Turned out there were lots of other OWLs on offer, and the curriculum guides had a whole trove of interesting information that may come in handy. He hadn't had a chance to go into it properly, but he was definitely looking forward to looking into it.

He continued to use earplugs to keep Binns from putting him to sleep, and spent the classes with the textbook, highlighting and annotating the interesting useful bit's and making notes. He also got other texts from the library, to read. It turned out, when Binns wasn't droning on and on about the same 9 goblin rebellions, history was fascinating. He had loved fantasy books as a kid, especially the Lord of the Rings and Silmarillion. This was like that, only better, it had actually happened and was real, his people's stories. Even the goblin rebellions were interesting what it wasn't Binns drowning about them. Honestly, Harry couldn't blame the Goblin for rebelling with the way wizards treated them. He would have too.

Even Professor Sinistra noticed, or more accurately heard about his improvement in his lessons and held him back on after Astronomy on Thursday night.

"I had heard from some of your other teacher's Potter that you had been holding back in class, that you'd improved exponentially. I had hoped the improvement would carry over to my class too," she said sounding a little disapproving.

"Well, Ma'am, the theory yes I've been holding back but the practice of finding stars and drawing the charts not so much ma'am, I really am just terrible at it."

"When was the last time your eyes were examined by an Optiwitch?" She asked seemingly out of nowhere.

"A what?" He said stupidly.

"Your eyes, when were they last checked?"

"Oh... Um..." He said, maybe that was the problem. He'd never once had them checked. But he couldn't say that his glasses were one's Petunia had brought home from a charity bin after a teacher in primary school had complained. They had helped, but not much, he still couldn't see the board in class unless he was in the front row. He was honestly astounded he could actually see the Snitch well enough to play quidditch.

"Yes, oh." She said with disapproval that was coloured by slight amusement, "get them checked next time you're in Hogsmeade. When you have them sorted out, we can reassess where you're at, and have a few remedial sessions to catch you up."

Harry thought it was strangely considerate of her, and beamed.

Flitwick's reaction on Friday morning was perhaps the best though. He pulled Harry aside after morning class. While he questioned Harry, he didn't automatically accuse Harry of cheating. Instead, he actually asked what was going on. It was astounding how reasonable he was about it, adults really were not reasonable beings most of the time, not when it came to him anyway.
"I hate to ask Mr Potter," he had said, "but did Miss Granger assist you with your last essay? It was quite a remarkable improvement and a complete change in writing style. From what I have heard, my class is not the only one you have had a sudden improve in, I was wondering what had prompted the improvement" Professor Flitwick asked gently.

"No sir, I did it on my own," he assured the professor.

"It's remarkably different," his professor congratulated.

"Well sir, Hermione and I had a chat. We have a pretty solid friendship. So I don't need to play stupid to protect our friendship anymore. Hermione prefers someone to challenge her anyway rather than someone playing stupid to stroke her ego. And Ron's not talking to me anyway, so there's no point holding back for his friendship now either. This tournament will kill me if I don't learn as much as I possibly can" Harry said bluntly, not feeling the normal hesitance he did when talking to McGonagall.

Professor Flitwick looked dumbfounded and perhaps even a touch concerned.

"Well I say," he after a moment, "carry on then. Good work Mr Potter. You understand I had to ask, it did look suspicious, but I did wonder if you'd been holding back. Your parents were both very intelligent, especially your mother. She was my favourite you know, one of the top in her year, every year. I expect this level of work in all your essays from now on then, and try to stop holding back on your spell work. I had noticed."

Harry had the decency to blush, "I don't hold you asking against you, Snape and McGonagall have already given me tests to prove I didn't cheat."

"Hmm," he murmured with a slight hint of disapproval, though whether it was at his colleagues' assumption of his cheating, or his lack of honorific in front of his professor's name, Harry wasn't sure.

"I'll work harder now sir, I won't let you down." Harry paused before continuing hesitantly, "Sir, do you think... do you think you could tell me about her sir, my mother? No-one ever talks about her."

"I'd be delighted. If you have a moment, I'll call an elf, and we can have a chat over lunch. I'll tell you all about them."

Tea was Flitwick was both not as awkward as he expected, and brilliant in the fact that he heard all about his mother's sorting. It took ages apparently, a hat-stall, much like his own. Lily had later confided in Flitwick that she'd argued with the hat for Slytherin, but while it wanted her there, it didn't think it was the right time with the growth in the Muggleborn racism. They had a long argument (robust discussion she had called it) about Ravenclaw or Gryffindor.

"She was happy with her house," Flitwick had explained, "but she was disappointed when her best friend was sorted into Slytherin without her, or into Gryffindor with her. They stayed close for a very long time. I might tell you about it one day." Flitwick had said, "at the moment their friendship is not my story to tell,"

"I understand sir," Harry hesitated before he added, "it wanted me in Slytherin too..."

He looked at Flitwick anxiously, he'd never told anyone that.

"Really? I can see some of those traits in you now I think about it, you would make a good Slytherin I think" Professor Flitwick pondered.
Harry blanched.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Flitwick reassured him.

"I argued because...." He trailed off realising something, "Hagrid told me only dark wizards went to Slytherin, like Voldemort, and so did Ron, coupled with meeting Malfoy who said he was going to be a Slytherin. He is too much like my cousin. I don't really want to be dark, I don't want to be evil."

Harry trailed off, wondered now if it was another setup. Surely not all Slytherins could be evil, but Hagrid had pushed it rather hard that it would terrible if Harry had gone into Slytherin. Could that also be one of Dumbledore's manipulations? Maybe it was time for him to nurture some of his cunning and ambition...

"It is a person's actions who make them good or bad." Professor Flitwick said filling up Harry's cup of tea. "The house does not make a person. Nor does being Dark mean evil. I have a book on it if you like? I can lend it to you. Don't forget that Death Eaters have come from other houses too. Just look at Barty Crouch Jr, he was a death eater from my own house."

"Crouch has a son?" Harry asked?

"Had," the professor corrected, "he died, in Azkaban. Not all Slytherins are evil, or even bad, look at Professor Snape. He may not be well liked but he is a good man," Flitwick explained, kindly ignoring Harry's slight look of disagreement at the mention of Snape.

"I guess it's like not all Gryffindors are good?" Harry asked.

"Exactly, there have been many brilliant and noble Slytherins, Merlin was one. Slytherin is not a bad house, just a little different from some of the other houses. They are often very reserved and traditional. Lately, that is frowned on, but they are just like you or I. It is our choices that make us. Not the colour of our robes. But don't forget, dark does not mean evil, magic itself is neither good nor bad, it just is. it is the intent that makes it help or hinder. And just so, Dark is not necessarily evil, the ministry may calm a lot of things, are dark, and therefore evil and have outlawed them, but it is not so. Dark is a little more complex than that. Would you like me to find that book for you?"

"Thank you, Professor, I should have realised that," Harry said, "um if you don't mind I'd like to read it. It sounds interesting."

"Not at all, I'll give it to you next class." Professor Flitwick beamed, "I used to lend your mother books too."

"What did she like?" He asked eagerly.

"Well she loved Charms, I lent her quite a few books on that topic. It was a joy to discuss things with her. She was also quite the potions prodigy, along with her Slytherin friend. She was also very interested in Old magic and the Old ways. Which is frowned on now, but she looked quite heavily into Wizarding traditions, culture and religion. She liked history too, she said it was like muggle fantasy novels, but better as it was her history."

"Yes!" Harry broke in, "it is! It's like reading a story but more alive, it's more..." He trailed off, "it means more because it's ours. We're connected to it."

"Just so," beamed the professor, "She had a love of muggle fantasy novels, she said the ideas were inspiring. She liked Lord of the Rings, the Crucible (despite its dark topic) and an author called Chris D'lacey, a less well-known book about a potter who makes clay dragons. Lily said she didn't have an artistic bone in her body, but she liked the idea of breathing life into little clay dragons. She liked
dragons"

"You knew her well then?" Harry asked

"Yes, your mother may have been a Gryffindor but I was her advisor though her OWLs and NEWTs. She was going to go onto a charms apprenticeship after she graduated if it had not been for the war. She had such a talent for it, I was really looking forward to taking her on as my apprentice, she had a passion for learning, a true joy to teach. She always had a new question on the bottom of her homework or a book review. I used to recommend her reading all the time." Flitwick explained, "Actually I might have something of hers, back in my quarters, I'll have a look and let you know after your next charms class. I may have some old letters and essays of hers. She came over for tea every other Tuesday. I may have some of her old school things. She had packed a trunk and sent it here when she was going to start her apprenticeship. But with the war, I'm not sure what happened to it, I'll have a look for you."

"Thank you, professor, that means a lot,"

"And between you and me Harry," Professor Flitwick said as he walked Harry to the door as the bell for class rang, "about you dying in this tournament, I have no doubt it will be challenging, but I have faith that you'll pull through. I can't help you with it, but I can recommend some books that may help. I'll put some aside for your next lesson. I have a few spare copies of the 5th, 6th and 7th-year textbooks, that should help you catch up too."

"Really? That would be great sir, I appreciate it."

Chapter End Notes

I'd just like to say, I did enjoy writing the bit with Professor Sinistra. Writing Harry and Flitwick was also fun.

Also a couple of book references in there (i'm a nerd 😎) I know the Fire Within, which is the Chris D'Lacey book mentioned, was not actually released at the time Lily would have read it, it didn't come out till the early 2000's, but we are just ignoring that fact because it suits me better that way.
However brilliant lunch had been, it was amazing to hear about his mother, even if it was a little bittersweet, it didn't quite make up for the rest of the day. He was exhausted. Constantly dodging hex's; being on the alert, on his guard all the time looking for the next hex, staying up to the early hours of the morning trying to catch up on the reading and practice different protection and warding spells. It left him in a bad mood on the way down to potions that afternoon. Which never boded well.

Double Potions that afternoon was, as always, a horrible experience. Which was a pity, because though it was devilishly confusing, even with the primer, Harry had been looking forward to it when he first came to Hogwarts. It had sounded like the best class, really. But not with Snape breathing down his neck.

The primer hadn't really touched potions much, so there was still a lot there that didn't make sense. He didn't understand why things reacted the way they did. It had explained how to tell the differences between colours and how to properly prepare ingredients. Grinding, crushing and powdering was not the same thing. That had been helpful. Despite Hermione saying, he just had to follow the recipe, like an Arithmancy equation, he thought there was more to it than that. It just felt... He wasn't sure. But even if he followed the steps, they didn't always feel right. He didn't really have the words to explain it, and he didn't know what it was.

Potions could have been a fabulous class, he had enjoyed it almost as much as he had first hoped when he had practised earlier that week on his own in Myrtle's bathroom. But the class... If only it had a different teacher or at least one that didn't hate his guts quite so much. Even having someone he could ask questions, or even just to watch them preparing and brewing would have been fantastic.

Having Slytherins, (and now Ron too) throwing things in his cauldron to get him in trouble didn't help, not when he didn't understand enough to be able to compensate or guard against it. Snape didn't let them cast any spells in the Potions room, it would affect the delicate balance of the magic in the potion with their "dunderheaded, heavy-handedness." These days the class was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom
seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Friday's double lesson, jumpy as hell, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning "ignore them, ignore them, ignore them" under her breath, and he couldn't see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione met up at Snape's dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment, Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges - then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:

SUPPORT CEDRIC Diggory--

THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION!

"Like them, Potter?" said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. "And this isn't all they do - look!"

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

POTTER STINKS!

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too until the message POTTER STINKS was shining brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

"Oh very funny," Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, "really witty."

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn't laughing, but he wasn't sticking up for Harry either.

"Want one, Granger?" said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione.

"I've got loads. But don't touch my hand now. I've just washed it, you see; don't want a Mudblood sliming it up."

Harry clenched his jaw to prevent himself saying or doing something stupid as Hermione said warningly, "Harry!"

"Go on, then, Potter," Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his wand. "Moody's not here to look after you now - do it, if you've got the guts -"

For a split second, they looked into each other's eyes, then, Harry bit down hard on his tongue, and put his wand back in his pocket, tasting blood. He wasn't going to give them more of an excuse to have a go at him.

"Hermione is not a Mudblood," he said with forced calm, "if anyone has dirty blood, it's clearly you. Especially if how poor your treatment of others is anything to judge it by."

"Take that back!" Malfoy yelled.

"No," he said simply, "though I will admit you have a point, Diggory is the real Hogwarts champion. It's good of you to support him, I wouldn't have expected anything so agreeable from you," Harry said, turning to walk away, sick and tired of always fighting with the boy.

He should have known better.
"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy, making Harry flinch and duck without even thinking about it.

A jet of light shot from Malfoy's wand and Harry didn't manage to draw his wand to shield before, to his horror, the spell hit Hermione who had been behind him. Hermione, whimpering in panic, clutching her mouth.

"Hermione!" He gasped, hurrying forward. Ron had beat him to it and was dragging Hermione's hand away from her face. It wasn't a pretty sight. Hermione's front teeth - already larger than average - were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, down her chin, panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

"Finite," Harry intoned, waving his wand at her teeth, then tried again with the stronger, "finite incantatem."

They stopped growing, but he didn't know how to shrink them, "I'm sorry, I don't know-" he started but jumped when he was cut off.

"And what is all this noise about?" said a soft, deadly voice, Harry spun around, his wand still held tightly in his hand.

Harry's heart sank, just what they needed. Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamoured to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, "Explain."

"Potter attacked me, sir -"

"I did not!" Harry protested.

"Malfoy got Hermione!" Ron said. "Look!"

"It was Potters fault she was hexed" Malfoy spat.

Ron forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth - she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape's back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, "I see no difference."

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears. She turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days, trying to hold it back, seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

"Let's see," he said, in his silkiest voice. "Fifty points from Gryffindor and detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions."

Harry's ears were ringing, fury and disappointment coursing through him. Disappointment that he hadn't managed to control his temper and stay out of trouble and anger at Snape. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He clenched his fists and bit his lip to stop him from saying something dumb. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too - for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon,
Malfyoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. POTTER STINKS flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, angrily pulling his things out to take notes. He nearly broke his quill.

"Antidotes!" Spat Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. "You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone's to test..."

Snape's eyes met Harry's, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison him. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron and sprinting to the front of the class, bringing it down on Snape's greasy head-

And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry's thoughts.

Gods, he thought, he had to learn to control his temper, or it would get him killed. He never would have acted like that at the Dursleys, they would have killed him. What was it about Hogwarts that took away all his self-preservation instincts. What was wrong with him!?

The door opened, Colin Creevey edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room. Harry had to try very hard not to groan. This could be nothing good.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs." Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

"Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," said Snape coldly, and Harry was actually grateful for once, whatever Colin was so excited about needing him for, it couldn't be good.

"He will come upstairs when this class is finished." Snape continued.

Colin went pink.

"Sir - sir, Mr Bagman wants him," he said nervously. "All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photographs. . . ."

"You have got to be kidding me," Harry muttered, unable to stop himself, letting his head drop forward onto the desk with a soft 'thunk'. He would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the ceiling. Harry's shoulders slumped, a queasy feeling rising in his gut as his chest tightened.

"Very well, very well," Snape snapped, glaring at Harry, "Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote."

"Please, sir - he's got to take his things with him," squeaked Colin. "All the champions..."

"Very well!" said Snape. "Potter - take your bag and get out of my sight! I expect you here after dinner to test your antidote. Don't think you will get out of this."

Harry gulped, making a mental note to start carrying a Bezoar with him from now on, swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, POTTER STINKS flashed at him from every direction. He wasn't sure whether to be grateful to be
away from Snape or fume that Snape had let him go, but that thought alone gave him enough sense to stop himself from slamming the door on Snape and Colin.

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. "You being champion?"

"Shut up, Colin," said Harry snapped as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall.

"But Harry! Isn't it, though? You're Champion!"

"No, it is not," he said shortly, "what do they want photos for, Colin?" He continued trying to deflect, sick of it all already.

"The Daily Prophet, I think!"

"Great, just great," said Harry sarcastically, "exactly what I need. More publicity."

"I know, right?" Colin cheeped back, obliviously, "Good luck!" He finished when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered with extreme reluctance.

He was in a reasonably small classroom. Most of the desks had been pushed to the back of the room, leaving ample space in the middle. Three of desks, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes. Gods, he thought, he didn't want to be here.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Diggory and Fleur were in conversation. Fleur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward, making Harry take a hurried step back, clenching his wand, but forced himself not to do anything.

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come. Nothing to worry about, it's just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment-"

"Wand weighing?" Harry repeated nervously.

"We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools in the tasks ahead," said Bagman. "The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photoshoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet..."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry. Dread pooled in his stomach. He felt sick.

Skeeter's hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jewelled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "The youngest champion, you know... to add a bit of colour?"

"What?!" Harry took another hurried step back out of reach of her grabby hands.
"Certainly!" cried Bagman over the top of him, "that is - if Harry has no objection?"

"No! I don't wan-" said Harry.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, and in a second has left forward and her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly vicelike grip as she steered him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

"Wait, I don't-" but she cut him off.

"We don't want to be in there with all that noise," she said. "Let's see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy."

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her in horror. Suddenly not too sure he remembered how to breathe.

"Come along, dear - that's right - lovely," said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, and yanking Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness.

Harry swallowed, feeling something cold and sick slowly start to claw at him in his stomach.

"Let's see now. . ."

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair so that they could see what they were doing.

"You won't mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally..."

"A what? I don't want to talk at all!" said Harry dumbly trying to focus on breathing and not hyperventilating. He hated cupboards, he hated people locking him in.

Rita Skeeter's smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth with a shudder. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs Skower's All- Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

"Testing... my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter."

Harry looked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations -

"What on earth?" Harry asked, momentarily distracted.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, "Ignore the quill, Harry. So... what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"I didn't -" Harry snapped getting frustrated, at least it distracted him from being stuck in a too-small cramped cupboard. A cupboard much too much like his own, even the cleaning products smelt the same, despite the magic.
He was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake, he could make out a new sentence:

An ugly scar, a souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes --

"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly Harry looked up at her instead. "Now -- why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in there."

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily pencilled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered at all. But don't worry about that. Our readers love a rebel."

"I am not. A. Lier." He bit out, "I didn't enter, I don't know who -" 

"How do you feel about the tasks ahead?" She cut him off, "Excited? Nervous?"

"As someone is probably trying to Murder me. Again... so yeah, let's go with nervous," said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke. Was the door pressing in on them? It was awfully stuffy. Was it getting smaller? He clenched the hem of his jumper and tried not to look at the walls pressing in on him as he tried to catch a breath.

"Champions have died in the past, haven't they?" said Rita Skeeter briskly. "Have you thought about that at all?"

"I...," he stuttered, getting distracted by the dark walls of the cupboard. He could have sworn they had just moved, inching closer to him. Gods he was going to get swallowed alive by this stupid cupboard she'd trapped him in!

"Of course, you've looked death in the face before, haven't you?" said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. "How would you say that's affected you?"

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

"I... Can we...," tried Harry, yet again, Gods he needed to get out of here.

"Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because - "

"I didn't enter," said Harry, starting to feel irritated, despite the panic rising like ice through his insides. He tugged at his collar, struggling to get a breath, pressing a hand to the wall, trying to stop it pressing in on him.

"Can you remember your parents at all?" said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

"No," he stuttered out, gods he had to get out of here. Please let him out.

"How do you think they'd feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?"

A spike of annoyance penetrated the fog of his mind. How on earth was he to know how his parents
would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Gods were they running out of air. He looked around frantically for a way out, avoiding her gaze and caught the words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

"I do NOT!" Gasped Harry, struggling to breathe through the rising panic "leave me alone...let me out! Let me out!" He made a grab for the door, a wall anything, snagging the paper, as he overbalanced and toppled off his box, hitting his head on a shelf of buckets with a clatter that made him jump and throw a hand over his head.

Before Rita Skeeter could do anything, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

"Dumbledore!" cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight.

Harry scrambled out of the cupboard, frantically grabbing at the mess of cleaning products in his hurry to get out. Skeeter, glared at him as she vanished the quill into her bag. Gasping and hating himself for the persistent weakness Harry swore under his breath. Gods he thought he'd gotten over his claustrophobia.

"How are you Dumbledore?" she said, standing up and holding out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. Harry looked down at the paper in his hand. When had that gotten there? But he hurriedly stuffed it into his pocket when he realised it was the one she'd been writing lies on. He didn't really remember how he got it, but he wasn't stupid enough to give it back to her.

"I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?"

"Enchantingly nasty," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat."

Rita Skeeter didn't look remotely abashed, but Harry didn't care, he was too focused on trying to catch his breath, too relieved to be out of the cupboard. He inched away from them both, he had his cloak in his pocket, he could just vanish, sneak away.

"I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned-

"I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita," cut in Dumbledore, with a glance at Harry, before giving a courteous bow and a smile to Skeeter, "but I'm afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard."

Bugger thought Harry. But was glad for an excuse to get away from Rita Skeeter however it came. Harry hurried back into the room, Dumbledore at his heels. But Skeeter grated his arm in her talon-like claws and said, "I'll get you for that boy, you should be careful, never know who might you piss off if your not careful," before she shoved passed him into the room.

He swallowed, and followed her in reluctantly, feeling small and vulnerable. He wished Hermione was with him. He hoped she was okay.

The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Diggory, hooking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting -
Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on another piece of parchment.

"May I introduce Mr Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and talking to the champions. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament."

Harry looked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr Ollivander before - he was the wand-maker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley. He hoped Mr Ollivander wasn't going to tell anyone anything about his wand core...

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr Ollivander and handed him her wand. "Hmm..." he said. He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton, and it emitted several pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and scrutinized it.

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches... Inflexible, rosewood... and containing... dear me..."

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a Veela," said Fleur. "One of my grandmuzzer's."

So Fleur was part Veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron... then he remembered that Ron wasn't speaking to him. He sighed quietly, feeling impossibly tired all of a sudden.

"Yes," said Mr Ollivander, "yes, I've never used Veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands...however, to each his own, and if this suit's you."

Mr Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, "Orchideous!" and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip, orchids if his experience slaving away in his aunts garden was anything to go by.

"Very well, very well, it's in fine working order," said Mr Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. "Mr Diggory, you next."

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Diggory as he passed her.

"Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?" said Mr Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Diggory handed over his wand. "Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn... must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches... ash... pleasantly springy. It's in fine condition...You treat it regularly?"

"Polished it last night," said Diggory, grinning.

Harry looked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He didn't realise they were meant to be polished. Where on earth would he find wand polish? He gathered a fistful of his robe and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronising look, and he stopped, mortified. Mr Ollivander hadn't said anything about wand care back in Diagon Alley, and neither had his introduction books. But then, they hadn't been that useful in quill use either... maybe it was one of those things you were just meant to know. He added it to his growing mental to-do list.
Mr Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Diggory's wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then said, "Mr Krum, if you please."

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood glowering, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

"Hmm," said Mr Ollivander, "this is a Gregorovitch creation unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I... however..."

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

"Yes... hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees... quite rigid... ten and a quarter inches... Avis!"

The hornbeam wand let off a blast hike a gun, and some small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight. "Good," said Mr Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. "Which leaves... Mr Potter."

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

"Aaaah, yes," said Mr Ohlivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming. "Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember."

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday...

Mr Ollivander had explained that the phoenix feather in Harry's wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort's.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned it's relation to Voldemort's wand was something it couldn't help - just like he couldn't help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he desperately hoped that Mr Ollivander wasn't about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did. He shuddered, remembering the nasty glint she'd had in her eye when she'd threatened him.

Mr Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than anyone else's. Harry fought the urge to squirm with discomfort the entire time. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

"Thank you all," said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges' table. "You may go back to your lessons now - or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end -"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to hurry to the door, but the man with the black camera cleared his throat and jumped in front of Harry blocking the door.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly, Harry groaned silently, "all the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Er - yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual shots."

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn't stand far enough back to get her into the frame; eventually, she had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of
thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence, despite his reluctance. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, they were free to go.

Harry wanted to head to the infirmary next to check if Hermione was okay. However, he waylaid by Ron in the entrance hall. Classes had just let out, and it was crowded.

"You've had an owl," spat Ron, a nasty look on his face. Hedwig perched on his shoulder, letter in her beak.

Puzzled, Harry offered her an arm. He'd only sent his reply's yesterday morning, how on earth had any of them replied so soon? Though he hadn't heard back from Professor Lupin, maybe it was from him. "Oh - right, thank-" Harry was cut off.

"-and we've got to do our detentions night, Snape's dungeon," said Ron.

"Oh thank-" Harry tried again turning around, but Ron had walked away into the great hall. For a moment, Harry considered going after him - he wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing - but he restrained himself. He had more important things to do.

Chapter End Notes

I don't want to say self harm, but he bites his tongue/lip to keep from doing or saying something dumb. It bleeds a bit.

Claustrophobia - he is in a cupboard with Skeeter, he doesn't like cupboards. At all.
Other note on his claustrophobia.
He's only claustrophobic when his in a small space with others. When others are with him or are forcing him into small spaces he has a LOT of trouble with them. But if its on his own terms, and there's a clear way out hes fine. If his in control of the situation, he's totally fine with small spaces, likes them even. He's used his ability to get into small places to hide from people more than once. Its odd, but that's how it is for Harry.
Harry opened his letter, trouble's afoot
He visits Hermione
He goes to see McGonagall
Detention with Snape
He plans on sneaking out
Dragons!

Chapter Notes

This Chapter is dedicated to the brilliant Autumn4Sky, who has Beta'd it for me. Thank you so much.

Harry ducked behind a tapestry on the way to the hospital wing when he saw Fred and George
coming around the corner. It wasn't that he didn't like the twins, he did, but he didn't want them to
pull a Ron. They had always been good to him. He didn't want to find out if that they didn't believe
him and were jealous and angry at him like Ron was.

He perched in the small alcove behind the tapestry and threw up a quick privacy ward that he'd been
studying. He lit his wand to read the letter.

The letter, to his slight disappointment, was not from Lupin. He spared a moment thought to wonder
if Lupin had gotten his owl and if he was going to right back to him at all. Maybe Lupin just didn't
want to bother with his dead friend's kids whining. He'd never cared about Harry before he was his
teacher. Never visited Harry as a child, never written. He never even offered to tell him stories of his
parents, not even when he was Harry's teacher. Hell, he only taught Harry the Patronus charm
because Harry had begged. Maybe Lupin just didn't care.

Harry kicked himself for being surprised. Adults had never cared before. Even Sirius seemed more
interested in remembering James than in Harry himself, and following Dumbeldore's every whim. He
scowled. A kid who jumps at the chance to live with a total stranger should raise some concerns. But
Sirius hadn't questioned it when Harry agreed straight away. Harry thought that any sane and
competent person should. But then, maybe Sirius really wasn't that sane or competent. He, Harry,
fainted by being near the dementors. Who knows what they would have done to Sirius after 13
years. That was assuming he'd been a competent before. Had Sirius ever really been responsible?
He'd given Harry up to Hagrid at Dumbeldore's say so that night. Being Harry's godfather, it should
have fallen to Sirius to look after Harry with his parents dead. Not chasing after Wormtail. Why did
Sirius just hand Harry over to Hagrid? Why was catching Wormtail more important that Harry?
Weren't kids meant to come first? It shouldn't have surprised him, but it still hurt.

Sirius would have only been in his early 20's, that was pretty young, especially to be thrown into a
war. Could Harry really blame him? On top of that Sirius would have been reeling from losing his best friends. Harry couldn't imagine that he would be able to think clearly, immediately after losing Ron and Hermione.

Shoving the thoughts aside, he read his letter. It was a quick note from Bill about a book he'd been reading, "Controlling Magics and Their Counters." Harry snorted, subtle Bill, he thought sniggering, real subtle.

Harry wondered how Bill had received and replied to his letter so fast. He was hoping Bill would mention how he did it in the other part of the letter. Harry cast the counter-charm to reveal the hidden writing. The writing wriggled around on the page, and rearranged itself to show:

"Harry,

We need to talk. Something's off, I think something seriously wrong. You should have at least been getting statements which should have mentioned your vaults and account manager. I'm surprised you've not heard of them, and that you don't know who your magical guardian is. Your letter brought up several alarming implications. (Don't worry, it's not your fault. We'll sort it out)

Can you sneak out to Gringotts? When's your next Hogsmead weekend? Or can you get the twins to show you a passage out one night after curfew? They'll keep it a secret if you ask. I can meet you at the Hogshead and apparate you to Gringotts (don't tell mum, but Gringotts employers can floo between branches. It's not done often, Portkeys are preferable, but they'll let me come get you for this.) Something fishy is going on. We need to meet in person and with the goblins soon.

Don't tell anyone, not a word. It's not safe, I'll explain later.

Burn after reading.

Bill

P.S. address your reply to Cursebreaker William Weasley CO Gringotts Bank London Branch. It will get to me much faster than sending your owl all the way to Egypt. Don't spread it around though, that's privileged information.

Also, check out the book I mentioned on the other side."

Harry's stomach sank. He knew something was seriously wrong ever since he'd felt Hermione's magic, but this seemed to make it more real. He pressed his head to his knees, feeling dizzy, his breathing shallow, racing. He'd been hoping for good news. Gods, he hadn't realised how much until now, but he'd desperately been hoping for some good news. That Bill may magically have a solution or something, anything to make this whole awful thing a little bit better. He selfishly wanted someone to say, it's all going to be okay, you don't have to do this alone, you don't have to fight so hard to exist all on your own.

He clenched and unclenched his fists repetitively as he tried to catch his racing breaths. His vision was blurring and spotting, he couldn't breathe. It was awful. Everything was spinning out of control. He'd been working so hard. Making so much progress, and now he felt like he was at the beginning again, with him being ignorant of his own life. People pulling at his strings like a marionette.

He forced himself to take a deeper breath, forcing himself to let it out slowly and focus on something else. What could he see? Not much, it was dark here, but his wand was lit, making the parchment seem more yellow that it really was. His wand was a dark brown colour, shining slightly in the light. The light was a soft pale yellow. The stones were grey. What could he smell, He took a breath. It
dusty behind the tapestry, it was old but not musty. He tapped his fingers against the stone floor next to where he was crouching. Smooth stone, not as cold as he expected, humming slightly with magic. He focused on the magic, it tingled faintly at the edge of his senses, warming him slightly.

He was okay. He could do this. He was working on it. He was working on fixing his ignorance. He had the Gringotts and the etiquette book left to read. He could read them tonight. He was making progress on Occlumency and making sure he could protect himself from others manipulating him. He had started looking into some simple wards. Bill knew something was up, that meant they could do something about it.

He could sneak out via Honeydukes tonight, but he didn't think an owl would get back to Bill in time. Plus, if Honeydukes were closed, they might think it was being broken into. He didn't want to set off any wards they may have. He needed another way out. Maybe the Shrieking Shack? He couldn't apparate, so he'd have to make sure there was a way out of the Shack. Maybe his broom? He could fly out a window, were they all boarded up? He could use the cloak, and he'd read about a disillusionment charm. He could use that. He couldn't do it yet, but if he practised... He'd have to check it out later tonight and plan his escape carefully. But it was doable.

He sighed, it looked like tonight was going to be a late one, finishing the Gringotts book and scouting as well, plus whatever Snape had in store for him.

Harry paused long enough to crumble Bill's letter up, incinerate it with a flick of his wand and vanish the ashes before he headed up to the hospital wing.

He was accosted by Madame Pomfrey almost as soon as he entered the wing.

"What have you done this time," she demanded exasperatedly.

"Nothing! I swear, I'm fine! I only wanted to see Hermione," He said a bit nervously. He hated the hospital wing, it was always unpleasant, and Madam Pomfrey always seemed so irritated with him.

She glared at him suspiciously, before clicking her tongue and letting him in.

"Harry!" Hermione said, "what are you doing here?"

"Coming to see you, of course! Are you okay?"

"Oh! Thanks, Harry! Yes, I'm okay. My teeth hurt a bit, but Madam Pomfrey shrank them back down. They need to set a bit though before I can go. She wants to check the magic has settled before I leave." Hermione said, smiling a bit nervously.

Something about them looked... a bit different.

"Your teeth...," Harry said slowly, thinking about it a moment, "they're a bit different, a bit straighter and slightly smaller," he finished sitting down on the end of her bed.

Hermione smiled suddenly, very mischievously, and held her finger to her lips, "Well... Madam Pomfrey when she went to shrink them held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were," she said. "I just... let her carry on a bit." She smiled even more widely.

"Mum and Dad won't be too pleased. I've been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they're dentists, they just don't think teeth and magic should mix,” Hermione scrunched up her nose in distaste at the mention of her Braces. Harry frowned, he hadn't really realised Hermione hated them that much. But then Braces
would have been rather annoying, and lots of Magicals pointed them out and questioned them all the
time, not being familiar with what they must of seen as very bizarre and outrageous muggle devices.

"Malfoy's spell wrecked the braces," she went on, "so Madame Pomfrey had to vanish them
anyway! So I let her fix my teeth. It was too good an opportunity to pass up!" She finished grinning
wickedly.

Harry grinned, "Well, they look very nice. Not that you didn't before," Harry hurried, hoping he
hadn't dug himself a hole, "you have a beautiful smile. Now and before you shrunk your teeth. No,
really!" He said, when she looked ready to protest, "You did, you do. But I understand why you
were uncomfortable and why you wanted to change them. I'm happy for you. As long as you're
happy! Either way, they look nice. Never let anyone tell you that you're not beautiful. You seem
more comfortable with them now. It shows." Harry finished fiddling with the hem of his robe sleeve.

Hermione looked a bit teary, but before Harry could panic that he had said the wrong thing, she
beamed and said, "Thanks, Harry. Anyway, how'd the rest of potions go? What did I miss? We were
meant to be looking at antidotes? Which one did he have us brewing? Did you take notes for me?"

"Ugh, I wish!" He groaned and proceeded to tell her all about the wand weighing, and Skeeter.

"It was horrible," he finished, "I would have rather stayed in potions…" he stopped hesitant to say
anything else. Should he tell her anyway? He'd be breaking the rules, she won't approve. Would she
tell if he asked her not to? Would she trust him? She hadn't with the Firebolt, just assumed he would
be stupid and couldn't look after himself...

"Harry?" Hermione asked, interrupting his train of thought, "What's up?"

"Nothing, just thinking," he said hedged.

She frowned at him for a long moment, "Harry, I can tell your avoiding talking about something.
What's wrong?"

He cast a silencing spell around them and then said, "had some bad news, but I can't really talk about
it."

"Harry! What happened?" She exclaimed.

"I have it under control, I can't talk about it yet. Please drop it," he asked.

She frowned at him as if he was a particularly complex book she were trying to figure out. He felt
momentarily guilty. But then he reminded himself, he was allowed to have secrets. She did.
Hermione had kept the time turner a secret, this was like that. It wasn't safe, not because he didn't
trust her, but because it was too big a risk, not when he didn't know what was going on.

She pressed her lips, "When have I ever let you down?" She asked, slightly defiant.

"It's not that, it's not safe. And also, I guess, partly?" Harry hesitated, "I know you may not agree
with me, I'm going to need to break a few rules. I don't want you running to a teacher when you
decide I can't make my own decisions in regards to how best to keep myself safe, and then take
matters into your own hands" he said in a rush.

She looked irritated for a moment, then hurt, "when have I ever assumed I know best?"

"The Firebolt,"
"Harry, that was ages ago! And it could have been da-

"I know," he cut off, "I didn't have any intention of riding it! I was actually going to take it to
Madam Hooch, but you beat me to it. I'm not an idiot. I don't go looking for trouble, I just end up
stuck in it," he said carefully. "I was really hurt you thought I couldn't make my own decisions
regarding my own safety, that you thought I'd be so stupid. You should have said something to me
first, not made the decision for me. That's not trust."

"Oh... I guess I hadn't thought of it like that, I didn't see it that way, I was just so worried" she said
picking at a thread in the blanket, her eyes looking suspiciously damp.

Harry shrugged not sure what to say, "I do trust you, well as much as I really trust anyone, but I
guess I'm worried you'll get upset that I'm about to break some rules and tell a teacher? Not to hurt
me, but if you think it would keep me safe. I don't trust them, Hermione."

"I didn't mean to hurt you with the Firebolt," she said, "it's just that you have a history of acting
rashly. I was worried."

"You're right, I do act rashly sometimes, I'm trying to fix it though," Harry said.

"I promise I'll try to talk to you next time if I'm worried, but only if you promise you'll try to have a
little faith in me too," Hermione said after considering it for a moment, "you're my best friend, Harry.
If you don't want to talk about this, then I respect that, really!"

He frowned at her slightly but she went on, “While I do think rules should be followed, look at
Quirrell! I set his robes on fire so you wouldn’t fall of your broom. I helped you go after the stone
when the teachers wouldn’t listen. I respect rules, but sometimes they do need to be broken, I do
understand that.”

Harry sighed she was right. He was being a bit unfair. He was about to say something when she
went on speaking quietly to her blanket covered knees, “I don’t like thinking you don’t trust me, I'm
your friend. But if it's not safe to talk about, I understand."

He reached over and hugged her tightly, glad she understood, wanting to reassure her. It was
awkward, and it made his skin crawl a little at the touch. He wasn't really comfortable with it. The
contact was blessedly brief. He tried not to look too relieved when she let him go.

"I'll tell you about it when I can, I promise," he said softly, "I'll try to have faith, I'm so sorry
Hermione. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm not very good at the whole trust and friend thing."

"I know. I'll try too. We're all works in progress, but we can make this work Harry. I've never had a
friend before either. I sometimes think I don't really know how. I don't want to lose you," she said.

"I know," he sighed, "Friendship is sometimes confusing."

"We'll work it out though," she said, smiling.

He laughed softly and nodded as Madam Pomfrey came to shoo Harry out, claiming Hermione
needed her rest. Knowing better than to argue with her, he bid Hermione farewell and went down to
see McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall’s office was a small room off the first floor corridor. It was lit by a large fire
that made the room look more inviting than Harry felt it actually was. But then maybe that was less
the office and more the person in it.
"No, of course not, I'm not your magical guardian Potter. You have your own. Now if you don't hurry, you'll be late for dinner," McGonagall snapped out when he asked her.

Irritated at her continually brushing him off, Harry continued with forced politeness, "But ma'am, I don't know who it is. I didn't even know that magical guardians were a thing before today. How am I meant to know? Do you know who it is? Or where I can find out?" He persisted.

"I'm sorry Potter, I can't help you." She said briskly getting up and opening the door for him, a distinct dismissal.

"But ma'am" he pressed, trying not to snap, it was getting beyond ridiculous. It was as if she wanted him ignorant and on his own. Maybe she did, was she in on it? Or perhaps he was wrong, maybe it was her behind it all, not Dumbledore.

"You're my head of house," he said, "you act in Loco Parentis for your students, and are the Magical Guardian of all the Gryffindor muggleborn. Who else am I meant to go to for help? It's your job to help us, isn't it?"

"Ten points for your rudeness Potter, I expected better of you. Now, your issues are not my problem, you have your own guardian, and are more than capable of going to him, and not bothering me so needlessly. Now I have told you I am unable to help you with your enquiry, and I have had enough of your endless badgering. Off. You. Go." She said in a stern voice, gesturing to the open door.

Harry's shoulders slumped. Why did every adult in his life, let him down. First Dumbledore, then Sirius, now McGonagall. Maybe she was in it with Dumbledore. He sighed then realised if he didn't get a move on, he'd be late for dinner and thereby also late for Snape.

He cracked open the Gringotts book at dinner, after spelling it to look like his charms book.

It was a fascinating read, especially compared to his tiny green salad which seemed to be all the kitchens were willing to let him take from the buffet today. He scowled at it. He had to stop himself from looking to the head table and glaring at dumbledore. Why did he care so much about keeping Harry underfed and hungry. Really what difference did it make. He stabbed at a piece of lettuce moodily.

If only he didn’t feel the need to hide the fact he now had Winky and Dobby, who were quite keen to look after him properly. If Harry wasn’t so cautious of Dumbledore noticing Harry was starting to figure things out he’d just ask for meals in the hall from them. Then he could have a proper meal instead of nibbling things surreptitiously on the go. He hoped they would have something for him later. Maybe Winky would put some more nuts and dried fruit in his bag again? She'd been putting little bags of trail mix in his pocket all week for between classes, it was quite good. Especially the tiny bit of dark chocolate mixed through it, he had come to learn that he loved chocolate.

Ron was already there when he got down to the dungeons, pickling rat's brains. Harry hoped for a moment they could at least share a commiserating look at their rotten luck. Unfortunately for Harry, Ron didn't even glance up as Harry knocked on the door. He merely focused on his task, looking thoroughly disgusted.

Snape was not in a good mood.

"This is the poison you will be brewing the antidote for," he said, holding up a file with milky liquid to show Harry, "If your antidote is brewed correctly, it should be more than enough to counteract the poison," Snape explained, holding up the vial, "Should you prove to be less moronic than your
father.”

Harry clenched his jaw, but said nothing. There wasn't much point in arguing with him. He could manage the antidote, he did have a Bezoar from his potions kit in his pocket. Harry would not need it, he could brew his own antidote. Plus it was not as if he was about to let Snape poison him. No way.

He got to work. By some small mercy, now that Harry knew how to prepare ingredients properly, tell the slight difference between colours, and how to stir things properly, coupled with no Slytherins tossing odd ingredients in his cauldron, Harry managed to brew the antidote correctly. It even looked to be the right texture. Snape sniffed it and glared at him.

Sneering, he said nothing other than, "Well? Are you going to volunteer, or am I going to have to make you?" Snape asked, holding a dropper with the poison.

Harry glared, there was no way he was letting Snape poison him, not willingly he wasn't stupid, "I'm afraid you'll have to make me sir," he said with forced politeness.

There was a snort from the back of the room, and Harry jumped. He'd forgotten Ron was there.

"I see you can learn," Snape shot back.

Harry could have sworn Snape looked almost pleased for a moment, but then the look was gone, and he looked just as displeased with Harry as ever.

Harry wondered what on earth Snape had meant and if he really was going to force Harry to drink poison. Snape loathed Harry, but he had saved his life in his first year. Snape just jerked his hand out, grabbed Harry’s antidote and placed a drop of poison in it. Oh, he wasn't going to poison him... Harry had been sure.

Nothing happened to the potion for a moment before the whole vial turned sunshine yellow.

"Satisfactory, your obviously not quite as moronic as you look, if only that came across in your essays without cheating off Miss Granger," Snape spat out as if it was insulting and then, "Weasley you can go, Potter finish those brains, and the cauldrons then you can go as well."

Harry bit back a groan, he had homework to do still and had plenty of other things he had wanted to get done. He didn't complain though and got to work.

He was actually grateful for the mindless repetition of pickling the rats’ brains and later scrubbing the cauldrons. While the brains were gross, it wasn't that hard, and he could focus on the little things, making sure he cut them and stewed them correctly in brine. It was almost peaceful, it gave his overfull head a chance to rest, relax a bit. He may hate doing all his relatives cleaning and scrubbing, but he did actually like scrubbing cauldrons. It was meditative, physically tricky enough to keep him busy and clear his head, while it gave him time to think clearly. By the time he had finished and had trudged wearily up to the tower, he felt he had a good few options for sneaking out, and that it would probably be best to do it after curfew the next day. It gave him the whole morning to practice the disillusionment spell and figure out how to get out without being caught.

Instead of going up to the bed after he had finally finished his homework, Harry pulled out the Marauders’ Map. He shrunk his broom, pocketed it before he slipped on the Invisibility Cloak. Returning to the empty common room, he placed a silencing spell over himself, to make sure no-one could hear him. It had become a standard practice under the cloak after a few near misses, with Mrs Norris. Activating the map, he was pleased to see that this late at night the corridors were mostly
deserted. Only Filch was still up, it was too late for the prefects to still have rounds.

There were multiple passages out of the castle, but only seven actually left the school grounds. On the fourth floor, there was a passage behind a mirror. It led out into the woods on the far side of Hogsmeade. That had caved in, unfortunately, that one sounded promising. The whooping willow led to the shrieking Shack. That could work. The One-eyed Witch led to the Honeydukes cellar, but he'd then have to break out of Honeydukes to get to Hogsmeade. Harry thought it was only logical that they would have more than just a locked door to keep people from breaking into the shop at night. Though wizards were not logical...

There were then the 4 passages that Filch knew about. Harry wondered whether they were warded or guarded at all. They would have to be, not having known ways into and out of the castle warded in some way was just asking for trouble. One passage was in the entrance hall leading out into the forest, west of the school border.

The passage behind Gregory the Smarmy's statue on the first floor led out into the forest, east of the school. Then there were two others, one lead to Hogsmeade station, one to the mountains behind Hogsmeade.

He went done the Honeydukes passage first, and despite managing to get into the cellar no problem, the door out of the shop was locked. Harry cast a detection spell he had recently learned and it revealed a bunch of wards that were tied to a Caterwauling Charm. He considered trying to break them, but they were woven together in such a way that he didn't think he'd manage it. He wasn't very good at wards yet. He really didn't want to set of the Caterwauling charm. The noise of it would bring everyone running.

He went back into the castle and checked out the passages Filch knew about next, all the while keeping a careful eye on the map so not to be caught out of bed. The one to the mountains behind Hogsmeade was behind a portrait of a grumpy looking hag on the second floor. It took the password, Revelare. He didn't try opening that, though. The picture would know someone had used it, even if they couldn't see his face. He wondered if he should find a spell to disguise his voice...

The next one was a statue of a witch he'd never heard of, on the 5th floor. He probably could have snuck past the suit of armor guarding it, but it has an alert ward on it. He could dismantle the ward but not without triggering yet another Caterwauling charm that seemed to need a password to dismiss. Knowing Filch, it was probably something torturous or derogatory.

Pity the map didn't pick it up, he thought. He wondered why the map picked up the passwords to the passage ways but not the ward’s passwords. Maybe the map wasn’t tied to the wards, just the people in the castle. If his father had made the map and drawn it based off only what they knew and had found, that would make more sense. It would explain why it didn’t show the Room of Requirement, his father must not have found it, same with the Chamber of Secrets. It would also explain why the passwords for the secret passageways were there, but not the common room. The map wasn’t tied to the wards, it didn’t pick up new passwords. Just the ones his father must of told it when they were making the map.

Harry wondered if it was possible to somehow tie the map to the castle wards so that it would pick up new passwords. Having it tell him what ward were on something would be helpful. He was going to have to ask Bill for a book on curse breaking, or wards and he really should ask Lupin or Sirius about the map. Harry scowled at the thought of his godfather. He really did need to talk to him, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to set himself up to be disappointed.

The passage behind Gregory the Smarmy, leading to the forest east of the school, was next. While there were portraits nearby, they were sleeping, and there didn't seem to be any wards on them as far
as he could tell. It was only once he had opened the passage and repeated the spells that he realised there were the same wards here too. He wondered who Filch had gotten to set them for him, they were rather good.

The passage leading to the forest west of the school was similarly warded. So it just left either the shrieking shark exit if he couldn't prepare the cleansed tunnel or learn how to break the wards on Gregory the Smarmy.

He snuck out of the school and down to the Whomping Willow next. It was strange seeing the tree so calm. With no one nearby it was only swaying ever so slightly, as if by a breeze, though the night was still. It looked beautiful under the moonlight. He picked up a stone as he got a bit closer. Within 5 meters, it seemed to sense him and twitch ominously. He stepped back, and it stilled. He levitated the stone and directed it carefully to prod the knot at the tree's base. The tree froze. He cautiously crept forward, but it stayed unnaturally still. He gave the tree a friendly pat as he pocketed the cloak, after a furtive glance around. The tree twitched, in response, but didn't move. He hurried forward and carefully slid down into the tunnel at the base of the tree.

It was odd being under the tree, the roots twisted and stuck out around the tunnel's ceiling and walls. As the tree came to life again above him, he thought he saw some of the roots wriggle. He patted one of them tentatively. It definitely wriggled this time. He suppressed a laugh at the sight. It almost seemed friendly from down hear. He felt oddly safe under here in the bowels of the tree's roots. Protected.

At a crouch, he entered the tunnel propped and lit his wand. The tunnel was just as low and as long as he remembered it. On and on it went; at least as long as the Honeydukes one. He felt just as awkward as last time, running the long tunnel at a crouch. At least he had a bit more stamina now, from running every morning. Shame he hadn't grown any taller though.

And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Harry could see a patch of dim, dusty light.

Crawling through the small hole in the wall, he looked about the first floor of the Shack. Still as dusty and dilapidated as he remembered it. Paper peeling from the walls, stains all over the floor, every piece of furniture broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all boarded up. There were deep scratches in the walls and small holes in places. There was what could have been a front door, except it was so heavily boarded up it would be quicker to look for another way out instead.

He carefully moved down into the shadowy hallway. He crept along the hall and up the crumbling staircase. They creaked and the wide shiny stripe in the dust where Sirius dragged Ron along last year was no longer visible under all the new dust.

The dusty rooms upstarts were just as dilapidated, with doors hanging off their hinges, the windows, curtains torn, were all boarded up. Not a single way out. He looked about for another floor. There were no more stairs, but there was a hole in the ceiling over what looked like the broken remains of a set of wooden spiral stairs. There was a pile of wood at the base, covered in claw marks. He looked up. It seemed to lead to a small attic room. He thought he could see some light coming from the other side, maybe there was an open window? He could fly up then out the window. He'd need to go back for his broom though. He huffed and went back downstairs. Apart from all the dust and all the broken furniture, it was actually quite a beautiful little house once upon a time. He could imagine it being rather nice when it was fixed up. A bit gothic, but if he stripped back all the filthy wallpaper back to the wooden panelling on the walls, it would be quite lovely, dark, gothic and cozy. He wondered who owned it, he thought, as he moved about the room absentmindedly straightening
furniture and an upturned table.

He was just moving the couch away from where it was blocking the front door when he noticed it. A gap in the wooden boards of the wall. He moved the couch some more. There in the wall, it was small, too small for a werewolf to get out, but if he tore off some more of the wallpaper and pulled out a few of the broken boards, he could probably sneak through it. He cautiously stuck his head into the hole and looked about with his lit wand. The cavity of the wall was just wide enough for him to slip in, but the drop was probably taller than him. He glanced around. The studs in the walls could act as a ladder, he'd be able to get out. He cautiously clambered down, trying hard not to think about how small the space was. There was no door here. It wasn't a cupboard, his uncle wasn't locking him in. He could leave at any time. He was fine. He was in control, and no one could get him here. He was safe. His feet hit the dirt. He took a breath, it was cold down here. He wondered if the house had a cellar. He kind of hoped so. He liked cellars. He wasn't too sure why, he just did.

He peered along either side of the wall but paused when he noticed a draft. He turned and carefully crept along the wall. Sure enough, there was another small hole in the brickwork. It was small, but with some help he from his wand, he managed to move two more bricks, making the hole just big enough for him to wriggle out of onto the grounds of the Shrieking Shack. It was dark out, nearly every single light in the village was out. But it was a clear night, and the sky was alight with stars on a dark blanket of inky blues and purples. It was beautiful.

So, he had a way out of the castle without anyone noticing. He grinned, all the opportunities this could bring... He looked about the side of the Shack. The main door was indeed boarded up from the outside as well as the inside. The windows, except for a tiny one on up at the top of the roof, were similarly boarded up. He looked down, the hole he had made was small, and half-covered by some scraggly bushes if he moved a couple of loose rocks and pieces of the old board, no one would be able to see the entrance unless they knew to look for it.

It was very early when he returned to the castle. He went straight up to the dorm and into the much needed long hot shower. After spending his childhood filthy more often than not - either from not being allowed to bathe ('freaks don't get clean water,') being pushed into the dirt by Dudley and his gang ('into the dirt where you belong freak'), or being filthy from scrubbing the Dursleys house top to bottom - he took great joy in being able to have not only a shower every day, but being able to have a hot one.

The shack had a lot of potential, he thought as he got dressed for bed. It may be worth cleaning up a bit, at least so he didn't get filthy every time he went. He really wanted to crawl into bed, but he had to scribble down a reply for Bill.

"Bill

Hogsmeade is not until next weekend, but I can get off the grounds no problem. I could meet you tomorrow night outside the Shrieking Shack? What time works for you? How long do we need?

Harry

P.S.

Also, had the weighing of the wands today, got dragged into a cupboard by Rita Skeeter. She wouldn't take no for an answer, and no-one listened when I said I didn't want to talk to her, let alone give her an interview. Any advice for avoiding her? Or dealing with the fall out when she writes something? I've heard she can be really nasty. I'm worried she's going to print a bunch of lies about me. Wizards will believe anything here, I don't suppose you lot have defamation laws or something to protect minors from the media?"
Letting the ink dry, he pulled out a strip of leather from his trunk. He'd been working all week on charming it for Hedwig. It now had several useful spells and runes on it. He was about to sneak up to the Owlery when there was soft tapping on his window. He grinned as he let her in.

"You're brilliant, you are," he said fondly. Hedwig tilted her head proudly and allowed him to stroke her feathers.

He held up the piece of leather for her to see.

"I know it's not pretty, but it should keep you safe," he told Hedwig, "In theory, it should cover you with a notice-me-not-charm and a spell-me-not charm, stop anyone tracking you and also keep you from harm." He paused thinking for a moment, "I was hoping you'd let me add a bit of your blood too. I want to link it to you so you can control who sees you. Theoretically just me, and whoever you're delivering the letter too, unless you will it otherwise. Will you wear it?" He asked.

She allowed him to prick her wing and put a small drop of her blood on the collar. He healed the spot and touched the collar with the tip of his wand. It glowed briefly as the blood sank into it and he put the small collar around her neck. She ruffled her feathers a bit, turned her head around a few times and ruffled her winds. She seemed okay with it.

He held the letter out to her, "I need you to take this to Gringotts, it's for Bill. He said they can get it to him fast. So, I don't know who you'll need to give it to them or if they'll have a way for you to get there faster but I trust you." She took the letter from him in her beak, before spreading her wings and soaring back out the window.

He stood there for a while. Watching her get smaller and smaller among what was left of the very early morning stars, before he turned, donning the cloak, and headed back to the common room where Winky would hopefully be waiting with a very late dinner.

Chapter End Notes

I have written a little piece, called 'Harry Potter gets smart and takes control - chp 11&12 out-take.'

It's a moment between Severus and Filius, after Filius has spoken to Harry. It belongs here in the timeline, please read that bit next before continuing to chapter 13. I had already posted it as an individual piece in this series, and by the time I realised it sat better in between chapter 12 & 13 it was too late to move it without deleting the original.
Out take

Chapter Summary

The post 11/12 outtake.
After Filius talks to Harry, he goes to see Lily's old friend in order to help her son.

Chapter Notes

(this is literally the same outtake as the one I added earlier as a sequel to this story. I wanted to move it in between chapter 12 & 13 but didn't know how to do that without loosing comments and kudos and things so i've copied it.

There are more outtakes to come, in future they will be posted as chapters of the main story in future.

I didn't mean for this to happen... I was just going through my notes today while writing chapter 18 and it kinda happened, I had to share it with you.

Happy reading

Out take 1

That evening, after Filius had eaten dinner, he pondered over the conversation he had had with young Mr Potter. He was shocked that he was so desperate for anything of Lily's. That no-one ever told him about her. He frowned and stood up. Going over to the little attic of his tower, he started routing around in the boxes of old files and assignments he had there, looking for his Protege's trunk. He was sure he had something of hers, he could give to her son.

Later than night after curfew, he walked down to the dungeons and knocked on the door of his colleague's office.

"Enter," the cool voice intoned

"Good evening Severus," Filius said, even after all this time, it was still odd following human customs of speaking first when entering, instead of waiting and having at times a small staring contest, as the goblins did.

"What can I do for you, Filius?" Severus asked, looking up from his marking, "please have a seat."

Filius sat down and pondered for a moment how to put his request. It was no secret how much Severus hated James Potter and Harry.

"I had a most interesting conversation today, with Lily's son." He said after a moment.

Severus looked up sharply, "what did you say?"
"Lily's son." Filius repeated evenly, "I spoke to him. It got me thinking. Do you have any photos of Lily, that I could copy for her son? He has precious little of hers. He was desperate to connect with her in any way when he heard I knew her. Do you know what he said to me, Severus? He begged me to tell him about her, anything at all. No-one ever talks about her he said. He doesn't know anything about her. I didn't tell him you were her friend, though, don't worry. But if you had any pictures of her, I would appreciate a copy for him." Filius explained.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, looking slightly pained before with a sigh said, "Lily's son."

"He is Lily's son; I spoke to him as he's had a remarkable improvement in his marks. I had to be sure he wasn't cheating."

"Yes, I suspect the little cretin is getting significant help from Ms Granger," Severus sneered.

"Severus," Filius chided gently with a smile, used to his colleague's harsh antics by now, "he's not. I checked. He's been holding back; all these years, didn't want to risk his friendship by getting better marks. He's not stupid Severus. He's much more like Lily than I thought. Much less like James than he looks."

Severus frowned, which turned into a slight sneer, "I'll believe it when I see it. He's still horrible at potions."

"Lily was too at the start, wasn't she? Said it didn't make sense. It was only when you started showing her why's over everything that she started getting so good. Maybe her son is the same." Filius suggested.

Severus frowned, then sighed again, thinking of her green eyes. He missed her.

He got up abruptly and disappeared through a hidden door in the wall behind his desk. After a moment, he returned with a small bundle of pictures.

"You can copy the ones that don't have me in it," he said sharply not looking at them. Not able to bear it.

"Thank you, Severus," Filius said softly as if understanding just how much it cost the man to bring these out.

It didn't take long for Filius to sort through and make a copy of the pictures. He got up and silently left the room, leaving his brooding college staring off unseeingly at the fire.

* 

Severus stayed there for a very long time that night, staring at the fire, not really seeing it. He missed Lily so much. He bitterly regretted his part in her death; the guilt clawed at him.

How could he look her son in the eye, her eyes, when it was his fault. He pinched the bridge of his nose. How could he look and see her eyes staring out of the face of his tormentor?
Harry woke, after precious little sleep, to the alert ward on his bed going off. He started violently, and tore open the hangings, his wand out, a Protago on his lips. But he could tell by the size and colouring of the blur that it was just Hermione. His shoulders slumped in relief. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, putting his glasses on. Hermione came into focus, looking wide-eyed. He glanced at the window. Bugger, he'd slept in, they were meant to be going for a run.

"Sorry, was up late, I'll be down in a tick," he said shuffling to his trunk then into the bathroom to chance, shooting his roommates a glance to check they were still asleep.

He joined her a few moments later, and they crept out of the castle. They took a different route today. Instead of running the edge of the forest or the lake, Harry took them into the forest, along a path Hagrid had shown him. He knew it pretty well, and this close to the edge of the forest; it was no real danger. The air was cold and crisp, and the sting of it against his skin kept him awake. It was brilliant. He loved being in the forest.

"What on earth did you ward your bed with Harry?" Hermione asked, "I couldn't open your curtains, it stung me!"

"Sorry, proximity and protection ward, to keep people out. I may have forgotten to take the stinging hex off, people have been pesterling me. Sorry if it got you. I was so tired last night. Didn't get to bed till early this morning." He said between breaths as they rounded a corner in the path. They were a bit deeper in now, the trees were more abundant, larger and closer together. It made the trail a little more complicated. Harry loved it. The air smelt a little different this far in, woody, musty, damp.

"maybe you need to add in an intent ward or something to it, I'll have to look them up it the library. With all the nastiness going on at the moment, warding your bed's a good idea. So what were you doing so late?" Hermione asked.

"Detention with Snape for one. He did ask to poison me, but when I politely declined, I think he
actually complimented me. I think he was genuinely pleased, I fully expected him to force the poison down my throat. But he didn’t."

"Well he wouldn't really poison you, he's a teacher. Besides, he saved your life in our first year. It would be a bit counterproductive." Hermione pointed out.

"Being a teacher has not stopped people from trying to harm me before," Harry said, "but your right, he has saved my life a few times now, he saved it again in our third-year too, when Lupin forgot his potion. How have I continually forgotten how he’s always trying to save my ass. He may be horrible, but he's always tried to keep me safe. Even if he is a prick." Harry finished thoughtfully

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

"It's true," he said, "besides, I got the potion right. He didn't even criticise my antidote; he even called it Satisfactory!"

"Harry that's brilliant, well done!"

"Thanks, I even got a bunch of things sorted out while I was pickling rat brains and scrubbing his cauldrons," he said.

"Planning for the rules you need to break, but can't discuss?" She said cautiously.

"Yep. Tonight, I'm going to bed early, but the bed should be warded. You shouldn't know, plausible deniability and all." He said.

"Just don't do anything foolish, and if it's illegal, don't get caught," she said after a huff.

Harry just laughed and lead them back through the forest to the changing rooms.

After their run, as he often did, Harry parted ways with Hermione in the great hall. She went to eat breakfast with Ron while Harry went up to the Room of Requirement for Breakfast.

Winky met him with a steaming bowl of porridge and fresh fruit, which Harry tucked into with gusto while flipping through a NEWT spellbook for the Disillusionment Charm. The theory was easy enough to understand now Harry had read the introduction theory books. The charm itself thought, was challenging. It required using the spell to manipulate his magic to make him blend into his surroundings.

Concentrating hard, and whispering the incantation, Harry twirled his wand around him as if he was wrapping himself in a rope. It felt off, like a raw egg. He looked down at his body, or rather, what had been his body, for it didn't look anything like his anymore. It was not invisible; it had merely taken on the exact colour and texture of the wall behind him. He seemed to have become a human chameleon. He grinned, but as soon as he did, it started to flicker, and it died.

He let out an irritated huff but kept practising. It was a challenging spell and even when he did manage to consistently get it to cover all of him, not merely in patches or flicking in and out, he found it very difficult to maintain. Something just felt wrong, the book said he would have to focus on making sure his magic was covering all of him, but he couldn't exactly feel his own magic at all, so it was hard to know if he was doing it right. It had said that once he had gotten the feel of the spell, and had cast it correctly and directed his magic to cover and hide him. It should click into place and be rather stable. But Harry was having trouble maintaining it.

After a good hour of working on the disillusionment charm. The best Harry could manage was getting it to last a couple of minutes. It was very frustrating as he couldn't feel what he was doing
Exhausted, he cracked open the Gringotts book again instead. He spent most of the morning with his head emerged in it. It was a massive brick of a tome but not at all as dry as he had expected. It was very informative. Once he'd started reading it, he'd noticed a subtle sassiness and sarcasm in the way that the goblins had written it. They clearly didn't think much of wizards or their intelligence. Instead of being offended by this, Harry thought it was hilarious. They were right, wizards could be rather stupid. He was rather enjoying reading it, he hoped the Author, Master Scribe Ripquill had written more books.

It was quite an informative read as well as an entertaining one. It started with a long list of the services the bank provided, going into great detail about each of them. It went over what they cost, as well as what a customer could expect from the bank for those services and what the bank than expected from the customer.

He was amazed by all the things Gringotts did. It wasn't just banking, loans, investment, financial management and accounting. They also did Warding (personal and location-based), curse breaking, spell checking and spell-breaking services as well as Magiarchaeology. Then there was also Inheritance matters and Heritage testing as well as ability testing. They offered healing and ritual services, as well as Stonework (walls, houses, tunnelling etc.,) Architecture and construction as well as Metallurgy (jewellery, swords, gates etc.) If Gringotts was so useful why on earth did wizards treat the goblins with such disdain and disrespect? At the very least, Harry thought it was just plain stupid to piss off people who managed your money.

The more he read and started to understand the part that the bank played in the Wizarding World, the more uncomfortable Harry became. It was growing more evident to him by the hour, that much had been kept from him. Too much to let slide. Possibly as an oversight but most probably maliciously to keep him stupid and ignorant, to use him. He just wasn't sure who or whom and why. How many people were trying to play him like a puppet?

He was now uncomfortably aware that he, at the very least, should have been given his key by the bank, not Hagrid on Dumbledore's behalf (and where had he gotten it from?) Harry should have received quarterly statements from his 11th birthday, as well as the first and introductory statement, on his 11th birthday along with his key. The fact that no-one had explained his vault, the conditions and rules in regards to it when he had first entered the bank was also odd. And If Gringotts handled wills, what had happened to his parent's? Did they even have one? If not, why not?

The book then went on to discuss Goblin culture. It mostly talked about what not to do, and how not to offend the Goblins (too badly). Though it had also stated that most wizards ignored the practices as they were as a whole usually imbeciles. It explained that one should never speak first to a goblin, wait to be addressed, look them in the eye for the first greeting (and in farewell) don't look away. But aside from first greeting and farewell, one should not look a goblin in the eye, it was rather rude.

That was fine with Harry, he'd never really like meeting peoples eyes anyway. It always made him feel vulnerable, as if he could be seen. He especially his liked it since learning about Legilimency, the eyes were quite literally the window to the soul. Meeting ones gaze could be seen as a challenge in goblin culture. Having said that if you did meet their eyes, looking away first was seen as submission or weakness. Harry loved how complex the culture was.

Goblins were an intelligent, ruthless race of warriors. Correct forms of greeting were often, well met followed by their name or title, or Greetings Warrior or Greetings followed by their name or title. Proper forms of address were Warrior, Master of their job title, or just by their job title (i.e. Warrior, Teller, Master Teller, Master Goblin, Master Ripquill, Warrior, Warrior Ripquill or Scribe Ripquill.)
The book went into little detail behind all the forms of address though, leaving Harry a bit confused as to how you were meant to know which one was the correct one to use for different situations, there were so many.

It was genuinely fascinating. If goblin culture was so intricate and enthralling, Harry was looking forward to cracking open the one on Wizarding culture and etiquette book. Hopefully, it would be just as brilliant.

The book on Goblin culture, he came to realise, however, really only briefly touched the surface of it. He realised he would need to ask Bill for some more books if he wanted to learn more. Which he did. He wondered if he could learn the language. He liked languages. He enjoyed studying Latin in the library outside of classes. It had undoubtedly made learning spells easier. It seemed sensible to learn the language of those that dealt with his money too.

Harry looked up sometime shortly after lunch to Hermione, opening the door to join him. She looked irritated.

"What's up? Ron being a pain?" He asked, not getting up from where he was sprawled in front of the fire with all his books and notes.

She huffed, "no, well yes, he is. He refused to do any study with me, a total waste of the morning. He'll never pass his exams at this rate. But no that's not what I'm irritated about. Do you have a subscription to the paper? Have you seen it yet?"

"No... I can't afford any non-essentials at the moment. What's she done?" He asked wearily, thinking back with a shiver to the horrible smirk on Skeeters face from yesterday.

Hermione let out a frustrated huff, "Skeeter made the tournament article all about you, hardly mentioning the other champions at all. She heavily implied that not only did you cheat your way in, but that you're also now trying to back out. She implied that you're a coward, that you can't cope. She also wrote a lot of rubbish about how your parent's loss has affected you, and it's painting you to be an attention-seeking cry baby with no backbone. It's appalling. I bet you didn't say any of that!"

She said it all very fast as if summarising it quickly could mitigate some of the damage.

Harry groaned and thumped his head down onto the floor in front of him.

She handed him the paper. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of him; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about him, including a colourfully detailed account of his life story. An almost entirely fabricated life story. Yes, his parents had been murdered by Voldemort, yes he lived with muggle relatives. But that was where the truth in her article ended. Many of the rumours that he had heard floating around Hogwarts appeared in the article, making him wonder. 'Harry was raised by his adoring muggle aunt, treated like a pampered prince was used to having had every whim catered too.' It heavily implied that this spoilt upbringing was responsible for him thinking he could cheat his way in and get whatever he wanted.

Rita Skeeter had gone a step further and reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that god awful broom cupboard. 'I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me... Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it... I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me...'

She had then gone even further and had interviewed other people about him too.
'He entered himself, cheating his way in, stealing the spotlight again,' his good friend Ron Weasley said, 'it's fine though because he's Harry. He'll get away with anything, we just wish he'd helped us enter too.'

And it got worse...

'Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty muggleborn girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

And worse...

The Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champion's names had been misspelled and squashed into the last line of the article as if they were a mean afterthought and not at all important. Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all. Harry was fuming by the end of it. He crumpled up the profit into a ball and threw it across the room and tried to incinerate it with a harsh jab on his wand. He was so angry though that his hands were shaking and his spell missed, harmlessly hitting the stone ceiling.

He wanted no part in this whole stupid thing, but they had, he was unwillingly, unwittingly stealing their glory whether he wanted to or not.

He swore, making Hermione jump. "Damn Skeeter! I want no part of this stupid thing. I don't want any attention! I want people to leave me the hell alone! If I ever get my hands on Collin or Ron, they're going to be sorry, that's the sort of shit I'd expect from Malfoy or the Slytherins, not my housemates. Gods their all going to crucify me on Monday, its bad enough in the corridors as is, I don't need more people hexing me in the back! Why can't the Wizarding world just leave me alone!"

He fumed.

"We'll their not going to leave you alone," Hermione snapped irritated, "so we're just going to have to deal with it. There's no use yelling about it."

He swore again, stalked over to the bookshelves and started pulling off books.

"I need a law book or a book on Wizarding rights. Do wizards even have defamation laws? Or any privacy protection laws? What about a magical equivalent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Does it even apply to them? Self-entitled pricks..." he muttered to himself still fuming. Hermione sat down primly on an armchair that appeared for her and watched him with a mixture of irritation and bemusement.

He looked up an hour later and slammed the book shut.

"They're all in bloody Latin! Old fancily worded Latin, not normal Latin! My Latin's okay but not that good! The ones that aren't, keep talking about a bunch of things I've never even heard of! They're not even in the dictionary!"

He fumed again, restraining himself from tossing his Latin dictionary across the room.

"Are you wanting to just keep fuming and ranting?" Hermione asked curiously, putting a bookmark in her book, "or do you want to have a civilised discussion to sort this out,"

That brought him up short, and he thought about it a moment before saying, "Um, No. no actually I don't, I'm too mad right now," he said, slamming the book shut, "I just want to keep yelling."

"Well then, ask the room for cups or something to smash while you do it, you'll feel better about it," she suggested, opening her book again and leaving him to it.
As she spoke, the room got bigger and a large crate of what seemed to be empty sherry bottles appeared. He leapt up and taking them to the far end away from Hermione started throwing the bottles. They didn't all break straight away, some were old and dainty, making a wonderful smashing sound as they hit the wall and seemed to fly into a million pieces. But some took a lot more effort to smash as they were bigger and older. And by the time he got through the whole crate, he was sweaty, exhausted and aching from the exertion but could think again.

"Sorry for snapping," he said to Hermione, somewhat embarrassed.

"That's okay, it was pretty horrid of her, I'd be mad too," Hermione said, looking up from her book, "my Latin is not good enough to read these yet either but we can work on translating them. I think the reason you have been struggling with some of them is because you haven't read the book on traditions and etiquette yet. It actually talks quite a lot about how society works and is run. You'll need to understand that first to understand what the law books talk about."

"Thanks, Hermione, I don't know what I'd do without your clear head sometimes," Harry said tiredly, getting up, and crossing to the bathroom door that had suddenly appeared, "I'll have a quick shower then work through that, I should have just enough time before dinner."

When he cracked open the etiquette book, it became immediately apparent once more how much had been kept from him. There was no way his aunt would have known any of this or told him even if she had. Someone would have at the bare minimum, had to tell him about the books. They should have. There was so much he couldn't have known on his own.

Someone had deliberately kept things from him. There was so much more to the magical world than he thought. The more he read, the more he realised how much etiquette played an essential part in the wizarding world and how vital the unspoken aspects of the culture was. The wizarding world was very different from the muggle one. Almost like it as a totally different country and culture. It had many complex rules that governed social interaction. Even just a quick informal introduction seemed complex to Harry.

It was also immediately apparent, however, that he had made several blunders thought his ignorance and had quite probably, unintentionally, not only offended several people quite badly but snubbed them too. Which could quickly escalate to a blood feud if he didn't fix it. Particular with Malfoy and Snape to Harry's horror and chagrin.

With Malfoy, Harry had turned down his hand back in his first year on the train. While it was not polite to refuse someone's hand in the muggle world, it wasn't nearly as rude there, as it was in the Wizarding world. Here it was a grave insult and one of the biggest snubs possible. Harry hadn't meant it that way, Malfoy had just reminded him too much of his bullying cousin. But Harry had unwittingly made a massive blunder by not shaking his hand that day. By insulting Malfoy so badly, Harry had opened up a can of worms that could become a blood feud.

He sighed, he didn't need this. He also didn't really want to admit he had been so wrong. But it would explain why Malfoy had always taken such a strong dislike to him, taking every opportunity to insult, humiliate, demean, hex and get Harry into trouble ever since.

Snape on the other hand, while an unpleasant teacher, had also been snubbed by Harry's continual disuse of his title of professor as well as Harry's refusal to call him sir and his general disrespect. While titles were polite in the muggle world, they were often not insisted upon. Here, however, it was almost as grave an insult to drop the honorific, as it was to refuse a handshake. Harry had basically been saying, 'I think I'm better than you, you're not worth my time, you're not so well learned as to be worthy of your title, and you're not worth anything to me.' No wonder the professor always called him 'arrogant.'
However much Harry disliked the Potions Master, and hated how the man treated him, Harry hadn't intended to actually snub him like that.

His face burned as shame pulled in his gut. Looking at the rules of etiquette, Harry had acted terribly. Gods, Professor Snape, had indeed been correct in his opinion of Harry acting like an arrogant brat, however unintentional it had been. If he was right about that could it possibly be that he was right about Harry's father as well? Surely not...

Harry would have to fix it. He'd have to apologise to Malfoy too. Probably in public, and hope Malfoy could if not forgive him, be willing to work past it or ignore it. He didn't really understand it all yet, or the whole family feeding thing worked, Harry didn't think he was really anyone of importance, but he didn't need more enemies.

He hadn't realised how serious and well... formal everything was in the Wizarding world, even though Hogwarts was known to be quite informal with its manners and traditions. It was much stricter outside the castle walls. He didn't need more people out to get him or thinking badly of him. Maybe his lack of knowledge on wizarding customs, which came across as him being rude, contributed to why the school seemed to turn on him so fast, so often.

Harry sighed, pulled out a notebook and started making notes about how it all worked, and what he would have to work on. Somehow he didn't think that infernal article would help him at all. It would probably not make his job of fixing his mistakes any easier. He'd just have to study up and make sure he was sincere. All he could do was try his best.

It turned out that while some in the Wizarding world didn't obey the Old Ways anymore (discarding a lot of old traditions and courtesies), many of the older families still kept them up. They were quickly (and rightly so in Harry's newly informed opinion) offended when people ignored their ways. Especially those from other old families. Muggleborns got an exception, though were looked down on if not seen to be making an effort to learn.

Harry, coming from an old family like the Potters (not that he really understood what it meant yet) and seemingly 'ignoring' the old ways, was a huge insult. On par with being a blood traitor. If he didn't fix it soon, he would be in a word of trouble. It was like, he figured, being in the muggle world and going to Indonesia, or some other foreign country and refusing to learn the language or culture and expecting everyone to cater to him.

The wizarding world had its own culture, unspoken social communication, and traditions. They were as rich and alive as any other culture, as Harry discovered as he read, absolutely fascinating.

The importance of blood wasn't about scorning muggleborns (as far as Harry could tell, though people did use it as an excuse.) It was about Magical traditions and their importance. They were sacred and to be protected. He hadn't even known that there was something he was accidentally shunning. It made sense to broaden magical community, making them stronger as a whole, not weakening it by letting go of the old ways and picking up 'muggle' culture instead. They were wizards, not muggles. They did things differently and for a good reason.

Unfortunately, the book only vaguely hinted at the importance of the old ways. Though it hinted at them, and the reasons behind them, Harry was disappointed it didn't go into greater detail about the Old Ways.

For the first time in his life, Harry thought that maybe, just maybe this might be home. Perhaps this might be that unnamed thing he had been yearning for. The pull for something more, that left an empty hollow gaping in his chest that he could never entirely shift or explain. A place to belong, with history and beliefs and something he could hang on to sink his teeth into and belong to.
Magic ran in his blood (he may not be able to feel it) but he felt deep within his bones that it was sacred, he could feel it in the very air around him and in the earth under his feet, if magic had a way of life, traditions and even a religion if you will, Harry wanted in. He wanted to belong to that. He had always felt like an outsider, never fitting in, still being alone. But magic... magic seemed to be somewhere or something he could call home, and his.

Then there was his family that he realised he was ignorant of too. Between the Culture book and the Goblin book, he got the impression that his family was probably old and powerful. Often Purebloods - he was pretty sure someone had said his dad was one - were often wealthy and had a role in society of some kind. They would have had a will, an account manager to look after their estate, and made plans for him. They wouldn't have left him in the muggle world, it went against all the old practices.

Bill was right, he would have an account manager. He needed to go to Gringotts or at least contact his account manager.

But how deliberate was it? Was it merely an error, or was someone, (Dumbledore probably) deliberately keeping him stupid? Keeping him isolated, ignorant and an outsider, keeping him weak? Was it Dumbledore? Did he really want Harry dead?

"I have a lot of work to do," Harry said finally as he closed the two books before Dinner. His head was swimming with all the new information, and he could feel long hours ahead of cross-referencing some of the intro books and scouring the room for more detailed books on magic, tradition, etched and religion. Though useful the intro book hadn't really gone into as much detail as he would have liked. It had hinted in a rich and complex set of traditions, but not gone into enough detail other than the basics.

"Mm?" Hermione said, looking from the law book.

"Turns out there are lots of unwritten rules, and I've been snubbing people by accident quite a bit," Harry said, feeling embarrassed again, "I didn't realise, there were so many important traditions and things."

"Oh, I just thought you were not that polite or just didn't think it important." she said after a moment, "Ron's pureblood and he doesn't believe in any of the traditions and manners in general. Lots of people don't nowadays. I figured it was like that. Anyway, it's not that important anymore, as long as you're basically polite. You don't need to stick to most of the rules, a lot of the older pureblood traditions aren't followed any more, they're interesting but not that important in day to day life." She explained.

"But Hermione, it is important, it's magic! There's so much more to it than spells and wands. I didn't know there were such a rich culture and unspoken language, that's amazing, that's precious. I want to learn that I want to be part of that. I want to be a part of something bigger than just me."

"You sound like a pureblood talking like that," Hermione said frostily, "don't tell me you suddenly think they're better than people like me, do you?"

"No! Of course not, muggleborns are just as good, talented and deserving of magic as any pureblood, but should not magic culture be learnt? Would we move to Japan and make no effort to fit in and learn the language at the very least?" Harry asked.

"Oh..." She said slowly, "I guess I never thought of it like that. I suppose I assumed the traditions meant bigotry, but when you explain it like that, it makes a lot of sense. I admit it did seem interesting when I read it, but a lot of the older students said it wasn't important. No-one cared about it anymore."
"We can look into it together," Harry said, "anyway I need to apologise to Professor Snape and Malfoy, but I'm still a bit confused on the correct greetings and bows and stuff.

"Neville was raised with magic, and is a pureblood," Hermione suggested, "he would probably know."

"Brilliant, thanks. Want to come?" he asked, offering her a hand up.

"No thanks, I'm going to stay here and finish this, it's really interesting," she said, waving him off.

Neville was in out in the vegetable patch by the greenhouses when Harry found him. Elbow deep in dirt, pulling up what looked like artichokes. Harry walked over to him, careful not to step on any of the plants. Neville looked up as Harry approached, "Hi, Harry, what's up?"

"Hey Neville," Harry said, "sorry to bother you, but I need some advice, help. If you don't mind."

"What from me?" Neville said, somewhat surprised.

Harry frowned, "Um yes, please, if you don't mind. You grew up in the magical world, I didn't. So you'll know things Hermione and I don't," Harry said nervously, bending down to help Neville dig out some of the artichokes.

"Oh okay," Neville said, "what do you need help with?"

"Well, I didn't know there was an intro pack, and that etiquette here is really different from the muggle world. I just found out, I've been snubbing and being rude to people for years without knowing. I need to apologise for my behaviour, but the book wasn't very helpful in using etiquette, just that it existed. I was wondering if you could help me understand it, especially the greetings, forms of address and the bows." Harry said nervously, not really enjoying having to admit his ignorance or his mistakes.

"Oh, wow!" Neville exclaimed, "so much makes sense now. Yeah no problem, if you help me pull the rest of this row, I'll explain it to you."

"Thanks," Harry said gratefully, tossing another artichoke into their bucket and watched in slight bemusement as it immediately vanished, leaving some loose dirt behind. It must have been going straight to the kitchens he thought.

"So how much do you know?" Neville asked

"I read being pureblood: a Slytherin muggleborns guide to faking it till you make it," Harry said.

"Ooh boy," Neville let out a breath, "that one's okay, it's from the introduction list, isn't it?"

Harry nodded, "what's wrong with it?"

"nothing technically, it's just not really a good guide for someone who needs to be a lord."

Harry looked at him, "what?"

"Oh, boy!" Neville said again, dropping the artichoke he was pulling out and looking at Harry, "You have a lot of power, Harry."

"What do you mean? I don't have any power…"

"You do, you'll be a lord one day." Neville said, then when Harry just stared at him, he said, "you
"I don't want power, I just want people to leave me alone!" Harry exclaimed yanking another artichoke out with enough force to topple back into the dirt.

Harry swore, and then let out a heavy sigh. "Best to assume I know nothing, before this week that was true, I'm basically a muggleborn, only I didn't get the introduction to the wizarding world they did."

"Oh man, right well..." Neville sighed and started to give Harry a crash course in the practical aspects of Wizarding Etiquette.

"In the wizarding world, there is a lot of old family's, the head of which is called lord or lady. Some lords and ladies have more power than other's you'll need to learn who they all are, and where each of them sits in the pecking order." Neville started going on to talk him thought the different lords and their hierarchy, and which were all the old families and which position they held.

"Oh, that makes more sense now," Harry said.

"The fact you don't is huge," Neville continued, pulling out the last artichoke, "Your magical guardian should have told you.

"I don't know my magical guardian," Harry said following Neville back into the greenhouse to put the tools away.

Neville groaned, "Get to Gringotts get an inheritance test done. That will teach you about your family or family's, and get you to the vault where there should be family grimoires that will teach you your family's mantle in their place. Muggleborns can get away with reading about this. But people from the old family's, especially those in line, have to at least be aware of them and follow them loosely.

"Now, when greeting someone formally uses..." Neville went on going on to explain the most common formal and informal greetings, and farewells, as well as the different gestures and handshakes for different people and situations.

When Harry had practiced them a few times and been corrected a little, Neville continued "Now you only ever use peoples surname unless you have been given permission to use their first, and only then if people you know well. It's insulting to just use their first name, it's seen as you taking liberties otherwise."

"Oh," said Harry, "but not everyone uses my last name, and I never really gave anyone permission, Ron used it straight away."

"Yes well," Neville scowled, "there is a reason his family is called a blood traitor. They shun the traditions and think them unimportant. Magic, land and family are important here Harry, magical important, not just because of tradition and etiquette, there's more to it than that, magically. But a lot of people don't follow the old ways, but even those who don't it's still rude to use the first name without permission."

"Most of the time you're pretty safe calling people Mr or Ms and their last name, or here where it's slightly more informal, just by their last name. But to an adult always try to go for their proper title, Mr so-and-so or Heir so-and-so or Lord so-and-so. There are a few lords here at Hogwarts and heirs, often they don't stand to formality every day, but you should use the proper greetings at least when your first introduced."

He went on to show Harry how to bow correctly to different people. He also explained that there
was a range of simple gestures people used every day for various different things, such as gestures to subtly acknowledge another person or that you followed the old ways.

Neville kept coaching Harry though a crash course on etiquette all the way back up to the great hall of which Harry was immensely grateful for.

"Now Gryffindor is not very formal, few of us practice the old ways, the old traditions and religions, and more and more of the rules of etiquette are forgotten in our house. But there are students and houses, like Slytherin that are much more formal and to follow the old ways." Neville explained, "so they will take longer to convince of your sincerity, but it's doable," Neville went on explaining at some length some of the more subtle things Harry had done wrong over the years to accidentally offend people.

"Hold yourself with confidence, if not pride. Be firm and calm, don't lose your temper. Pretend you know what you're doing even if it doesn't feel like it," Neville said neared the castle doors.

"I'll do my best," Harry said, "thank you for helping me with this, I'm really grateful."

"Don't worry about it, you've always treated me okay, I don't mind returning the favour. We may not be close, but we're still friends," Neville replied, making Harry smile.

"Besides," he said, "I didn't believe that trash, Skeeter wrote anyway, she's always steering up the doxies."

Harry groaned, "it was horrible! They're all going to be even worse now they've read that!"

"Yep," Neville said with a grin, "hold your ground, you know what really happened, act like a lord. If they don't get a rise, they won't react as much." he said as they approached the entrance hall.

Harry sighed but nodded, "thanks,"

"Any time, good like with Malfoy and Professor Snape," Neville said, leaving Harry in the entrance hall to catch Malfoy.

The school's reaction to Skeeters article, was somehow even worse than Harry had anticipated, as he found out as he stood to the side of the entrance hall waited for Malfoy to come up for dinner.

From the moment he appeared, Harry had had people - and not just Slytherins - quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying at dinner?"

"Been snogging your girlfriend Potter?"

"Been cheating at Charms too Potter?"

The shunning he had been experiencing since his name came out of the goblet seemed to increase as well, but not it was from the other schools as well, as they sat with the Hogwarts students for dinner. They didn't outright hex him as the Hogwarts students did, but there were nasty glares and muttering, most of which were not in English.

Harry was very relieved to see Malfoy walking up from the dungeons with along with not only Crab and Goyle, but also Nott, Parkinson, Greengrass, and Zabini. Even if it was only so he could hopefully step into a quiet corner with them, out of the hard eyes of the main school.
Harry stepped out of the alcove he had been unsuccessful in hiding in and approached them with great trepidation.

Malfoy evidently drew his wand and said, "where's your mudblood girlfriend, Potty?"

Harry bit back a lot of nasty comebacks but offered a proper bow of peaceful greeting, his palms up with no wand as the custom dictated before saying, "Well Met, Heir Malfoy, Slytherins. Might I ask for a moment of your time?"

"What do you want Potty?" Malfoy spat, looking surprised and irritated.

Harry bit back another retort, especially now he knew how rude Malfoy was really being and merely said, "I have recently learned that I have wronged you. I wish to make a most sincere apology and offer an explanation. Not an excuse, but an explanation for my unintentional snubbing of you back in First Year. And for the record, most of that article is rubbish."

Malfoy snorted, clearly not believing Harry and spat out, "this better be good Potter," before gesturing regally for Harry to continue.

Harry bit back a sigh of irritation "I was raised entirely muggle. I didn't even know magic existed before my letter. I was unaware that we had such a rich culture and was completely ignorant of all etiquette practices when I met you. I must sensibly apologise for snubbing you on the train when I refused your hand. I honestly had no idea that I was making such a grave insult to you and your house. It was not my intent. I merely took affront to a stranger insulting the very first friend I'd ever had. It was wrong of me, however, to act that way. I apologise. I did not, and do not have anything against you or your family. I had not intended to demean you like that. I do not expect forgiveness, but I would appreciate the opportunity to start again if you can find it within yourself to put the past behind us. I have no wish to be your enemy." Harry held out his hand.

Malfoy snorted and sneered, "Gryffindor golden boy, practically a mudblood. I wondered when you were going to figure it you, or if you are just too stupid and too much of a bloodtraiter. Well, it seemed you've wised up. Fine, I accept your apology and proposed truce."

Harry clenched his jaw but waited. After a painfully long pause, in which Harry could clearly see how much Malfoy was enjoying this, he shook Harry's hand. Harry kept his face blank, not showing a wince, as he allowed himself to return the vice-like grip Malfoy was using to try and break his fingers.

"Malfoy, Draco Malfoy. Heir of the Nobel and Most Ancient House of Black, heir of the Nobel House of Malfoy," Malfoy said dropping Harry's hand as if it was dirty.

Harry refrained from raising an eyebrow at the claim to House Black, but said, "Harry Potter, apparently the heir of the Noble and Ancient House of Potter. Nice to meet you."

"I, unfortunately, can't say the same. This doesn't mean I like you," Malfoy sneered, "but I'll refrain from hexing or starting any trouble with you."

"I appreciate that," Harry said calmly, "I likewise will not start trouble, I have enough people out for me, hide."

"This doesn't mean I won't hex Weasel whenever I see him. Or the Mudblood."

"Weasley is not my problem, though would prefer it if you left Hermione alone, or at least refrained from insulting her in my presence. My mother is a muggleborn as well, and she was a hero." Harry said coolly.
"Fine," Malfoy said, stalking away rudely, not even a proper farewell. Harry stopped himself from letting out a sigh, he supposed that was to be expected, that Malfoy still hated him. Harry didn't like him much either, but at least he had started making up for his errors.

Harry turned to the other Slytherin 4th years, "likewise Ms Greengrass, Ms Parkins, Mr Nott and Mr Zabini, I sincerely apologise for my appallingly ignorant lack of manners. Ignorance is no excuse, but I am very sorry."

"So that article really was fabricated?" Parkinson said disbelievingly, "what the profit said?"

"And what did you mean by apparently an heir? You either are or your not," Nott snapped.

Harry pressed his lips together in a tight line but nodded before saying rather tersely, "most of it was made up. She forced me into an interview with her, though I didn't say a word to her. The only bits it got right was that my parents were murdered by Voldemort," he ignored their flinch, "and that I was raised by Muggles. However, they were not fond of me and did not tell me I was a wizard. Hagrid came and told me, but unfortunately, I missed out on the Muggleborn introduction. I didn't know of my ignorance until now. I asked Neville for assistance on making sure I apologised correctly and didn't make any more blunders. The books were not very helpful on actually practising any of them. Neville told me about my house and that I am an heir. I didn't know."

"Your heritage has been kept from you? Longbottom told you? That's criminal!" Cut in Zabini, and Harry wasn't sure whether it was Neville explaining it was criminal or the fact it was kept from him. Harry hoped it was the latter, he liked Neville.

"The Muggleborn pack is rubbish with traditions and things. Lots of the old ways are frowned on now. You won't get much detail in there, not what someone in your position will need. You'll need to read these books, hang on" Greengrass said, pulling out parchment and quill and writing down the names of three books, "these are better, and all but the end one is neutral, neither light nor dark. The last explains the different political cations and how culture is swayed within them."

"Thank you, Ms Greengrass, I appreciate it."

"they may now be in the restricted section, a lot of the really useful resources on traditions and culture have been moved there in the later years. Its criminal, but if you ask Professor Snape, he will give you a pass," Greengrass explained.

Harry couldn't stop a dubious expression crossing his face.

Greengrass gave him a withering look and said, "you will be apologising to him too, will you not?" she demanded.

"of course," Harry said, meaning it.

"Well then, tell him we gave it to you, and be polite, he's good with the old ways. He'll give you the pass if you explain why you need it. He teaches all the muggleborns and half-bloods in our house so that they can fit in. He won't turn you away, even if he doesn't like you," Parkinson said, "he respects the traditions and magic too much to do it such a disserves."

"Thank you."

"Look I can tell you have worked hard to get this right, but it's painful clean you don't really know what you're doing. Your guardian is clearly deficient. For all that you can bluff quite well for a Gryffindor, you need lessons," Parkinson continued.
"We could be persuaded to tutor you in etiquette," Zabini offered,

"for a price Mr Zabini?" Harry said with a smile.

"very good for a Gryffindor," Nott muttered to Parkinson

Harry smirked, "I'm good at Defence, I can cast a Patronus. I could tutor you if you like? We all know our teachers in the past have been somewhat deficient. I'm also rather okay at Care of Magical Creatures."

"That would be fair, a lesson for a lesson," Parkinson said

"And you will tutor me on heirs and lords, not just etiquette?" Harry asked.

"Well bargained," added Greengrass, "you will continue until we master the Patronus then, not just one lesson."

"Agreed," Harry said, "likewise, not just a lecture on etiquette the Traditions and the old ways too? It's hinted at, but I haven't managed to find any books yet, and magic is fascinating."

"We don't know you, and that knowledge can be dangerous to us, in the wrong hands. We don't know you, don't trust you." Nott snapped, his eyes cold.

"It's dangerous?" Harry said, coming up short, "I don't understand. I'm sorry? How is knowing traditions and the old ways dangerous?"

Nott sighed, "your such a Gryffindor."

"I was meant to be Slytherin, but I met Malfoy and begged the hat otherwise," Harry snapped, "he is too much like my bullying Muggle cousin."

That startled a snort out of the cold boy, and he said, "to think the damage we could do to his reputation when we get you up to snuff, and people find out that it was because of him, we missed out of the 'golden boy,' the only Paselmouth in Hogwarts." Not continued with a wicked smirk, that was mirrored by the other Slytherins.

"If people thought that we practised the old ways, it could be perilous," Parkinson explained

"Perhaps can we discuss it later then, in private? I'd be prepared to make an oath, not to knowingly bring trouble to yours or your family doors? Or something like that, as long as it was mutual." Harry offered.

"Read the books Potter, and we'll discuss it after a few lessons," Zabini said, "maybe you do have the makings of a Slytherin."

"You won't know until you teach me, will you Mr Zabini," Harry said with a sharp smile.

"Just Zabini will do, you can drop the formalities, Potter," Zabini said his returning smile equally sharp

"Likewise," Harry said with a nod, "merry part then," he said before parting ways with them to go to eat at the Gryffindor table.
Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning:
Harry swears a bit, not a lot
also gets supper mad

Other notes:
In case anyone was wondering, yes they are professor trelawneys used sherry bottles
that she hides in the RoR
Chapter Summary

A trip into the forest with Hagrid - Centaurs
Harry sneaks out
Bill takes him to Gringotts, the Goblins, are not too happy with Harry

Chapter Notes

Sorry its a tad late, this is the start of about 3-4 chapters worth of Gringotts stuff. It has taken ages to write this bit! I think I must of re-written the Gringotts stuff about 9 times now to get just right.

The forbidden forest hijacked my plot for this chapter!

I hadn’t anticipated the forest being such an important part of the story it was meant to be a little side note on the way to gringotes. It was meant to be a moment with the unicorns (with was important I’ll have to find somewhere else to put it now!) But the Centaurs came and hijacked it and the forest seemed to want to be heard so… have at it.
I really do love trees and the land.

Happy reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dinner was not much better than waiting in the entrance hall had been. Even his book on diagnostic spells that he and Hermione had been reading wasn't much of a distraction. Especially when Hermione had had to keep whispering, "ignore them, just ignore them," in his ear every time his peers said something snide, or to stop Harry jumping a mile every time someone tried to surreptitiously hex him in the back. A few of the hex's he did get hit with though, he was getting good at shielding now, proved to be harder to undo, and he suspected a few had been Bulgarian or French hexs.

"Want to come to Hagrid's with me?" Harry asked Hermione as he exited the hall with great relief after their meal. He slipped the invisibility cloak around his shoulders as soon as he could but left the hood down so Hermione could see his face.

"No thanks," she frowned but didn't mention it, "I know he's taking you into the forest and that you love it, but being in once a day is enough for me. Besides, you're going to check on the Thestrals, aren't you? I can't see them. And while I can feel them, we both know I wasn't much help last time, not really, though I admit it was fascinating. Have fun, though. I promised Ron I'd play chess with him," Hermione said.

Harry couldn't hide a grimace from her, she knew him too well.

"Honestly, Harry," she sighed, "he'll get over it, he means well."
"Means well!" Harry exploded, unable to bite it back anymore, "he talked to the bloody profit! He called me a cheat and said I get away with whatever I want because of my name."

"Sorry poor choice of words on my part," she plicated, "but he's jealous of you. I've told you that before. I wish you'd just talk to him! Anyway, you do get away with a lot!"

"What!?" He exclaimed horrified.

She sighed and said, "Well, you do, you don't mean for it to happen, but it does. You break the rules at the end of every year, for a good reason," she hurried, "but you get rewarded for going into danger, not punished. That's probably what would happen to anyone else."

Harry glowered, and she added, "It's not your fault, but I don't think anyone else would have been made seeker in your first year, for flying when Madam Hooch said we'd be expelled."

"Why? I never... oh gods, what do I do? I don't want special treatment, I want to be normal, to slip through the cracks and not be noticed. I never asked for this!"

"I know," she said soothingly, "but we can't really help that. Maybe... Well I won't say don't break the rules, everyone does, but try not to get caught. Try not to be so rash, plan ahead. Don't leap in head first, if you don't know how deep the water is."

He nodded miserably, "Hagrid's doing it too, isn't he? With taking me into the forest and teaching me stuff, 'cause I'm the boy-who-lived," he spat out the title loathingly.

"Maybe," she admitted, "but probably just because he's your friend and your genuinely passionate. He likes you, Harry and he likes sharing that passion about creatures with you. Ask him if you're worried. He liked Charlie too, and Charlie loved animals as well. You write to him, don't you? Maybe Hagrid mentored Charlie as well. Ask them." She suggested.

He nodded and slipped the hood over his head and disappeared so he could sneak down to Hagrid's without being hexed by the group of muttering Ravenclaws that was eyeing him as they exited the great hall.

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"I didn' know you and Hermione were datin' 'arry?" Hagrid said when Harry met him at his hut.

"We're not! The article was a load of Thestral dung," Harry said, trying not to snap at his friend.

"Oh, fair enough then. I know you didn' enter the tournament, but I wondered about the rest," Hagrid admitted as he led Harry into the Forest, his crossbow on his shoulder, Fang trotting at their heels.

Harry sighed, "don't worry about it Hagrid, but most of what they print about me is crap. I did wonder though... Do... Are you taking me into the forest and teaching me extra because we're friends and you like sharing your passion with me? Or are you doing it because I'm the boy who lived and giving me special treatment? It was pointed out to me that I get a lot of special treatment" he said bitterly, "and I don't want you treating me different because I didn't die. You don't owe me anything Hagrid, don't feel you have to."

"No 'arry, I teach you 'cause you asked f'it, you like it as much as I do. Don't you worry now about what they all sayin' 'arry." Hagrid said, his black beetle eyes crinkling as he smiled reassuringly behind his bushy beard.
"Took Charlie in, too sometimes I did," Hagrid continued, "he loved aminals like you seem to, he did. He left early though, to study Dragons. Anyway, we're going to check on the Thestrals again this evenin', make sure the foals are doin' okay, and their mum's."

The walked the familiar path, and Hagrid again pointed out the different plant species as they went, what they were used for, what they fed or where inhabited by. They saw some bowtruckles briefly, too. Hagrid pulled some woodlice out of one of his endless pockets and coax one down onto Harry's hand. It was a strange twig-like creature, but Harry laughed as it waved its little fist at Hagrid when it ran out of woodlice, while Hagrid was still telling Harry about it. Harry reached into Hagrid's pocket and pulled out a few more, and it sat contentedly on his hand, as Harry handed it its tiny wriggling meal. He loved magic. It still sometimes seem so fantastical.

They saw two Centaurs on the way back from the Thestral's. Harry recognized the black-bodied and bearded Bane, whom he had met nearly four years ago and the palomino Firenze.

"Ev'nin" Hagrid called as they approached.

"Good evening Hagrid" Bane called

"You met Harry? I've been takin 'im under me wing, showin' him the ropes so to speak," Hagrid said clapping Harry on the back, he stumbled but was pleased when he managed not to fall over this time.

"We have met, good evening Harry Potter, I hope you are well," Firenze said.

"Er hello, I'm doing okay. Better in here than out there, anyway" he jerked a thumb back towards the school. For some reason, not feeling ashamed for admitting it here, when he was in the forest with Hagrid and the Centaurs. If anything, he thought they'd understand how much safer he felt in here than out there, at least in here, he knew what the risks were.

"You?" Harry stuttered, still little awed by their presence.

"Mm," Firenze hummed casting his gaze skyward. Harry looked up too, there was a patch of dark sky glimmering through the trees, the stars starting to shine brightly as the evening got darker.

"Mars shines brightly above us tonight," Firenze said, looking back down at Harry.

"Mars is the bringer of battle," He said slowly thinking back to Astronomy and Divination. He didn't think much of Trelawny, but he respected the Centaurs. They had said that last time too.

Harry glanced up at the sky again, squinting but could make out any individual stars, let alone Mars, "The war... he'll be back?"

Bane stamped a front leg, "we do not divine the stars at will like petty fortune tellers, for humans," he spat.

"No of course not, I didn't mean to offend," Harry said before Hagrid say anything in his defence, "I'm sorry, I'm still learning about the magical world, and the other cultures part of it. I didn't mean to imply anything, just meant to clarify if I understood you correctly."

"We do not bow to the whims of others," Bane scorned.

"Gods, I wish I could do that." Harry muttered enviously, unable to stop himself, "I wish I had your strength... I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offence, I..." He trailed off a moment trying to find the right words, "there's so much I don't know, the magical world so big, and diverse, and so... wonderful. I want to learn it all, but there's so much I don't know. I keep putting my foot in it. I don't mean to, I
just want to be... I don't know, connected to it? It's magic, magic is...sacred," he trailed off feeling lost and small.

"He's, but a foal Bane," Firenze chided softly, and Harry wanted to bristle at the accusation, but he was uncomfortably aware of how much he didn't know at that moment, and how much smaller than the Centaurs he was. He felt tiny, blearly coming to Firenze's hip.

"Teach me," he said quietly, pleadingly.

"For shame!" Bane growled, pawing at the ground, Hagrid put a hand on Harry's shoulder about to pull him back, but he stood firm. He was braver here, under the safety of the trees, away from the harsh, judgmental eyes in the castle.

"Exactly," Harry persisted, stepping forward in his earnestness, "I don't know anything! I keep messing up. I know you don't like wizards much, and rightly so! I don't really either! We keep screwing everything up and treating you horribly. Hogwarts sings, but no one hears her. The forest sings, but they ignore her too. I don't want to be like them! I don't want to be ignorant and rude, scornful because I don't know better. Magic is more than just wizards, and wands! I want to be better, I want to be part of it, part of Magic. Not the wizarding world and its prejudice and small-mindedness. I want to understand the magical world not just the Wizarding, there's more to it than that. Teach me. Teach me your ways, teach me the ways of the forest. So I don't make the same mistakes as that of my forefathers. I won't be a foal forever; eventually, I'll be an adult, and I won't have the leeway of youth. Help me be better.

Bane looked furious, Hagrid looked stunned, and Firenze looked down at Harry with an uncharacteristically sharp gaze before glancing at the sky again.

"Centaurs are not the servants or playthings of humans," said Firenze quietly after a moment.

"We shall not enter into servitude to humans," said Bane, his voice spitting with anger and disdain.

"Peddling our knowledge and secrets among humans," he continued, "For shame! There would be no return from such disgrace."

"No!" Harry pleaded, "That's not what I meant! Not servitude! Not secrets, not sacred knowledge! Sacred knowledge is to be respected, and if it's not to be shared with outsiders, I respect that. I mean little things, like how to address you properly, with proper terms of respect that are not offensive. Do you use sir and ma'am like wizards do, or master like the goblins? Teach me how to not accidentally offend you. I don't want to! Not at all! I don't know how old you are, and I don't know if it's rude, but you're older than me, I think, and that means you have years of wisdom and learning on me, that's to be respected. That's... that's special and worth respect. But I don't know how to do that without accidentally offending you, because I don't know anything. You live in here, and I think that's amazing, it so much better in here away from that lot," he looked up at them earnestly, enviously, begging silently for them to understand.

Desperation and frustration, at his constant isolation, at the pain of being cut off, of desperately wanting more was bleeding into his voice. "This forest would kill me in a minute, I know nothing. But I want too! I'm desperate to know something. To connect!" He had long kept it all under tight reign, but it was slipping out now.

Now he had started it rushed out of him like a burst dam, "I don't want to tramp through the forest, damaging it as I go, I love this land, it feels like home, it feels right, it sings to me. I want to care for it and protect it and be part of it. I don't want to use you! I don't want to know whatever you're not willing to share, but help me be better, less ignorant and stupid like the rest of my kind. I want to
know the ways of the forest, to help it, to be part of it. I don't want to be like them."

He looked at them in the eye so desperate for them to understand. He'd never been able to express it before. The connection he felt with the land, with the trees and the creatures, the peace he felt in here. It was dark and dangerous, but it felt as much like home, if not more sometimes than Hogwarts did. He had a deep yearning to be part of it. Some days he wanted to step into the forest and never leave. He felt part of it somehow, he may not be able to feel his magic, but he knew the land was part of him, and he part of the land.

He didn't want to offend the Centaurs, they had knowledge and wisdom, and he wanted to learn all he could from them. It wasn't about just surviving the tournament, this just felt right, a need, deep in his bones.

"I'm not asking you to work for me, I would never. As someone who has had a lifetime of servitude to others, I would never ask. But can I give you something in return, an exchange? I can earn it? Please." He all but begged, "I'm not good for much, but I can be useful, I can earn my keep so to speak. Please teach me the ways of the forest."

"'arry," Hagrid cracked out, sounding worried.

"You are bold in your request, Harry Potter" Firenze cut in.

"Bold and rude through your ignorance but perhaps that makes your point. Though your sincerity for learning is commendable. We will. Not. Enter. Servitude. To humans," Bane added harshly.

"I'll work for you! In return, anything. You would not be serving a human, it would be an exchange, a trade between two living souls who are not so different really. You breathe, you feel, you sleep. I breathe, I feel, I sleep" Harry said, almost yelling now. Why did they keep misunderstanding him?

He took a breath and considered how to explain it better, "every living thing, is really no different from each other. We are all brothers and sisters; Witches and Wizards, Muggles, Centaurs, Unicorns, Thestrals, Trees, Shrubs, Mandrakes. We are all children of the land, this land" He paused a moment, casting his gaze around, his eyes lingering on a bowtruckle in the tree above him.

"No-one else has ever understood it. But we are all of The Land, we are all part of Magic. That makes us brothers and sisters. Part of the earth, part of Magic. They look down on you, Hagrid for... being taller, for..." Harry threw his hands up in frustration, "I don't know! People are stupid!"

He took another breath and started again, "They look down on you for looking different, my Muggle relatives hate me for being magical, Wizards shunned Professor Lupin for being a Werewolf, Hermione is shunned for having Muggle parents, my mum probably was too" he said, "but it should not be that way. People are ignorant, so they act badly. This forest is special."

He reached a hand out to the bowtruckle and coaxed it down onto his hand, fishing a few woodlice out of Hagrid’s pocket again, looking at it, reverently. "it's part of Magic. It's home, it feels like home. I've never had that, never felt connected to anything before. I can't even feel the magic inside me, but I can feel it here, in the earth. I look at the trees, and the dirt, and all the living things and I see my brothers and sisters," he said stroking the Bowtruckles back fondly, it chittered at him.

"I want to be part of something, part of the magic, I don't want to be another arrogant wizard stomping through damaging and scorning everything. I want to be part of it, part of the forest. I want to understand its people and its ways. I want to belong somewhere, to something bigger than me. Please. The trees call me. Please, let me in. I can't explain it any better than that, but my intentions are honest and true, with no disrespect meant." He trailed off, looking up at Bane and Firenze, shire
desperation in his gaze that had Hagrid sniffing.

Harry could feel the magic in the forest floor under his feet, wrapping around him, urging him on, egging him on, encouraging him. He kept speaking, "As far as I can tell, you are the wisest, most knowledgeable people in the forest. You understand how it works, you and Hagrid, please teach me. I want to be part of it, not part of the problem." Harry finished, and he bowed deeply.

He wasn't good at the Wizarding bows yet, but he bowed low, bearing the back of his neck, making sure he was lower than them. Trying to show respect, sincerity and forcing himself to place himself at their mercy, "please, please teach me the ways of the forest, I beg of you. I will place myself at your mercy, but please consider it. Please don't shut me out. Teach me, please" The forest around him hummed.

Firenze looked at him for a long moment, before glancing at the sky contemplatively, and humming softly.

Bane rounded on him, and said sharply, "Vega has been unusually prominent" as if that explained everything.

Firenze nodded calmly.

Bane suddenly reared, his fists clenched, kicking his forelegs in Firenze’s direction. Harry flinched back, suddenly his hand shot out as if to grab Firenze and pull him back, but Hagrid had Harry by the collar and was pulling him out of reach before he could do anything. His heart pounded, he suppressed the urge to fight free of Hagrid's grip and hide. He hated yelling, hated fighting and violence. He shivered as Hagrid cried out, "Hey, now!"

But both centaurs waved a dismissive hand. Firenze stood his ground calmly, unharmed, not even needing to move out of reach, of Bane’s angry hooves.

"Vega has been prominent" Firenze agreed mildly.

Harry had the distinct impression Firenze meant something else to what Bane had meant when he said the same thing. Harry tried to remember what Vega was, but could only remember it part of the constellation Lyra and had something to do with falling. He shivered.

"We do not set ourselves against the heavens!" Bane roared.

"And we shall not, it is as the stars say, as it has ever been. But they have been read wrongly before, even by centaurs. Mars is bright, as is Vega, you think that will not touch us? He is the potter boy." Firenze said firmly, reminding Harry again, of what he had said in harry’s first year, after Quirrellmort in the forest. Harry wondered anew what he meant, it made it sound like there was some sort foretelling about him.

War was coming... and something would fall. It would affect the centaurs as well. But they couldn't do anything about it, but Harry may be able to? Or maybe had a part to play? He was uncomfortably reminded of Professor Trelawney's prophecy at the end of third year.

Harry shivered, feeling something bigger than him was going on, and it filled him with dread and an urgent need.... For something.

"Get up human foal and leave our forest," Bane said sharply to Harry before turning to leave the path.

Harry felt like he had been physically hit, his hopes and dreams snuffed out before they even began.
His heart sank, and his throat ached, feeling swollen. He got up mechanically and started to leave, trying not to feel sick and cold inside.

He didn't really understand. Why did it matter to him so much? But it did, and their rejection hurt. He couldn't explain why he felt so strongly, but he did, and for some reason, this place felt part of him. And yet he was being turned away.

"Sorry, I won't bother you again," he wheezed, walking down the path towards the school with a heavy heart.

"You misunderstand Harry Potter. We have not banished you yet. Return at dusk on your Sunday. You will have an answer then," Firenze said, turning and following Bane into the trees.

Harry looked back at them, beaming, "thank you!"

"We promise nothing," Firenze called back, melting into the shadows of the trees.

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"You really are somthin' 'arry." Hagrid said as they walked back to his hut.

"That was risky Harry, I don't know what they'll say, they might still banish you."

"I know but Hagrid I just, I feel strongly about it. I can't explain it any better, and I've never said anything, but I've always felt that way. The more I read about magic, the more it feels right. I just, I had to ask." he said, looking up at Hagrid willing him to understand.

"I understand ‘arry, I do," Hagrid said, putting an arm around Harry. Harry flinched but managed to not pull away, Hagrid was a gentle soul.

"Hogwarts and the forest ‘as been my home, longer than you been alive. I understand Harry. Not many wizards do, great man Dumbledore, but he don' really get it neither, not like I'm starting to see that you do. Don' worry ‘arry, it'll work out. When the forest calls, you obey. That's sacred that is, it'll work out." Hagrid finished, and Harry even managed hugged him back briefly, so grateful that he understood.

Harry went straight up to the castle and up to the common room after he left Hagrid's. It wasn't quite curfew yet. He slipped into the common room, hoping not to be noticed. While the Gryffindors hadn't been hexing him in the corridors, he didn’t trust them not to start now that the newspapers had portrayed him as a coward. He had gotten quite a few snide looks at dinner. He, somewhat hesitantly, slipped over to where Hermione was playing chess with Ron. He sat down on the couch next to her and pulled out a book. He needed to mention going to bed early, so people didn’t look for him. But he didn’t want it to sound forced.

"How was Hagrids?" Hermione asked, looking up from the game she was losing. Ron around and cut in, "what do you want, cheat?"

Harry sighed, he hadn't expected it to go down well with Ron when he joined them, but he expected the cold shoulder or glares he'd been treated to all week. He didn’t expect Ron to say anything.

"Ron!" Said Hermione

"What? It's true!" Ron said scathingly, "he's nowhere near as smart as you, so he can't be getting those marks honestly, and there's no way he entered it on his own, so he cheated."
"I'm going to bed," Harry said, getting up, suddenly too tired to fight and this was as good an excuse as any, "I'll see you in the morning, Hermione."

"Early?" She said.

"Probably, we'll go for a run down by the lake." He replied before heading up boys stairs, fumingly ignoring Ron's call of "coward," as he went.

Harry yanked the curtains on his bed shut and warded them so no-one would get in. As an afterthought, he added in a strong stinging hex as a deterrent and added an alert ward so he would know if someone tried to get in. He then changed out of his school clothes. Having no clothes of his own except school uniforms and robes, he nearly always wore his uniform unless it was winter, in which case, he needed all the layers he could get to try and stay warm. He changed into his best (but still rather horrible, despite Dobby and Winky's best efforts) set of Dudley's off casts, he didn't want to be recognised as a student, though he wished he had a black cloak or something that didn't have the school crest on it. He wondered if there was a plain black cloak in the lost property or something. Did Hogwarts even have lost property? He frowned, he'd have to ask Dobby.

He pulled the map and the invisibility cloak out to pack into his bag, and was just rummaging in his trunk for his black scarf and gloves when the door opened. He sipped around, jumpy, his wand out.

"Going to curse us Harrykins?" Teased Fred.

"You've been avoiding us," added George.

Harry looked at them wearily, he really liked them, but he was a bit hesitant.

"Sorry Ron's a prat, we hexed him-" started Fred

"-good for calling you a coward though" cut in George

"We believe you though," they said together.

He blinked at them, and sagged in relief, "sorry, I just wasn't sure..." He trailed off.

"That we weren't going to turn into colossal prats too?" Said Fred.

"We don't hold it against you Harrykins," said George, "you planning some mischief then?" He asked.

Harry looked around shiftily and cast a privacy ward but didn't answer. He just turned back to his trunk and pulled out some other useful things to put into his bag; a notebook and quill, then after a moment, pulled out a small swiss army knife he nicked from Dudley's pile of forgotten junk. It was useful that one.

"Yes, but I can't tell you yet, it's not safe," Harry said after a moment, "please don't tell anyone." He begged,

They looked uncharacteristically serious for a moment.

"Of course, do you need-"

"A hand?" They said, still finishing each other's sentences.

"No, I just need to sneak out the portrait hole without anyone noticing, and for no-one to come looking if I'm not back before morning," Harry said carefully.
"We shall delight in running interference for you!" they chorused back, making Harry grin.

"Do you need any other help though?" Fred asked

"With the tournament? We can help you."

"Tutor you in some of the more useful spells we've picked up of you like?"

Harry, through for a moment, "that would be great, can you help me with the Disillusionment spell?"

"Sure!" They coursed back matching grins on their faces.

"what about breaking into the Restricted section without getting caught?" Harry asked an eyebrow raised slyly.

"Our little Harrykins growing up to make mischief," George cooed wiping his eyes with mock motherly pride causing Harry snort.

"We're so proud!" Added Fred wrapping Harry into an exaggerated hug.

Harry pushed them away but laughed, "thanks guys, how about duelling? You two any good? With someone out to kill me, I want to learn how to fight and fight dirty. I'm sure you two know all sorts of good things..."

"Come find us tomorrow, we'll help you out," they chorused with a manic grin as Harry disappeared under the cloak, "we'll open the portrait for you."

When Harry was out of the commonroom, and in a deserted portrait and statue free alcove, he called Dobby softly. There was a pop, and Dobby appeared.

"Winky is telling Dobby to give Mr Harry Potter this sir," the elf whisper-squeaked, holding out a packet of sandwiches.

Harry grinned, "thanks, Dobby! Thank Winky for me?" He asked, taking a half of one, before putting the rest carefully in his bag.

Casting a quick privacy ward, Harry said, "I have to sneak out, to go to Gringotts, but I was wondering if one of you would be able to keep an eye on my bed for me, and maybe come and let me know if someone starts really looking for me? They shouldn't but just in case?" Harry asked.

The elf nodded, "no one be catching Dobby unawares! You is being safe with Dobby sir!"

Harry smiled, "knew I could count on you, thanks Dobby. Another thing though, I've realised I don't have a cloak that's not got Hogwarts school crest on it. I don't want to be noticed, do we have a lost property or something I could borrow a plain travelling cloak from or something?"

"not really lost property Harry Potter sir," Dobby said slowly, "we elves's can be sensing who things belong to and can's be returning them. But there is being a room of hidden things, sir. Dobby be showing you, sir, at the come and go room, sir."

The elf popped away, and Harry quickly hurried to follow him. Using the map, he didn’t run into anyone on his trip up to the 7th floor. Dobby was waiting on the seventh floor, "you is wanting the room of hidden things," he said, passing back and forth.

A door appeared, and opening it, Harry gasped. He could not help but be overawed by what he was looking at. He was standing in a room the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were
sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by teetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, stowed away, perhaps, to hide the evidence of mishandled magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt banned or graffitied or stolen. There were winged catapults and Fanged Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were chipped bottles of congealed potions, hats, jewels, cloaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusting swords, and a heavy, bloodstained axe.

Harry had to restrain himself from exploring the many alleyways of hidden treasure. He could have easily gotten lost in here and was dying to explore and crack open some of the books. But glancing at his battered watch he really only had 20 minutes to get out of the castle and meet Bill at the Shack. He hired over to an old cloak rack and after a quick detection charm, pulled off a black cloak. It was old, worn and dusty, but it was sturdy and warm, with a deep hood. Dobby clicked his fingers, and the cloak shook itself out and appeared to be cleanly laundered and pressed.

"Thank's Dobby!" Harry exclaimed putting the cloak on. It was warm, and he could sense that it had once had warming charmed imbued into the material, or perhaps stitched runes on the collar. He'd have to try and re-activate them later. It was a bit big on him, covering his hands and reaching the floor, but when he put the hood on, it covered his face well enough that no-one would know who he was. Grinning, he folded it up and put it in his bag, so it wouldn't get dirty on his climb out of the Shack.

"Will anyone mind if I borrow this Dobby?" Harry asked, worriedly.

"No sir, everything here is either lots or hidden or forgotten it, doesn’t have owners any more sir, Hoggywarts is not be minding if Harry Potter claims it, sir. Hogywarts helps those who need it, sir," the elf explained in an earnest squeak.

"Thank's dobbys," Harry said, heading back towards the door before adding, "thanks Hogwarts." He felt an ever so slight tingling in the magic of Hogwarts under his feet and grinned.

He was almost back at the door when something silver caught his eye. Huh, he thought, that now would be useful for keeping his bezoar on him. He pulled the bezoar out of his pocket. He had thought, after the potion lesson on poisons, that keeping a bezoar on him, while someone was out to kill him, was only a prudent idea. The object that had caught his eye was a little round cage-like spring of fine silver metal, on a leather cord. The perfect size to slip his Bezoar into so he could wear it around his neck. He cautiously cast a few detection spells on it, and when it came out clean of any magic, he pulled it off the finger of an enormous stuffed troll. He pulled the spring apart enough to slip the bezoar into it before he slipped it over his head and under his shirt.

Donning the cloak and pulling the map out again, after saying goodbye to Dobby, Harry had no trouble avoiding Filch and slipping out of the castle. He was careful not to get close enough to the Willow to trigger its movement. Carefully he levitated his folded up swiss army knife and prodded the knot on the tree. It froze, and he hurried over, wishing he had managed to master the Disillusionment charm. He hadn't managed a stable one yet, but waving his wand and concentrating hard on his intent, he thought he might manage to hold it long enough, to take off the cloak and slip into the tunnel.

He looked around, he couldn't see anyone, he stuffed the cloak into his bag and slid into the tunnel before the charm broke with a cold feeling of raw egg. He shuddered and gave one of the tree's roots a friendly pat in thanks for not braining him. The tree root twitched slightly, and made a slight grabby
motion around his finger, before letting him go. He grinned at it, and after one last fond pat hurried along the tunnel at a crouched run.

He lit his wand in the tunnel and was glad he had when he slipped into the shack. It was almost pitch black, with all the boarded-up windows. He slipped into the hole in the wall, and carefully climbed down the gap, his wand held gently between his teeth. It was freezing, and he hurried to wriggle out the hole at the base of the wall and slip out onto the grounds of the Shack. It was even darker outside, the sky was cloudy, coving all light from the stars and moon. Harry hurriedly vanish the dust and dirt he was covered in, his teeth chattering, and pulled on his scarf and gloves, before donning his black cloak and then the invisibility cloak over that. He hurriedly cast a bunch of warming charms on his hand's feet, and on his cloak and shivered as he glanced at his watch. He had a few minutes before Bill was due to arrive. Glancing around he carefully picked his way across the grounds to the outer fence surrounding the shack, taking careful note of what was around him, so he could easily find the hole in the wall on the way back. It looked different at with the moon covered tonight.

Harry jumped a mile, and nearly hexed Bill when he apparated in with a crack. It took Harry a moment to catch his breath as his heart raced. He climbed carefully over the wire fence and went to join Bill, who was looking around as if he was checking to see if anyone was around.

Harry pulled the hood off his invisibility cloak. "Bill," he called softly from behind him suddenly feeling nervous.

Bill jumped, spun around, and grinned, "Harry!"

He wrapped Harry in a bear hug greeting. Harry, already jumpy, flinched at the contact and jerked himself back. Bill hurriedly let him go, looking concerned but to Harry's huge relief said nothing.

"Hi," Harry said awkwardly, shuffling his feet. Gods, what was it going to be like at Gringotts, what would they find out? He was so nervous about it but also so embarrassed suddenly in front of Bill too. He hadn't seen Bill since the summer, sure they had written, but Harry suddenly felt rather unsure of himself. He was no-one, nothing to Bill, who seemed so impossibly cool. Here Harry was, his ratty clothing hidden by a borrowed cloak and an invisibility cloak and there was Bill looking like something from a rock concert-like he always did. Harry felt a flush of embarrassment when he also realised how much shorter than Bill he was, he didn't even reach Bill's collar bone. Bill still a good foot or two taller than him. Everyone was taller than Harry, but not normal by quite that much.

Bill seemed to catch his expression and let out a huff of a laugh and ruffled Harry's hair causing another flinch and said, "you'll grow Harry, don't worry. You just haven't hit your growth spurt yet."

"I really don't think I will," Harry said dubiously.

Bill laughed, "Sure you will," he said, reaching out and ruffling Harry's hair again.

"Hey!! Don't mess it up!" Harry yelped dodging out of Bill's reach, "it's hard enough to keep neat as it is! It's impossible, I hate it," he grumbled.

"Why do you keep it like that, then if you don’t like it?" Bill asked with a grin.

"Not like I have much choice. It won't do anything! My aunt chopped it off when I was a kid, it grew back overnight and hasn’t done anything at all since. It won't even grow and never cooperates when I try and brush it neat."

"You a metamorph?" He asked a raising a thin ginger eyebrow in askance.

"A what?" Harry asked, blankly.
"A Metamorphmagus. Charlie had a friend whose hair does things by itself when it wasn’t changing colours, she had trouble keeping haircuts as well. A Metamorphmagus is someone who can change their appearance at will." Bill explained.

"That would be so useful! I could get rid of my scar! How do you learn it?" Harry asked, practically bouncing with excitement.

"You don’t. It’s a born ability. I can ask Charlie to get a book recommendation off Tonks, his friend if you like?" Bill said, laughing at Harry’s excitement.

"Thanks, I’m writing to him already, I’ll put it in my next letter. Maybe if I grow it long like yours, it might behave?" Harry asked, hopefully.

"Maybe," Bill grinned, "mine looks terrible short it sticks up all over the place, not like yours, but maybe yours will calm down when it’s longer as well." Bill said, "come on, we should head off, I’ll aparate us."

He moved to take Harry's arm. Slowly Harry noticed, like when Hermione wanted to hug him but didn't want to startle him too badly. It made him feel oddly warm and squirmy.

Bill gripped his arm tightly, and Harry had to force himself not to squirm at the unfamiliar gentle touch. Bills hand was warm, and it didn’t hurt, like Harry expected from touch, but it still made his skin tingle. Harry only just managed to control the almost automatic impulse to pull away or flinch at the contact. Bill twisted away from him; the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull and then -

He yanked himself desperately from Bills grip. He staggered and fell over, his knees hitting the ground hard. Gasping great lungfuls of cold night air, he opened his streaming eyes and tried hard not to be sick. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realised that the Shrieking Shack had vanished. He bit his lip and pressed a hand over his mouth. His stomach heaved.

“You all right? Takes a bit of getting used to.” Bill crouched next to him, and Harry had to desperately fight the urge to leap away out of reach. His heart was still ponding, and his head swimming.

Harry put his head between his knees and focus on just continuing to breathe, but a hand touched his back, startling him, and he was sick all over his shoes.

The hand just kept rubbing up and down his back. Smooth and steady, is warm weight burning slightly. Sure Hermione and Hagrid hugged him sometimes, but he wasn’t comfortable with it. But this was almost nice. A wand switched, the sick vanished.

"That was horrible," he croaked.

Bill conjured a cup and using aguamenti, to fill it with water, "here, take a sip of that. It can be rough the first time. I didn't think to warn you sorry. I forgot you would not be familiar with it. Are you okay?"

"s’okay," Harry said, taking a drink. His head cleared a bit, comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life. They were in the corner of a dark alley. He gapped.
"Wow, that was cool! Horrible; but cool." Harry said, putting his invisibility cloak in his bag, and pulling up the hood of his black cloak.

Bill snorted in amused agreement with the assessment, "it is pretty cool, takes getting used to but it is pretty cool," he smiled his earring catching the light.

"Do you always wear the same earing?" Harry asked, suddenly distracted by the glint of light.

"Hm? Yeah," Bill said absently as he started leading them down the street. Harry recognised the muggle London, but they were not on Charing cross Road by the Leaky Caldron.

"Why?" Harry asked curiously wondering where they were.

Bill blushed. Harry stared, what could Bill possibly have to be embarrassed about?

"Don’t tell anyone, okay?" Bill said sounded sheepish, Harry nodded beyond curious now, "It's charmed to protect me from sunburn and sandflies. I burnt like a lobster in my first week in Egypt. After it stopped hurting so bad, Charlie thought it was hysterical. And as for sandflies, just... nope," he shuddered

"You can do that? With an earring?" Harry asked, intrigued, thinking of all the summers with the Dursley's where he had slaved away in the garden, burning until his pale skin had blistered and burst. He'd ended up with oozing sores one particularly hot summer. Vernon has locked him outside several days in a row and had demanded he repaint the house.

"Yep," Bill replied, "You can do all sorts of things with clothing and jewellery, especially with runes. No more than one or two things per piece depending on how big the spell is and how big the piece is and what its made of. Some things hold magic better than others. The fang was magical, so it can hold more magic than a metal stud could have, which is why it can hold the sunburn and the sandfly ward to cover all of me." Bill explained patiently as they walked into a slightly seedier back alley.

"Did you make yours?" Harry asked, curiously.

"Nah bought it, my first weekend off in Egypt back when I first started Curse breaking. They have some brilliant markets over there. You should come to visit one day. I probably could make one, though, why? Want one?" He asked, glancing down at Harry.

"Yes, please! Will you teach me?" Harry said grinning at the thought of no more sunburn when the Dursley’s working him to the bone.

Bill laughed at Harry's eagerness, "okay but I’m not piercing your ear. Mum would murder me. Or how about a bracket or necklace? I could do a leather band. Or a ring?"

Harry narrowed eyes, and glared up at Bill from under his hood, "I like your mum. She’s been kind to me, kept me from starving too many times over the holidays to count. But it’s not up to her what I wear, or what I do to my body. I've always wanted to pierce my ears," Harry said sternly.

"Might take me a bit to get it done, no one will let me here, and you need an adult with you in the muggle world. You don’t have to help me. I wasn’t fishing. I was just curious, that's all," Harry said a bit defensively not looking at Bill, but at the toes of his falling apart shoes. He wished he had something better. He felt so shabby standing next to Bill, even in his borrowed black cloak.

Bill wrapped an arm, gently around Harry and pulled him close briefly (again kindly did not ask when Harry flinched at the touch.) "That's fair enough, it wasn't a criticism. I'm the last person to
criticise you on your choices and how you look,” he said, letting go of Harry.

Harry wasn’t sure whether to be pleased the contact had ended or mourn its loss, it was very confusing.

"I was only joking," Bill continued, "I'm happy to make you one. I can send you notes if you like. We won't have time tonight for me to show you, but I'm happy to make you an earing like mine. I really can’t pierce your ears, though."

"Why?" Harry said, hesitant curiosity.

Bill looked away a bit sheepishly and mumbled, "don’t like needles..."

Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing, but it escaped from him a little.

"Hey!" Bill exclaimed.

Harry bit down a smile, "sorry sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh, s’okay though. I get it. But needles? You’re a cursebreaker!"

"Oh, hush you!" Bill said all mock outrage.

Harry grinned then asked shyly, “I’m already working on some leather bands and things, to hold protection charms and the like, to keep me safe. Would you help me?”

“Brilliant, ’course, I will. Now pay attention,” he said gently, pointing out where they were.

Harry looked around, and he went on, "this is the back entrance to Knockturn Alley. We can get into Gringotts from there. It’s less noticeable."

Harry looked around, noting the name of the alley they were in. Bill led him along the alley, and up to a graffitied brick wall. The graffiti almost looked like a witch’s hat, a snake and a broom. Harry snickered as Bill pointed out the 3rd from centre brick, under the snake’s eye, and placed his hand on it.

"You want to push your magic into it a little, to open it. It's not like Diagon where you need a wand. It's an intent ward if you mean anyone harm (Auror's are not popular here) it won’t let you in.” He explained to Harry.

Harry nodded, and watched as Bill’s hand glowed softly for a moment, then the wall shivered, a brick wriggled, and the wall vanished. They were walked into the narrow cobblestone alley. It was dark and dirty, but the air tingled with magic. It felt alive and wild. Different from Hogwarts and Diagon which felt positively tame by comparison. Harry loved it.

"They know me here, but pull keep your hood up," Bill said, "we want to keep this secret."

Harry nodded, gripping his wand a little tighter in his hand as Bill drew his wand and after waving it over the hood of Harry's cloak before he tapped the hood with it briefly.

"It will keep your face in shadows now when you have the hood up. It already had runes in the hood, they were just old and had faded. I reactivated them for you.” Bill said.

"Can you reactivate the warming charms too? Harry asked eagerly, “I'm pretty sure that's what the other magic on it is.”

“Yeah sure, hang on a tick,” Bill said, waving his wand around Harry is a slightly different pattern,
before tapping the clasp of the cloak under his chin. Harry flinched slightly at having a wand so close to him but almost moaned when suddenly the cloak filled with warmth. For the first time all night, he stopped shivering.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a slightly blissed-out smile, “Will I get in trouble if I do a quick repairing spell?” Harry asked, suddenly realising that the mending charm he’d used on his cousin’s ratty shoes had worn off again. Dobby and Winky had adjusted his clothes to fit a little better, and they had patched them up a bit. It was the best he had, but he felt shabby. He shifted self consciously.

"Sure. The trace only knows who did the magic when there are no other magical registered in the area. In a magic rich area, like this, it will know underage magic was used here, but it won't know who it was as there are so many people. It only works in muggle areas as underage witch or wizard are registered to the area. They can then guess use that to figure out who did it. You won't get caught here, as they won't know who did it." Bill explained.

"You mean basically anyone, not a Muggleborn can get away with magic over the summer and the ministry would never no!" Harry exclaimed as he cast a repair charm on each of his shoes. The toes seemed to sew themselves back together, mostly. They were still filthy, ratty and too small, but at least he could no longer see all his toes peeking out.

"Pretty much," Bill said, “how do you think the twins managed to make all those prank sweets?"

"Oh! But that’s so unfair," Harry mumbled flicking his wand and watching in amusement as some of the dirt flew off his shoes and into a neat pile on the tip of his wand. Harry flicked it, and it vanished.

"Come on, this way," Bill said, leading Harry down the alley and around the corner. Harry looked around eagerly. Much like Diagon, Knockturn Alley twisted and turned out of sight. Despite it being quite late now, Harry had the distinct impression that the alley was really only just starting to wake up.

"It’s nocturnal this one. It’s always busier at night than during the day, you get lots more unusual people here. I like it." Bill said as he led Harry through the crowd.

Again Harry wished he could look everywhere at once. The alley was less colourful than Diagon, with darker stones and woodwork, and grimmer colours. It had a much more gothic feel to it. People seemed to be more secretive here, often wearing hoods or low pulled hats. And the people! While in Diagon he’d really only seen Witches and Wizards shop there. Here Harry thought he saw some hags, a vampire or two, some Goblins and a few other people that didn’t look entirely human either.

The alley twisted around and they reached a snowy white building that towered over the other shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of black and silver stood a goblin. It was a different uniform from the ones that stood outside the Diagon Alley entrance. Harry wondered if it was significant.

"This is the Knockturn entrance, the back door so to speak, to the Diagon Alley branch," Bill explained, "open from dusk till dawn, whereas Diagon is open dawn till dusk," nodding to the goblin as they entered.

There was another goblin on the inside who nodded to them as they passed. It looked much the same as the Diagon entrance. They were in a vast marble hall. Goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Bill led Harry to a counter, and Harry was suddenly hyper-aware of how he had forgotten to ask Bill about what they were doing tonight and what Bill was so
worry about. How could he have forgotten?

The goblin didn't look up. Bill just stood patiently. Eventually, the Goblin looked up and met Bill's eyes, but didn't say anything. Bill just smirked slightly but didn't say anything either.

"Greetings Cursebreaker Weasley," the goblin said eventually looking away with a smirk. Harry grinned, understanding what had just happened.

Bill looked away as well and replied, "greetings Master Teller, Harry Potter to see his account manager, please."

"So you have finally dined to grace us with your presence then?" The goblin asked glaring down at Harry disdainfully. It was how Aunt Petunia looked at him like he was filth on the bottom of her shoes. He shivered.

"I- What?" He stuttered feeling both stupid, and a little cowed under the intensity of the Goblins hate-filled glare.

"He wasn't getting-" Bill started, only to be cut off by the teller, who spoke in a slow sneer, as if Harry were stupid as well, "You have been ignoring our owls. And we couldn't talk with your escort there. He's not a potter. You have been quite rude, even more than what is normal for wizards."

"What owls? And I have written to you! The other day. I can't ignore what I haven't gotten," Harry snapped back.

The teller grinned, "ah, this one does has a spine. Well, come alone, Mr Potter, Cursebreaker Weasley."

The teller hopped off his stool and lead them along the hall at a brisk pace. Down another corridor, turning left, then right, then left again, before taking another few more turns that left Harry feeling dizzy.

Harry looked at Bill, confused. Bill just smiled as they reached a door that said, 'Rodgrip.'

The teller knocked on the door with a long knuckle.

A sharp voice called "enter."

"Cursebreaker Weasley and Mr Potter for you," the teller said before saying something in what Harry assumed must be Goblin tongue before leaving them at the door.

Bill entered, and Harry followed, peering around curiously. It was a large office, with a large oak desk. Behind it sat an older looking goblin, possibly a female harry thought, in a smart red and black uniform. The Goblin gestured to the chairs with a long-fingered hand but did not look up from her paperwork.

They sat down but said nothing. Harry remembering what he had read, and made eye contact with the goblin, when she finally looked up at them but said nothing, trying not to blink.

After what felt like a long time, the goblin blinked and said, "well met Cursebreaker Weasley, Mr Potter. What brings you here?"

"Well met Master Rodgrip," Harry greeted tentatively hoping he wasn't messing up.

Bill nodded at him subtly, in reassurance, so he continued, "I was entered into the tri wizard
tournament against my will. I need to find a copy of the contract so I can figure out exactly what I have been bound to. I owled Bill for help. I then learnt that I have been kept in the dark about practically everything. I was raised by muggles. I didn’t know anything about the magical world before my letter. I didn’t get any of the introduction packs. Apparently, I have a magical guardian. Apparently, I have an account manager, but I’ve never even heard either. People act like my family is rich, but I thought it was just my vault and that's only enough to last school if I'm careful and maybe long enough for me to find a job if I'm as frugal as I can be. And I have been careful. Really!” he said earnestly, not wanting to them to think he was whining.

“There’s something wrong with my magic, I can't feel it. Things are happening at school, but whenever I try and ask for help, people dismiss me or forget. Something’s wrong, and I thought Gringotts may be able to help with the contract if nothing else.” Harry finished in a rush, twisting his fingers in his lap.

“I also have reason to suspect that his home life is not the greatest, Fred and George and I have tried in the past to look into it and were blocked at every turn.” Bill added making Harry looked up sharply, “it's very worrying that Harry doesn't know anything, highly suspect.” bill finished

"That is worrying." Rodgrip, "Mail redirection wards. It's not legal to prevent Gringotts mail. It would explain a lot... especially why you have been ignoring our requests to meet. But once a minor is at Hogwarts age, it is not legal to have a mail ward like you would seem to have without their knowledge and permission. Not even a guardian can keep their male from them against their will," Rodgrip said harshly, "And in your ignorance didn’t know that you are never to give your key to another. That can be fixed for a fee."

"As for your finances, your parents were very rich, has no-one discussed this with you?" Rodgrip asked, pulling out a thick lever file from a draw in her desk.

"Er...no," Harry shook his head.

The Goblin sighed before saying, "That is incorrect. We will have to go over your inheritance and your finances today while you are here. I am coming to suspect you will need the complete basic testing done too, to see how much of a mess you're in" Rodgrip explained, flipping through the file looking for something.

"Can I afford these tests?" Harry asked dubiously as she stopped flipping through the file.

"You can," she said, running a long bony finger down a page in reference, "I cannot say much until we have proved you are who you say you are. But I can say you can afford the tests. You may not be able to access any of your family's money until you are older, and your trust is tightly controlled by your guardian. But your health and well being is provided for by the family vault, as stated in the Potter Gringotts Charter. This means all fees to the bank are automatically taken out when authorised by yourself and your account manager."

Harry slump in his chair in relief, things were happening now, he was able to do something now, "thank the gods, thank you, Master Rodgrip, I do appreciate it."

"Polite too for a human could be stuck with worse, I suppose" Rodgrip muttered with a nasty grin that Harry could sympathise with. He knew what it was like to expect people to hate you and be horrible. It was very cathartic to see someone else, an adult with as low an opinion of people as he did.

"But," Rodgrip continued, "first we need to confirm you are who you say you are and not under any
controlling magic," pulling out quills, paper, a knife, and a ritual bowl, from her desk.

"I am," Harry said morosely, "I could work out we were under magic - Hermione and I - but not the specifics so we haven't been able to break it yet."

"What?" cried Bill

But Rodgrip ignored him and continued, "Well we need to figure out the extent of this mess then" she went on, "you should have been getting statements, and you should have been brought here by your guardian. They should have explained about your finances and your family or at least organised your account manager, me, to do it for them. Here," the goblin finished holding out a quill and parchment.

Harry picked it up, it was black with a sharp nib. It’s magic felt odd, harsh.

"What do I write with it?" He asked.

"Just your name," Bill explained, "It's a blood quill, normal only used for signing documents and contracts, illegal anywhere else except Gringotts. This one is enchanted to do a simple identity ritual. You write your name, it will take your blood. Unlike an ordinary one it won't cut into the back of your hand, it just takes some blood and its mixed with a potion it uses for ink."

Harry frowned at it a moment, before starting to write his name. There was a sting as the quill seemed to make a small cut on the back of his hand. There was a slight delay, but it produced a dark brown ink. He put the quill down, the ink glowed, and the quill jumped up and started writing again. It crossed out his name and instead wrote:

" Harry James Potter

Hadrian James Evens-Potter

Born : 31st July 1984

Age : 14 years, 3 months, 14 days

Currently under spells

Currently under potions

Currently tied to wards

Currently under bindings

Debts, vows and contracts applicable

Health : poor

Paternal inheritance from James Charlus Potter:

The Most Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter - Heir to Lordship and vaults, 7 Wizengamot votes, trust vault

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black - Member of House Black

Godfather Inheritance from Sirius Orion Black:
The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black - Heir to Lordship and vaults, trust vault, 6 Wizengamot votes

Maternal Inheritance from Lily Marie Evens-Potter:

The Most Noble and most Ancient house of Slytherin - Heir to Lordship and vaults, 7 Wizengamot votes

The Most Noble and Most Ancient House of Gryffindor - Heir to Lordship and vaults, 7 Wizengamot votes

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black - Member of House Black

Magical guardian:

Albus Percival Wolfric Brian Dumbledore - corrupt 31st October 1985
SIRius Orion Black - forcibly removed 31st October 1985

Muggle guardian:


Chapter End Notes

I’d say I’m sorry for leaving it there. But I’m not.

So I've bent and added to Centaur lore a little.
When Firenze says “on your Sunday,” he really means on the day harry calls Sunday.
Centaurs do not use human day names to track the course of time. They are familiar with them though. Pretty sure Centaurs have their own language (in this story anyway.) Not sure yet. But they don’t use days of the week and months, they track things by the moon, so January is wolf moon ect. And they would track the weeks ect by the phase of the moon I should think. They have no need for day names. Hence ‘your Sunday.’
mars is bringer of battle, its been bright for years.
Vega has also been bright in the sky recently (by centaur reconning, so a few years but not as long as mars) is the brightest star in the constellation Lyra (music) and is sometimes seen as a falling eagle. Could be seen as doom, in reference to several things. Vega is sometimes also associated with as a minor deity, Vanant, who's name means concoror. Food for though.
Firenze and Bane have both interpreted its brightness, slightly differently as what its falling could be in reference to. Divination is after all not always 100 spot on.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vega#Etymology_and_cultural_significance

So, there is some debate over the date of HP#1, many agree it was set in 1991. But I have gone with 1995 as the date points we have just makes more sense that way. Below is a link to a super interesting essay that explains it.
I have also taken some liberties with the Potter family, and bent cannon lore in regards to that a little bit, where it suits me, especially with some names and things. Actually I've made up some stuff in regards to how the Wizengamot works too. It will be explained later, much later.
"My name's not Hadrian," Harry blurted out.

Rodgrip glared at him, "of course it is," she said bluntly.

"No, it's not. I was told it I was to answer to Harry Potter," he said, twisting and pulling at his fingers.

He had spent weeks in his first year of primary school getting yelled at for not answering the name his primary school teacher had given him, Harry Potter. He had been so used to being called boy or freak... He hadn't known he would get a different name at school, but he figured Harry was better than boy or freak though.

"What do you mean you were told," Bill said with a frown.

"When I started school, I was given… I mean, I was told that my name was Harry Potter," Harry stuttered hesitantly. "I didn't know I had a middle name still professor McGonagall used it to yell at me." Harry hedged twinging his fingers together some more, not entirely understanding why Bill was so confused.

"Well, now you know your true name," Rodgrip cut in before Bill could say anything else. "You can think on what you would prefer to be called. Many wizards are called something slightly different names from their true name. We clearly need to look at your magical guardians and your muggle ones."

Rodgrip sneered nastily. "Moronic wizards not even able to look after their young properly."

She muttered something in goblin tongue that Harry thought was probably not very nice. Whatever it was, it had Bill sniggering, and Harry hid a smile. It was nice seeing an adult angry on his behalf. The fact it was a goblin adult didn't matter.
Ignoring the inheritance for a moment, Harry was not surprised that he was under all sorts of magic; disappointed but not surprised. Dumbledore was his guardian. He had suspected but hoped it wasn't. That would have made Dumbledore responsible for so much of Harry's hardship. Fear kindled in his gut, smouldering quietly.

He sighed, "Dumbledore, I had wondered how much he was behind, but..." Harry trailed, "I didn't think he was actually my guardian, I had never even heard of him before I got my Hogwarts letter. How could he have been my guardian? And what does corrupt mean in that context?"

"It means he has forced guardianship or that he was not meant to be your guardian or both," Rodgrip explained with a huff of irritation.

"How does that work?" Harry asked

"It is likely that in the death of your parents, Sirius Black automatically became your guardian. He was your godfather, so magic would have automatically named him your guardian. But it seems like Dumbledore forcibly overrode it. Black was not taken to Azkaban until 2nd November. Now, even if he was cleared, he is no longer well enough to be your guardian even if he wasn't on the run from the law."

Harry slumped, he felt like someone had gripped his heart and pulled it down into his belly. He was never going to get to live with Sirius. Even if Sirius did manage to pull his socks up and be the adult Harry needed, he was never going to be Harry's guardian. Harry would never get away from the Dursleys. His eyes burned, and he clenched his jaw, his nails digging into his palms as he willed himself, not to care.

"Oh..." Harry asked, pleased that he managed to keep his voice steady.

"He hasn't done a very good job. The into books said guardians were in charge of your health and well being as well as making sure minors were not being taken advantage of, that they were protected. He'd never done any of that," Harry said, fighting against fury rising in his throat.

"In fact," Harry continued, "I think he'd done a bunch of horrible things, including making sure I'm kept hungry at Hogwarts. I know I'm under spells and potions - it would not surprise me if Dumbledore placed them. What can I do to stop Dumbledore being my guardian?"

"You will need a solicitor to get rid of him as your guardian, at the moment you have neither the money or the power to go up against the chief warlock. He would slip out of any charges you tried to bring him up on." Rodgrip said.

Harry allowed himself to slump in his chair, clenching his fists. "Well, I guess I'll just have to gather as much evidence against him in the meantime. What do the inheritances mean, do I have a family?" he asked hopefully, "it lists potter and black, but I thought the Gryffindor and Slytherin lines had died out?"

"They had gone dormant, apparently no longer. We will have to look into it and see how you are related to them. We will need a full inheritance tree test for that. I'll add it to the others, here," she said, getting a knife out and crossing over to Harry.

Rodgrip rounded the desk and approached Harry, a knife in one hand, reaching for Harry's hand in the other. Harry jumped and jerked back in alar, his eyes wide.

"Not to be rude or anything," Harry stuttered out in a rush, not taking his eyes off the goblins long fingers and the knife, "but what are you going to do?"
"I'm doing some medical testing on you obviously," Rodgrip spat out, the 'you moron,' going unspoken, "What? You think I'm going to eat you, wizard?" She sneered, "you lot are all the same, thinking we're dirt beneath your feet."

"No! I don't think that!" Harry stuttered before Bill could intervene, "Of course I don't think you eat humans, what kind of idiot do you take me for? Even if you did or do, you're smart enough to not get caught, or let it get out. We both know I would not be a good choice. So no, I don't think you're going to eat me. I'm irritatingly well known, it would be noticed if I went missing. Plus I'm skin and bone, I wouldn't even eat me."

The Goblin and Bill all let out a snort of laughter. "Your rather funny, almost intelligent for a human," Rodgrip said with another sneer after a moment.

"I've just never seen a doctor, I mean healer! Not a magical one. I just don't know what to expect from a healer, I've never been to one, not really. I don't know what you do! And you're coming at me with a Knife!"

"Your guardian is deficient" Rodgrip stated with another snort, "we shall be gathering evidence."

"We can somehow record the fact, I've never seen a healer?" Harry asked eagerly, "I know I don't have any records in the muggle world we could use."

"The medical history will record any untreated issues you have had over the years," Rodgrip said.

"Not even made Pomfrey?" Bill cut in astounded.

"Erm," Harry said, shifting awkwardly in his chair, tugging on his fingers again, "she did a quick spell once, and muttered something and gave me a potion. She said I needed shots but then forgot when I came back for the appointment. She's never really told me anything, and I'm nearly always knocked out first. I've only been to her twice other than that. Even for my arm with Lockhart, she knocked me out before anything happened. When I wake up, and she sends me out. I know nothing about any kind of healing, just that muggle doctors are horrible, and it hurts."

"That is not good," Bill said slowly, "it's not meant to hurt normally."

"I don't mind it hurting," Harry said quickly, not wanting them to think him a baby, "I'm not complaining or whining! I just would rather know first, so I can, you know, expect it."

"Not an unreasonable request," Rodgrip, said slowly, "Healing is nothing like that. Even Humans should not treat people like that. But I will agree to your request, though it is not our way. I am going to do several tests. Other than pricking your finger for some blood, it should not hurt. The tests will tell me everything that is possibly wrong with you, was ever wrong with you as well as any genetic dispositions you have. The magic does feel invasive to humans, I am told. But it should not hurt. Tell me if it does." She sharply looking Harry in the eye to make sure he understood.

He nodded, "thank you, Master Rodgrip, I appreciate it."

They tested his magic first. He pricked his finger again and dabbed the blood onto Rodgrip's thumb and forefinger. She then touched a bloody finger to Harry's forehead, chanted something in Goblin tongue before making an odd pinching motion with her long fingers. Harry felt magic rush into him, foreign and not at all familiar. It seemed to ooze into him, and something squirmed inside. It ached. He bit his lip so not to let out a noise, as Rodgrip slowly withdrew her pinched fingers. Something wispy and almost see-through followed. It felt as if she was pulling something out of him, a slow deep ache. He rubbed his chest as she touched a quill to the substance. The quill shivered, absorbed
the wispy substance and then started writing frantically on a piece of parchment.

"That should not have hurt as it did." Rodgrip said looking at the parchment, "it doesn't bode well for the health of your cor, Wizard, and from the results, you have quite the mess on your hands" she continued with frowning down at the parchment.

"I thought so," Harry said dully, "I can't feel my magic at all, other magic yes but not my own."

"Hmm," she said, "that is concerning, we will do spells and potions next,"

"Wait, there are more? You can't do it all at once?" Harry asked, rubbing his aching chest.

"Of course, there is more than one!" Rodgrip snapped, "we cannot just click our fingers and magically know and fix everything. You wizards are so impatient."

"There will be a full Spell, Health, Potions, Vows, Inheritance, Warding, Magic testing." Bill cut in, "Then we will look at your finances and Inheritance as well as treatment and the tournament contract to get an idea of the full extent of this," Bill explained.

"Ah, sorry Master Rodgrip, I meant no offence," Harry said

Rodgrip sneered but said nothing. She repeated the process twice more using different chants each time, the sensation of her magic did not lessen in discomfort and seemed to only start hurting more the more he was exposed to it. The quills this time seemed to keep writing for far longer than the first time.

"The spells will first list what is currently affecting you, before continuing with all the spells ever cast upon you. The other is the same, but concerning potions. They seem to be uncharacteristically long, especially for one of your age." Rodgrip said peering at him curiously, frowning, "Health next, again it will also take a history."

She made the pinching magic again, the magic seemed different this time. It was as if it was looking at his physical body this time not just his soul and magic. It ached deep in his bones. He let out a groan that he couldn't quite bite back, and tipped forward, his head coming to rest on the edge of Rodgrip desk. It was blessedly cool against his hot forehead.

The health parchment seemed to just keep going, and going, and going rolling off the bed and onto the floor and stopping at the goblin's feet.

"Oh Harry," Bill murmured, sounding very worried. Bill put a hand on the feverish boy's shoulder, but Harry flinched away startled. Bill frowned and looked at Rodgrip. She frowned, and pushing Harry back upright repeated the pinching motion one last time, this parchment was only afoot.

Rodgrip handed the knife to Harry again. Knowing what to expect this time, he pricked his finger again and let her dab the blood on her fingers. She dabbed some on his neck, and made a pinching motion there, before pulling away and tapping a quill, which sprang up and started scribbling.

"This is half of it the ward-analysis tied to you, we will also have to analyse the house itself, or whatever properties that the wards tied to you are tied to," Rodgrip said, "that is a job for one of the curse breakers though."

She waved a hand, and all the scrolls split themselves into neat sheets and then stacked themselves. Another flick of her wrist duplicated each stack. "One set for the manager, me, and one for you," she said to Harry.
Harry nodded but didn't say anything waiting as the residual ache of the magic wore off. It didn't wear off, he just took a deep breath and concentrated on pushing it aside so he could breathe again.

It didn't make the pain stop or go away, but by pushing it into a little corner with the rest, he was able to ignore it.

Rodgrip said handing over a bowl and a knife, "49 drops,"

"Pardon?" Harry asked.

"You need 49 for a detailed list of how you are related to those lines," Bill explained, "it can then be taken to a tapestry maker to make a Magical Tapestry of your Family tree."

"Oh, wow, I've always wanted to know my family," Harry said wistfully.

"The test will produce a detailed family tree on parchment that the tapestry weaver then uses to make up a full tapestry. There is quite a bit of magic involved to get the faces of the family members and such. It's quite the art," Rodgrip explained exasperatedly.

"Let's do that then," Harry said, making a cut on his hand and carefully counting out the drops. It took a while, and he had to make a second cut to get them all. Bill healed it for him, while Rodgrip chanted over the ritual bowl which was floating over a small flame before she added some herbs and powders. She stirred the potion with a quill for a moment. Harry jumped as the potion suddenly caught fire, turning purple. When the fire had burnt out, the potion was deep blue and was being absorbed by the somehow un-harmed quill. A large sheet of parchment appeared, and the quill started frantically scribbling.

Harry watched it curiously. It started with his name, and drew a line up to his parents, James Phinus Fleemon Potter married Lily Marie Evans Potter. His grandparents were Marie Daisy Evans and Harrold George Evans on his mother's side, and as Charlus Fleamont Potter and Dorea Euphemia Black Potter on his father's side.

He was related to Sirius! He watched as the names went back. His grandmother was a black, the daughter of Lysandra Yaxley and Aracticus Black, the son of Phineus Nigelus, the Hogwarts headmaster. His father's father, however, was a descendant of Hardwin Potter, son of Linfred of Stinchcom who seemed to be the first Potter. Hardwin had married a Peverel daughter though, Iolanthe, daughter of Ignatious Peverel and the Peverells appeared to go back even further.

Harry wasn't sure where he knew the name Peverell, but he could have sworn he saw it somewhere before. He didn't recognise any of the names on his mother's side though. Until after a long while he noticed the name Slytherin and Gryffindor. His mum was a muggleborn though, how on earth did she descent from them? Maybe from a squib line? He'd heard a theory that most muggleborns were from squib lines.

"It could be at it for a while," Bill said, "it should go way back."

"What does this mean, me being the heir? The books didn't talk much about nobility. If I'm heir, does that mean I have family?"

"We cannot talk about Slytherin or Gryffindor as you have not been accepted into the family through the induction ritual and heir ritual yet. That cannot be done until you are free of other magics. You will have records and things in the vaults, diary and the like to train you to take on the family mantles. It's not something I can explain to you, Goblins do not meddle in the offers of wizards just
manage their finances. I can say, all purebloods are related in some way. You are quite wealthy, you have a black family trust vault as a member of the black family through your paternal grandmother as well as through your godfather, who before his incarceration was the heir to the House of Black. He took you as his heir and as a member of the family, which makes you the Black heir as he is no longer eligible, after being in Azkaban. Long term dementor exposure can damage your core. You also have seats on the Wizengamot that will be your when you turn 17, from both the Potter and Black houses.

"Who has them now?" Harry asked

"As your father did not set a proxy formally for House Potter, nor did your grandfather before he died, I do not know. You will have to look up the Wizengamot laws and approach the ministry for the details to find out if someone is voting for you, it could well be your magical guardian.

"Dumbledore..." Harry groaned

"Yes, again you'll need to find a solicitor if you wish to oppose the decisions he has made with your house."

"Right. Did my parents have a will?

"Your mother yes, but it was suppressed. Your father, not a proper one no. He was convinced he would not need one, as no-one could find them in the Fidelius. Like most wizards, he was arrogant and thought nothing could touch him. He scrubbed a quick note on his wishes to Dumbledore. But it was not a legal will. However, Dumbledore ignored the fact that as your father died first, it's your mothers will that would decide your future."

"Perhaps that's why it was suppressed?" asked Harry

"Possibly. Anyhow your father left everything in Dumbledore's care if your mother died first. Dumbledore used the note to illegally gain possession of your guardian. Your mother's is in her vault, you cannot access it at this stage."

"Why?" Harry asked, disappointed.

"The magic does not allow it. If your parents are not there to induct you as family properly through ritual traditionally at your 7th birthday, as yours are not, you will need to perform a ritual to accept any family the inheritance test finds. If you are under magic at that point, the family magics in the ritual will reject you, and you can only try it once. Not all things automatically pass down from parents to children, you need to ritually accept them. Without a will, you must go through the heritage ritual. If there was a will, it would be just a matter of blood to open the vault wards. The will would be magically binding and would pass them on to you magically. But as you don't have that, you need to do the ritual."

"And what of my trust vault at the moment? You said Dumbledore controlled it tightly? What does that mean, and how much of my movements here does he know of." Harry asked curiously

"The family vaults will become open to you at your 17th birthday, or when you become emancipated. Even if you do become emancipated, you cannot take up any lordships until you reach 17. It's the rules. You were given a black trust and a potter trust at birth, but Dumbledore combined them into one when he took over guardianship. He has set a limit on your trust of 100G a year. This is despite the vault gaining more than that amount each year from the family vaults of both houses, along with interest." Rodgrip explained, "You can apply for more, but will have to go through him. Like you said, it will suffice per year for supplies if you are frugal, and get second-hand things. It
will not stretch to any other books or the like. He will not be informed of anything unless you take more than the allowed 100G a year. He is also allowed to withdraw money for your care from the family vault though.

"I never got a penny growing up!" Harry spat angrily, "If he's taken it I haven't seen any of it. How much did Mrs Weasleys take out earlier this year, when getting my school books? Is there enough left over for me to get the Muggleborn introduction books?"

"We will do a full audit and make sure your 'guardian,'" she sneered, "has not pilfered anything he shouldn't. We are bound by the charter to follow some of the ministry's mandate and therefore have to listen to him in regards to you to an extent, like giving him statements for your trust and letting him control your trust, but we can make sure he has not removed any artefacts from the family vaults. If he has, we can use it as an excuse to finally bar him access."

"Can I go to my vaults?"

"Just your trust."

"So I have more vaults?"

"Yes, the Potters had a large currency vault and a large items vault full of heirlooms and such."

"But he can get to my family on, though I can't?" Harry asked

"Yes, but he can not take money from it." Rodgrip said, before continuing, "We can use the audit to recall all family artefacts to the vault, which we have been wanting to do for a while but have not been unable to without you. This year Mrs Weasley took out the full 100Gs."

"Oh, that's disappointing. Dumbledore had my invisibility Cloak till the Christmas of my first year. I hate to think what else he has and hasn't told me about." Harry said, "What do the results say, I can imagine that they will only confirm my suspicions."

"What suspicions do you have young Wizard?" Rodgrip asked with a shrewd expression.

"Promise you won't say a word to anyone," Harry said, turning to Bill.

"All meetings with your account manager are confidential. All work I do with Gringotts is confidential as covered my oaths to Gringotts. But I will also promise you that I will not now, or ever use anything I learn about you against you, especially not here at Gringotts in my capacity as your Your Human Adviser. The post is also bound by confidentiality clauses that are in the contract we signed" Bill said earnestly looking at Harry.

Harry looked at him for a moment, searching his face before he nodded slowly, "I thought so, but I just wanted to be certain."

"I'm on your side," Bill said with a soft smile.

"Right," Harry said, taking a breath before explaining, "I know I'm under magic to control me, spells and potions, and there's something wrong with my magic. It feels wrong. I think Dumbledore's behind it. It makes even more sense if he's my magical guardian. I think he's set me up to be badly treated, then be kept ignorant and stupid, it would make it easier for him to play me like a fiddle. I think all the times I've been under threat at Hogwarts, he was behind, I think he knew. He knew at let it all happen anyway as some kind of test maybe. I don't know why, but he wants something from me, he wants to make me into something, probably to do with Voldemort. Dumbledore's using me, for his own... I don't know! But I want out. I will not let him control and dictate my life anymore! He
is not a good man, not nearly as deserving of the revere people give him as he wants us to think. At least with me, he has a lot to answer for." Harry said in a rush.

"Well, he is your magical guardian, and on that account has much to answer for," Bill said, "what did the results say, Master Rodgrip?"

Rodgrip went to sit back behind her desk and started leafing through a stack of test results. Harry grabbed the other set and Bill after raising an eyebrow in askance, peering over his shoulder to read them as well.

"Magical Core test of Hadrian James Evans-Potter

Magical Core Status of one Hadrian James Evans-Potter:

Poor (positively mangled)

Core bound, binding removal advisable.

Magics Upon Core:

Sacrificial Maternal Blood Protection Shield - 31st October 1985 (age 1)
Caster: Lily Marie Evans-Potter
Status: Mostly Degraded
Currently focused: binding Soul leach

Parasitic soul leach of Tom Marvolo Riddle - 31st October 1985 (age 1)
Caster: Tom Marvolo Riddle
Status: Contained by Sacrificial Maternal Blood Protection

Core leach to Power blood wards - 1st November 1985 (age 1)
Caster: Unclear (magic too degraded)
Status: Partially Degraded

Core block - 1st November 1985 (age 1)
Caster: Unclear (magic too degraded)
Status: Partially Degraded

Metamorphmagic block - 5th September 1989 (age 5)
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Anti-apparition Block - 5th November 1991 (age 7)  
Caster: Unclear (magic too degraded)  
Status: Partially Degraded

Core block  
5th November 1991 (age 7)  
9th January 1992 (aged 8)  
15th March 1993 (aged 9)  
30th August 1995 (aged 11)  
Caster: Unclear (magic too degraded)  
Status: Partially Degraded

Mental Magic Block - 24th August 1998 (aged 14)  
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore  
Status: Partially Degraded

**Percentage of magic blocked:** 53% of the original 70% blocked

Ability to remove: difficult due to mutation of magics upon the core.

**Magical aptitude:** Talent in Mind arts, Talent in Metamorphmagic and Genetic Animagus potential

**Recommended further testing:** Spells, Potions, Ward-analysis & health test

**Additional Recommendation:** Purging, Cleansing and Bond Breaking"  

Harry frowned, half of it he wasn't too sure about, but the other half couldn't be anything good. He flipped over to the next test.  

"Advanced Warding Test of all Wards tied to one Hadrian James Evans-Potter  

Blood Wards based off Sacrificial Maternal Blood Protection Shield upon one No.4 Privet Drive Little Whinging Surrey - 31st October 1985 (age 1)  

Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore  
Status: Full Power
Self Powered Blood Wards upon one No.4 Privet Drive Little Whinging Surrey - originally 5th December 1985 (age 1)

Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (continually reapplied)

Ward Status: quality poor, strength weak

Anti-Owl & Re-Direction ward upon one Hadrian James Evans-Potter - 31st October 1985 (age 1)

Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Ward Status: Strong

Exception list:

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore - 31st October 1985 (age 1)
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Heads - 22nd July 1991 (aged 10)
Snowy Owl (Hedwig) - 31st July 1995 (aged 11)
Rubius Hagrid - 31st July 1995 (aged 11)
Weasley family - 1st October 1995 (aged 11)
Hermione Jean Granger - 1st November 1995 (aged 11)
Great Grey Owl (Errol) 1st June 1996 (aged 11)
Sirius Orion Black - 7th June 1998 (aged 13)

Notice-me-ward upon one Hadrian James Evans-Potter - 22nd July 1995 (aged 10)

Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Ward Status: Strong but Degrading

Target: Wizarding Population specifically 'watch and scrutinise' Harry Potter the boy-who-lived.'

Property analysis required for specifics."

"No wonder I can never go unnoticed, and people are always bloody staring at me," Harry muttered flipping over to the next test, half-heartedly hoping it would have better results, but knowing it wouldn't. The Spells Test. Again it listed the type of spells on him and when they were cast. But interestingly enough, there wasn't always a caster or a status listed. Harry wondered why.

"Spell test of Hadrian James Evans-Potter"

**Advanced targeted Notice-Me-Not Hex:**

Target: Muggles noticing anything odd about Harry Potter - in particular, authorities - Cast 1st
November 1985 (age 1)

Target: Wizards noticing anything odd about Harry Potter - in particular noticing he's anything but loved and cared for - Cast 1st November 1985 (age 1)

**Confundus charm:**

multiple - beginning 5th September 1989 (age 5)

Obliviate Charm:

multiple - beginning 5th September 1989 (age 5)

**Impulsive charm:**

30th August 1995 (aged 11)

25th December 1995 (aged 11)

4th June 1996 (aged 11)

30th August 1996 (aged 12)

18th December 1996 (aged 12)

30th August 1997 (aged 13)

30th August 1997 (aged 14)

Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Status: Strong but Degrading

**Compulsion charms:**

1st November 1985 (age 1)

Compulsion to see the Dursley's house as home

Caster: Unknown

Status: Broken

30th August 1995 (aged 11)

Compulsion to be in Gryffindor house

Compulsion to argue with Slytherins students

Compulsion to save people
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to be nosey
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

25th December 1995 (aged 11)
Compulsion to try invisibility cloak
Compulsion to find the mirror
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to save people
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

4th June 1996 (aged 11)
Compulsion to rescue the stone
Compulsion to defeat Voldemort
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to save people
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

7th June 1996 (aged 11)
Compulsion to stay at No.4 Privet Drive Little Winging Surrey
Compulsion to see the No.4 Privet Drive Little Whinging Surrey as home
Compulsion to see the Dursley family as family
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th August 1996 (aged 12)
Compulsion to save people
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to be nosey
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

18th December 1996 (aged 12)
Compulsion to save people
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to be nosey
Compulsion to defeat Voldemort
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

12th February 1997 (aged 12)
Compulsion Read me
Caster: Tom Marvolo Riddle
Status: Broken

29th May 1997 (aged 12)
Compulsion to stay at No.4 Privet Drive Little Winging Surrey
Compulsion to see the No.4 Privet Drive Little Whinging Surrey as home
Compulsion to see the Dursley family as family
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th August 1997 (aged 13)
Compulsion to save people
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to be noisy
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

29th May 1998 (aged 13)
Compulsion to stay at No.4 Privet Drive Little Winging Surrey
Compulsion to see the No.4 Privet Drive Little Whinging Surrey as home
Compulsion to see the Dursley family as family
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Status: Degraded

30th August 1998 (aged 14)
Compulsion to save people
Compulsion to solve mysteries
Compulsion to be noisy
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Status: Partially Degraded

30th October 1999 (aged 14)
Compulsion to Obey
Compulsion to Obey
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Status: Degraded

**Hatred Hex:**

1st November 1985 (age 1)
7th June 1996 (aged 11)
Target: Dursley Family (trigger word, boy)
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th August 1995 (aged 11)
Target: Severus Prince Snape (trigger word, Potter!)
Target: Slytherin House
Target: Schoolwork
Target: Intelligence
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th September 1995 (aged 11)
Target: Draconis Lucious Malfoy
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th August 1996 (aged 12)
Target: Severus Prince Snape (trigger word, Potter!)
Target: Slytherin House
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

18th December 1996 (aged 12)
Target: Draconis Lucious Malfoy
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

29th May 1997 (aged 12)
Target Dursley Family (trigger word, boy)
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Harry closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep, steadying breath. There was a burning aching in his chest. How much of him was real? He kept reading the surprisingly long list of his spell history containing not every spell he had cased, but every spell ever cast on him. He knew the hexing he endured in the corridors back in his second year, and this year was terrible, but he hadn't realised just how bad.

He also had totally forgotten that Gryffindor had taken to hexing him in punishment back in first year after all the points he had lost over Norbert. He was surprised to see one or two foreign hexes on there too. They only saw the international students in the hall for meals, they seemed to take all their
classes in their Ship/Carriage. Other than the odd nasty look, they seemed to believe he would not stand a chance and was beneath their notice. He hadn't realised how many of them had gotten a hex in. No wonder some of them had been so difficult to undo.

He moved to the potion test. These ones had the types and dates of the potions but did not say who was responsible. Harry could guess who had administered it though, Dumbledore. He wondered if Snape had brewed them. But he had repeatedly tried to save Harry's life...

"Potion test of Hadrian James Evans-Potter

Notoriously-Intense-Nutrition

Skellegrow

Complex manipulation Potions of spell class:

Distrust

Keyed to Severus Prince Snape (trigger word, Potter! Dunderhead)

Keyed to Draconis Lucious Malfoy (trigger word, Potter, Potty, Weasel, Mudblood)

Keyed to Slytherin House (trigger word, Potter Gryffindor)

Compulsion potion - obey without question

Keyed to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (trigger word, Harry, my boy)

Loyalty potions

Keyed to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (trigger word, Harry, my boy)

Love potion (Amorfamily)

Keyed to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (trigger word, Harry, my boy)

Complex manipulation potions of compulsion class:

Impulsiveness

Bravery

Anti-self preservation

Self-sacrificing
Loyalty potions

Keyed to Gryffindor house

Keyed to Ronald Billius Weasley

Keyed to Weasley family (minor)

Keyed to Sirius Orion Black (minor)

Keyed to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (minor)

Love potion (Amorfamilia)

Keyed to Weasley family

Keyed to Gryffindor house

Purging immediately recommended."

He took another breath, trying to fight down a slimy sick feeling in his gut, looked to the Medical test.

"Medical History of Hadrian James Evans-Potter

**Current overall health:**

extremely poor - contributing to a mild state of constant magical exhaustion and mental fatigue

**Prevalent issues:**

Vision - extremely poor

Various levels of damage to hand and foot bones - healed incorrectly

Multiple Broken or fractured bones - healed incorrectly (see history for rill list)

Multiple cracked and broken ribs - only some treated

Multiple skull fractures - treated poorly

Basilisk Venom

Contained by Pheonix Tears

Repeated magical exhaustion (see lower history)

History of Pneumonia and bronchitis - leaving scarring on the lungs and throat (see lower history)

History of Concussion (see lower history)

Treatment immediately recommended
Chronic malnutrition causing the following:

Poor bone density
Poor immune system
Stunted growth - likely permanent
Delayed Development
Iron, Calcium, Vitamin Deficiencies
Treatment immediately recommended

Potions recommended:

Notoriously-Intense-Nutrition Potion
Immuno-stimulate
Skelegrow
(at the least)"

It then it proceeded to list every injury he had ever had and seemed to comprise of at least 20 pages of minuscule writing. Most of them started from 1st November 1981, after his parents had died and he’d been left at the Dursleys. It even listed every scar he had and what caused it, and why it scared. It listed what treatment he should have had for every hurt he’d had. He had no idea it was possible to scar from nappy rash… He had no idea it was ever that bad. Sure he got pushed around a bit, sure, he sometimes got the belt, but seeing it laid out like that...

"Where did you come across basilisk venom and survive it?" Rodgrip cut in suddenly.

"Oh, the chamber of secrets in my second year, it was terrorising the school, Tom Riddle set it loose. I killed it," Harry said, not really paying attention as he kept reading the results.

"Contracts, Vows and Debts tied to one Hadrian James Evans-Potter

Contracts bound:
Triwizard Tournament - Contestant Contract

Contracts Binding:
William Fabian Weasley - Gringotts Human Account Advisor

Receiving Life debt:
Minor wizarding world - inherited from Lily Marie Evans-Potter
Severus Prince Snape - inherited from James Charlus Potter - fulfilled by protection vow
Harry looked up, reeling, "did you know?" He said rounding on Bill, "about the contract, the magic keyed to your family, did you know!"

"No, Harry," Bill said, his face white, "I didn't. I don't know why? It wasn't my parents, they would not have spelled you."

"But the contract?" Harry demanded furiously.

"No! Well, my mother would have, she'd like nothing more than for you to truly be her son, she sees you as one."

"She's not my mother," Harry said carefully, "she doesn't even know me! She let Dumbledore keep leaving me at the Dursleys, she dismissed Fred and George when they complained on my behalf."

"I know Harry, the twins came to Charlie and I when she dismissed their concerns after they rescued you."

"What?" Harry asked

"They were worried about you, how you're treated at home, they wanted Mum and Dad to remove you." bill explained to Harry's growing horror.

"Mum said she was sure you were fine, but would check on it and then told them Dumbledore said you were fine there."

Harry snorted bitterly.

"She loves her children fiercely and will do what she thinks is best for them. She would have signed a marriage contract for ginny with you if offered to her. It's normal in Wizarding society. She means well, Harry." Bill said, his voice tight, his face looking conflicted.

"I will not marry your sister," Harry said.

"Unfortunately," Rodgrip cut in, pinching the bridge of her long nose, "you have to it seems, you
guardian bound you to it. I will need to pull the contract for the details, but as your guardian, he has bound you...

"I don't want to get married! Not to her, not to anyone! I will not be bound to another! I will not be a slave to the whims of others. Certainly not for the rest of my life!" Harry said fiercely, meeting Rodgrips eyes.

"You could lose your magic, Harry," Bill said exclaimed, "surely you don't hate Ginny that much!"

"I don't hate her!" Harry said, turning to glare at Bill, "If I actually knew her better she'd probably be like a sister when she'd not blushing and stuttering or stalking me with Collin. I can't marry her. And if this is what the Wizarding world had done to me, maybe I'm better off without it."

"You don't mean that Harry," Bill said horrified.

"Maybe I do. I'm tired of being controlled. I'm tired of being chained down as someone else's pawn, to be used with no care for my own will," Harry said his eyes fierce.

"First Dumbledore, leaving me with my family, he kept spelling me, and if the last few were him, they probably all were, he would have known what they did! If he kept trying to block my accidental magic, he must have. And he left me there... I wouldn't be surprised if my relatives were spelled either." Harry fumed on.

"We can check," Rodgrip cut in.

"Dumbledore has used magic to make me his pawn. He has made it, so no-one will notice or help me. He has lied about the protections on my relative's house. I begged not to go back to the Dursleys at the end of every year. But Dumbledore said my mothers sacrifice protected me. He said that as long as I could call the place where her blood dwells home, I'd be safe. That's why I have to go back. To recharge the blood wards by living with my aunt. He said it was vitally important," he sneered.

Rodgrip sighed, muttered something unflattering about incompetent, arrogant wizards, before saying, "that sort of ward, based on the blood of a sacrifice, could very well have been placed with your mother's blood around the house. It would be particularly potent where her sister dwelt and would keep you and the house safe, to an extent. Sacrifice, a loving one at that, is a powerful force. If that sister loved you, it might keep the magic going longer, and made it more potent, but wards need something to keep them charged."

"She doesn't love me," Harry spat, "she hates my guts,"

"And so they fell then. Your mother's sacrifice likely laid the foundations for the protection wards at the house. But they fell or failed to take and start-up at all when your aunt didn't care. Dumbledore then tied to them to your blood, your core, powering what was left of them. It's probably contributed to you being sickly as a child. The wards would have been heavily draining on you, especially with all the bindings. You would have been in a constant state of exhaustion. You still are. Between the wards leaching your magic and the blocks it's a wonder that your not a squib or dead."

"So it's not really the only place I'll truly be safe, and the wards there won't really keep me safe from anyone that wishes me harm?" Harry said, anger breading clearly into his tone.

"Well if you were loved it may have been. If you don't see it as a home, and having the young and unstable core, especially when so tightly bound, it's no wonder they kept falling. Blood wards are notoriously fickle if the intent behind them isn't right and the perimeters not fulfilled." Rodgrip went on, "it's much easier to put up a blood ward to stop anyone but the person with that blood getting
into a place, than use blood and love based sacrifice to keep a person safe from everything else. It's just not a logical way to ward."

Rodgrip sneered, "He clearly is not a master warder, or he never would have set the wards up like that." she said, making Bill snicker, "they would fall. Again we won't know until we analyse the house as well, they probably do something, but I doubt they are that strong or that effective. But no goblin master warder would have set wards like that. There are many better alternatives to keep you safe and hidden."

"so I have put up with years of... of... torture, by those people - unable to escape or get help - totally at their mercy, for protection and wards that do not exist. What were all the lies of a man meant to be my magical guardian? It was all a lie."

"yes, so it seems." The goblin surmised.

"Oh, my gods Harry," Bill muttered, his head in his hands.

"Fuck," swore Harry, "fuck!" Harry said, wanting to break something. Wanting to throw things and watch them shatter into a thousand million tiny irreversibly broken pieces.

"Indeed," the goblin agreed.

"On top of that he has kept me ignorant, and let me be almost killed every year at school," Harry fumed.

"What?" Bill cut in

Harry ignored him, not really wanting to talk about it, "tell me about this soul leech, I'm not familiar with it. That makes it sound like I have something praying on me, something in me," Harry asked revolted.

"You don't mean... he's a Horcrux? That someone made put one in him?" Bill said suddenly, sounding horrified. Harry stared at him, he didn't think he'd ever seen Bill shocked by anything, not Bill. It must be bad, a queasy feeling was growing in his gut.

Rodgrip sighed and muttered something that sounded like 'wizards are so stupid,' and explained, "Its a dark piece of magic wizards were moronic enough to invent in an attempt to gain immortality. A Horcrux or a soul shard as they are sometimes called is made by tearing a bit of your soul off. The piece of soul is placed in a container, mostly an inanimate magical object and is used to resurrect the person if they die. In your case, a bit of someone's soul was placed in you. Most probably in your scar, it's like a parasite. It's leeching off your core as well to sustain itself, but it is contained, and therefore unable to possess you due to your mother's protection. Which could be contributing to the fact that that protection is starting to fail as it will be a constant drain on your magic and on the protection."

"Who is this, Tom Riddle bloke? How does he fit in?" Bill cut in

"That's Voldemort's real name," Harry replied nonchalantly, "he made Voldemort up, its a mangled version of a French phrase that roughly translates to flight from death. He's not even pronouncing it right. T is meant to be silent, a lot of French words are like that."

"How do you know that?" Rodgrip interjected, "very few humans know that."

"The French? I read." Harry replied flippantly, making them snort, "His name? He told me."
"What?! He told you?" Exclaimed Bill, as Rodgrip asked, "When did you meet Riddle?"

"Second year," Harry said with a shrug, "Riddle possessed Ginny through a diary. He used her to open the chamber of secrets and let Slytherin's Basilisk out. Apparently, no-one knew what the monster was or where the chamber was. I heard that the school was going to be closed and Ginny would die. I felt I had to do something. We worked out it all out. I went down there, we took Lockhart, but he was useless. When I got down there, a boy was standing there, Tom Riddle. He came from the diary. It was super creepy, and it talked a lot about how he renamed himself Voldemort and how he was the heir of Slytherin."

"Riddle was not, and is not the Heir of Slytherin," spat Rodgrip.

Now that Harry had started the story; however, it seemed too poor out of him like water from a broken dam, "In hindsight, the diary was probably one of those Soul Shards. It felt really slimy when I'd encountered it earlier in the year. It was given to Ginny by Mr Malfoy. When written in, it wrote back. I didn't have it very long. By writing in it all year, it said she had poured her soul into it, and it started pouring a bit of its soul back into her to possessed her. It seemed to drain the life out of her and used her life to create a body I think. Ginny looked dead.

I didn't know what to do or how to save her. Riddle had my wand, he called the Basilisk. I couldn't stop it, it wouldn't listen to me. It was like it had gone insane, it didn't make any sense, only speaking in broken sentences. I was done-for. I stabbed it with Gryffindors sword and it died. I pulled its fang out of my arm, stabbed the diary with it, and it started bleeding ink. Riddle screamed and was gone.

Oh and Fawks cried on my at some point, so I was fine. He took us out of the chamber and back to Dumbledore, who had Mr and Mrs Weasly with him. I had to tell them what had happened. He said..."

Harry trailed off for a moment, what little colour that was still in his face drained out rapidly, leaving him a sickly grey colour, "Dumbledore said that's how I could talk to snakes, he said that Riddle had placed a bit of himself, his power in me, the night my parents died, that's why I can talk to snakes."

He felt queasy and light-headed, "I have a piece of Voldemort in me," Harry muttered, as it suddenly clicked. He'd read the report, but it hadn't really clocked, until that moment, he groaned, "I have a piece of him in me...Gods... gods, sorry, gonna be sick."

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:
Reference to child abuse.
The Dursley’s are horrible people and should not ever be in charge of even a fish let alone a child
We will see bits of harry's medical history
Harry has been manipulated rather a lot, and neglected.
Basically once again adults are ass holes.

Yes technically nappy rash does not scar. But the point is, basically the Dursley's were/are horrible despicable people who showed their nephew no care or human decency what so ever. As a baby/child many of his ailments went unnoticed and completely untreated until his magic kicked in and saved his ass. So yes in this instance it was bad enough that it scarred. Go with it. I don't have actual medical training, so let's
just pretend any minor inaccuracies are correct.

Also, Dumbledore is an ass. His a horrible person to Harry (despite genuinely have the best intentions over all, for the Wizarding world. He’s just being a dick about it, especially to Harry, who is his tool.) He has too much power, I kind of didn't intend him to be quite this much of a dick, but well sometimes they do what they want and not what I tell them.

This is not intended to be a molly bashing fic. She does mean well for everything she does, even if it doesn't always turn out that well (she's a couplex character) Everything here happens for a reason, its just not here yet.

Amorfamila is a family based love potion (I made it up with help from a latin translator)

I originally had two goblins in the office scene. A male account manager and a female healer, but I decided goblins are multitalented and don’t need to call in extras, so Harry’s account manager is a little like jack of all trades to an extent. (All the gringotts goblins are to an extent, they get basic training in all areas of the bank)
Also decided we need more female goblins, though goblins (in this story) do not have the gender divide we do. There are no male and female goblin names, and no male and female jobs. There are just names, and jobs. Gender is not important to anything really in Goblin culture (accept for the obvious biological difference of bearing children)

I fudged the family tree's a bit but we’re going to go with it.

Bill's middle name.
Is far as I can tell, it's not given to us in cannon, same with Fred and George (who in fannon are often given the middle names of Fabian and Gideon.) But I figured as Bill and Charlie are Molly's first born sons, she would name them after her brothers. So Bill's name is William Fabian Weasley, and Charlie's is Charles Gideon Weasley.

With the year dates, again reference the below link for my reasoning.
https://www.hp-lexicon.org/2004/03/13/mapping-the-harry-potter-timeline/
JK seems to have wanted to the book to be dateless/timless. This article goes though the possible dates and figures out that logical 1994 was their first year.
Therefore he would have been born in 1983

Small rant
Reg: Harry being overly emotional/wet blanket.
The thing some of you need to understand is that you don't get over PTSD and trauma over night. You don't just get over monumental changes and upheavals in your life, overnight with out getting emotional about it.
There are also lots of potions in his system making him dance like a puppet.
He's going to be emotional, he's a traumatised child. He'll get better as time goes by, there is definitely more cold cynical harry in the works, but him being intelligent and independent is not going to remove his emotional responses to the traumatic things that he is going though.
Rant over

Hope you enjoyed it!
He fell forward off the chair as a stone basin appeared in front of him. He vomited. His insides heaved until there was nothing left to come up. Not that there had been much to start with after his encounter with apparition.

Bill was beside him again, but Harry didn't notice mumbling, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," over and over again, still on the floor, not really sure where he was any more. The room was spinning. He couldn't breathe.

"Harry, you're okay, it's okay Harry," Bill murmured, inching close to Harry, but luckily knew better than to touch him this time. Bill's words didn't seem to penetrate the fog in Harry's mind though. He was rocking back and forth on his toes, curled in a tight ball.

"Pull yourself together, Warrior!" Snapped Rodgrip sharply.

That seemed to get Harry's attention. His head snapped up, his hands out as if to ward off a blow or maybe to strike something.

"You slayed a Basilisk, Warrior. You can defeat a Manipulative old man and a soul shard."

Harry seemed to give himself a shake, took a few deep breaths and sat back in his chair, "forgive me, Master Goblin, I seemed to have lost my self a moment."

The goblin nodded sharply, and Bill watched in awe.

"Why did you call me, warrior?" Harry asked.

"You have proven yourself in battle young wizard. Child, you may be, but warrior too."

"It's an honour, Harry," whispered a wide-eyed Bill.

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling embarrassed. "Thank you for reminding me of my strength instead of judging me for my show of weakness."
"It is forgotten," Rodgrip dismissed to Harry's relief.

"I thought you hated humans?" Harry asked curiously.

"We do. They are arrogant and moronic, but we put up with them. This doesn't mean I like you."

She bit out, "I don't. But you're slightly less intolerable than most, even if you are a bit of a wet noodle, like most of your kind. You seem to be forging a set of balls, and a backbone though; unlike most. I suppose years of conditioning to be a walkover take time to overcome," she sneered.

Harry felt conflicted for a moment, then laughed, "yeah, I'm trying though, and we're not all that different, you and I."

When Rodgrip looked positively affronted, Harry sighed and said, "we are both living, thinking, feeling beings. We are both of the earth. That makes us, brothers and sisters. I said it to the centaurs, and I will say it again. Every living thing: goblin, wizard, muggle; we are not that different. We are all living beings, children of this earth, that makes us brothers and sisters."

"Wait," Bill cut in out, bringing them back on track, "You mean to tell me, my little sister, Little Ginny, was possessed by a Horcrux! A piece of Riddle's soul and no-one told me? You need ritual cleansing for just encountering one, let alone being possessed. She would need treatment if she was possessed by a soul fragment!"

"Can we get rid of it then? I don't want a bit of him in me?!" Harry exclaimed disgusted, "and how could you not know Bill? Didn't all of the Weasleys visit you in Egypt that summer to get her treated? Your parents were there when I told Dumbledore. They would have known about it. Can it really affect you just by interacting with one?"

Bill pinched the bridge of his nose, "Yes. What a mess. There is no way Mum would have let it go un-looked at if she had known it was something that dark. But anyway, you both should have known better than to talk to something magical if you can't see it's brain and how it thinks!"

"I thought it was normal," Harry said blankly, "there are all sorts of things that do weird things in the magical world. The spell test results show it had a compulsion charm on it anyway, I didn't stand a chance..."

But Harry wasn't really listening any more, going over all the compulsion spells. There were so many. He felt sick again. How much of his actions were his own? How much was due to someone else making him so.

"If I can throw off the Imperious Curse, how did I not notice or fight off any of these?" Harry asked.

"When did you get put under the imperious curse?" Cried Bill.

Rodgrip said, "compulsion is a bit more subtle, and by the looks of it, you've been exposed to it from a young age. You probably didn't notice, and a lot of it was probably building on older spells that you were already under. If it was Dumbledore, like you think, he's been doing magic on you for so long, your body is probably used to it. Especially if it was him that tied your core. It would have been so confused, especially when you can't actually internally feel your magic, that at the moment, you wouldn't really stand a chance to even feel them, let alone fight them off. It's a miracle you can fight off the imperious curse in your current state. When unbound, and you can feel the compulsion spells, you should have an easier time throwing them off." She explained.

"Good, so I can work on it not happening again. There's little point me trying to free myself from all this, and show my hand too early, if I'm just going to be put under again," Harry grumbled.
"When were you under the imperious curse?" Bill asked again, indignantly.

"Moody did it in class, so we know what it's like, and can maybe throw it off. Not many of us could, and it took me a few goes before I could throw it off completely." Harry explained.

"That's illegal! And highly dark magic, he put it on all of you?" Bill said incredulously, "he's nuts!"

"Yeah, but brilliant. We have learnt loads," Harry said.

"Just be careful okay. That's a bit odd, I mean the man is nuts, but if he's doing spells on you, just be really careful? Don't let your guard down around him."

"Okay," Harry agreed, "but if Dumbledore is doing this to me, it doesn't surprise me that he gave Moody permission to use imperious on us."

"Gods, that man! Just because he gave permission doesn't mean he should have!" Bill sighed, "my opinion of him has plummeted in the last 20 minutes alone."

"How did he put all those spells on me? If the blood wards need my blood, how did he get that? I didn't give it to him, and he can't have Obliviated me that often can he? I'd have noticed."

"Well, that's probably what the Confundus charms are for. To stop you noticing that gap in your memory. Some of your blood could have been taken when you were an infant," Rodgrip explained darkly, "and some of the potions listed here would have needed your blood to tie it to you; as would some of the specialised spells. Wizarding law severely restrict Blood magic, in several ways. Firstly it is not legal to use it to harm another person, secondly, it is not legal to use it on a minor, and not on anyone without their permission.

Even harmless blood magic, with consent, is highly frowned on. Wizards seem to see Blood Magic as taboo. If it is Dumbledore, then it's not too far of a stretch to hypothesise that he could have used your blood to make an effigy, and used that to cast the spells on you remotely."

"How do I know, how do I stop it?" Harry said furiously, the little colour in his face draining. "I hate being right sometimes. I knew there is something seriously wrong with my magic. It's pretty screwed up, and if we don't fix it, it could be permanently damaged." Harry started, thinking aloud.

"correct, it's actually worse than I thought it would be," Rodgrip agreed.

"Great. Just great. What can you tell me about it and what can we do about it?"

Rodgrip grinned in a bloodthirsty manner that was full of approval. It left Harry, feeling oddly warmed.

"First, get you free and healthy. Then, we keep you that way." Rodgrip said, "there are many bindings on your core, some of which have started breaking. It may have also been done to limit your accidental magic. Though, it is known that it can be very harmful to a child's development. Judging by your lack of ability to feel your magic at all, the bindings are the sort that are very harsh and hard to remove."

"Adding in that you're a Metamorphmagus, that makes your magic sit under the skin more," Rodgrip continued, "along with a talent for mind arts and the potential to be able to be an Animagus, it means your magic is slightly wilder than normal. Not unusual. That's how you we check, if a person is one or not. It feels different. But it would have contributed to the mess you're magic's in now, after fighting the bindings for so long."
Harry was torn between being pleased or horrified, "how do we break them? Can we remove the soul leach?"

"Yes. We can do an unbinding, cleansing ritual. It will remove it, but we will need to remove all the other magic and the bindings at the same time."

"So how do we plan on breaking the bindings then?" Bill asked frowning slightly.

"We shall have to plan the ritual carefully. It shall be difficult. It will probably be quite painful for you, as well. And what shape you'll be in afterwards, I cannot say. We will need a specialist, so we can work out how to undo it all. It may permanently harm your magic. I do not know. But it should be possible to undo" Rodgrip said.

Harry sighed, "we should be able to undo all the spells and potions too?"

"Yes. Again, hard but not impossible." Rodgrip said, "It won't be easy in this aspect either as all the blocks, leaches, potions and spell magic on you have seemed to have mutated and fused together. It will be tough to break, if we manage at all.

There is no simple way to release a binding, not when the original is so old and has had so many added to it that it had mutated, coupled with your use of magic, and your magic's fight to get rid of it. It has left your magic rather mangled, truth be told. It will probably try and fight the unbinding ritual too. It will be hyper-sensitive to external magic if your reaction to the testing is anything to go by," Rodgrip explained, and Harry felt his heart sink. Again.

"If they were ordinary bindings or even custom bindings layered, simply and neatly over the top of each other," Rodgrip continued, "we could just unwind them. It would take time and finesse, but it would be manageable.

Some of the potions will be easy enough to remove. But the ones that were administered or brewed with spell casting, to tie in a trigger word, are much harder. They are highly illegal psychological programming potions. They nearly always have a specific counter spell to be used along with the counter potion.

The normal purging potion won't work for them. You'll need an in-depth ritual for it, and that's not possible while you have all the blocks on your core and the soul leach choking it.

We will have to think about it very carefully. If we're brutally honest, warrior, your magic has fought so hard for the freedom, that it's scarred badly. There may be permanent scarring and side effects. The best we can do, I should think, is to heighten your magic; heighten your ability to feel it so you can see it to unknot it yourself."

"What about adding a cleansing and bond breaking ritual into a basic heavy duty cleansing ritual? Do it all at once, with the purging?" suggested Bill.

The goblin hummed, deep in through.

"What about..." Harry suggested hesitantly, he didn't really know much about any of this, but it felt right, "what about using both the extreme purging potions? The spells and the potions purging ones, that strip everything. I've read about them, but not managed to track it down. Maybe, along with the cleansing or unbinding ritual that would help.

If we can do something to help me feel what's going on, something to heighten it, maybe I can unknot them and fight them off. If I've been working on fighting them off for years, maybe we work on helping me do that, not adding in foreign magic to forcibly strip them away. If some of it was
done with blood magic, is there some way of using my blood to cleanse it?" Harry asked, hesitantly

"That could work," Bill said, "worth a shot anyway."

"It could," agreed Rodgrip.

"Well you'd have to brew them yourself," Rodgrip said. "We are bound by our charter not to make or give out the recipe as it is highly illegal, unfortunately. Though I can say they are Moste Potente Potions." He looked at Harry, who frowned. Then after a moment, something clicked, and he grinned.

"If we combine our harshest cleansing ritual and strongest bond-breaking ritual, both those potions along with a magic heightening chant, you may just be able to fight them off. We'd need rune circles on the floor to combine the components together, and be careful with our arithmancy...

We'd have to do it over the break. It would take a few days I should think and would take a while to recover from." Rodgrip suggested.

"The two purging potions would help, but they would also strip your mother's protection. It is failing anyway, at the moment. It's doing more harm than good as Dumbledore tied it to Harry to keep it powered when Petunia's love failed to keep it going." Bill added in.

"Will the person who did the spells know if I remove them?" Harry asked

"No. They are tied to you and powered by your magic, not the original castor. So no, the caster will not know. Which is another reason they are harder to break. It's a more advanced spell." Rodgrip explained.

"Just out of curiosity, and no potential offence meant," Harry asked suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere "but how do you know so much about spell breaking and healing if you're an account manager? I thought that was numbers and business decisions."

Rodgrip snorted, "all goblins get basic training in all fields of work at Gringotts before we specialise in a field. All Gringotts employees need a well rounded and well-versed knowledge base, especially account managers. We are not just accountants."

"Huh, cool," said Harry, making Bill snort with laughter.

"Is there any way of finding out what has been obliviated and to undo it?" Harry asked

"Yes but it's extremely magically draining, and you can't even begin to contemplate it before you are free of your bindings and totally healthy. Ask me again next year if you feel the need to do it. It will only give you dates, and maybe who did it and what method was used. It would not break the obliviates." She explained, "Occasionally, it can give you the topic that was obliviated but not always. It won't break the magic. We do not deal with human obliviates; not undoing them anyway." Rodgrip sneered.

"Right, okay. I'll put it aside for now. As for my health, what can I do to fix it?" Harry asked, with a sigh, he didn't want to be short and scrawny forever.

"We will need to consult a Healer to be sure. Gringotts has healers, and it would then be covered under the Charter. But I should think you will need a heavy potions regime and a good diet to even begin to repair some of the damage, once we have freed you from all this magic," Rodgrip said, "Some of it will be irreparable. You will always be short, and it has also delayed your development, particularly Puberty."
Harry went scarlet at this, but Bill chucked at his embarrassment.

She ignored them both, "We can get that back on track though, especially with the help of your house elves. We should be able to recover one last growth spurt."

"Many of your bones will have to be vanished and regrown," she continued ignoring Harry's wince, "then you will need a course of Skelegrow to strengthen your skeleton which is woefully underdeveloped and weak. It's no wonder you have so many breaks. You will also need sections of your skull vanished and regrown. This is a delicate and dangerous procedure and will need several healers and a few days to do, so you don't end up with mush for brains afterwards. It too, would need to wait for your school holidays."

"I've never left school for the Christmas break before but I can this time. I'll stay at the Leaky or something, I don't know anywhere else to go."

"There's an inn here in Nocturne," Bill said, "it's nice, and you'll be harder to find there. I'd say you could stay with mum, but she would worry and go straight to Dumbledore. She loves you like a son, but worships the ground that man walks on, unfortunately. She won't hear a bad thing about him. She means well, but is sometimes off the mark a bit in how vigorous she is in her caring. I love her, but she has dismissed the twins' concerns about you before, so I wouldn't go to her."

"Can we do the binding breaking now? Or will it have to also wait for the holidays?" Harry asked a little impatiently.

"Not tonight, it will have to be planned and will take time. Probably a few days to complete. For now, keep taking the Notoriously-Intense-Nutrition Potion that your elf has been giving you. It cannot hurt." Rodgrip said, with a frown, "likewise, we cannot go into your inheritance tonight while you are under compulsions, but we can discuss the basics of your finances as long as you make no major decisions while you are under manipulative magic." Rodgrip said.

"Okay fair enough, before we get on to that though, the wards, can we break these wards?" Harry asked, furiously, "without Dumbledore knowing?"

"As they are all tied to you, powered by you, and not him, yes. Though it is possible, he has used your blood to set up some kind of ward monitor. We will need to first destroy all blood outside of your body. If that is done first, he won't notice them falling, unless he checks. Though as he is getting the mail, he will notice he is no longer getting it. You will need to find out where it's going, other than just to Dumbledore, so you can both retrieve it, and then make sure he doesn't notice that he is not getting it any more," she said.

"He's probably storing it at Hogwarts somewhere, in which case I bet Winky and Dobby can track it down," Harry pondered.

He jumped when Winky appeared with a pop.

"Young Master Harry be needing Winky?" She squeaked, giving Rodgrip and Bill a weary look.

Harry grinned, "Oh, thanks Winky, you're brilliant! Well, it turns out someone is stealing my mail. We were brainstorming, and I think Dumbledore might be hiding it somewhere at Hogwarts. Would you mind keeping an eye out for it, for me?" Harry asked.

"Winky be doing that Master Harry sir, Winky be finding it."

"Thanks, Winky, sorry for disturbing you, I was thinking aloud. And thanks for the sandwiches too, they were great."
She beamed, "you is making sure you be finishing them!" She said sternly pointing a finger at him before she popped away.

"Now that is a good idea," Bill said, "I didn't know you had an elf."

"It's a new development," Harry said before looking back at the lists of spells affecting him, "can that happen tonight or later?"

"Best to do everything at once," said, Rodgrip.

"I'm sorry," Bill said after a long moment, "but can we go back to the fact that you encountered a basilisk? You should not have been in that situation at all, let alone at school."

"No one else knew where it was, and there was no-one else going to help Ginny." Harry muttered darkly, "though now I think of it, it is suspicious that no-one else could figure out what a group of 12-year-olds could. That too, was probably a setup."

"You should not have had to deal with that. At all. What else have you been up to at Hogwarts? How many other times have you almost been killed?" Bill said angrily.

"A lot,"

"Tell me,"

"Why do you care?" Harry asked suddenly, genuinely confused.

Bill sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, "you're a friend of my brothers for a start, they like you. Also, if you had to put up with it, they were exposed to danger too, by being in the same place you were, where the danger was. Also, you're a good kid, I like you, you've had a shitty lot in life. I may not be able to stop it, but I can be your friend. I care, Harry, truly." Bill said, his big blue eyes boring into Harry's earnestly. Harry looked away and glanced at Rodgrip. She nodded viciously.

He sighed but started talking, "well there was the cursed broomstick in first year. My first Quidditch match. Quirrell cursed it trying to kill me, he was possessed by Voldemort. Snape did the counter curse before Hermione stopped both of them, with fire. Then there was stumbling across Fluffy one night when lost."

“Fluffy?”

“A Cerberus. He’s Hagrid’s pet that was guarding the entrance to the gauntlet hiding the philosopher's stone. A simple Alohomora spell opened the door; which is also pretty fishy in hindsight. We nearly got eaten. The only thing that saved us was that the dog was as surprised as we were,” Harry explained with a frown. “Then there was Norbert, sorry Norberta, Did Charlie tell you about that?” Harry asked, glancing at Bill.

“Yeah, he didn’t mention how you lot got it though,” Bill said

“Quirrell gave it to Hagrid over a game of cards. He got him drunk to figure out how to get passed Fluffy. Hagrid hatched it, nearly burning his house down. We nearly got bitten a number of times too. We smuggled it out, but got caught. So we lost points earning us a hexing, and were sent to the forbidden forest for detention late at night, to hunt down whatever was killing unicorns,” Harry said with a glower, “it was Quirrell. Again. Who was possessed by Voldemort, hence the name Quirrellmort.”

“Oh, and there was the troll at Halloween. Quirrell, let it in as a diversion. It nearly got Hermione
who was in the bathroom. We went after her, as it was Ron’s fault she was hiding. We thought it would be safe to nick in, and nick back. It was meant to be in the dungeons.

Though the Slytherin’s common room is down there! Why would they send all of us back to the common rooms, sending us into the castle, instead of keeping us all together and safe in the hall, like they did when Sirius broke in? It doesn’t make any sense. Anyway, we went after her, and knocked it out.” Harry continued, fidgeting with the strap of his bag. It was strange talking about it all now. It felt like a lifetime ago.

“Then, there was the time when we went after the stone. We worked out Riddle wanted it, and with Dumbledore gone, and Professor McGonagall not believing us, we had to do something about it. We got past Fluffy with music, Hagrid had told us. He can't keep a secret.

"Hagrid doesn't have a deceptive bone in his body." Bill added in, "But everyone knows Hagrid is rubbish at keeping secrets. He must have been set up too, getting something top secret from Gringotts and making sure you knew how secret it was!"

"Anyway, we got past Fluffy," Harry continued, "the Devil Snare, flying keys, a life-sized chess set, a troll again but it was already dead, then there was a logic riddle with potions. If they were really trying to keep it safe, why not have poison in all of them? And the traps were rather easy for first years... Then there was the mirror of Erised. I'd found that at Christmas. Spent ages in front of it…”

“That's a powerful dark artefact, it entraps people.” Rodgrup cut in with a dark expression on her face, “it had no place in a school. You could have got insnared and been there for years without knowing, and wasted away.”

“Nearly did, I’d look up and hours would have passed, and I hadn’t even realised I'd been there all right. Dumbledore moved it on after I was there several nights.”

"Wizards," muttered Rodgrip darkly.

"Anyway I looked into it, and it gave me the stone. Stupid of it really. Quirrellmort tried to kill me as he wanted the stone. I burnt him, mum’s protection apparently. Quirrell died, Voldemort's spirit escaped. I was magically exhausted for ages after that. Then my relatives tried to starve me or maybe just work me to death. Again.

Then a house-elf locked me off the train. We flew your dad's car to school, nearly died when it crashed into the whomping willow. Stupid of us, I should have just owled, but I'm no good at talking Ron down when he gets an idea in his head," Harry shook his head self deprecatingly.

"Then there was the basilisk petrifying people. Lockhart tried to oblivate us, and other than the basilisk, that was a pretty mild year except for people thinking I was the heir and hexing me in the corridors. Oh and a mad house-elf set a bludger after me to get me too hurt to stay at school. He was trying to save me from the heir. My arm was broken, and no one listened when I said I didn’t want Lockhart touching it. He vanished the bones, I had to regrow them."

"That would explain why your left arm has no breaks and is in strangely good health, by your standards," Rodgrip said, "That's why your spell history is also so long if people were hexing you so regularly."

Harry nodded miserably, "third year was okay. Though, a Dementor came on the train, nearly sucked out my soul before Lupin stopped them. Then again at the quidditch match and I fell from my broom. Dumbledore used magic to catch me, I think, or I would have died."
Then there was Sirius who drew us into the shack. He found Pettigrew, the whomping willow nearly killed us. Then we were going to hand in Pettigrew and get Sirius freed, but the moon came out. Lupin had forgotten his wolfsbane potion. Which,” Harry paused a moment, frowning, “if you were a werewolf, and will be homicidal without it, how on earth would you forget it? I mean, honestly!

Then the dementors came. Dumbledore sent us back in time with the time turner.”

"What!?“ they both exclaimed, but Harry powered on, it was a bit of a relief to get it all off his chest. And the more he spoke, the more he realised just how screwed up the first years of his schooling were.

"-to rescue Sirius and Buckbeak the hippogriff. We nearly got our souls sucked out by the dementors. Again. But I knew the Patronus by then.

Then there's this year. It’s been pretty tame so far."

“He should not have sent you back in time. It is highly illegal,” Rodgrip said, her voice like ice, “as the chief warlock he should know that, and would have been able to call a trial for Black himself. Which leads one to the assumption he is trying to remove Black or keep him off the chessboard.”

"Bloody hell, Harry." Bill said, "That is insane. I suppose that's not mentioning all the times your relatives have hurt, starved, neglected and emotionally abused or beaten you up?"

Harry flinched again, shifting in his chair, but said nothing.

Bill swore viciously, with a couple of words Harry had never heard of and some that he suspected, not in English.

"So,” Harry surmised after a moment, “I have been spelled and obliviated multiple times. Dumbledore could easily use all those manipulation spells to shape me into what he wants. How much of my actions over the years were actually mine?"

Harry shivered, “I've been made to hate people, possibly to get me into Gryffindor, not Slytherin. It would have put me in Slytherin, had I not been compelled and brainwashed into arguing with it. I bet Dumbledore couldn't stomach the thought of his shiny 'golden pawn' in Slytherins with the 'evil slimy snakes',” Harry spat out.

“My hard learnt self-preservation instincts seem to have been magically squashed out of me. It makes sense. A lot of my actions have been out of character since I came to Hogwarts, possibly to alienate me from my peers. I’ve been played like a fiddle, magicked to bend to the will of another.

"Seems so," Rodgrip surmised.

"Bloody hell," Bill muttered clenching his fists.

"All those dates, the spells, even some of the wards, coincide with me either going to Hogwarts, leaving Hogwarts to my relative's house, or around the same time as my numerous 'adventures' at school. And there are so many other spells on the spell history list,” Harry said flicking back to the spell history.

“I knew about some of them, most of them, but I hadn't realised just how often I'd been hexed back in first year after the dragon incident, or in second year, or even this year. I knew it happened a lot, but I didn't realise it was that often. Is that normal? That much hexing in the corridors?" Harry turned to Bill.
"No," he shook his head horrified, "if it were my siblings I'd be kicking up a real stink. That is not right. That's bullying and magical abuse right there, that is."

"No point bringing it up," Harry rebutted, "they never do anything. I tried."

"Eat the rest of that sandwich," Rodgrip sneered suddenly, "it's late, and will only get later. You're already malnourished, and I do not want the wrath of your elf upon me if you pass out."

"Thanks," Harry said dryly, pulling out the sandwiches from his bag, "want some?"

"No," Rodgrip said with a frown, "goblin cuisine and human cuisine are rather different,"

"Really?" Harry asked curiously taking a bite.

"There are books, I'll give you a list. All human employers are educated in the ways of goblins when joining the bank. I am sure Cursebreaker Weasley can lend them to you; we have little time tonight," Rodgrip said

Harry glanced at Bill eagerly "are there more by Master Ripquill? His was brilliant, informative and hilarious."

"Odd, odd reaction for a wizard," Rodgrop mutters, "Yes it is a good book, most insulting, humans tell me," the goblin drawled with a smirk.

Harry grinned, "it was. It was brilliantly funny! I'd love to read more of his work."

"There are more. More on goblin culture, goblin language, wizard culture, what's wrong with the wizarding world and why goblins should run it, why your ministry are morons, things wizards take for granted, Goblin magic and wizard magic - abilities wizards don't realise they have (wandless for one). The old ways the ways wizards have forgotten, but goblins have not. He is a prolific writer, but many of the books are not legal here for wizards to own, so do not get caught with them."

"Really why?" Harry asked curiously

"Like I said, your ministry are morons. Closed-minded, controlling morons, that think ignorance will give them what they want." Rodgrip sneered

"Oh, well that’s dumb. Do you have them?" Harry turned to Bill, "can I borrow them."

Bill laughed softly, "Sure, just don't get caught, yeah?"

Harry nodded eagerly, making Bill grin.

"So the Contracts?" Harry asked flicking back to the relevant test page that they had not yet gone over, "is there anything I can do to get out of the marriage contract or the tournament? And, what's the life debts the tests mentioned?"

"Life debts are when you have saved someone's life, they owe you. Ginny’s makes sense, but Pettigrew?" Bill raised an eyebrow at that.

Harry thought about it for a minute, “I stopped Sirius and Remus from killing Pettigrew that night, which is why he owes me one."

"Wow, okay," Bill said, before continuing, "as for the minor one, from the wizarding world; it's inherited. That proves that it was your mum's actions that saved you and by proxy the wizarding world. I'll lend you a book on what they all mean. They're not that useful in the grand scheme of
things, but if someone tried to kill you and owed you a debt, the magic stops them from harming you. Inherited debts are rare, and are when a parent saved the life of someone, and it was never paid back in any way, it may sometimes be inherited by their child. Debts are often paid back in some way though. I’ll give you a book on it. Most of the time, now it's ignored, but they are important."

“Thanks, I would appreciate it,” Harry said, “and the ones I owe? How do I pay it back?”

"The debts you owe are to people who saved your life. Snape, but you don't actually owe him a debt, partly because one of your parents saved his life, but also because apparently, he made a vow to protect you, that voids the life debt as he is sworn to protect you." Bill went on.

"What? He hates my guts, he loathes me. Yes, he had protected me before, but why would he make a vow? That means he has to. I would have thought he'd rather me dead! He certainly hated my dad,” Harry exclaimed puzzled.

"Maybe he liked your mum?" Bill guessed, "and wanted to protect her son? Maybe the hatred came later when he met you, and you looked like your dad, who he hates."

"Yeah, that actually makes sense," Harry said after a moment, "and it makes sense that he thinks I'm like my dad. I got off on the wrong foot by not knowing the etiquette so it would be an easy mistake to make, I guess. I should probably talk to him about it."

"Maybe, just be careful. He's a volatile and proud man." Bill warned.

"And the vow mum made?" Harry asked.

"Many parents make a vow at the birth of their child to do anything in their power to protect and look after their child. It's an old tradition, a Darke practice." Bill explained.

"Dark? Why would mum do something dark?" Harry said puzzled.

"Not Dark, Darke," Bill explained, “there’s a silent ‘e’ at the end. There is a difference. Its like religion, we will have to discuss it another time, it will take a while," Bill hurried when Rodgrip glared at them for going off-topic.

"You humans talk too much," she griped, "this is the tournament contract. I've looked at it. You and your guardian accepted it." She pulled out a thick scroll of parchment from another draw on her desk.

"What!? I didn't accept it! I want no part in this! I did not willingly or knowingly consent to this," Harry said hotly, failing to stay calm.

"Knowingly." The goblin shot back, "You were entered by someone else. That effectively put you under a temporary contract. When the goblet pulled out your name, as a minor, it did not complete the contract until you and your guardian agreed. As neither you nor he contested it, you were bound. The only way you would have been able to get out of it was if you had refused it, in front of the goblet and sworn an oath, or refused to go to the meeting. If Dumbledore had done his job as your guardian, he could have protested on your behalf and removed you from the contract. But as he was there, he gave permission by asking you to step into the meeting room; asking you to obey the contract. The good news is, that with your guardian and yourself agreeing to participate in an adult competition, it effectively, partially emancipates you. Now you just need the final Ministry approval."

"How does that help? Dumbledore is my guardian, there's no way he wants me emancipated, and he controls the Wizengamot and basically Fudge too. And don't you need to be at least 15 to be
emancipated?" Harry asked, irritably.

"You do. But you are closer to being emancipated that you were before. I'm sure once you build a good case against Dumbledore, or keep him occupied elsewhere, you could work to persuade the ministry to confirm you as an adult rather easily. The Triwizard tournament contract alone would be enough. They had two senior officials agree to you participating as an adult. They cannot really say no. It doesn’t have to be the Wizengamot or Fudge, the head of Wizarding Child Services or the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would do. You have until your birthday to figure it out anyway," the goblin explained.

"I guess that is a good thing. But I am still stuck in something I want no part of. Dumbledore said there was no other way out. He lied and compelled me to obey him. I stupidly believed I had to do as he said. Years of having it beaten into me to not cause a scene, to not disobey... I was too shocked, too daunted to argue when so many people were already staring at me..."

"He would have known you didn't know about oaths. He practically orchestrated your ignorance." Bill said frowning, "but with all the International Confederation of Wizards business this summer, and Wizengamot duties, on top of preparing for the tournament and running the school, it's possible he didn't even bother to read the tournament rules and contracts. I don't know how he manages 3 full-time jobs."

"I didn’t know about oaths till now, but it’s all common knowledge," Harry said miserably, "So that’s why everyone thinks I did it because I didn't make an oath? They assumed I orchestrated it."

"Yes"

"Great. Just fucking great. Will making an oath now do anything at all?"

"Not really. It will confirm you're an unwilling contestant if people are there to witness it. It may make a difference to some of the contract clauses, it will definitely solidify in the eyes of magic, that your guardian is not doing his duty, and it will confirm your emancipation. A new oath will make sure no-one can undo it. It will also prove to people it wasn't your fault.

"There were portraits watching, there was no way he could have missed someone adding a name. He let me get entered. He wanted me to do this. He sent Hagrid for me. He had my Gringotts key. Dumbledore's setting me up for something," Harry said, jumping up and pacing the edges of the room as he sorted through it all.

"He placed me at the Dursleys. He would have known what they were like. I told him it was horrible. I begged him to let me out. The wards ensured that no-one noticed I was hurt. I was at their mercy. He should have known I'd need the intro pack. He withheld it. He's kept me ignorant, and abused; cowed, willing to obey anything me rescuer asked. I bet all those spells on me, the potions and memory charms, I bet they're all him. He wants something…” Harry paused still pacing the room a little like a caged tiger, but Rodgrip seemed content to let him figure it out.

“He knows!” Harry exclaimed suddenly turning to them, “Dumbledore knows about the diary, the soul shard! I have a bit of Riddle Soul in me! He... he knows, and he's setting me up. Dumbledore! He's setting me up to die and take Riddle with me!” He said, looking very pail again all of a sudden.

“He’s making sure I follow all the right orders in his plan. That’s why he lets all these horrible things happen! Why he's orchestrating them,” Harry was breathing hard now, his fists clenched in his hair. Rocking slightly on the spot where he stood by the door.

"He wants me dead because I have to die to destroy Riddle-" Harry rambled picking up steam in his
"Harry, that's-" Bill started.

"He wants me to die-" Harry went on

"Harry that d-

"He wants me dead, or just too stupid to stay alive. He doesn't want a person or a student, he wants a pawn, a perfect soldier. For whatever reason, he wants me to be the good little pawn that will do exactly what he wants. Maybe he does want me dead, maybe not. Maybe he hates me because I have a bit of Voldemort in me. That must make me dark, evil.

He wants to use me, then throw me away. He doesn't care about my well being, he doesn't care about my childhood or future, just about how useful I am to him. He doesn't care if I get hurt, or how horrible or traumatic it is," Harry rushed on his eyes lighting up with an angry fire, Bill hadn't seen before.

"I won't let Dumbledore set me up to die. I won't do it. I'll fight, I'm not a slave to his whims, never again. I'm my own person. I do not deserve to be punished for merely existing. It's not my fault I exist! Gods, I didn't ask to be born!" He was almost yelling now, angry tears slipping down his face, to his horrified mortification.

"I will fight, however for the right to continue to do so and to do so freely. I am not the plaything of others. He won't manage it. He won't hold me or bind me. What do I have to do to break his hold over me?" Harry demanded, his voice thick but all steal.

"Well," Rodgrip said speaking for the first time in a while, “for a start you need to start warding yourself whenever you're not awake and check for spells nightly. You should also start testing all food, drink and eating utensils for potions before you touch them. If it has a potion in it, take a sample and send it to us. It's evidence," Radgrip explained, “Work on making sure you are never caught unaware.”

She turned to Bill, “Cursebreaker Weasley, you will mentor and tutor this client. The bank likes our high profile clients to live long enough to open their other vaults again.”

Bill nodded and Rodgrip continued. "We won't go so far as to transfer you to England. You can floo in from Cairo Gringotts to London Gringotts every Sunday. Your schedule will be adjusted accordingly, and the time difference taken into account. I trust you can apparat to meet Mr Evans-Potter from here.’’

Bill nodded and she turned to Harry again. “As your mail cannot be trusted, we shall set you up with a Gringotts box, for a fee. It will allow you to safely communicate with myself and Cursebreaker Weasley.’’

"Thank you, I would appreciate that greatly if you don't mind Bill," Harry said. "We could meet in the Shack, I'll need to make the hole bigger so you can get in, but no-one uses it and it's discrete." Harry offered before adding curiously, "what's a Gringotts box?"

"They are like muggle PO boxes I've been told, but portable.” Bill explained, “you can use them to send post between boxes, so it avoids the need for owls, which can be intercepted. Your box will have an ID number. You can send mail to other boxes by writing their Box ID number on the letter. Alternatively, you can link boxes together, like speed dial, I am told,” Bill explained, and Rodgrop pulled a small wooden box out of another desk draw.
It was about the size of an envelope and made of dark wood.

"A drop of blood onto the lid, and some magic," Rodgrip said.

Harry pricked his finger again, and pressed the blood into the lid, and pushed some magic in, as he had done with the brick entrance to Knockturn Alley. The box glowed for a moment.

"You can set a password by pushing your magic into it and saying the chosen password with intent." Rodgrip said, "as it is blood bound, anyone not you will need a password to open it."

Harry nodded, and Rodgrip went on, "the ID number is in the lid. You can give it to anyone else that has a box, so they can use it to send things to you. Any mail received though the box is checked for hexes and malicious magical content. They will be disabled, as will howlers. If they contain something cursed, they will be redirected to Gringotts, and you will be informed. It’s bigger on the inside than the outside."

"Is it possible to divert all mail through the box then? If all mail here is checked." Harry said.

"After we break the bindings and the wards, yes we can set a redirect."

"What are the runes on the lid?" Harry asked

"The middle one, you tap to send mail," Rodgrip explained shortly, "The others are numbers 1-10 in goblin runes. Tap one, to send the contents to Gringotts, me. Two is Cursebreaker Weasley," Rodgrip said, passing the box to Bill, who pressed a drop of blood to the required rune.

"If you don't have blood, write in the ID number of their box," Bill said with a grin, pulling out a small penknife and carefully scratching something neatly next to the third rune, "that's Charlie's box number. Make sure you give him yours so he can send it back."

Harry grinned, and Bill continued, “we'll meet on Sundays, and go over Occlumency, and warding. We can go over checking food and drink for things. And I'll teach you how to ward your clothes for some extra protection."

"Thank you," Harry said to them both sincerely, putting the box in his bag. "What can I do to stop him using an effigy to spell or potion me?"

"There is a ritual spell that will find and destroy any blood out of your body, it won't work on blood already in a potion, or already ingested, but if something is tied to you with your blood, like a tracking device, or effigy, it will break the connection. We can do that tonight. But make sure you give no-one your blood afterwards. We can repeat the ritual again after the bond-breaking just in case."

"That would be great, can we do that today?" Harry used every

"Yes," Rodgrip said.

"That would be great. The potions though, how can I figure out who brewed them and who administered them? Or how old the potions are? Will they wear off?" Harry asked, turning to the next topic of the results.

"Well, each one will need a blood test. It will take a while. It will come up with a magical signature of the caster, for the ones with spell components, and with the brewer. But not who gave it to you. It can tell if it was spelled into you or used blood in the potion along with an effigy though."
"Bugger. What's the love potion though? I have heard of Amortentia, but not that one?"

"It's family love, so he probably wants you to see him as a wise old grandfather, who had your best interests at heart," Bill explained.

Harry let out a gusty sigh, "well he's not doing a very good job of it. So I can't do anything now to get out of the tournament, but I can survive it. What exactly does the contract require of me?" Harry asked.

"You have to attend all three tasks, one on the 24th November, one on the 24th February and the final one on the 24th of June, as well as the weighing of the wands ceremony which has already been completed. It does not list the tasks here, just that you only enter the first task with your wand. You will receive the clue to the second test at the end of the first. It says nothing about what can and cannot be brought to the second task. The third task will be revealed at a later date after the second task. In the third task, you will only have your wand again. It says that each task is marked out of 10 points by each of the 4 judges, one for each school and one for the ministry, bringing it to a total to 50 points.

"So each champion except me has a representative amongst the judges."

"Correct. Technically you are not tied to Hogwarts in this. You were entered as Harry James Potter, not Harry James Potter of Hogwarts."

"Balls," Harry swore.

"Rather," agreed Rodbrip startling a laugh out of Harry.

"So I just have to do the tasks. Does it explicitly say I have to compete and try my best to win, or just show up, and not die?" Harry said.

"It says you must do the tasks but not how much effort you have to put in. So you could go in to just survive and not worry about winning," Rodgrip agreed

"Good," Harry said, stifling a yawn, "now what about the marriage contract. It should not be legal to force a minor to marry someone, that’s archaic."

"It’s pretty normal here actually," Bill said, “mum and dad were contracted. They didn’t set up contracts for any of us, until now, but it’s not uncommon. A lot of your classmates will be contracted."

"I still don't agree with it," Harry snapped back, "I've been forced into enough things, I won't have the rest of my life bound as well."

"I will have to look into the contract closely to look for loopholes. It is unlikely to be that flawed. Dumbledore is clever that way, but we shall look. We may be able to use the fact he didn’t use your true name as a way out, or the life debt Ginevra owes you as an out. Or possibly early emancipation can be used to void it if we can prove he is not justly your guardian. We shall see."

"If we can use the name thing to get me out of that, why not the tournament?" Harry asked.

"You agreed to it, so the name became irrelevant." Rodgrip reminded him sharply.

Harry swore again, beyond irritated, “Please gather everything you can on my account records and such that can be later used as evidence of Dumbledore's unlawful and dubious actions against me,"
He paused for a long moment, thinking. "We should start making a file, for when the day comes that we can take Dumbledore to court. He will be going down. I may not be able to do it now, I may not be able to afford a lawyer, but he will go down for this."

"Have you got any good law books, Bill?" Harry asked

"Just in relationship to curse breaking, so they won’t be much help."

Harry nodded, getting up and pacing again, “What evidence can we record, what can we use against him later? I won't let this go, I have scars from this," he said suddenly yanking his cloak and top off to reveal his torso, that was indeed littered with scars and marks. Half from his relatives, some from his various end of year scrapes and some from hexing.

Bill gaped, looking at Harry's boney body with horror. He reached out a hand to touch without even realising. Harry flinched away out of reach.

"I will not have pity," Harry said, looking hard at Bill, incorrectly interpreting his expression of horror.

Harry hurriedly putting his top back on and started pacing again, his eyes hard.

"He will not get away with this, but I will not jump into it blindly. For now, we watch and wait and prepare. We shall gather a good case. He is too popular for anything to stick. And it’s said that Riddle is coming back. Dumbledore apparently is the only one Riddle ever feared. If he does comes back, we'll need Dumbledore. Without him, everyone will expect me to deal with Riddle. I don't want to fight him! I just want him to leave me alone!"

Harry paused, wringing his fingers together as he thought. “Dumbledore will make me…” he said slowly, “but without Dumbledore, the ministry and everyone else will make me. So we remove Dumbledore's power over me, but not over Hogwarts, which he keeps safe from Riddle. We take him out in a way to bring down his power, reduce his influence but not imprison him and leave him useless. It will probably hurt him more that way anyway if people lose all respect for him."

Rodgrip grinned savagely, and said, "your enemies will crumble at your feet,"

"Yes," Harry said bluntly with an equally savage smile, “We shall make it so,” he was coming to like the goblins way of thinking.

"I don't suppose Gringotts offers legal services?" Harry asked.

"No, we do not offer wizard solicitors, but we do offer contract advice, and legal advice, but we do not work as lawyers for wizards."

"And would legal advice be covered under the charter?" Harry asked slyly

“It would,” Rodgrip said with a nasty smirk, that Harry was coming to see as the closest Goblins ever got to a true smile.

"And could you provide law advice?" He asked

"I could."

"Press control; they're slaughtering me. Are libel laws a thing here?"

"No they are not ‘a thing’,” Rodgrip sneered, making Harry laugh, “but you can sign a contract with
a journalist that is essentially a gag order preventing anyone other than your contracted journalist from writing about you. When the contract is signed, if you put in an automatic notification clause, it will be sent out to every journalist centre as a warning. It binds all other journalists from mentioning you directly. They can still reference you anonymously, like a Gryffindor fourth year and such, but not by name, which you have to specify in the contract."

"So I need a reporter I can either trust or one I can persuade to do things my way," Harry said with a frown, "where do you find a reporter here, that doesn't work for the prophet? What about photography?"

"There are some independent magazines," Bill said. "There will be some in the library, check them out and write to them."

"The same can be done for Photography," Rodgrip said. "Can you help me at all with the Wizengamot issue?"

"No," Rodgrip said succinctly. "Pity," Harry said, "What about people using my name and profiting from it?"

"No, you'll need a lawyer."

"Is there anyone Gringotts could recommend and work in conjunction with, that could come under the charter and therefore the vault."

"We'll look into it," Rodgrip said after a moment.

"The will cannot be accessed until the holidays when I have done the rituals?" Harry confirmed. "Correct," Rodgrip said with a sharp nod.

"Depending on what it says, I may be able to use it to oust Dumbledore?"

"Perhaps, but probably not. But you can use it as evidence against him. Only emancipation or a court order can oust him from your guardianship."

"Balls," he swore again. "Indeed," Rodgrip replied as Bill muffled a snigger.

"Anyway to stop others from binding me to contracts?"

"Change your true name, and set a known name through ritual. So only those with your true name can contract it. Having a complex true name, after your family (you have several) will help protect you. You will have to make it different from your current name, Harry James Potter."

"Okay, is there reading on it I can do?"

"Yes, it will be in the book list I will give you," she said, flicking her wrist at a draw in her desk. A bit of parchment flew out followed by a quill. She tapped the quill with a long finger, and it started writing.

"Now, what can I do about my key? I don't have it, I never really did have it, just for 3rd year when I was on my own, and even then there was always someone with me."
"It shall be replaced, and all others smelted," Rodgrip said pulling out a new key, just as tiny as the other one. She placed it in the ritual bowl and pushed it towards Harry, with the knife, "blood and magic," she ordered.

He complied, cutting another finger and pressing the bloody digit onto the key, and pushing, what he hoped was a bit of magic into it. The key glowed briefly and heated up. Rodgrip waved a hand over it and chanted something Harry didn’t understand, the key caught fire, there was a soft pop sound, and the fire went out.

Rodgrip handed Harry the key, "don’t lose it, don't give it to anyone. This is now the only key to any of your vaults. It will also open your other vaults when eligible. It’s bound by blood to you, for another fee, we can give you a necklace to put it on, no-one but you can remove, or you can get a money pouch to put it in, that is tied to your vault."

"Can I do both?" He asked, "can it too, be blood warded to me? So no-one else can touch it?" He asked, pricking his finger again when Rodgrip handed him a small leather pouch. The pouch was a soft navy blue leather with the Gringotts symbol on it. It glowed for a moment before he passed it back to Rodgrip, who again waved a hand over it and pressed Harry’s key to it. The key wiggled and looped itself through the leather tie on the pouch.

"Now no-one can open it but you, and it will not be removed from your person unless you willingly do so, to withdraw money. Put your hand in and think the amount. Keep in mind, if you have already withdrawn your limit, nothing will happen."

"Thank you, Master Rodgrip, what about the blood ritual then?" Harry said.

"Yes, you should also visit your vault before you leave. There should be exactly 13 Gallions, 6 Sickles and 2 Knuts collectively leftover from your previous allowances, that you could take out."

"Will Dumbledore know?" Harry asked.

“We can backdate it in the accounts to stop your guardian being informed. For a fee."

Harry brightened and nodded.
"So if I were to open my own vault, would my guardian be informed?" Harry asked nonchalantly, thinking of the potion ingredients he had so far collected in the forest.

"You could for a fee, have the notification lost on its way to your guardian," Rodgrip proposed, "and that Basilisk you killed is also yours by right of conquest. Should you choose to sell it, it should be very profitable. You couldn't sell it all straight away, or it would lose value by flooding the market. But you could employ Gringotts to harvest it and sell it for you. Goblins like basilisk meat, as do some other denizens that live in Nocturne Ally."

"Interesting," Harry said, "that would help significantly. I would have to see how much is left or if it is decomposed at all. Would I need to either, sneak you into the school or transport it out?" Harry said, thinking, trying not to yawn again.

"We shall discuss it via the Gringotts box. Come, wizard, let's do the ritual, get you to your vault and then out of my bank. It's so late it's early." Rodgrip said, leading them out of the office.

Rodgrip led them to a small ritual room deep in the bowels of Gringotts. Bill seemed to be familiar with it and grabbed a bag off the wall and with a flick of his wand, and started poring salt around a large Pentagram carved in the floor. He then lit a bundle of sage and started smoking the room with it.

Harry watched, fascinated. He could feel the magic of the room, old and strong. A mix of Goblin magic, but a little Wizard magic too. It was brilliant. Rodgrip reappeared, Harry hadn't even noticed she had gone, with 3 other goblins.

"Strip and into the circle," she barked, "after bleeding on that," she ordered handing him a tiny bronze figurine. When he added blood to it, its eyes glowed slightly. He handed it back to Rodgrip, who stowed it on a shelf on the wall.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Now he asks," she huffed, irritated but also pleased he didn't question her first this time, "an effigy, to monitor you in ritual and make sure the blood burning ritual works. Now stop dawdling and
Harry went scarlet and looked around self-consciously, not really wanting to be naked in front of the goblins he didn't know and Bill. He was so small and scrawny, and no one had ever seen his scars...

Rodgrip sighed and muttered something unsavoury about human priorities.

"You wizards are thingy about the oddest things," she said scowling at him, "I will only say this once youngling," the goblin said tartly, "a warrior is never ashamed of their scares for they are badges of strength and honour. You survived. Wear them with pride, for many would not have. They are proof of your strength."

Harry swallowed, his throat thick and nodded, glancing around furtively. Bill was still smoking the room with sage though and wasn't paying him any attention. The other goblins were also busy.

"Your body is your weapon, look after it, and it looks after you. Never be ashamed of the bite of your dagger, or it will be your downfall." Rodgrip said before adding, "clothes will interfere with the ritual, off with them!"

"Thank you Master Rodgrip," Harry said gratefully.

Blushing furiously, he did as asked, and striped, folding his clothes and placing them on his bag on a shelf in the corner of the room.

"The necklace too, it's magic, what is it?" Rodgrip demanded.

"A bezoar." He said, taking it off and putting it with his bag, "my glasses too? I'm blind without them."

"Give them to me," she snapped. He reluctantly handed them over, and the world became a blur of colour that made little sense. He jumped when she shoved them back into his hands.

"I've shielded them, on top of them being non-magical in every way, you can keep them on." She said.

He almost felt more self concise now he could see everyone again.

"Into the circle and memorise that, you'll need to chant it," Rodgrip said, handing him a piece of paper.

The other goblins seemed to keep bustling about doing things. He stood in the centre of the salt circle. Sage smoke now having in the air around them. He read the chant a few times, but it seemed easy enough to remember it. The pentagram, he noted was, carved into the floor as if designed to hold liquid. Bill stopped lighting sage and stood at top point of the star smiling reassuringly at Harry. Rodgrip, and three other goblins Harry didn't know at the rest of points. Harry stood, blushing scarlet at his nudity, in the middle and gave Rodgrip back the paper when she held her hand out for it demandingly.

"Now use that to cut both ankles. Stand with your feet apart, so the blood runs into the carved rivets in the floor. It needs to bleed a lot, we can give you a potion for it after." She barked.

Harry nodded and feeling exposed used the knife made a cut in each angle, so his blood flowed. When he started to feel light-headed, the blood seemed to have flowed enough to fill the channels in the floor. He was starting to feel a little dizzy when those outside the circle, carrying sage sticks that were smouldering, started to chant.
Some of it was in the goblin tongue, but Bill seemed to be chanting the same poem Harry had read. Magic filled the room and seemed to press in on him. Prompting him, he opened his mouth and started chanting too.

"Blood of my blood I call to you,
Blood of my blood return to me,
Blood of my blood outside my body,
By the power of water, earth, fire and air,
may my blood outside of me be destroyed"

The magic seemed to pull at him, and it hurt. There was a tingling at Harry's feet where he was standing on the bloody pentagram. His body felt hot all over and suddenly the blood in the pentagram caught fire. He jumped, but didn't move, couldn't move away. But it only ticked slightly.

The magic in the circle thickened until Harry thought he could taste it, until he felt he could reach out and touch it. He did, moving his hand through the air, touching what he couldn't see, though he almost expected it to be swirling like steam. It was a heady, wild feeling.

"So as I say so mote it be." He finished

The blood burning in the channels on the floor turned bright blood red before going out suddenly, leaving behind an empty pentagram, with no blood left, not even ash.

Harry staggered briefly, suddenly exhausted and light-headed. He stumbled, but Bill caught him with firm hand on his elbow and took him back over to where his clothes were. Harry dressed slowly leaning against Bill slightly so at not to tip over when he stood on one leg to pull his pants on.

"Here," Bill said, handing Harry a potion, "blood replenisher. It should help you feel better. There is a Pepper-up, but it will keep you awake all night, so take it tomorrow if you wake up feeling lousy, okay?"

Harry nodded and downed the Blood replenisher. It tasted like salt and metal, and a hot feeling rushed through him but faded, leaving him feeling less light-headed and woozy.

"Did it work?" Harry asked, putting the pepper-up in his bag, "the ritual?"

"Of course," Rodgrip snapped as the other goblins, flicked their hands and the salt, sage and smoke began to clear.

She held out the little effigy to him. Its mouth was open now, smoking softly and its eyes had stopped glowing.

They tossed it into a basket in the wall of the ritual room, it vanished, and Bill said, "they will cleanse it and use it again for something else. But the ritual worked. All things containing your blood out of your body are now useless."

"Though," Rodgrip said as she let them back out of the room, " as I said before, it doesn't work on blood that is ingested, i.e. a potion with your blood that has already been consumed, i.e. if someone made a love potion keyed to you with your blood, so someone would fall in love with you, and they
had already taken it, it would not do anything. There is another ritual for that, and it can be deadly. It also won't destroy any tests conducted with your blood. Like the ones we did today. There's another ritual for that, and you don't really need it."

"Is there a ritual to seek out any blood out of your body, i.e. used in tests or in potions?" Harry asked, "and will it affect the Gringotts box and wallet?"

"There is. We can do it over the yule break, though it is mostly redundant now. The Gringotts blood work is not effected by this ritual, it has its own. That is partly what we did, when we set you a new key. All Gringotts blood work is authorised and recorded, done by an official Gringotts chant. They're protected against such rituals, you need not worry," Rodgrip said leading them to the Gringotts carts.

"Griphook shall take you to your vault. We shall meet again at the yule holidays. We shall message about the progress of the other things we have discussed today between now and then though your Gringotts box." She said before turning and walking away.

Harry, recognising Griphook and had to stop himself calling out in greeting, remembering his manners.

Griphook smirked for a moment as if knowing and said after a pause, "well meet, Mr Evans-Potter, Cursbreaker Weasley."

"Well met Master Griphook," Harry replied grinning.

The cart ride down to his vault was just as breakneck and terrifyingly brilliant as last time. Harry didn't even both trying to count the turns this time, long having given up. They came to a sudden stop outside Harry's vault, and Harry handed Griphook his key. Again, a cloud of green smoke came billowing out, and Harry said, "what is the purpose of the green smoke? It's a defence of some kind, right?"

Griphook grinned nastily, "it tests the magical signature of the person opening the vault, it will not harm the owner of the vault, but you will be in trouble if you did not have a goblin with you."

Judging from the goblins wicked grin, Harry decided he didn't need to know what would happen to a thief.

"Can Dumbledore get in?" He asked.

"He is your guardian; unfortunately, he can. He can set limits to your gold, and he can withdraw gold from the family vaults for your care."

Harry frowned but stepped into the vault.

The inside was the same, mountains of gold, silver and bronze. Harry carefully counted out, exactly 13 Galleons, 6 sickles and 2 knuts. He was about to put them in his money pouch when he turned and said, "I know I can withdraw money from the pouch, and it comes from the vault but if I put money in the pouch, will it go back to the vault or stay in the pouch?"

"Either, it's about your intent," Griphook said.

Nodding, Harry put the gold in his pouch, feeling slightly forlorn that there was so much gold put aside for him, for his education, that Dumbledore wouldn't let him touch. He thought wistfully of all the books he could get with even a handful of it.
He sighed and stepped properly into the vault, "are there only coins in here?" Harry asked, not seeing much passed the coinage.

"No, your mother also has left things here for you. For your time in school if they did not survive." Griphook said from the doorway.

Harry looked around the vault with new eyes. He picked his way carefully around the pile of gold. The chamber was a small round cave-like space carved into the rock, littered with stalagmites and stalactites. Most of the space was taken up by coins, but at the back, he found, in small patch clear of coins was an older looking Hogwarts bookbag.

He softly called to Bill, who stepped into the vault and around the pile of coins.

"What's up?" He asked Harry curiously.

"I'm not allowed to use my wand in Gringotts am I?" Harry asked, remembering what he read in the book.

"No, with permission and supervision maybe, but mostly no. It's just employees of the bank that can use their wands." Bill confirmed

"Can you do a detection charm on them then?" Harry asked gesturing to the book bag.

"Course," and with a complicated flick of his wand Bill peered at the bag for a moment, reading something Harry couldn't see, before saying, "the bag is magical but harmless, it has a blood ward on it. But it shouldn’t hurt you."

"Thanks," Harry said, reaching for the bag. It tingled in a friendly almost-but-not-quite familiar manor, but wouldn't open. He took out his pocket knife and pricked a finger with it. He pressed the blood onto a corner of the bag. It glowed briefly then the flap fell open effortlessly.

Harry looked inside. It seemed to have a lot more space in it than it should have had. He'd seen them in Diagon Alley, bags with space expansion charms. It was feather-light too. He put his hand inside, and his arm seemed to just keep going down. It must have a bottomless charm on it, he thought. His hand touched parchment, and he pulled out a letter.

"My Darling Hadrian,

In the event of the worst, I have stashed this here for you. You should get it in time for your first year. After we went into hiding, I thought it best to prepare for the worst just in case. I do not want you growing up not knowing your parents or that they loved you.

I may not be able to take you on your first trip to Diagon Alley or to get your school things like I am hoping I will be able to. But never let it be said that I have not helped my son prepare for school. I have hardly been allowed out of the house, but I have been able to gather this for you from my own and your father's own school supplies. It's not much, and it's not new, but it is something that I can do for you. Just in case.

Everything in this bag should be helpful. Hopefully, it will not be needed, even if the worst should happen, you should be well taken care of but, just in case. I did have some good fun putting it together for you and writing you little notes on what it all is or is for.

I love you, my wonderful son. Stay strong, true to your self. Read and nurture your learning, knowledge is power, my darling Hadrian, and though power can not always be a good thing if abused. You can use it to keep your self safe. All the best, my son, stay strong, I'm proud of you.
Whatever happens, I will always watch over you and cherish you. You are the light of my world. I will be proud of you always, no matter what.

All the love in the world my darling son,

Love,

Mum.”

Harry pressed a hand over his mouth, a silent sob rose in him, unstoppable. He pressed his eyes closed and tilted forward, pressing his face into the bag. It smelt faintly of roses. He flinched when he heard Bill move closer to him, unable to hold back another sob. He bit down hard on a fist to stifle the noise, without really being aware of the old habit, another sob slipped out. And another.

His mum wrote that. For him. She loved him. She really loved him and was trying to look after him, even now. He took a deep shuddering breath and ran a finger over the edge of the letter and along the bag strap. His mum was wonderful. He missed her, suddenly, in a sharply acute way like he never had before. She’d been merely an idea, a dream before. Now she was a real tangible person that had cared for him and was gone. It made her more real, real enough to truly miss now.

Pressing his lips together rightly, and tried to carefully put the letter back in its envelope, but his hands shook, his throat thick. Bill gently took the letter from him and wordlessly put it in its envelope without looking at it, before passing it back to him.

Harry had been unprepared for the kindness of his mum’s letter or for Bill's. It swelled in his chest with an unfamiliar warm that hurt so much. Harry squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself not to start crying.

Harry put the letter in the bag, "do you know an expansion charm?” he croaked his voice thick not looking up at Bill as he whipped his eyes

"I do,” Bill said gently

"Can you cast it on my bag? So I can put mum's in it? I don’t want anyone to know I have it yet,” Harry asked with a slight snifflle still not able to look at him.

Bill nodded and said, “Capacious Extremis,” with a sharp circle of his wand and a harsh flick.

Harry paid careful attention to the wand movement, so as to both distract himself and learn it for later.

“Its legality is questionable, it has the potential for great disuse,” Bill said, looking at Harry carefully, “it's also pretty advanced, so be careful, yeah?”

Harry nodded and carefully put his mum's bag in his own.

He stood there for a moment, feeling lost, and jumped when Bill gently took his hand and squeezed it gently. This small kindness almost hadHarry crying again. He gripped Bill's hand tightly and went back to the door.

"If I leave my copy of the tests here, will it be safe? Is there a way to stop him from getting in?" Harry asked Griphook when outside the vault.

"We could set a blood ward, for a fee,” Griphook said after a while.
"Will he know?" Harry asked.

"Only if he tries to enter, and if he does, he will realise he cannot find his key anyway. The ritual we did destroyed it. So no, he will not know you warded the vaults against him. He will assume, as most wizards do, that he just lost his key, or is bared by some small technicality." Griphook said with a vicious grin.

"Let’s do that, please. Can we do it now?" Harry asked curiously.

Griphook sighed but said, "very well, hand and key."

Harry offered both, and the goblin cut Harry’s palm with a sharp claw-like fingernail and pressed both the key and his bloody palm to the vault door. He chanted for a long moment. His hand heated up, uncomfortably, for a moment, while the vault door grew warm and started to glow.

"It is done," Griphook said when the door had stopped glowing.

"Brilliant thank you Master Griphook," Harry said, placing his copy of the reports into the back of the vault for safekeeping. "Thank you for waiting," he said when he stepped out of the vault. The door swung shut behind him with a series of clunks and clicks.

He was not exactly sad, but the trip back to the surface did cheer him up, the break necked ride just as thrilling as the trip down.

"Thank you, Master Griphook," Harry said with a grin as he flipped his hood back up while the goblin escorted them to the door of the bank.

Harry and Bill didn’t talk as Bill led him back through a lively and bustling Knockturn Alley and Harry was too tired to peer around curiously. It had to be about 3am. When they appeared back to the shrieking shack, Bill was struck suddenly by how small Harry looked.

Harry was by no means weak or defenceless. He had been through more than most adults ever went through in their lifetime, but it made Bill's chest ache just thinking about it.


"I'm going to hug you now, Harry," Bill warned before he pulled Harry close to his chest in a tight hug.

"What! Why?" Harry bit out, "Don't pity me! I'm not weak, I don't need babying," Harry snapped, trying to push Bill away.

But Bill just hung on, holding him close and muttered, "I don't pity you, Harry. I think you might just be one of the strongest people I know. I bet you were never really a baby. You probably practically raised yourself."

Harry stopped actively fighting but didn’t hug back. He wasn't sure what to think.

"I don't pity you, though it sucks what you've been through and what we've learnt. It's horrible. Really horrible. And my heart hurts for you, Harry. You never should have been put through any of it. You deserve so much better. But you're safe now, or getting there. We are going to work on you being safe now. You're not alone, Harry," Bill murmured softly, still holding him close, "promise."
Harry felt small and overwhelmed suddenly. He gave in to the hug and let his head fall forward against Bill's chest, feeling exhausted. It was warm in Bill's arms, and his touch almost burned in the still unfamiliar sensation of touch that didn't hurt. It still felt odd, though, and Harry could feel Bill's magic all around him; warm, steady and vibrant. It was... odd and overwhelming, but... nice? Nice was the only word he could come up with as he reminded himself he was meant to hug back. That's what you were meant to do when someone hugged you.

He mechanically put his arms around Bill's waist to hug him back. Which seemed to make Bill chuckle lightly; the sound making Bill's chest rumble softly against Harry's forehead. Harry wondered if he'd done it right. He thought that was what you were meant to do when someone hugged you.

"You'll be alright, Harry," Bill murmured squeezing him tighter for a moment, running a hand over Harry's messy hair.

Bill pulled away what seemed like a mere moment later, and Harry felt oddly bereft. It was a foreign feeling. Harry felt his hand twitch oddly at his side as if to reach out. Harry almost thought that maybe it was nice, being hugged. Was this why Hermione liked them so much? He knew she liked hugs, but she avoided touching him that much. She knew it made him jumpy. But that odd warmth that Bill's hug had kindled in his chest... he almost felt safe there; standing like that, cared for almost. Maybe Bill was right.

"You gonna be okay, Harry? What about going back to the school?" Bill asked when they arrived at the hole in the wall of the Shack.

"I..." he trailed for a moment. He wanted to say yes, that he was fine, but he wasn't. His throat was tight, and his stomach a tense knot. He felt hurt and angry and betrayed, and his head was too full.

Bill put an arm out again slowly. Harry found, oddly, that he couldn't refuse the proffered comfort; couldn't turn away the offered warmth and closeness to another person, one of the few people that didn’t hate his guts. He found that the protest didn’t even leave his throat as he let Bill wrap him into a hug again. Harry sagged a little against Bill, warm and safe. He almost didn't want to let go. Just for a moment, he surrendered to the feeling.

He shuddered, his eyes stinging. It was too much, too much. He couldn't do this! He couldn't be this. The whole world was against him and wanted to see him fall.

Harry pushed away, "I'll manage," he said shortly before changing topic, desperately, "Let me show you how to get in," he said, not meeting Bill's eyes.

Bill watched him move the shrubbery and some rocks and peered at the small hole in the case of the wall in astonishment.

"How'd you fit in that? It's tiny?" He exclaimed.

"So am I," Harry grouched.

Bill placed a hand on his shoulder, and he managed to restrain a flinch, and instead said, "we'll have to make it bigger for you, though I'm actually not sure you'll fit in the wall..." Harry pondered peering at Bill critically. "Your broader than I am. Maybe bring a broom? Under a disillusionment you can fly through the attic window, I don't think it's boarded up. I'll check it out this week and let you know. I need to fix up the stairs anyway."

"Might be better, it's warded, so I can't apparate in. I'll meet you here next Saturday at 9am, okay?"
Bill said, giving Harry another quick hug but Harry pulled away quickly, flinching again. Bill watched with a slight frown as Harry quickly and easily slipped into the tiny hole in the ground at the bass of the wall and vanished.

He stood there for a long time, watching the spot where Harry had disappeared, a slight frown still on his face.

*

Harry slipped his cloak on as he climbed out of the Whomping Willow, giving the tree a friendly pat as he went. He smiled at it when it shivered at him, one of its branches twitching almost as if it was waving to him.

He slipped into the school, deftly avoiding the notice of Filch and Mrs Norris, and up into the Gryffindor tower. The Fat Lady did not even wake when he whispered the password.

Part of him wanted more than anything to just crawl into bed and forget the world. But he made himself undress and hop into the shower. The hot water soothed him slightly but even after his shower, he lay awake for a long time. His mind racing, sleep still a long way off.

What he was really itching to look at, however, was his mum's bag. He knew that all he had to do was fall asleep, and he would wake up in no time and could look at it then. But despite being so exhausted his eyes were aching, he felt wide awake.

He sighed quietly and got up. He carefully extracted his bag from his trunk and put it on the bed with him, before shutting and re-warding his curtains again.

“Lumos,” his whispered, despite the silencing ward that was now up permanently around his bed, preventing any noise, (nightmares,) from getting out to disturb his roommates.

He took a moment to have a closer look at the bag. It was like his own bag; a standard Hogwarts messenger bag with the Hogwarts crest on the front. It was better quality than his own, which was not spelled and did not have a crest on it. He hadn’t been able to afford the extras back in his first year when he still had robes and a trunk to buy as well.

While his mum's bag was clearly used and older, it was well taken care of. It had a little pocket on the front that when he put his hand into, found a bunch of pens, a scrap of parchment and a pot of ink. He pulled them out, curiously. The pens, when he looked at them closely, all seemed to be fountain pens. They would be the perfect compromise between the ink quills Hogwarts preferred and the convenience of a muggle pen. The inkwell was filled with a dark purple ink labelled, ‘Everclear's Ever-Filling Ink - Dark Violet’. The ink seemed to be to fill the fountain pens then. He grinned and looked at the parchment.

"Hadrian,

You should be raised in the magical world, but in case of the worst, you will find it easier to write with fountain pens. Much easier to handle than quills, especially if you grow up with pens and pencils. They are still an ink pen that you fill yourself, so they can be imbued with your magic. (That’s why wizards insist of Quills, especially for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy.) You won’t be able to use them for exams, but for homework and notes, it should be fine. You'll want to practice with a quill though too.

Love you always,

Mum"
He pressed his lips together in a tight line and swallowed thickly, his throat aching. Even now, after practising all the exercises in Hermione’s quill writing book, he still struggled with it and had longed to just be able to use pens. There was something about holding a quill that was just challenging, and his hand often cramped up. This would make things much easier.

His mum had done this, for him.

He opened the bag and peered inside properly. There were so many pockets, pockets for everything, a much better design than his bag, where you just tossed everything in higgledy-piggledy. There even seemed to be a pocket for pebbles, feathers, muggle pence coins and twigs to practice transfiguration on. There were also some needles, buttons, a thimble and a tiny snuff box. They must be things his mother had transfigured. He grinned, wondering how she made the changes permanent. He’d have to check, that would be a useful skill.

He pulled out the parchments and frowned. They seemed to have been bound together into notebooks. He flipped thought one. ‘Transfiguration Lily Evans.’ The notes started in first year; matchsticks into needles, mice into snuff box, teapots into tortoises, essays going all the way through to her fifth year full of class notes and other related assignments.

He flipped through the rest. His mum had notebooks like that for all her core subjects as well as Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures. The latter of which seemed to have a slightly different curriculum under Professor Kettleburn than he did under Hagrid. He grinned, his mum had studied all the things he had, except for Divination. Something warm kindled in his chest at the thought, maybe she would be proud of him.

He pulled out the books next and was surprised at the sheer amount in the bag. From the size and weight of it, he never would have expected that many, but then, it was charmed.

First of all, there was the muggleborn introduction texts, as well as all of the further reading. Giving some of them a flip through he noticed all of them were annotated and notes made in the margins, just like he did. He grinned. It seemed that his mum had taken longer to find the Goblin book funny than he had.

There was a note written inside the cover of 'Magic's Real.'

"You should be raised, if not by us, then at least in the Wizarding world, so you should have no need of these at all. But just in case, Love Mum,"

The fact that his mother had planned for him to be looked after, and had made contingencies, filled him again with that odd warmth in his chest. It was almost too big a feeling. A little alien, but very pleasant. He hugged the book to his chest for a moment before looking at the rest of the books.

There were a lot more books on the further reading list. There were more on etiquette and culture, one on religions that sounded interesting, and a few on old magics and the Darke and Lyght as well. He frowned at the unfamiliar terms. Another note fell out.

"My darling,

Not all these books are actually on the further reading list. I edited it so that it reflects both parts of the Wizarding world. The ones on older magic’s and religions are frowned on, Darling, as are those on the Darke. It's often not talked about, as the Ministry does not approve. So be careful who sees you reading them and who knows you have them. Especially the books about the Darke. The ministry has been trying to outlaw the practices for years. I don't expect they will manage it, but it has become somewhat taboo. Not that I agree with them, but do be careful please, my love."
I believe in knowledge, my son. Knowledge is power and foresight that can keep us safe. Better to know and choose not to practice than be kept in line through ignorance, as the ministry tries.

I could go on for pages about the Darke my son, and my beliefs. But I won't. I included some books on it, and on the Lyght to give you the wider picture.

The original list only had half as many as the list I've included, if you can believe it. Honestly, what were they thinking listing, so few to explain a whole world and culture…

Love mum.
PS, if Professor Flitwick is still teaching, and I'm sure he will be, ask to borrow his copy of Magical Languages from around the world. I seem to have misplaced my copy and it has a rather interesting section on Goblins among other things.

PSS, Darke is a culture. Dark seems to be a colloquialism for evil. It is often assumed that the Darke is dark, evil."

Harry was itching to read them. Bill hadn't gotten around to explaining what the Darke actually was, and why it was different from Dark... And he had never heard of the Lyght. It was so interesting!

He flipped through the rest of the books. All his first through fourth-year textbooks; a few different editions of some of the Defence Against the Dark Arts books. Some of the books were older editions, but they all had detailed and useful annotations in them. He didn't recognise some of the books that he presumed to be the 5th year OWL textbooks. He wasn't able to get his own copies of them. He was also pleased to see the Standard Book of Spells Grades 1 through 7, and would be able to stop 'borrowing' older Gryffindor's copies that had often been left lying around.

There was another note in the front of the Standard Book of Spells Grade 1.

"Of course you'll have your own school books (I hope), but I thought you might like my notes and things. If I am not here to help you with your summer homework, maybe the notes in the margins may help answer your questions in my stead. Or at least give you a bit of a laugh. Never be afraid to ask questions, Hadrian. He who questions, learns much."

Then there were also a couple of divination books and a few muggle studies books as well. He opened the cover of one.

"My Darling Hadrian,

I have included some of your father's texts from his electives as well, just in case you take these. He doesn't really take notes in his textbooks, not with anything useful anyway. But you may find it funny, or useful in deciding which electives to take. My advice would be, take what you enjoy, and what keeps your options open. Remember, you can swap up until the end of the 3rd week of school if you change your mind.

Love mum"

Placing them carefully aside, he moved on to the next set of books. These were leather-bound notebooks that turned out to be a stack of diaries. Some had larger childish pencilled handwriting and pictures, some had neater older writing done in what Harry presumed was the dark purple ink of the fountain pen.

Her diaries. She had written diaries. His mum liked to draw, like he did sometimes over the summer, when locked up in his room.
He may not have anyone to tell him about her, but now he could read about her, in her own words. This was a real tangible connection to his mother so he could get to know her. He hugged them to his chest and had to use great self-restraint to keep from opening the first one and spending all morning reading.

Next, he pulled out some cauldrons. He frowned, not expecting it. There were several standard cauldrons, a large box of Bicarb soda (what?), a range of stirring rods, and a bunch of little bowls.

He frowned and pulled a note out from inside one the cauldrons.

"Hadrian,

My best friend taught me a lot about what I know and love about potions. He was a prodigy at them. We spent many a day during the summer in Cokesworth brewing in my mother's kitchen. She was ever so patient when one of our experiments blew up all over her nice clean kitchen. And if we were not in there, we were in the local woods foraging for ingredients or in the garden growing them.

I hope you come to enjoy the art as much as I do. And even if you can't use your wand during the summer, potions is magic that you can use as it is passive magic.

I used to note down the recipe I was brewing, add in any changes I was going to make to it. Sometimes there are ways to improve the recipes in your text book. I would then prepare all my ingredients and have them sitting ready in little bowls. I've left some for you. I found it was ideal, this way, to keep track of everything, keep everything neat, and to work in an efficient way. I have left you a few of my old cauldrons, stirring rods, and knives, in case you would like to experiment with some potions too and end up melting some like we did at the start. It's always good to have extras. I haven't left you any ingredients; they don't always keep well.

Happy brewing, be careful,

Love mum.

PS if it looks like the cauldrons going to explode or melt, smothering it in Muggle Bicarb soda. It actually works. Also a good cleaning agent."

Harry stared. His mum liked potions, loved them. She and her best friend used to brew over the summer in his muggle grandmothers kitchen, making a mess and loving it. He gaped. He couldn't really imagine it. He wondered who her friend was and if they were around still. Would they teach him; the way they taught his mum?

Feeling warm and happy, this was what it must feel like to be loved; to be given gifts at Christmas by your parents! He pulled out a bundle from the bag. They seemed to be a stack of clothes. He took the note from the top.

"My Darling Hadrian,

In the off chance, he sent you to my sister - everyone knows not to send you there. I have made it very clear that I will come back and haunt their saggy asses for the rest of their sorry lives if they so much as even think about sending you there! I do love my sister, but she can be very unkind and cruel with regards to the magical world.

Anyway, if the worst comes to the worst, this is a just in case. I don’t want it to be necessary, but I have a bad feeling, that I've not been able to push away over the last few days...

If you need clothes, be it muggle wear or wizarding, I've left you some. I know what it's like to be too poor to be able to afford clothes better than rags, my darling, and while my sister does too. I
know her to be bitter and spiteful. I would not put it past her to refuse to provide for you, if they force you to stay with her. They are worn, they were your dad's. He was a spoilt prat, careless with his things, especially in his first year. But just in case. If for no other reason than you can use them for dirty play clothes.

I have mended them best I can. He was rather tall, even in his first year, so hopefully, they fit if you need them. If you hate the colours get one of your prefects or teachers to charm them for you.

Your father was a hoarder, despite not really being that sentimental over anything except his 'marauders,' he never threw anything out. So it was easy enough to grab his old school trunk and put some things away for you as I was preparing this.

Don't think he didn't care by his lack of input in this. He did. He loves you very, very much. He just doesn't think it necessary to prepare for our deaths. He thinks me overly cautious and sentimental. He is confident we will survive and win this war.

I hope we do.

Love,

Mum"

Harry took a shuddering breath. His mother’s fear was palpable in her words. It made his insides clench, and he bit his lip, trying not to get upset. He missed her so much. This was giving him a taste of what he could have had. He hastily scrubbed his eyes, forgetting that no-one could see him.

Folded up were two school robes and a thick winter cloak, thicker than Harry anyway. He wondered what it was made of. There were also two sets of plain black day robes, a couple of black pants that looked like jeans, but he didn't think were and some shirts. They had a note stuck to them.

"Most wizards don't wear pants under their robes, just their underwear. But I have always thought, and my friend agrees with me, that wearing pants under them is preferable. Just in case. So I have included some for you. Especially if you end up being raised muggle. I imagine it would be very disconcerting to suddenly have to wear robes with no pants underneath."

Harry wondered what incident she was referring to. There was no way there wasn't a story behind that comment. He did prefer wearing pants under his school robes. And he only had one pair of school trousers. There were also a bunch of socks. He grinned, they were still second hand, but at least they weren't Dudley's or Vernon's old socks!

He pulled out the last two books from the bag. One was an old-looking leather-bound volume. It had a scrap of parchment stuck with a minor sticking charm on the front cover. He cancelled the charm and looked at it. It was different handwriting. Larger than his mother's minuscule writing, and messier too.

"Son,

You won't need this, as I'll be there to teach you and show you the ropes but your mother insisted. Just in case, she said. We'll laugh about it later though, don't you worry, Harry.

This is basically a big book of notes and boring, stuffy heir things from the various heirs in our line. It's secret family business, so don't show anyone. Sirius is okay though. If the worst happens, he'll be looking after you and can explain it all. It has a lot of entries from my ancestors when they were learning to be good pureblood heirs. I never actually wrote in it, but I did later go back and put some memories in. There's a nifty spell that can convert a memory into writing. It will be in the back
somewhere; luckily there were others of us that also hate writing this sort of thing.

See you soon,

Dad"

Harry stared. The note was so different from his mums. Was he so sure that they would survive that he didn't think it necessary to help prepare for just in case? Harry thought his mum and dad were meant to be so in love. But by the sounds of it, his mum didn't like his dad that much, and his dad seemed to think his mum a bit silly. What happened?

The book opened with a drop of blood. Again there was a short note in the cover, but to his disappointment, it wasn't another one from his dad.

"Heir,

This book has been compiled over the years by (many a time reluctant) heirs to the house of Pereverll and later Potter. It acts as both a diary and a guide to being the heir of our great and noble house. If gods forbid, your forbearers are not there to guide you, this shall serve you well."

Harry eagerly flipped through it but was disappointed when he didn't find the answers about his father he was looking for. Wanting to know more, he wondered if his dad had any diaries. He didn't find a diary, but he did find a thick brick of a book, that looked very battered, titled 'The Marauders Grimoire.' He grinned and flipped it open. Only it didn't open.

He tapped it with his wand and muttered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." He grinned as it flipped open.

Pages and pages of what looked like detailed accounts from often multiple perspectives on not only how the Marauders had met, but all the pranks they ever pulled together, and sometimes individually too. Some of them even had little diagrams and pictures drawn in, and a few even had photos. It seemed that most of the diary entries (while Lupin and Pettigrew had contributed) were written by Sirius and his dad.

There were notes too, on the potions and spells they had used, on how they had become Animagi's, how they had made the map, how they had found all the tunnels and passages in the school. Most of these notes were written by Lupin and Pettigrew. It was brilliant, and he wondered how his mum had managed to get it.

He then noticed a note that had fluttered onto the bed when he had picked up the book.

"Hadrian,

I don't approve of this. I can only imagine what's in it, I don't have the password. But maybe it will let you in. Your father was not a good person in school. He was a hideous bully, but he made an effort to change, after a while. He wasn't exactly kind, but he wasn't as bad out of school as he was in it. I don't approve of how he acted.

Please, Hadrian, don't become a bully, my darling. As one who was on the receiving end for being a muggleborn, please don't. Pranks are fine if they are funny, but not hurtful or humiliating ones.

He would want you to have this when you're in school, and you deserve to have a bit of fun. Plus, it can help in a fight to have odd, obscure and annoying spells. Please do not try the animagi book on your own.
He felt queasy all of a sudden, his father was a bully? That didn’t match all the stories everyone told him about his dad…. But Snape always said his father was horrible. By the sounds of it, his mother didn’t think much of him either. And it didn’t sound like his father had improved that much out of school. Why did they marry? Why didn't she leave him? Surely he wasn't a bully. Surely?

He flicked through the start of the book, desperate to prove it not true, reading bits and pieces from their first year. The pages were littered with prideful accounts of successful hexings and not getting caught. The favourites being a spell to give someone loud flatulence or a spell to give someone a painful wedgie.

Harry’s gut rolled, and he winced in sympathy. His cousin had done that to him when he caught him and often blamed his loud and smelly farts on Harry, causing him more ridicule from his peers and more people to pick on him.

He flicked through the pages, flipping through their later years. The pranks got more complex, the spells more advanced, but just as unkind. A lot of the people they bullied (pranked as they frequently called it) were from Slytherin, though not all of them. The same people seemed to feature an awful lot. They seemed to give a lot of their victims unkind nicknames. Snivellus, being one of the most mentioned ones. Harry felt sorry for the guy, whoever he was. He knew what it was like to be picked on like that.

Then the pictures started, giving tangible proof of spells cast, pranks played and his father and Sirius laughing as other students cried or went red with anger and humiliation. Apparently, that was the origin of Snivillus’s name. They had made him cry once, early in their first year, and had coined him Snively Snivellus.

Harry just stared at the pages. They sounded exactly like his cousin. He shivered, suddenly glad his father was not at Hogwarts with him. Judging by the descriptions of this ‘Snivillus’ bloke, and Harry hated using the name, they would of picked on Harry too. Harry wasn’t very different from this ‘Snivillus’, scrawny and poor, unattractive, often unkempt after being locked up all summer. Harry was nearly a Slytherin. What would his father have said to that?

Harry shivered and kept flicking through the book with a sick fascination. His mother often featured in it too. They talked about her a lot, calling her Lilly-Pilly. Harry wondered if she liked the name. Somehow he didn’t think she would have. She was often featured in photos, red in the face from yelling, her wand out as if to hex them back or undo the spells on the victim. She often seemed to jump to the defence of a dark-haired Slytherin boy, Harry didn’t quite recognise, though he did look oddly familiar. Maybe that was ‘Snivellus.’ He cringed at the name and wondered if the boy was the best friend his mother had mentioned.

Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly and turned the page again, hoping for something, anything to redeem his father, to explain his actions… Maybe this Snivillus really deserved it for some reason.

He fell short, though. The picture on the next page was of a boy being jerked up by into the air by an ankle. His robes hung over his head, hiding his face, leaving his bony legs and hips on display in nothing by greying underpants.

Harry felt sick as he watched the boy in the photo flail and try to cover himself up or get down. His father and his friends were clearly holding him up with magic, keeping him there, laughing. They were surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. His mother was there too, in the background, her wand out, looking furious. His father would flick his wand and pulled the boy's underpants off, only for the whole horrible scene to begin again...
Harry slammed the book shut, tore through the hangings on his bed and bolted over to the bathroom, only to be sick all over the bathroom floor.

His father was a bully. A horrible and cruel, abusive bully, no better than the Dursley’s. His head spun, and his fingers were tingling so badly he couldn’t move them. Gods he couldn’t believe his father stripped that boy in front of everyone, Harry thought as he retched. And then to produce a photo of it, so they could watch it over and over again. He sat back and crawled over to the corner behind the door, his head spinning.

He could remember the burning humiliation he had felt when Dudley had done that to him, like it was yesterday. Dudley’s clothes were always too big on him before he’d managed to steal some string to use as a belt. They'd always been slipping down on his boney frame. He’d constantly been holding them up or pulling them up, afraid they would fall off. He put his head on his knees and hugged himself tightly, rocking slightly.

Harry’d been hurt that day back in primary school. He hadn’t run fast enough, tripping over his fraying too big shoes. They had caught him by the back of his pants. Instead of beating him up as he’d expected, they’d pulled his pants off, causing Harry to fall face-first into the concrete. Everyone had laughed and jeered at him, “he’s so skinny,” “so dirty,” “so ugly.”

Harry curled up impossibly smaller, a ball in a corner, his breathing ragged. He couldn't feel his hands. He tried hopelessly to clench his fingers, but they didn't move. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to drag in another shuddering breath. He wished he hadn’t looked now. He dragged in another breath as hot, humiliating tears pricked at his eyes.

He scrubbed at them furiously, with his numb wrists. He wouldn’t cry over someone like that. He took another shuddering breath, focusing on the cool air flowing into his lungs and counted, trying to get his lungs to cooperate.

His father was dead. He may have been like his cousin, but he couldn’t hurt Harry, or that boy anymore. Another breath. Gods, why had she married him? Breathe Harry. Why didn't she leave him? Another breath.

Shakily, he crawled over to the shower, still clothed, and yanked at the tap. Icy water blasted him, making him gasp. He sat there shivering, as the icy water slowly washed away the panic, the dirty feeling that the book had left him with, that his father's actions had left him with, that his memories had left him with. He turned the heat up and took off his sopping clothes, washing the panic off his skin with soap.

He smiled weakly. Even now, after months of being at Hogwarts, he relished the luxury of being allowed a hot shower, with soap whenever he wanted. After a long time, when his skin was red from the heat and the soap, finally feeling clean again, Harry stepped out of the shower.

Dobby or Winky had cleaned the sick and taken his wet clothes away, leaving a fluffy towel and a clean pair of Pyjamas out on the bench for him.

He got changed and picked up the offending book gingerly, and buried it at the bottom of his mum's bag. As much as he wanted to burn it and never look at it again, he knew he'd read it later. He had to know. But right now it was too much, and the book would be safer in the blood warded bag than in his trunk.

He then forced himself to put away his father’s clothes carefully into his trunk. His skin crawled slightly not wanting to touch them, but he appreciated extra clothes too much to be picky. He hated that he needed them. He hated that they would still fit. He hated the fact he had money in his vault to
buy proper clothes, his very own clothes or even a second pair of school pants but that Dumbledore would not let him access enough to actually do so.

He crawled back into bed, fuming yet exhausted now and with a little trepidation pulled out the last thing in the bag.

It seemed to be a hand-knitted blanket made of large squares stitched together. It was made of a range of different wools in various shades of greens and purples. He brought it to his face. It was so soft and seemed to be warm, despite having been in the bag for years. He inhaled. It smelt faintly of roses, and something clean. He smiled, wrapped it over his knees. A note fell out of this too.

"My Darling Hadrian,

I used to keep this on the end of my bed in my dormitory in Gryffindor. My mother (your Grandma Daisy) knitted this for me when I got my letter. She used both my favourite colours and somehow managed to finish it in time for me to leave for school. So I could have a little piece of home to take with me for when I felt homesick.

I was going to knit you one as well darling, but I'm simply shocking at it. Really, your father thought it was hilarious, the prat.

Your Grandma Daisy knitted one for my sister Petunia too. Hers was in pinks and reds. As I cannot make my own for you, I am passing on my blanket to you. It saw many moments of laughter and tears. It kept me warm and safe at night for many a year. May it do the same for you.

Love you,

Mum"

Feeling warm and happy, he thought, his father may have been horrible, but his mother had loved him.

Harry carefully put his mum's letters away in a side pocket in the bag, and packed all the books back into his mother's bag. They had more useful notes than his own did. After thinking a moment, he put his own school books away in his trunk and settled on using his mums, apart from his defence book which was different. He liked having a little piece of his mum with him, to learn from.

Seeing as there was space in the bag and it would not make the bag heavier, he added in the rest of his school things to it as well. After a moment's thought, he added his new wallet, the Gringotts box, the Peverell Heir Grimoire and Charlie’s dragon book. Everything that was important was now in the bag.

They would be safer in this bag that was warded. Now he could fit it, he may as well keep all his school things in his bag instead of having to take them in and out of his trunk because his own bag was too small.

He thought for a minute, tapping his wand tip against his chin. He wasn't that good at wards yet, but he could spell the curtains shut so only the right password could open them. Smiling, he cast it on his locked trunk. He didn’t want Ron going through his things as he had in the past looking for chocolate or homework to copy. He didn't think his ward would keep out an older student. It wasn't that sophisticated, but it should be a good deterrent.

Happy his things were safe, he crawled back into bed, warded his curtains and pulled his mum's warm blanket around him. He was exhausted, but spent most of the remaining time until dawn tossing and turning.
All he could see when he shut his eyes was the expression on his father’s face as he hexed that boy upside down and pulled his pants off. And if it wasn’t that, it was the long list of spells and potions on him and the contracts and…

Harry say up with a jerk, clenching and unclenching his fits. He sat there for a long moment breathing hard, feeling empty and cold inside, with a heavy feeling in his gut. His father was a horrible person. For some reason, his mother still married him. But his mother loved him, Harry, dearly. Dumbledore was his guardian and hated his guts enough to keep him hurt and miserable, and wanted to use him like a pawn in his grand chess game.

Harry took a shuddering breath. It was too much.

He would not manage sleep. He couldn't bring himself to face the nightmares that he knew would come. Instead, he stayed up until the crack of dawn alternating between scribbling out notes on a few ideas he had to protect himself and reading his mothers early diaries, desperate for a distraction and something to do.

His mother had started writing diaries a few years before Hogwarts as a primary school project. By the looks of it, she'd kept up the habit. At first, she wrote about her weekends and what her family got up to, but soon she seemed to be writing her thoughts and worries out as well; her worries for her good friend Sev, whose home life was worrying her; her amazement when Sev told her she was a witch; how they would go to Hogwarts together; and, her hurt when Petunia turned on her when she got her letter.

He mum and Sev had gone to Diagon alley together with Sev's mum, Ms Eileen. He wondered who Sev was, though? What happened to him and was he still around?
Harry woke up after precious little sleep and quickly pulled his mum's blanket over his head to muffle his groan when the full extent of the day before dawned on him, hitting him like a bludger to the gut. His chest tightened in that familiar painful twisting and pulling sensation of horror and betrayal.

He couldn't say he couldn't believe it. He could. He could believe that his father had been awful and that Dumbledore, his supposed, kind mentor, would do that to him. He hated it. He hated how unreliable the adults in his life were, and hated none of them where what he thought. He hated that it had happened, that he had been weak enough to be oblivious to it and had let it happen. He hated himself for not knowing or spotting it.

He hated too, that he had come to expect it. He bit down hard on his hand, as a focus, as he forced it all to the back, shoving it all into a tiny little box in the back of his mind. He didn't have time for that now.

His cheeks heated as he suddenly realised, with horror, how open and trusting he'd been with Bill. Shame welled in him at the weakness. He didn't know Bill or Charlie, and yet he trusted them. He'd been sickeningly honest with them. He'd let Bill see all the horrid weak and ugly bits of his life. He had confided in him. Gods Bill had seen his scars, all of them. And he couldn't take that back. He bit down harder on his hand, focusing on the dull pain of it.

Bill's magic and presence had been so warm and soothing, so reassuring. It had been like that with Charlie as well, when Harry had met them both, over the summer. They had a warm, reassuring presence about them; a steadiness. Harry had forgotten for a moment that he really only had himself to rely on. It was so nice being able to lean on another for a moment. How had he let himself slip so severely? Why was he trusting Bill?

Was it the magic? Or was he really so starved for affection that he had let himself trust the first friendly person? Isn't that what had happened with Ron?

And Bill's hugs. They'd been nice. For as long as Harry could remember, touch had meant pain. Hugs had been a totally unknown concept until Hermione had hugged near the end of first year. It
had been an alien, uncomfortably vulnerable, position to be in. He'd hated it. Hated how trapped he
had felt, how close she'd been, how his skin crawled at the touch; not even just the hug, any touch
seemed to make his skin crawl. Hagrid's hugs, though meant well, were often painful or knocked
him over. Mrs Weasley's hugs were smothering, he avoided them like the plague, and Hermione,
while well-meaning, her hugs were enthusiastic. Even now, he often felt trapped in them. Touch still
made his skin crawl and sometimes, he even felt like he needed a shower afterwards.

But Bill's... Bill's had been gentle, and kind, and he'd felt safe and warm... and it was a foreign
thing.

His touch still made his skin feel funny. It burned, but it felt good too. Harry didn't understand and
hated that weakness, hated the fact he'd like it. Hated the fact that he may just want another one. It
was like a hunger had woken inside him. He hated it, hated the weakness.

Harry let himself groan again, and wallow for another moment before he used that hate to shove his
mortification back to join the horror in a small box in the back of his mind out of the way. He sighed.

He was exhausted, but he had things to do. He had a life to take back.

Harry didn't say anything to Hermione when they met for their run. He just lead her on a long run
through the Forbidden Forest. Thankfully, she didn't question his exhaustion or his need to run
longer and harder than usual. In fact, she didn't say anything at all other than a brief good morning;
happy to let him have his silence until they had finished washing up in the changing rooms.

"We need to work on Occlumency," he said suddenly, thinking over how much he now knew. How
much he knew that Dumbledore did not want him knowing. He'd need to be able to keep that
knowledge safe now. Especially if it got back to Dumbledore that he was no longer holding back in
his classes. He shuddered.

"We'll work harder at it then," she said, looking at him, concerned, "we've been practising every
night."

He nodded but didn't say anything else. How much should he tell her? How would he tell her?
Shame and terrified anger burned again in his gut. How did you tell someone your headmaster, the
head of the school, was behind half of the horrid things in your life and wanted you dead? How did
you tell someone your father had been a disgusting, abusive bully and that your own bully was right
about everything they had ever said about said father.

"Are you okay, Harry?" She asked later as she walked with him up to the castle for breakfast. They
had stopped by Hagrid's hut to take a look at some salamanders with scale rot.

"Had some bad news last night. Several actually, I haven't quite gotten my head around it yet," he
said after thinking on it a moment.

"Is that what your rule-breaking you couldn't say anything about was for last night?" She asked, after
casting a quick silencing spell around them.

He nodded, "I learnt who my guardian is," he said hesitating.

"It was Dumbledore, wasn't it?" she asked, taking his hand gently.

He watched their joint hands with a detached curiosity.

"Yeah," he nodded, "he knew about the Dursley's. He helped keep me there. He put me under those
potions and spells that our diagnostic charms showed so that he could control me. I have a list. It's
"Harry that's... But he wouldn't... would he?" She stuttered sounding shell shocked.

"He did," he said bluntly, too tired to be angry about it. All he felt at that moment was a burning determination to never be in this position again.

"But that's... that's horrible," she stuttered, looking pale.

"He did stuff to my magic. It's bad. It going to be hard to undo. I need to brew those purging potions for a start. But I have a lead on where to find them now. He... he contributed to the Dursley’s. And so much more. He's done so much."

He didn't want to tell her about all the spells, the potions, his medical history, his bound magic, about the contracts; none of it. Especially the soul shard. It all seemed to get stuck in his throat.

"I need to get help undoing it. It turns out I'm rich. Stinking rich. I just can't access it, as he's put a limit on my trust. The bare minimum required to get my school books. I can't afford my own copy of the intro books, or extra potions ingredients, so if they're not in the student cupboard, I'll have to steal from Professor Snape. I really don't want to. He hates me enough as is, he loathes me. And he always knows when I'm lying. He must be a Legilimens. I'm not sure how I'll manage it yet."

"Harry that's..." Hermione sounded like her world had turned on its head.

"Yeah," he agreed, "but I have a few galleons left, and mum left me some things. I found them last night. Maybe between the leftover gold and not needing to get books for next year, I can afford to order the ingredients." He said pondering.

He could probably sell his own textbooks, to a second-hand store for a bit of gold, now he had his mum's, and his dress robes. Why would he need them here at Hogwarts when he had a uniform? That may be enough.

"Fred and George are going to help me sneak into the Restricted Section after curfew tonight." Harry said, changing the subject.

Hermione snorted, "count me in."

"Really?" Harry asked, slightly surprised.

"So many books, Harry, that we're not allowed to read!" She exclaimed as they reached the entrance hall.

"You eating with Ron?" He asked as they paused outside the doors to the entrance hall so he could cast a discrete preemptive shield.

She frowned at it, but nodded, "he's begged help with his homework. Honestly! Leaving it all to the last minute, when will he learn?" She huffed.

"Not any time soon," Harry said drolly

"Harry!" She scolded

Harry just forced a small smile, and said, "I'll see you later. Fred and George are going to help me with the disillusionment charm after dinner."

"I'll come up and help too," she promised, and Harry gave her hand a squeeze before going up to the
Room of Requirement; not seeing her beam at the voluntary contact.

Harry spent the morning up up there. He knew he had plenty to do. He should be working on how to deal with all the information Gringotts had given him; how to keep himself safe. He should be working out how he felt about his father and what that meant. He still didn't want to believe it. It was too horrible and disappointing. He felt so sick and let down at the thought of his father.

He also knew he should go down and talk to Professor Snape after breakfast, but to be honest, he was dreading it. The man hated him; loathed him; had since before Harry had even met him. Harry's lack of manners only confirmed Professor Snape's poor opinion of him. And Harry was dreading the meeting, sure that Professor Snape would rub it in his face. If Professor Snape had been one of his father's victims, Harry couldn't blame him for hating him; not when Harry looked the same.

Instead, Harry compromised. He wrote the professor a very formal, very polite apology. He'd send it later that day.

Winky brought him a hot breakfast of porridge with fresh strawberries and maple syrup. It was quite possibly one of the best breakfasts he had ever had. He spent the meal poring over 'Detection spells for those who are paranoid and in for it.' The book title may have been a bit out there, but it seemed to be full of various and obscure detection spells. He focused on looking at spells that detected magical tampering in food and drink.

He tested all of them, on his meal. Of course, Winky and Dobby had prepared it, so he didn't expect to find anything. But he needed to find one or two spells that would detect almost everything. The fewer spells he had to cast on his food regularly, the better. He also needed to get good enough at it that he could do them silently with a subtle flick of his wand.

Luckily, the spells would only light up for the caster so, as long as no-one noticed his wand movements, no-one would know he was testing his food and drink.

"Why is you testing yous breakfast Young Master Harry sir?" Winky squeaked when she came back with a steaming mug of hot chocolate for him. Harry glanced up from the book and flushed. She looked offended.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I'm just practising. I know you won't let anyone put anything in the food you make me, but I don't have the same trust in the other elves. Dumbledore has been spelling and potioning me, for years," he explained hurriedly, "I'm breaking them at Christmas, but I need to make sure I can keep myself free of them."

"Winky and Dobby be checking all your food before it goes to the great hall then," she promised, "we is not always being able to prepare all your meals sir. We is still bound to listen to Tippy." At his inquiring frown, she explained, "she be the Hogwarts Head Elfs, and we is working at Hogwarts too still sir, so we has to be listening to her, sir, until we cans be bonding to you fully sir. We is needing Hogwarts Magic sir. But we's can be keeping an eye on yours food and drinks's, sir."

"Thanks, Winky," he said relieved.

If he was going to spend his Christmas break breaking all the magic Dumbledore was using to control him, he was going to have to make sure he could stay that way. And it had to be subtle. The last thing he needed was the man's attention, not when Harry wasn't convinced he could protect himself if Dumbledore found out what he knew and tried to obliviate him, again. As a precaution, he wrote extensive notes and locked them in his trunk, a copy in his vault, and, a copy in his mum's bag.
as well as sending a set to Rodgrip.

_It wasn't paranoia if someone really was out to get you._

He spent the rest of the morning, alternating between going through his mother's textbooks, combing them for any spells or potions to protect him from dragon fire, and reading Charlie's dragon book. They provided a wealth of knowledge.

He had just over a week now before he would face a dragon. That would have to come first, before any significant study for fixing the tangled mess that was the web Dumbledore had woven around him. The tournament was something he could manage to work on today and would provide an excellent distraction. One he was feeling rather desperate for.

Charlie's book was a virtual treasure trove of knowledge and not just about dragons; though, he focused more on dragons, for the moment. The book first went over dragons in general; their different classes and then their different breeds. It went into great detail about each dragon species, it's diet, habitat, mating habits and life cycle. It talked about the traits of different dragons and their personalities. It explained what defences they had and what their weaknesses were, for example, the Chinese Fireball had poor eyesight, but its flame burnt hotter than most. The Horntail had a poor sense of smell and taste in comparison to its brilliant ears and had very sharp spikes on its tail, that were somehow poisonous. He shivered and made a mental note to look up the antidote.

Harry was surprised at how many known species of dragons there were. The Romanian reserve housed 19 different breeds. That considerably narrowed down what Harry would have to prepare for, they couldn't bring what they didn't have.

He took a lot of detailed notes on every dragon species that the sanctuary housed, what they ate and particularly the defences against them, their temperaments and how they changed in accordance to the season and their life cycle. Females were much more vicious than most males in general, especially around the laying and hatching season. Whereas males were more vicious than usual during the mating season.

He practised every defensive spell the book listed. They were difficult spells. The ones from Charlie were more challenging to maintain. Harry expected he didn't quite have a stable enough core for it yet, or would just need a lot more practice. The ones from the standard book of spells were easier but fickle and less effective.

It was actually rather fun practising the fire protection spells, Harry found, when he asked the room for help. He tested out some rudimentary fire protection runic arrays he'd sketched out to sew onto a pair of Dudley's off-casts, to help protect him from dragon fire. He didn't know if it would work yet, but the room had conjured some fire for him to practice on. It produced a jet of flame in the middle of the room that gradually increased in intensity as Harry practised the various spells against it.

After a while, it even started sending small blasts of fire at him to dodge and shield against, like it had on his broom. His clothes got singed, but did not burst into flame, he was pleased to note. They still needed work. He didn't think they'd hold up to dragon fire, but it was progressing. It was good fun and excellent practice. He also made some of that burn paste that he'd found a recipe for in Charlie's book. It was pretty good.

Harry found that his mother's method for brewing worked pretty well. There were still bits that confused him. Like why it sometimes said you needed 3 and sometimes you needed 4 shrivel figs, but it worked out okay. He'd had to sneak into the student store cupboard, but it was open to students, so he hadn't seen the problem with it, and had even managed to try out 3 simple fire protection potions from his books. None were specifically for dragon fire, but Harry figured he could
probably sneak out and test them when Charlie and the dragons got there. He'd have to write to Charlie tonight.

Harry was feeling quite pleased with himself by the time he went into the great hall for lunch. His good mood plummeted though when people caught sight of him and started making snide comments again.

He dodged a few stray hexs on his way to the Gryffindor table, noting that a few of them may have been from their foreign guests. He had not interacted with the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students. They seemed spend all their time in their carriage or ship except when they came into the castle for meals.

Harry sat down next to Hermione and focused on ignoring Ron, so he didn't start yelling at him. Just looking at him made him mad, about Skeeter, about the loyalty potions, about the marriage contract... It was better to ignore him than start hexing him.

"Hi," he said to Hermione, trying to come up with some neutral conversation that would not set Ron off.

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and proceeded to spend the rest of the meal, trying to force Harry and Ron to talk. Today, the table had quite possibly beaten all other meals in the level of ridiculousness. It had only deeming fit to let him eat a few limp salad leaves and a quarter of a grapefruit. That certainly had not helped his growing anger at Dumbledore, at the students, the teachers and at the whole world. The people at Hogwarts were starting to seem rather similar to the Dursley's.

Hermione, insisting that he and Ron make up, was certainly not helping his slowly building temper. Ron was not helping matters either. Harry was so mad at Ron, it was taking all his self-control to stop from snapping at either of them. Ron only seemed to have snide things to say to Harry and had even started going on about how Harry must now be cheating off Hermione in class, now he was getting decent marks, "because your no smarter than me, and I couldn't get any of those marks on my own."

In the end however, Harry snapped. "Ron, will you pull your head out of your ass! I didn't and don't cheat in class or on homework, and I didn't enter my name. I want nothing to do with this. But if I had planned, which I didn't, to enter, I would have told you. I know how much you wanted to enter. I didn't!

I get that you're jealous of me or whatever and want to stand out compared to your brothers, but I don't want any of this. I really just want everyone to sod off and leave me alone! I hate the attention and all special treatment, you know this! I miss you, Ron. Just admit I didn't do it! You know I didn't. Why'd you have to go blabbing to Skeeter?"

Ron just snorted, going red in the race the way he did before he really lost his temper and Hermione dragged them both out of the hall and into an empty classroom.

"You two," she yelled at them both, "are so stupid! Just make up already!"

"I'm trying too!" Harry bit back.

"You're doing a crap job of it!" She snapped, "just talk to him. You know he misses you!"

"I don't miss-" Ron cut in

Hermione rounded on him, "and you! Your acting like a spoilt two-year-old who didn't get an ice-cream. You know Harry better than this, and he misses you too. Just admit you were wrong and
apologise to each other why don't you!" She yelled.

"No," snapped Ron glaring at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes and bit back a lot of nasty comments; instead, he forced out "I'm sorry if I spoke poorly, but I really didn't do it. Why did you have to go sprout those lies to Skeeter? Why won't you believe me? I'm sorry I upset you, but I haven't done anything?"

Ron muttered something nasty under his breath and said, "because you're an attention-seeking hog, who always gets everything; the fame, the money, the popularity! I'm sick of it!"

"-what?" Harry cut in, he spent most of his time here getting hexed!

"You get to be champion! And you didn't even help me enter! I've never complained before because you're my friend, but I always get overlooked because of you! I never complained because you always took us on your adventures too, but you didn't this time! I'm not okay with that! I'm sick of always being pushed aside and ignored by everyone cause you get everything!" Ron continued yelling.

Hermione hastily threw up a silencing charm over the shut door.

"But I didn't do it, someone else did! They're trying to off me!" Harry spat back, getting really angry now, "I didn't ask for any of this! I can't control it!"

"Sure, everything's always about you!" Ron spat, pushing past Hermione to give Harry a hard shove. Shocked, Harry stumbled and fell over. He scrambled away out of Ron's reach, certain, for a moment, that Ron was going to kick him in the kidneys like Dudley did.

"I didn't-"

Ron just spat, "bull! Some friend you are. We. Are. Done," and stalked off down the corridor.

"Ron!" Harry called.

But Ron kept going, and Harry just stared from his position on the cold stone floor, his palms stinging, as he watched his first and best friend walk away from him. He didn't think they could ever come back from that...

How had it gone so wrong? How did he fix it? Did he even want to?

"You two," Hermione said, with a sniffle, "are so stupid! Why can't you just make up? I don't understand you two! I just want us to all be friends again!"

She let out another sob and ran off as well, leaving Harry feeling like he'd just had the stuffing knocked out of him.

He watched her go, staring unseeing at the door they both just left though, feeling like some of his last hope in humanity was splintering, a little, inside.

His last human friends, gone, and he wasn't sure they would come back.

And if they did? Would it be the same? How did he fix this? Did he want to? What had he done wrong this time? Because he always seemed to be screwing things up.

Harry closed his eyes tightly, a painful twisting sensation in his gut. He swallowed, with difficulty and tried not to assume he had just seen his last friend leave for good. Taking another shuddering
breath, he hastily donned the cloak and scurrying up to the Room of Requirement. He managed to control himself until he made it into the room.

The maelstrom of emotions that had been building all day, like a boiling cauldron, burst out of him. It came spewing up inside, like hot acid, scorching and painful as it went, tearing him up inside. It was a frightening hungry feeling, making him want to break and shatter things, to see them broken beyond repair like he was. He wanted to destroy things.

The pressure building inside him at the hurt, the aching betrayal, the biting fear, the burning disappointment, the destructive anger. It grew eating at him until he was yelling himself hoarse, screaming at the world as he threw more empty bottles, watching them shatter and break into a million pieces.

Like him.

He threw them, he kicked them, he smashed them against walls with his bare hands. He picked up empty or half full crates and bashed them against the wall over and over again until the wood splintered and broke sending timber and bits of glass everywhere.

Still, he raged.

Gods, how could his father be such an ass? And Sirius and Lupin too! He had been so sure his father and his father's friends were good people! To find out otherwise, to find out his father was almost as bad as his relatives was such a burning disappointment that it physically hurt.

He grabbed the nearest empty sherry bottle and threw it against the far wall with all his might. It hit the wall with a sharp crack and burst into smithereens, tiny shards of glass going everywhere, glinting menacingly in the light of the room. It filled him with a sick sense of satisfaction to see it break.

And Dumbledore. Kind, wise old Dumbledore who had rescued Harry from the Dursley’s, who Harry had looked up to, had set him up. He'd played him like a windup toy; to make a slave, a child soldier. To find out that he'd been duped and used, that his mentor actually just didn’t give a shit about him...

Harry hefted up a huge empty bottle of cooking sherry with both his arms and smashed it against the wall, grimacing in sick satisfaction at the noise of glass breaking, watching transfixed, as glinting shards rained down everywhere.

He let out a dry, broken sob.

And the Weasley’s...

Smash, another bottle gone.

His surrogate family. Had that all been a lie too?

Smash!

It hit the wall with a crack, falling half-broken to the floor, with the others.

Were they pawns too or were they in on it. Did Mrs Weasley know? Was she in on it?

Smash!
The tiny bottle hit the wall with a tinkle; only it's top cracking off.

And Ron.

His best friend, his first-ever friend. Ron didn’t believe him. And it was never going to go back to the way it was before.

He grabbed the bottle again and whacked it hard against the wall, watching glass splinter, and glitter as it fell.

What was the point of trying so hard to make friends if they were just going to leave? It had been so hard, so scary to reach out on the train, to open up to a kid he’d never met, that was bigger than him. But it had been so wonderful too... to have a friend.

He kicked sharply at a fallen bottle, and it hit the wall with a resounding, satisfying crack, exploding.

He’d been so relieved when Hermione had believed him. And now? Was that a lie too?

He grabbed another bottle and smashed it over and over again, against the wall; until all that was left was the thick neck of it, a mere stub in his bloody hand. He let it fall, his anger having run dry.

It hadn't left leaving the calm he expected. It left only an empty, painful weight inside this time. He looked around at the broken pieces of glass, of his life. Total destruction.

That was that.

From that point forth, he swore not to be weak again, to not be the Gryffindor that Dumbledore wanted. The hat had wanted him in Slytherin. He always had been a bit of a Slytherin growing up. Cunning was what had kept him alive at the Dursley's. He'd buried that to fit into Gryffindor under all Dumbledore's choking magic. Maybe it was time to embrace the inner snake, and stop pretending to be the lion he wasn't.

The lion Dumbledore wanted, had never existed. Harry James Potter had never existed. Not really. He'd only ever been Boy, Freak.

He flicked his wand, "evanesco," he muttered, giving the wand a broad sweep over all the tiny pieces, a spark of icy determination growing in his gut.
Having exhausted himself, he sank down to the now glass-free floor, and trailed his wand tip over all the cuts on his hands and arms, vanishing any glass, then healing the cuts. He was getting good at doing his own healing spells now.

He really wanted to curl up and sleep, but he had so much to do.

He pulled out his Mailbox and one of his mum's pens. After filling it up with purple ink, and having a bit of a play, he found that they really were wonderfully easy to write with and his handwriting, while not perfect was quite a bit better already.

He was interrupted when Dobby popped in with a more substantial lunch than what the Great Hall had deemed fit to give him. Harry blinked. He’d forgotten about lunch. It felt like ages ago now, when it really hadn't been that long ago.

Today, he was being treated to a pot roast by Winky. He took great delight in being able to have a full meal for a change and to be able to have dessert. Winky and Dobby had made him Treacle Tart. It was just as good as he had imagined it would be.

It left him feeling deliciously full. He couldn't remember ever being allowed to eat enough to feel full before. It was an odd feeling. It was kind of nice. He was warm and cosy in front of the fire, with a good meal in his stomach. He felt so content that he almost fell asleep.

But he’d meant to write to Charlie and Bill...

He wrote to Charlie first, not telling him, (nor Bill) what had happened with Ron, or with Skeeter, or how the school reacted like he wanted to. He wanted to confide in someone, wanted a friend. That warmth of connection. But he held himself back, he knew better now. Ron may come around eventually, as Bill and Charlie had said, but it was now a little too late as far as Harry was concerned. Ron had severed their friendship.

He didn't tell Charlie about the mess Gringotts had revealed, but he did tell him about Bill taking him there, and about how he couldn't get out of the tournament. He told Charlie about his Gringotts box and its ID number so Charlie could write back to him. He did remember to ask though, about Charlie's metamorph friend and if she could maybe recommend a book for him. He wrote as well
about how he was working with Hagrid in the forest. Did Charlie do that too?

Harry thought long and hard for a moment, wondering whether to reveal the weakness, the worry, before he relented and carefully asked if Charlie thought Harry was getting special treatment from Hagrid. He told Charlie excitedly about his warding project and how much fun it had been so far. And how Bill had agreed to help him, and about the earring (though he didn't mention the needles).

He made sure to keep the letter not too personal, to stick to safer topics of magic and babbled in his letter (as Charlie often did) about dragons, and how interesting 'the book' was and which spells and potions he was working on, and how he planned to maybe use a summoning charm on an egg if he had to steal one, or use his broom to outfly the dragon, if asking nicely didn't work. Did dragons speak Pasteltongue anyway? He sent Charlie his notes on which runes and maybe potions he was thinking of treating his clothes with to maybe fireproof them and did Charlie have any suggestions?

Harry then scribbled a quick note to Bill, thanking him for his help, and asking to borrow some books. He scribbled down what he'd done so far with the leather bands he had started making to protect himself from manipulative magic. Harry was beginning to think he'd need silver or something stronger than just leather to hold all the magic. Or maybe even split them into a few pieces instead of one. Perhaps a couple of earrings? He thought about maybe making a ring to detect poisons, magic and potions in food. And scribbled that down too, before getting distracted working on the project and making runic arrays to detect potions.

He then realised he hadn't finished the letter at all, just gone on a very long tangent of project notes. He snorted and spelled the pages into the notebook he was currently using for the project and finished his line of thinking.

He pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and wrote to Bill properly. Now that he didn't have to write a fake letter to hide the original, Harry found he could get straight to the point. He started off by explaining what happened with Ron and letting Bill know that he didn't have to keep talking to Harry if he didn't want to. Harry hoped Bill wouldn't take Ron's side, and cut him off too, but Harry supposed it was to be expected.

He made sure to thank Bill properly for all his help before he added a polite request to borrow Bill's copies of Master Scribe Ripquills books and if he had any good warding books that Harry could use. After hesitating a moment, Harry added in a copy of his notes for his projects in case Bill had any advice for him. He hoped Bill didn't think him an idiot. He didn't really know what he was doing, and Hogwarts didn't really teach this sort of thing or this sort of complex cross-discipline magic. But he thought it would work.

Putting the letter in the envelope and sliding it into the mailbox he tapped Bill's rune and watched with fascination as the box glowed briefly. He opened it excitedly and smiled when he saw it was gone.

After sending Charlie's letter, he contemplated writing to Sirius. But he was still so angry, about his father... Sirius should have told him when he said Harry was so like James.

Harry shivered. He didn't want to be like James. But if that was what Sirius had been like as a kid, was he really going to be able to give Harry good advice? Was he in on it? He seemed to tell Dumbledore a lot and was always sprouting Dumbledore said this, and Dumbledore said that...

Harry put his mailbox away with a sigh. He couldn't afford to tell Sirius all about it. A month ago he may have but now... he let out another sigh.
Harry startled, when Dobby popped in, "you is being late for you's Weazey's!" The little elf squeaked.

Harry frowned a minute then, "Oh! Fred and George!"

He bolted from the room. He was a bit late to meet Fred and George in the entrance hall, and sprinted down, hoping not to be hexed or yelled at.

But in true form, the twins just apologised for their, "git of a brother," though Harry dismissed it not wanting to talk about it. He wasn't surprised they knew about the fight, everyone seemed to know everything in Hogwarts.

They were, however, thrilled with the Room of Requirement. Hermione joined them without a word about earlier. Harry felt a detached sort of relief, upon seeing her, but when she smiled at him as if nothing had changed he started to get angry.

He pushed the feeling aside however, as best he could when Fred and George started showing them spells.

"The trick with the Disillusionment charm Harrykins-" Fred explained, "is to worry less about the wand movement and incantation-" George continued, "and more about intent." Fred finished.

"Of course," Harry groaned, "Magics about intent! You can fudge things a lot better if you wish hard enough. Incantations and wand movements are still important, but its about intent and visualising what you want to happen!" He exclaimed.

"yep," Fred agreed, "with this one you have to will your magic to cover you."
"It's less channelling it out of the wand and more using the wand to direct magic internally," George added.

It got easier after that. Harry still struggled with the disillusionment charm but managed to hold it over himself for short periods. The twins proceeded to show them all sorts of other useful and obscure spells, most of which were rather odd. That was what made the twins so challenging to duel against, Harry learnt later that night.

Fred and George worked together against Harry and Hermione. While Hermione had a wide range of spells in her arsenal, she was not quick at shielding or avoiding being hit with spells like Harry was. Fred and George's spell repertoire was just plain bizarre, quirky, silly and irritating all at once. A lot of their spells were prank spells and ordinary spells used in odd ways. It made them difficult and unpredictable opponents, and it was great fun.

Harry was relieved to be so good at dodging their spells but realised pretty quickly that he was not at all used to working in a team. While he was quick to dodge and shoot a spell back in retaliation, he often forgot he was meant to be working with Hermione. Often she would end up hit by the spell he had dodged, not being quick enough to move out of the way or shield it.

It also became clear to Harry pretty early on that his trust issues were affecting his ability to work as a team. He found that he just didn't trust anyone to actually shield him from an oncoming spell. He wasn't sure whether the recent argument with Hermione and Ron was effecting it, or if it was his distrust of people in general. He just couldn't seem to trust that she would have his back. It also didn't help that he as angry and hurt at how she'd treated him with the Ron debacle.

Either way he'd spent half his attention keeping an eye on Fred and George, and half on her. It was
frustrating, and it ended up more harry against Fred and George with Hermione also against Fred and George but neither of them really working together, but not actively trying to get the other.

It was a mess, and harry clearly needed practice, but during was fun, and Harry made a mental note to come back regularly to the room to practice duelling. Surely it could come up with something to help him.

"Let's do this again," Hermione said panting after their last round, while waving her wand to dry off her wet shoes that had been hit with a stray spell.

"Definitely," Fred and George moaned from where they had flopped down on the floor next to each other.

"Next Sunday after dinner again?" Harry asked as he de-spelled the asparagus's that had spouted out his ears at one of George's spells. It would be good practice, and if the stars were right and there was a war coming, he would need it.

"Brilliant old chap!" Fred said,

"You can practice dodging too. We'll get some bludgers," George suggested.

"We hear Charlie-bear's coming soon!" Fred said, making Harry warm at the hidden warning.

"You coming down to dinner?" George asked

"We know you've been avoiding the hall," Fred added

"Nah I'll eat something up here. I'm needed outside with Hagrid after tea," Harry said as he pulled out a legal tome that the room had provided.

"Well then old chap, we'll see you in the Common Room at midnight for our next adventure," they chorused.

He didn't even notice them leave, so desperate to keep doing things. To keep moving and making progress on dealing with the whole enormous mess that seemed to be his life.

The room had thankfully provided a list of publications and journalists in the UK. None of the names on the list were even remotely familiar to Harry, other than Skeeter's. He certainly didn't want to work with her. He found one that he thought sounded familiar, Lovegood... Mr Weasley had talked about them being at the world cup. A Lovegood ran the Quibbler. Harry thought Ginny may have been friends with a Luna Lovegood. He wondered if they were related and if she was also into journalism.

Seeing as it was the only name he knew, Harry pulled out one of the issues of the Quibbler and had a look at it. At first, he wasn't quite sure what to think of it. It seemed to be a complete load of rubbish. One article spoke about a creature Harry had never heard of called a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Another was about a fourth use for Bicorn horns. Harry was about to toss it across the room in irritation, despite indeed seeing Miss Lovegood's name on some of the articles, when a pair of oddly coloured spectacles fell out. He peered at them and cast a few detection charms.

While magical, they seemed harmless. He put them on and peered at the magazine through them. Other than being oddly yellow and pink in colour, the tinted lenses now seemed to show some completely different articles.

He squinted at it a moment, then turned the magazine upside down so he could actually read it. This
issue seemed to be from earlier in the year and seemed to revolve around the Quidditch World Cup. It covered the game and then moved on to the drama afterwards. It speculated over what really happened at the Cup. Was it really Death Eaters, and were they acting on their own, or on Lord Voldemort's orders? Was he really coming back? It then examined in great depth the Ministry's actions leading up to the Cup and since then. Were they covering it up and if so why? It even did an article on Winky's unfair dismissal, looking quite harshly at Crouch.

Harry took the glasses off, and sat back, feeling a little stunned. The magazine may look and sound stupid, but it was actually ingenious. It pulled the general public into a false sense of security so it could print the truth under the radar; the truth the Ministry may not want to be known. Harry grinned, laughter bubbling up in his throat.

Harry wrote a proposal letter to Miss Lovegood, explaining his issue and proposal. He then drew up a few drafts of a mutually beneficial contract and sent it to Rodgrip to go over.

He was hoping that she would agree to sign on as his contracted journalist. That way he could be safe from the likes of Skeeter as only Miss Lovegood would be able to write about him or publish his photographs or name, without paying for the right or getting prior permission. It wouldn't cover everything but it should stop most of Skeeters more obvious nastiness.

Thankfully Harry managed to make it to the edge of the forest as dusk was properly settling in. Firenze materialised from between the trees.

"Harry Potter," he said in his smooth voice.

"Well met Firenze," Harry said with a bow, hiding his nerves.

"I see you have been studying, young one," the centaur said.

"Yes, sir, wizarding etiquette. I don't know any centaur customs so I figured Wizarding ones may be better than nothing." Harry said nervously, "it was either that or goblin ones, and I'm a bit more familiar with wizard ones."

"Hmm," the centaur said, looking up at the rapidly darkening sky.

"Sir?" Harry asked, curiously.

"We do not use Sir, and Ma'am or Mr and Ms the way you humans do," Firenze said suddenly.

"Oh?" Harry asked curiously, trying not to take that as a sign that they had agreed to teach him.

"In our culture, children are called foals or younglings. Our peers are our sisters and brothers. We call our mother and father, dam and sire. Everyone else, that is older than you is called aunty or uncle. The herd, as is every living thing, in a way, as you said, is family. The oldest and wisest in the herd, are called grandam, and grandsire. Your teachers are your elders, called Elda."

"And what about your leader, do you have a leader? Of your herd?" Harry asked curiously, cutting himself off before he could call Firenze sir again.

"Of course. Magorian is our leader. He is mostly called by his name, we are family, but his title in your language would be Elda as well." Firenze explained.

"We do, of course, often mostly use these terms in our own language. We may teach you someday," Firenze continued, still looking at the sky, "Vega has been seen in the sky for some time now, Harry Potter. We shall not set ourselves against the heavens. We are impartial. Unbiased."
Harry shivered slightly remembering their last conversation about Mars and Vega.

"We will teach you the ways of the forest. But do not forget our positions on the heavens. Do not forget that Harry Potter. Nor will we enter the servitude of Humans."

Harry nodded earnestly and said, "Yes, Firenze. What can I do for you in return, Elda?"

Firenze looked at him for a long moment, and Harry wondered if he had done something wrong, or miss interpreted what Firenze had told him. His heart sank.

But Firenze just said, "Contribute. You will learn our ways. You will help Hagrid pass on to others how to care for the forest. Too long have your kind butchered the land. For now, you will learn and grow. One day, you may be able to champion the rights of those your kind tramples all over, and protect our forest and the land.

"I, I'm no-one, Elda, I'm just Harry. I'm not anyone special. I don't think anyone will listen to me, but I will try." Harry stuttered.

"Good," said Firenze, leading Harry deeper into the trees.

Firenze, like Hagrid, pointed out the names and properties of things as they passed. He showed Harry how to harvest them correctly, making sure not to hurt the plant or whatever they were gathering, making sure not to prevent it from growing in the future.

"Never take the roots of a plant if you just need the leaves. If you are harvesting roots, do not take them all, or it will not grow back, and it will die, meaning there will not be any to harvest next year," the centaur explained.

There were mushrooms Harry hadn't known were edible, some only for centaurs, but some Harry could eat too. He harvested tree bark for tea and herbs for divination, like sage and mallow-sweet.

Firenze pointed out small tracks and trails in the forest around them, signs of things that had passed through. Signs that Harry would not have noticed or been able to read by himself. Firenze was a wealth of knowledge and his mild manner, despite the size and power of his body, seemed to set Harry at ease in a way he wasn't, as a general rule, when around people.

It was brilliant.

"One of the first things you must know about the forest, Harry Potter," Firenze said when they got deeper into the trees, "is that you must tell the truth. Be honest. Do not manipulate. That is not the way of the forest. It always comes out in the end."

Harry nodded and avoided tripping on a tree root as he followed Firenze. Despite how dark it was now, Harry found his eyes slowly adjusting to the dim light. The trees were so close together that they had to walk single file, though Firenze seemed to know exactly where they were going and seemed to be following some path Harry wasn't yet aware of. Harry suspected that centaur vision, or maybe just his night vision was superior to his.

"The Second thing," Firenze continued, "is balance. Everything has a balance and a price. Take a plant, give something in return; be it water or fertiliser at least or blood or magic at best. Pay your dues. Pay your respects. Do not take without asking, earning, or giving in return," He explained, looking back at Harry.

"Yes Elda," Harry said solemnly, thinking it over. It made sense.
"Third is respect." He continued on, "Animals, plants, the people, the beings, the land, the magic. Respect."

"Of course, but Elda? People say it's not sentient, magic. I know it is, but they argue against it." Harry puzzled.

Firenze sighed softly, "magic is a living thing, as is the land. Magic is the land. It is is the energy that makes up the world and is in every living thing. It is a wondrous thing, youngling. It deserves respect. Take divination for example," he said, "many have no gift for it, nor do they understand it. Hence, they scorn it. That is disrespectful to the magic and the art. That makes it even less likely to hear you, and help you seek out answers. Divination is not mere fortune-telling. It is asking the universe, magic, for guidance. Disrespect it, and it is even less likely to hear you." He explained, looking back at Harry, with his piercing blue eyes.

Oh, Harry thought, of course. Something clicked into place in his mind. It made so much sense. Harry’s heart sank, suddenly thinking of the divination homework, he used to make up with Ron. What was the point of trying when she just wanted to hear about his death?

"Elda?" He said cautiously, "I've messed up," he said and with a slight hesitation and shame proceeded to tell Firenze about it.

Firenze frowned, "you may not have a gift for it, but you should still try your best young one. She may have seen, I do not know. But, she too is disrespecting magic, wasting time on dramatic ego-stroking human nonsense that you humans call fortune-telling. Do not get caught up in it, or let the limitations of your kind blind you, youngling." He said, looking piercingly at Harry. Harry looked at the ground, shame burning in his cheeks.

"Sorry, Elda. I'll do better." Harry murmured.

Firenze just nodded and pointed out another type of fungus growing off the side of a big old elm tree.

"If you are to dwell in the forest, you need a defence and a means of hunting. That is the bow. Knives will come later when we make the arrowheads. We shall have to make you smaller knives, to fit your hands." Firenze said, as Harry was harvesting some of the fungi, and stowing it in one of the many pockets of his bag, after asking permission and offering it payment.

"When you are good at your bow, you will hunt with us, and work to feed our herd. You will contribute. In the meantime, we will teach you herbs and plants that are useful in our divination and you will gather those with us." He continued when they had stopped in front of a yew tree.

Firenze pointed out good trees for bow making and what you wanted to look for. "You want a long, straight limb. You don't want it too thin, or it will break before you finish it. It needs to be a strong, but flexible wood, such as Yew, Hickory, Oak, Maple or Plum," he explained to Harry before they stopped in front of a suitable tree branch that Harry had pointed out.

"Good, you need to make an offering to the Bowtruckle, first," he said.

Harry, since being introduced by Hagrid, had started taking some woodlice with him whenever he went into the forest. Hagrid had a barrel of them.

Once the sleepy Bowtruckle had been suitably pleased, and Harry had flat out explained to it what they wanted, Firenze had demonstrated how to ask the tree itself for permission to take one of its limbs.
"Press a hand to the trunk, and press a little magic in. You will feel it if it agrees," Firenze explained to Harry as if that made perfect sense, "after cutting the limb, as cleanly and painlessly as you can, youngling, you then give it payment."

Harry pressed a hand to the tree and pressed what he hoped was some of his magic into the tree. At first, he felt nothing and pressed his cheek to the trunk, ignoring the bowtruckle that had crawled into his head for a nap.

Slowly, he became aware of the tree's magic and slow acquiescence. Everything about trees was slow and steady. Harry took out his wand, and with a wordless cutting spell, cleanly cut the limb they were after, whispering thanks and apologies as he did. Harry then cut his palm with his knife and pressed it to the wound of the tree. Harry pressed some magic into the tree as an afterthought and stumbled out the ritual words of thanks Firenze had taught him.

He knew what they meant in theory, but he didn't really understand them or what language they were. Just that it was thanks to the trees sacrifice and his wish for its swift healing.

They stripped the outer bark, as Firenze explained the process to Harry.

"You humans used to use much longer bows," Firenze explained, "you used longbows as tall as a man; war bows. Here in the trees, they are smaller. They hold the same power. We can strengthen and coax some extra flex into the wood with magic as we make it. This allows the bow to be smaller, better for confined spaces like the deep forest, without sacrificing anything. You, of course, are smaller than we are, so you will again, need a smaller bow to fit your size." Firenze said without a hint of the usual judgment Harry was so used to receiving. He could hear his cousins crows of 'baby,' and 'girl' ringing in his ears.

Firenze showed him how to sand and shape the wood, gently bring Harry back to the present. Pressing magic into it slowly and carefully, they dried the fresh wood, adding strength and flex to it, seasoning it as they worked it with magic and hands to shape it.

"Often wood needs to season and dry before it is made into a bow if you expect it to last, but this way, if you treat it right, you do not need to take as much time," Firenze explained.

They bent the bow against another tree branch, testing the bend and shape, sanding and shaped it more to create an even, flexible draw as they bent it.

"It shall need to be oiled now, the wood," Firenze explained as they walked back to the edge of the forest, "we have dried it with magic, imbued it with magic, to stop it cracking amongst other things. It will need to be oiled regularly while the magic sets. It is also good practice. Care for your bow, and it shall care for you."

"You will ask your peers to stay out our Forest, Harry Potter," Firenze said when they were by Hagrid's hut. "You and Hagrid are fine, but the others are trespassing, and do not belong. Nor is it safe."

"I'll do my best, sir," Harry said, vowing to have a word to Fred and George about staying out of the forest, "is it okay for me to run in here in the mornings, with Hermione?"

Firenze nodded slowly and reached out a hand for Harry's bag, containing all they had collected.

Harry passed it over and said, "may I tell her some, about what you have taught me? So she knows how to be respectful of the forest too?"

Firenze looked at him for a long time and then said, "as you wish Harry Potter."
Harry wondered if it was a test, and vowed then and there to always listen to everything Firenze taught him and try his best to think about it.

Firenze took most of the mushrooms and herbs from his bag, but left Harry a few that were good for tea and some Harry recognised from potions, "return on your morning, youngling and we shall finish the bow, and start some arrows," he disappeared back into the trees not waiting for a response.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:
- so in the course of harry's melt down in the previous chapter, and smashing glass he had cut his hands, so not deliberate self harm, but its still self harm. He fixes that up in this chapter.

So when Harry talks about trees, "Slowly, he became aware of the tree's magic and slow acquiescence. Everything about trees was slow and steady"
That is a very subtle reference to a book called, "The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries From a Secret World by Peter Wohlleben."

It's a real book, (brilliant) that basically talks about research done into how trees communicate with each other and support each other, they form families in the big old growth forests. I'll be bringing it up again later, and working with that concept a little more.

Please don't jump to conclusions in regards to Harry and Hermione from the fight from the previous chapter, it will be looked at quite heavily next chapter, where they figure out where they stand and what they want. don't think he's just ignoring it or letting it go. He isn't, I just ran out of time in this chapter to put that in too.

also in case it has not been made clear, Harry and Hermione will not be an item, they do not like each other like that.
Harry carefully stowed his new bow in his bag before he reached the castle, not really wanting to explain it just yet. Fred, George and Hermione were waiting in the common room for him when he opened the portrait hole.

"You been waiting long?" He murmured, not wanting his voice to travel upstairs and wake anyone.

"Nah," Fred said,

"Your right mate," George finished

"Running Harry?" Hermione asked

"No, had a meeting with Firenze in the forest," Harry said, before turning to the twins, "speaking of which; the Centaurs, have requested that you two, and everyone really, stay out of the forest. It's fine if you ask them first, and have permission, or are with Hagrid. But it's actually their home, and it's kinda, basically trespassing. If you need something from it, let me know. I'll see what I can do, or get permission for you but I'd appreciate it if you stayed out and passed the message along to the rest of the students. I'm trying to foster a better relationship with them now, while we can. It's important."

Fred and George looked at him for a long while, before exchanging a look and some sort of silent twins speak, before nodding.

"All right Harrykins," Fred said

"But only because you asked so nice," George finished.

Between the map and the cloak, the four of them managed to sneak into the library. It was difficult, they had to move more slowly with the four of them under the cloak. Especially as Fred and George, while rather stocky, were both taller than Hermione, and everyone was taller than Harry. But they disillusioned and silenced their feet and managed to avoid everyone.

By the time they got to the deserted library; however, Harry was desperate to get out from between the twins and Hermione. Feeling trapped, and breathing harshly, he barely spared a glance to check that the library was deserted before he threw the cloak off and staggered away from them. It took him a moment to catch his breath and steady his shaking knees. Even if he did know them, and like them, being touched so much, for so long, left him feeling like he was burning like he needed to run.

Harry flinched away from Hermione when she put a concerned hand on his shoulder. She just smiled sadly at him, and he looked away, ashamed, irritation burning in his gut.

"I'm fine," he murmured flatly, as they followed Fred and George deeper into the library, Harry wrapping the cloak comfortingly around his shoulders.

It was odd seeing it so dark and still. Fred and George seemed to be old hands at sneaking in though. They pulled brooms out of their pockets and hovered near the top of the shelves of encyclopaedias that were blocking off the restricted section. Fred and George were on one broom and a reluctant Hermione sitting with Harry on the other.

"It's easier to bend the wards to let you through here, instead of by the main entrance. They're not as strong up here." Fred explained as he and George showed Harry how to, not dismantle the wards, but move them aside enough that they could slip past them.
"It got a caterwauling charm on it, but it's linked to somewhere else in the castle, it won't go off here. So you have to lift that first," George explained, showing them.

"while the other person lifts the barrier ward. It's not that hard with two people, but it only lasts a moment before it slips back into place, so you have to be quick," Fred said.

They quickly slipped through the gap in the magic. Harry couldn't see it, but he could feel it. It tingled in a prickly sort of way as if warning him out. It was unnatural quiet in the restricted section, somehow even more so than the main library.

"What book are you looking for?" George asked,

"Moste Pontente Potions," Harry said

"What? Making Polyjuice again?" Fred asked, curiously.

"How'd you know about that?" Hermione asked

"Ron's a blabbermouth," Fred said

"And you guys were not that subtle when you were 12" George finished.

Harry laughed quietly, "no, that's not it," he said, casting a quick adapted point-me charm to find the book he was after. He followed his wand along the stacks, curiously glancing at the book titles as he went. Upon finding the book he wanted, he ran his wand along it checking for wards. It was surprisingly ward free, but he stowed it in his bag instead of risking it screaming when he opened it like last time.

It was a good idea, though, having Polyjuice on hand, he thought. It might come in handy for hiding over the holidays if Dumbledore was reluctant to let Harry out of the castle. He'd have to see what ingredients he could get, or forage for.

"Ooh look at all these," Hermione gushed in a whisper, she had a good point, he may as well have a good poke around.

He ended up leaving with a few other useful books on various things to help with his side projects, amongst other things.

The trip back was just as painstaking and uncomfortable for Harry. They almost ran into Mrs Noris on the way back, and it was only the quick scent masking charm he threw up when she started sniffing at them, that kept them from detection. That, and a sprinkling of catnip on the floor, from George, that gave her something better to sniff at. By the time he got to the common room, he felt as if his skin was crawling and he was desperate for a hot shower and to escape from sight.

Later that night, he was in bed reading the library books. Despite the dragons, he can't resist looking at the books he's liberated. He was currently alternating between scribbling down wards and copying out useful potions into a notebook.

He was startled when he felt the wards on his bed ping, almost as if someone was magically knocking on them.

"Nox," he whispered to douse the light, flinging the blanket over his books and notes before shifting the curtains enough to see out, his wand up defensively...

It was only Hermione. Standing there in her pyjamas with a blanket around her shoulders. She
looked tired, he realised, but why was she there? What did she want with him? He thought she was
done with him, sure she still came to the library and to study with him, Fred and George, but he
thought she was done.

"Hermione?" He asked. "What do you want?"

She flinched slightly at Harry's cool tone, "I... Can we talk? I couldn't sleep, and I figured you'd
probably be awake too" she asked in a small voice.

Relief washed thought him at that, she wasn't angry, she wasn't leaving. He'd prepared for it,
mentally, but he was very pleasing she wasn't about to wash her hands of him. But then he narrowed
his eyes at her, analysing for a moment, she'd treated him badly, and that had hurt, she'd been
unreasonable.

But he huffed irritably, and shuffled over anyway, lighting his wand again and lifting the covers so
she could crawl in like they'd used to do. When she was seated next to him, he flipped the covers
back over their legs to keep them both warm but made sure there was plenty of space between them,
so he wasn't touching her.

They hadn't done this in ages, he suddenly realised, he was partially too relieved to have her back,
but he was also angry with her.

"So it kept you up too?" She asked, looking at his books, as she pulled her blanket tighter around her
shoulders.

He didn't have to ask what 'it' was, "yes," he said shortly

"This is new," she said, stroking a purple square gently.

"It's my mums," he said, not elaborating, "what do you want? I thought you were done with me?"
He said, moving away from her slightly and turning to look at her.

"What? No! I-"

"You left. You walked out on me." Harry said hollowly, "I thought you were done with me, that you
were leaving too."

"What! No! I-" she clapped a hand over her mouth, horrified.

"I'm so sorry," she said pulling her knees to her chest, and taking one of his hands "i-"

He was acutely aware of her fidgeting absently with his fingers as she searched for the right words,
and he snatched his hand back. He was too angry and hurt to even want to put up with being
touched, just the thought of it at the moment was making his skin crawl, and he had to fight the urge
to wipe his hand, even though he knew there was nothing wrong with it, it was all in his head.

"I'm sorry for making you feel like that, that's not what I meant, I just lost my temper. I'm sorry,
Harry, for yelling and being so unreasonable. I came here because I owe you an apology."

"I didn't see things clearly. I talked to Ginny about it, actually," she continued, frowning when harry
grimaced, "she's a good friend. She helped me see it from your side. I was scared that if our trio
broke up, I'd lose everything. But she helped me see clearly. I didn't realise how irrational and
unreasonable I was," She snorted, "I'm normally the logical one, pointing this stuff out."

Harry sighed, "This is the first time Ron, and I have argued. You begged me to try and make it
better, I tried, and he was a prat. He pushed me to the ground and walked out on me, saying we were done. Then you walked out too."

"I know, I'm really sorry, I was scared and mad, and being irrational. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to abandon you, I just wanted to cool off, so I didn't take my temper out on you."

He took a breath and considered his words carefully if she wanted to makeup, she needed to know, he needed to know that he wasn't a toy to be played with, he was a person. "I stuck by you both in third year, when you were at each other's throats. I didn't take sides. I tried to be supportive of you both. And now we're fighting, and you walk out on me. I needed you, and you weren't there." Harry said, feeling hollow, empty and angry but too tired to express it or feel it properly anymore.

"I didn't have any friends before here. Before Hogwarts," Hermione said, "I was raised by nanny's when mum and dad were at work all the time, and constantly around adults the rest of the time. By the time I got to school I was too odd for the other kids, they didn't like me, and I don't know what to do with people my own age, they seemed pretty stupid honestly, young and frivolous. It was a relief that you seemed to talk like an adult too, and seemed to make more sense than most of the morons our age."

Harry snorted, and she smiled briefly and continued, "But even here I didn't have any friends until you two rescued me from the troll. Then I had you two, it was so nice, having friends. I didn't want that to change."

She started again, "I know Ron, and I fight a lot, but when our positions had swapped, and I was the one trying to hold us together. I was worried we'd fall apart. I thought if you two could make up, we'd be okay. I don't want us to end." She said, "I didn't want to lose my friends, sometimes it feels like I'd just gotten them. I was scared you two fighting would result in me being alone again."

When he didn't say anything, she continued, "The more I think about it, the more I can see it from your point of view. I never thought he'd take it this far. I thought if you two just apologised to each other, you'd forget about it and put it behind you. But you tried, and he still turned on you. So I'm sorry Harry, for not seeing it clearly, for being so insistent."

"You were so convinced you were right," Harry said carefully, "you acted as if I had to do what you said. It was the same in history. Just because you disagree with me, doesn't mean I'm wrong. It doesn't mean you get to dictate how I act. You can ask, you can explain your point of view, I welcome it. But please don't try and force me or insist I have to do things your way. We're different people."

She looked hurt for a long moment, then took a breath, "do I really do that? I'm not really bossy, am I?" She asked.

He hesitated, and she said, "tell me."

After a moment, "you can be."

Her shoulders slumped, and she looked miserable, "you're just doing it wrong some times!" She said, sounding frustrated. Don't you see, how will you learn history if you don't pay attention! How will you save friendships if you don't make an effort! I thought we could fix it, that would make it work. I was wrong, I'm sorry." She said, trying to explain.

"I don't lean the same way you do," Harry said, deriding to tackle history first, "What works for you won't always work for me. I know it's important, but it's okay to go about it a different way." He explained, "he puts me to sleep, I can't stop that without blocking out the sound of his voice, instead,
I study the syllabus, so I still learn what's necessary for OWLs."

"oh..." She said deflating a bit, "can I look at it?" She asked hesitantly.

"Yeah sure, he sighed, "as to Ron, I was so hurt I didn't know whether I wanted to save it, he treated me badly and wasn't there for me when I needed him. That's not friendship. But you insisted, so I did try. But I couldn't do all the work. As we discussed before, you weren't right in this case."

"I know, I'm sorry Harry, I just get so caught up sometimes. I guess I'm used to being the smartest, and people not realising things and being stupid. I'm used to being right all the time."

"You're not always the only one with an opinion and your right a lot, but not all the time. That's okay. But your treatment hurt," he said softly, "don't do it again. I didn't do anything wrong, I was civil, I kept my temper as much as I could, I tried to apologise and do what you said, despite deserving better and deserving an apology."

"I know," she said softly.

"I deserve better than that, I let everyone walk all over me before, but not anymore."

She nodded and said, "I think I understand now, Harry, why you're less inclined to forgive him. He's young and stupid, but he's been making choices that are hard to forgive. I shouldn't have pushed you two so much to make up. It wasn't fair and Ron... I didn't expect him to act like that. I don't think I want us all back together any more either."

Harry sighed and said steadily, "I'll be the first to admit I make mistakes, and I can be harsh on people, I rarely forgive. But I can't forgive him that, and I don't know if I want to. He's not who I thought he was."

"Yeah, I can see that now,"

They sat in silence for a moment, before she yawned and said, "I'm really sorry, that it all fell apart so quickly."

When he nodded, she asked hesitantly, "Forgive me?"

He sighed, he was torn really "I'm still mad, it hurt. I thought you'd gone for good."

"I just meant to leave to lose my shit somewhere else. So I didn't take it out on you. I just meant to leave to cool down. I was so mad at you both." She said before continuing. "I'll say something next time I storm off to cool down, okay? So you don't think I'm abandoning you."

"Yeah, okay." He said.

"So what now?" she said hesitantly, "are we okay? Are we good? You're my best friend, I don't want to have messed that up, please."

He looked at her for a long moment, he'd thought he'd lost his last friend, had been prepared to cope with it. That had hurt. Her treatment had hurt. But he didn't want to lose her, so things would have to be okay, wouldn't they? She seemed to be willing to try and mend fences. Did he give her another chance, he didn't normally as a general rule... but, she was one of his first friends. It took two people to make something work...

"Yeah," he said, patting her doona covered knee softly with their joint hand, "yeah, we're good."
"Really?" She said, beaming when he nodded.

"Now tell me about your mums blanket," she asked eagerly, knowing how much it would mean to her friend, "where did you find it?"

"Gringotts, I... That's what I was doing. I snuck out and went to Gringotts to find out about the contract and the spells," He said slowly.

"Oh, and it was bad news?"

"Yeah, can't get out of it, Dumbledore agreed to it, has his fingers in everything. He's controlling my trust vault too so I can't buy the books or anything except the essentials. On top of that, my magic is so messed up I'll need to wait till the holidays to clean it up," he said in a detached voice, too tired emotionally to feel anything at all.

"How?" She asked horrified.

"I'll go to Gringotts at Christmas. I'm not staying at school this year. I'll get it removed then. It's going to take a while. That's what I need the potions book for," he said, flipping through Moste Potente Potions, to show her, "We should sneak you out too, get you tested."

"You think it's a good idea?" She asked, chewing on her lip.

"Yeah, we could organise it over the holidays." Harry said, "I'll ask Bill or Rodgrip about if we'd need an appointment or who would do it. I have an account manager who did it all, but I'll ask her how we do it for you."

"We're not going to be able to untangle it all by ourselves are we?" she said before nodding, "after the first task, then.

He nodded, "hopefully, it won't be as complex to undo for you."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. It was never meant to be like this," she said quietly, "the wizarding world. It was meant to be so wonderful... Magical."

"I know, but, we're working on it," he said, "I found mum's bag in my trust vault. That's where the blanket's from. She had prepared this for my first year, just in case."

And he told her then, hesitantly at first, about the books, the bag, and slowly, in a detached voice, about his father.

"Oh Harry," she said, reaching as if to take his hand, before she stopped herself, remembering it often made him jumpy.

He paused for a moment, then slowly, reached out and took her hand again. Her hand was warm and dry on his own. It's lightweight reassuring despite the fact the contact made his skin tingle and felt too tight somehow. He looked up at her hesitantly, and she beamed at him. She squeezed his hand lightly, and he decided it wasn't so bad.

*  

The following morning after Dobby popped in with a hot cup of one of Winky's smoothies (apple and cranberry this time), and his spoon of potions, Harry was feeling slightly more human. Dressing quickly, he re-warded his bed and grabbed his bag. He was about to don the cloak to head down to the forest when he paused, looking at his trunk speculatively. After thinking a moment, he pulled out
one of the books on warding that he'd nicked from the restricted section and after silencing the book, used it to help him ward his trunk and bedside table to the high heavens.

He thought someone may have been poking around when he had been out yesterday. He was sick of people nosing around his business. It probably wouldn't keep any of the older years out, but it should keep is dorm mates out, and it was the best he could do at the moment.

Hermione was waiting in the common room for him. They crept out for a quick run. Harry told her excitedly about his conversation with Firenze, having forgotten the night before.

They were walking up to changing rooms when Hermione said, "I've been thinking about what you said last night."

"Oh?" Harry asked, feeling a little apprehensive, "about what you said about my opinion, not being the only one and different people learning differently and me being bossy" She said.

"I know they learn differently and have different opinions. But sometimes people are stupid, they made stupid mistakes that will hurt them in the long run because they can't see everything. It's irritating. How can I not say something? and tell them they're doing it wrong!" She asked, clearly frustrated and having thought about it at length.

Harry sighed as they stepped in the changing rooms and into different shower cubicles.

"I agree. People can be really stupid. They make poor decisions, can't seem to see how their choices affect them and others, and everyone here seems to be really bloody young. They are ruled by their hormones and cannot seem to make any sensible discussions. But sometimes people have to learn on their own. You'll get on a lot better with others if you wait for them to ask you for help or advice, instead of pushing it on them. Sometimes people don't want to be told how to do things. Sometimes the people get emotional you occasionally have to let them figure it out for themselves" He said carefully.

"Oh?" She asked.

"Like first year, with the hover charm. Ron wasn't open to constructive criticism, and you came across a bit strong as if you thought him stupid. That made him defensive, so he got angry and was mean to you. Some people are just stupid, but acting as if they are, just gets them angry. Just be a bit more patient with stupid people. It's not they're fault they're stupid." He said bluntly, "they'll like you more for it. I'm not saying hide your smarts, or not to be yourself. Just don't throw your intelligence in peoples face, it's intimidating. We know you're smart, you don't need to set out to prove it every day."

She frowned thinking about it for a long moment, "do you really think I try and dictate your actions?"

"I think it's just that you come on a bit strong, it's just sometimes you can be very insistent when I don't agree."

"I didn't realise."

He shrugged "It's fine, I shouldn't have said something earlier."

She nodded, looking a little miserable, but determined, "do you think that's why Lavender and Parvati don't like me?" She asked, "I wouldn't mind actually getting on with my dorm mates, but they don't like me, and I'm not sure why! They're just so girly and frivolous! who cares what the latest hair care product is when there is a test at the end of the week!"
Harry laughed, turning the shower off and getting dressed "yes, they're very silly, vastly different from your studiousness and seriousness. It's just different. That's okay."

"It seems stupid though," She said

"Yep, I think so too. But they obviously don't. If you look down on them obviously for something you don't like or prove of, they're not going to like that. they'll think you think them stupid and people don't like people who think them stupid."

"I guess they're just different..." she said after a while, "like a different skill set, mum does dental surgery and dad does orthodontics. their not stupid for not having the others skill set, just different, they were interested in different fields" she said as they left the change rooms.

At that point Hermione left him and crept back to the castle, armed with a disillusionment charm and the map. Harry went back into the forest, to accompany Hagrid on his morning rounds.

Unfortunately, the morning seemed to be the highlight of the day, and the approaching date of the first task seemed to be creeping up on him. He skipped the great hall for breakfast and went straight to herbology, sitting with Neville and discussing culture.

Herbology was okay. Hermione worked tentatively with Lavender and Parvati, trying to med fences little. And Neville was happy to partner with him, and Harry had improved since he'd read the primer. He liked gardening, despite his relatives making him do it in the sun all summer; he did like plants. Professor Sprout seemed to be keen to use his and Neville's plant as an example an awful lot though. While Neville quietly glowed with pride, Harry had to stop himself from shrinking back and quaking under the attention. It made his heart beat a little faster, and his skin crawl.

But Harry did his best, and kept his head down; working hard. Hoping against hope that his sharp improvement since Halloween would not get back to Dumbledore. The last thing he needed was the old man's attention, not when Harry was running out of time before the first task and wasn't convinced he could protect himself if Dumbledore found out what he knew and tried to obliviate him again.

As a precaution, he wrote extensive notes at the break between classes and locked them in his trunk, a copy in his vault, a copy in his mum's bag as well as sending a set to Rodgrip. It was all he could do at the moment when he had to focus on the upcoming task.

Harry spoke to Miss Lovegood at lunch. Or rather he was in the kitchens eating lunch with Hermione, and she joined them, seemingly out of nowhere, seeming to know exactly what he wanted.

"Well Met, Harry Potter, I'd be happy to be your journalist, but Daddy doesn't like me signing contracts without showing an adult first. I'll get it back to you tomorrow though," she said before she had even sat down, "call me Luna."

He blinked at her, and it suddenly occurred to him, that maybe she wasn't as loopy as the roomer-mill implied.

"Harry," he said, "Well Met Luna," he said, holding out a hand formally, "this is Ms Hermione Granger."

Luna shook it with a dreamy smile and sat down with them as Hermione said, "Hello, Luna, nice to meet you."

"It's good that you've lost some of the Bumble-zingers that were stalking you, Harry. Dobby and
Winky seem to be keeping them away quite nicely." She said, looking just past his right ear.

Harry frowned, wondering what a Bumble-zingers was and panicking slightly over how she could possibly know about Dobby and Winkey. Then he remembered what professor Trelawney has said about different sorts of divination beliefs. Maybe that's how Luna knew?

"What are Bumble-zingers?" Hermione asked sceptically, "I've never heard of them before."

"Not everyone can see them," she said lightly, "their float around people's head."

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again with a frown.

"I hadn't told anyone," Harry cut in nervously, "how do you k-"

"The blubbering humdingers tell me," she said in a dreamy voice. Harry thought her magic felt slightly defensive and elbowed Hermione, who seemed to be about to question Luna on them again. He wondered if Luna used the creatures no one seemed to believe and the visage of madness to protect herself, the way he used cool detachment.

Harry nodded in understanding.

Not quite knowing what to say next, he pulled out the contract, "I'm glad they told you about the contract so that you could find me. I'd really appreciate your help. I need someone I know, and Skeeter seems intent on eating me alive" he explained, "as your the only journalist I've actually heard of, I figured maybe we could start working together."

Luna smiled then, brightly, "yes, it's much better without all the Bumble-zingers around you." She said, and he wondered if she was somehow referring to all of Dumbledore's manipulation.

The three of them chatted over the rest of lunch, and despite Hermione's scepticism over Luna's creatures, she was kind about it. Luna seemed happy to talk about all her preachers and answer all of Hermione's questions. Harry left to divination leaving behind a Bemused and curious Hermione who was still not too sure what to make of the dreamy girl's creatures.

Divination after lunch gave him the most food for thought though, and a welcome distraction from the dragons. With Firenze's warning in mind, Harry had painstakingly redone his star chart from violent made up deaths and redid it carefully cross-referencing his own divination book, and surprisingly, his fathers. While his father's book was obviously dog eared and mostly just used to scribble noughts and crosses in the margins, it was a remarkably useful text.

When he handed it in, he knew it would probably get a troll, for not giving the horrible predictions she wanted; but he was pleased. If he was going to be terrible at the subject, he may as well be honestly terrible and have tried hard anyway. He was pleased, however, that he had put in an honest effort.

What Firenze said about respect and magic had struck a chord with him. If cheating in divination was not only a waste of everyone's time, it made sense that disrespecting the subject was disrespecting magic. And with the way he could feel magic and Hogwarts, how could magic not be sentient? He liked it too much to disrespect it.

He wondered idly if there were wizening religions that worshipped magic or the land and magic. Muggles did, and they didn't even believe in magic. How could wizards not worship magic, when it was so beautiful? He settled to read the book his mum had on Wizarding religions later that night and focused on the lecture.
To his embarrassment, Professor Trelawney pulled him aside after class.

"I can see you have taken a different tactic with this one. Keep trying. The more you try, the better it will get," she said, and her voice was steadier, less dreamy than normal. He stopped himself from shifting uncomfortably under her gaze.

"I can tell you tried, well done." She continued.

Harry almost gaped at her and instead said, "Ma'am?"

"Magic rewards those who believe. Remember not to lie."

"But I thought you liked it when we foresaw our painful demises?" Harry asked, honestly confused.

"I gave you an O for your dedication to making it up and the way you referenced the stars to back up your claims," She said looking more than ever like an oversized dragonfly with her huge glasses and wispy silver-green shawl, "So far I can see little gift in you. You do not need a gift, or to agree with it, to try your best." She paused, fiddling with her model of the night sky.

It rang true to what Firenze had said, though he got the impression that she would not agree or approve of Firenze's ideas of divination, as much as Harry liked them.

* 

With the now, rapid approach of the first task, Harry reluctantly put aside his study of Wizarding traditions and culture, to focus on his studies and his preparation for the task. But even then, between his extracurricular activities: working with Hagrid and Firenze in the forest, studying protection magic, his class load, his mothers textbooks, Runes and Arithmancy, mastering every spell in all his textbooks from years 1-7 (hopefully it would be enough), and then, the extra projects to try and keep himself alive, Harry was so busy he didn't have time to be emotional about the revelations at Gringotts. Not really.

Frankly, between everything he was learning, and doing just to keep himself in one piece, as well as learning everything available, he found himself often wishing for a time turner. There just wasn't enough time in the day to get everything done. And he definitely understood Hermione's yearning from third year to take all the subjects.

He was also finding that he could manage on less sleep now, which was just as well as he was running out of hours in the day, and had taken to scheduling obsessively to keep track of everything and get everything done. He was in the forest every day now, either with Firenze or Hagrid, either very early in the morning or late in the evening. Harry was becoming excellent at sneaking in and out.

The centaurs did not, unfortunately, have any wisdom to share with him about dragons, and were not impressed that the wizards in the castle intended to bring four of the creatures into their home. It had taken Harry a lot of wheedling to get Elda Magorian to agree to even exchange letters with Charlie to try and reach some sort of accord.

"unfortunately Elda, it's not as if Charlie and the dragons have many choices. I got the impression they don't want to be here either. I don't know for sure that they will hide them in the forest, but it seemed the most logical choice."

Magrodian and Ronan cast their gaze skyward for a long moment before saying, "send this Charlie to us when he arrives. We will speak to him. Pass along his letters in the meantime, and we shall read them. Make sure, young colt, that he knows the proper courtesies. I know you know them now."
Magorian said after a while.

"Yes Elda," Harry said, before hurrying off to his morning history of magic class.

*

Harry had another interesting conversation with Neville later that week. While Harry was hesitant to get close to anyone, the other boy seemed happy to talk to him about culture, and herbology. Especially when Harry carefully pointed out how much herbology was part of potions, quietly in their Potions theory class on Tuesday. He had agreed to work with Neville in Potions if Neville could help explain why magical plants were so different from the normal ones. The primer hadn't really explained other than the obvious, magic.

Between the two of them, they both improved dramatically at potions. With Neville's deep understanding of plants and Harry's system, which helped counteract Neville's forgetfulness and their terror of Professor Snape that seemed to cause accidents, they got better. It all helped. Especially when he showed Neville the shortcuts his mum had pointed out. They even started working out why they worked.

Unfortunately, their progress in potions together did not really improve their enjoyment. Harry no doubt did enjoy potions but they both still disliked Professor Snape. Despite having gotten Harry's letter, he gave no indication at all of having read it. So Harry kept his head down and tried to be as polite and formal as he could in his classes. It seemed to help a little.

Harry had taken to spending an enjoyable bit of time, after finishing his homework, on his broom, zooming through the trees that the Room of Requirement had provided as an obstacle, dodging flaming rocks Dobby and Winky were throwing at him. Fred and George had taken to joining them too and helped Dobby and Winky pelt him with flaming things. They had taken to casting small fire hexes at him. He got a few burns, but on the whole, he was getting much better at sensing something coming near him. And at brewing burn salve.

He was starting to slowly feel more confident in his progress in preparing for the dragons. He still didn't know if he could talk to them, but his fireproofing charms were getting better, and he had almost found the right combination of potions and runes to embed his clothes with that should slow any burning down.

He wondered idly, as he ducked another two flaming rocks, and a fireball from Fred, if maybe it was a good thing quidditch wasn't on this year. He thought he might just enjoy flying by himself more. Flying like this was exciting and quite fun. He had missed flying, but he was finding he didn't miss quidditch as much as he'd expected.

He'd been too terrified of being expelled and sent back to the Dursley's to protest back in first year when McGonagall had placed him on the team. It wasn't as if she had actually asked him. He had thought she was dragging him off to be caned. He'd been so relieved not to be, that he hadn't even thought to argue when she informed him he was now seeker. Even if he had managed to find the voice and the courage to do so.

At first, playing with so many big kids had terrified him, especially when Fred and George sent bludgers after him. It got better when Fred and George started teaching him Gobstones and joking with him. He did like flying he found.

Quidditch itself, however, still reminded him a bit too much of Dudley. Dudley had always loved group games as it had been a brilliant and sanctioned opportunity to pick on, and often beat Harry up. With so many players out to get the seeker, the deciding factor in the game, Harry found it an
unpleasant reminder, when he wasn't totally lost in flying. He liked practice best when Oliver left him to his own devices to just fly around and catch the snitch. Harry could go up high out of the way of the game and just fly.

Maybe he would come to love the game too, but overall he loved the freedom of flying and would much rather be zooming between trees in the forest like a maniac, or flying in loops around the castle's turrets than doing seeker drills and chasing an elusive gold ball that he actually had trouble seeing. It was just as well that it glinted gold, and its magic had a distinct feel about it when he got close to it.

Now that he actually had time to fly regularly without quidditch, he wondered if maybe he could quit the team next year. It didn't feel so terrifying now that he knew he could still fly without quidditch. And he certainly wasn't feeling too charitable towards his housemates at the moment. He didn't really want to play with them or help them win the cup when they were so hot and cold.

*

Professor McGonagall cornered him in the corridor when they were on the way back to the common room. It seemed that while the whole of Slytherin heard about his apology to Malfoy, it had now spread to the whole school. Harry sighed. He'd expected as much, but he hadn't expected McGonagall to call him up on it. Her concern for him seemed slightly out of character.

"What's this I hear about you talking Etiquette with the Slytherins now Potter?" She asked him, and he couldn't quite read her face for some reason.

"I found a book, on wizarding etiquette, ma'am. I didn't realise my manners had been so poor, so I thought it best to apologise, ma'am." He said, trying to hedge around the issue a little, "I figured I don't need more people out to get me, ma'am."

She made a hmph noise and walked off, leaving Harry worried and a little puzzled.

What else had she heard?
The Gringotts mailbox had proven already, to be very useful. Rodgrip had sent Harry a contract to sign authorising Gringotts to take their fees from the family vaults along with an invoice of charges for Saturday night to finalise. Harry had signed it and asked for a copy of the charter or any, and all services Gringotts could cover. It was an interesting read.

He had also had used the box a few times previously to discuss the contract for a journalist with Rodgrip. Harry has asked her for a contract for Luna, not confident in his own drafting abilities. While she had stated numerous time that she was not a lawyer, she was able to help Harry draw up a safe and fair contract, that would protect Harry.

Rodgrip then corrects the amendments Harry made to it and had done it up properly, charging Harry a galleon for the service from his family vault and adding a postscript to her accompanying note saying, 'we are not lawyers, the treaty forbids us from practising Wizarding law...'. But Harry noted with a smirk the Goblin hadn't refused to do it. There must be a loophole that let the goblins help with contracts and laws but not let on or admit it.

Harry had also been writing rather frequently to Bill and Charlie, now that the box made it so easy. He didn't confide in them, as much as he liked them, they were adults, and Harry didn't have the best track records with adults, no matter what Bill said about caring. And he just somehow couldn't bring himself to open up to anyone else, not after Ron had turned his back on him. Hermione hadn't, but she was still cross with the both of them about their' inability to just get over it and move on.' Which was starting to frustrate Harry.

He swapped notes with Bill about warding and curse-breaking as well as his runes arithmancy classes, which Bill had also taken in school. Bill had sent him notes on the earring but hadn't had time to make one yet. Now he was in England one day a week, his timetable was getting hectic, and Harry felt guilty for burdening the man, no matter what he said.

They swapped notes though, and Bill looked over Harry's project notes and sent them back with detailed additions and ideas that Harry was fascinated to read. It was brilliant. Bill used the box also to send him more books by Master Ripquill, most on goblins, though some were on wizards too. All of them were cynical, sarcastic and highly critical of human idiocy, which Harry found just as amusing as the first one. Bill also sent through another Occlumency book with helpful detailed exercises to help Harry prepare for their lesson on Saturday.

Charlie was happy to talk dragons with Harry; at great length. They also spent time swapping potions recipes for burns and fire protection, and Charlie gave him tips on how to use spells against them for the best results without hurting the dragons. It was clear from his writing that Charlie loved and adored his dragons. Charlie was rather impressed with Harry's project to fireproof his clothes and gave him a few tips, promising to help Harry test it out before the task without getting caught.
wouldn't protect him completely, but it should slow any burning or roasting down.

Charlie also gave him some dragon teeth and bits of shed scales.

"Bill mentioned you wanted to make stuff. The teeth fall out and grow back, they're not actually useful in potions, so we collect them. I give them to Bill as well. He said they're good for holding magic and small personal wards. Have a go. If not, try the scales, they're can be used in potions, but are also suitable for holding magic, especially in protective jewellery and the like. (Again, Bill's really good at it. He sells them on the side in the Egyptian markets to fellow curse-breakers. Not that he often admits it mind you, but he'll be able to give you a hand.

They also fall out all the time, so again, we just collect them and sell some. They're not worth much, so don't feel bad about me giving them away, perks to the job."

So far, Harry had not managed to make a shielding band that could hold charge or absorb the energy of the spells it shielded. The dragon scales Charlie had sent him were helping him with this though. So far it had only blown up in his face 3 times. He had one band done though, a thick leather cord with a spelled dragon tooth, and some clay beads that had runes inscribed on them.

The band would work against low-level hexes and would only needed to be charged in the morning. It wasn't what he had been aiming for, but he was rather pleased with it. He was still working on a better one that would record the signature and name of whatever spells hit him. That would be vital in helping Harry stay clean of foreign spells after the cleansing ritual at Christmas. The library books on warding and blood magic that he had 'borrowed' from the restricted section were proving to be invaluable in letting him tie the bands to himself with his blood, and in using his blood to power them. He was hoping to get the bands to absorb the energy of the spells it shielded him from and use it to self-power. He hadn't worked it out yet, though.

Harry spent a lot of time reading now. His mum's books, the books from the restricted section, books from the Room of Requirement on protection magic, but mostly, everything he can get his hand on about Dragons. He had read just about everything in the library's small dragon section, and had broken into the restricted section and read everything there too.

It wasn't just Harry's slightly out of control desire to know everything, that fuelled his frantic reading. It was also a desperation to try to catch up to the seventh years competing in the tournament. That, and to not end up like a flame-grilled kabab when facing a dragon in front of hundreds of spectators. He frantically read and reread Charlie's big brick of a book all week. There was only a week to the task, and Harry was starting to feel the pressure, sure that he would fail. He really did not want to be burnt alive, and certainly not in front of everyone.

*  

With all Harry's dragon-filled fervour of books and reviewing spells, potions and rune schemes, Harry had totally forgotten that Professor Flitwick wanted to talk to him until he pulled Harry aside after class on Wednesday.

"Mr Potter?" Professor Flitwick called out as charms were being let out, and Harry was about to slip into a nearby short cut to escape the crowd corridors.

"Sir?" Harry asked with a slight bow.

The Professor smiled gently at him and said, "I found something for you, Mr Potter."

Harry's face brightened briefly thinking of his mother, but he squashed down the hope viciously.
Hope never gets you anything but disappointment.

"Professor?" He asked, instead.

"I didn't find her trunk, Mr Potter, though I am sure it's here somewhere. I did manage to find one of her old books, and I also managed to get some photos off her off one of her old school friends," Professor Flitwick said, handing them to him.

Harry took them reverently and looked at the book first.

It was old and clearly well warn. He ran a finger over the inscription in the front that his grandmother had written, "to my darling Lily, so you know what your name means, as all women in our family should, love mum."

He flicked through its pages, reading the little notes in the margins. It seemed that Lily and her friend Sev had used the flower language like a secret code of sorts.

Harry looked at the photos with awe. There were 11 of them. Each one starred his mother. Some were from her later Hogwarts years. Most, however, were clearly from before Hogwarts or over the summer holidays in her first years. He looked at them trying to memorise every bit before lunch ended and he would have to give them back.

"Thank you, Professor. Please convey my deepest thanks to my mother's friend," Harry said his voice thick with feeling.

"You can keep them, Mr Potter, I made these copies for you," Professor Flitwick said softly

"What?" Harry said so startled he forgot to be formal, "I mean, really sir?"

Professor Flitwick laughed, "yes, Mr Potter, they're all yours."

"I- Thank you, sir! Just... thank you!" Harry exclaimed a bright smile on his face for what felt like the first time in days. He wondered if this friend was Sev. Did the Professor know him? He knew better than to ask.

"Sir?" He asked as Professor Flitwick was walking him to the door, "Please convey my deepest gratitude to her friend. I truly appreciate it. It means a lot to me."

"I will, Harry."

*

Harry got a letter late that night, it was well past curfew. He'd crawled into bed and was about to open Charlie's dragon book again, wanting to double-check something he couldn't quite remember about Hungarian Horntails when he realised his Gringotts box was glowing softly.

He opened it.

One note was from Rodgrip about the start of the audit, the journalism contract had been signed and filed, and all the leading papers would know about it come morning.

One note was from Bill with suggestions to improve his dragon proofing runes on his clothes, and a few answers to Harry's Occlumency questions.

The last note wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be. Harry recognised Charlie's handwriting immediately.
It was short, "On our way, SSS, CFB, HH! WG, hopefully, there won't be any scrambled eggs!!!
Again, burn after reading. I got your notes about the centaurs. Good point about warning them. I
can't believe after all the time I spent in there that I forgot about them! I appreciate your help, thanks.
I've written them a letter. I kept all you said in mind. Can you pass it on for me? ETA late Friday."

SSS, CFB, HH! CWG, Harry thought as he burned Charlie's letter after extracting the letter for
Magorian and putting it aside to give to him in the morning.

He flicked through the dragon book again, it took him a little while to figure it out, but he got there.
The dragons: Swedish Short Snout, Chinese Fireball, Hungarian Horntail and a Common Welsh
Green. Charlie thought that Harry had to be especially cautious of the Horntail. Harry gulped. They
would be formidable. They were nesting mothers. With eggs.

That confirmed Harry's suspicious that they would likely have to steal an egg. Harry frowned. That
was hardly fair on the netting mothers or the eggs. He could practically feel Charlie's barely
concealed worry and fury thought the letter.

*

Harry was up stupidly early the next morning, with his bow.

"I have a letter from Charlie," Harry said as soon as he saw Ronan who was greeting him that
morning, "it's for Elda Magorian."

They gathered in a clearing and Harry watched as Magorian hashed out solutions to the problem
with the herd elders, Firenze, Bane and Ronan.

"We will find them a clearing big enough for 4 dragons, out of the way, but easy for them to get to
without them trampling too far into our forest. They will ward it and will keep their people and
dragons from roaming. They will be watched by the herd to make sure they do not cause trouble,"
Magorian had explained to Harry, as he handed over the letter of reply they had written.

The next two days passed in a blur of frantic studying. Harry spent all his time, when not in a class,
flipping between Charlie's dragon book, his mothers spell books, and having Hermione quiz him and
double and triple-check his potion recipes, his fire charms, and his notes on the runes he would use
on his clothes.

In the end, they snuck out of the castle and into the forest on Friday after class and went for a long
run, to burn off some of his nervous energy so he could actually get some work done.

After copious overpowered cleaning charms and Reparos, the shack was still dilapidated. But it was
a clean dilapidated and was slightly less broken than before. He set up a small potions lab on the
table in the main room, off the kitchen, and brewed more burn salve, an antidote to the poison on the
Horntails tail's spines, just in case, as well as a large batch of the two most potent fireproofing potions
in the book.

He soaked a set of robes in them, and some of Dudleys off casts before charming them with as many
warding spells and fireproofing spells as he could think of and then layered on some runes that he
painstakingly stitched into the hems and collars. By the time he was done, it was very late, and he
had seen no sign of Charlie or dragons.

*

Harry woke up after a restless sleep, to Dobby shaking him awake. He fell off the couch with a yelp
and blinked blearily.
"Dobby?" He asked, fumbling for his glasses.

"You's fire Weazey is coming, Harry Potter sir!" Dobby said.

"Charlie?" Harry asked, eagerly.

Dobby nodded, his bat-like ears flapping vigorously.

"Brilliant. Are they in the forest?" Harry asked.

"Not yet, sir. Fire Weazey and his party has just spoken to bad Whiskers and Winkey's old Mr Crouch, sir. He's now off to see Centaurs, his party is still in the airs sir!" Dobby squeaked.

Harry scrambled to get ready, pulling on his black borrowed coat from the Room of Requirement and activated the masking charm and warming charms before hurrying out of the shack; casting silencing charms on his feet.

He knew which clearing the centaurs would be placing the dragons in, and headed straight there. The grounds seemed deserted, and Harry couldn't see anyone, Dumbledore or from the ministry on the grounds. He quickly raised his hood and ducked into the forest behind the willow, armed with his wand, bow and the three arrows he had so far managed to make.

Magorian, Bane and Firenze were already there. It was a huge clearing, deeper into the forest than people normally went, and Harry wondered if they would hold the task there too. He hoped not. He didn't want that many people in there. He didn't think the centaurs would either.

He quietly moved up into a tree nearby and crouched high in its branches above the Centaurs, watching. Ronan entered the clearing, followed by Charlie Weasley; broom over his shoulder.

"Greetings Elda Magorian," Charlie said arm across his chest, hand on his shoulder as Harry had described to him, and bowed respectfully.

Magorian stepped forward and said, "greetings Dragon Bringer."

Charlie frowned, and said, "Yes, unfortunate that. Sorry. I apologies, on behalf of my group for invading your lands. We shall do our best to honour our agreement and make as little impact as we can."

Bane shifted on his hooves slightly and backed up, somewhat closer to Harry's tree, so he was standing underneath and said, very softly, without looking up, "I know you're there Harry Potter."

"How Elda?" Harry breathed, knowing Bane would be able to hear him.

"You reek of magic ill content" Bane replied as if it obvious.

Harry frowned but nodded, "I'll fix it soon. I made another arrow," he said, passing two down, "don't try and burn it though. I got a bit distracted, and it got coated in fire retardant potion."

The centaur raised an eyebrow at that but looked up at him for a long moment, as if judging him. When he didn't find Harry too wanting, he nodded and after scrutinising the arrows, added them to his quiver to take back to the herd with a nod. Harry watched him move away, feeling slightly less numb. That was almost approval from the distrustful centaur.

Harry watched with great curiosity as Charlie placed something on the ground in the middle of the clearing and tapped it with his wand. It expanded and seemed to unfold itself to cover most of the
clearing in a huge matt. From it appeared to spring four large rocky pens.

That done Charlie pointed his wand into the sky and shot off green sparks.

Four large crates materialised over one of the pens, levitated by about 30 wizards on brooms. There were about 7 or 8 wizards to each crate. They must have been disillusioned Harry thought idly, as he watched them lower a crate into a pen. They then landed and set about warding the pens, waving their wands intently for a good 30 minutes.

Harry crept silently down from his tree. The centaurs had gone now, blending back into their forest. He slunk around the clearing closer to where Charlie and the dragons were. He climbed back up onto another larger tree branch and crept along one of the branches overhanging the edge of the clearing to have a closer look.

When the pens were warded, the wizards vanished the crates revealing...

Harry froze and nearly fell out of his tree. The books did not do them justice at all, though Charlie's sketches had come close.

Dragons.

Four furious, or perhaps terrified, mother dragons. Each fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking females, rearing on their hind legs protectively over their eggs. They were vast. Big enough that he felt that one could easily have opened her jaws and swallowed him whole. The sky was suddenly alight with flames shooting out of large fang-lined jaws, fifty feet into the air. The dragons were clearly unhappy with the sudden change in accommodation.

The flames shot up astonishingly fast into the sky and even from the distance of his tree, Harry could feel the heat.

He recognised the silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground, the Swedish Short snout. The smooth-scaled Common Welsh Green was writhing and stamping with all her might circling her clutch of eggs. The red Chinese Fireball, with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around her face was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air and over her eggs. Lastly, the Horntail, a gigantic black dragon, more lizard-like than the others, was screeching deafeningly.

He felt as if the welling panic and terror that he had managed to keep at bay all week, threatened to rise up and eat him alive.

He looked at the dragons. They were glorious. He could feel their wild magic from where he crouched in his tree. Magnificently fierce, untamed and beautifully free. Everything he was not. Envy burned in his gut. Dumbledore's magic smothered his own, controlling him, making him feel things he didn't on top of everything else. It tightened somehow within him, as he emotions swelled at the sight of the dragons, so fierce and free. He could feel their magic crackling around him, making the foreign magic within him twitch and bite. It was slowly overwhelming him. It would kill him if it didn't send him insane.

He could feel it swelling up, the magic inside of him, against the foreign magic trying to drown him, to eat him, obliterate him to leave a blank pawn in its wake.

So he did what he'd always done, back at the Dursley's, on the streets of London, in his lonely, dark cupboard when it all got to much. He took all that icy panic, the uncertainty, the painful yearning, envy, the aching disappointment and the bone biting terror. He took it all and turned it into hate and
anger. Two powerful forces he was not above using to make himself capable of surviving.

He used the fire of hatred and anger to smother everything that he felt, forcing it deep down inside, until there was nothing left. Every little painful jaded memory that the icy fear always triggered, every little impulse not his own, that the foreign magic made to play him like a fiddle.

He pushed it all down and deep into the box deep in his soul and used the anger to stitch the broken pieces back together. He used the burning hatred to shove Dumbledore's magic back a little, to force out that which did not belong. And he used the sharp cynicism and spite, that he had long held back, to keep everything locked away and held together, and force an empty strength into his weak limbs. He would not let the world eat him alive.

It hurt.

It hurt fiercely with an intensity that few things matched. He felt like he was being torn in two as he raged against the magic controlling him. He wanted to scream with it, to writhe and shake with it. And yet he just curled in a ball tiny in the heart of the tree and was silent and still as he fought and raged inside.

Don't make a noise, don't let them know, don't let them see you cry.

He fought it with everything he had so he could think again, breath again, feel like himself again. He couldn't wait until Christmas to free, it would kill him. So he shoved, desperately with all he had, until he felt something burst free from the sickly ball of magic mess in his chest. It slid free and oozed out of him with enough pain to make him see stars. In its wake, something slid into place inside, and it was not all of it, it was not fixed, he was not free... But the small change was like coming home.

He still couldn't feel his own magic, and the knotted mess in his chest was still there, heavy and slimy and like a ball of snotty puke, but it was a little less. He couldn't feel his magic, but he could think again and thought he may just have managed to throw some of the compulsions off.

He could push back the aching, crushing disappointment, at the state of his magic, more properly now. It left his hands slightly unsteady, shaking with how empty and detached he felt, but he could force all the emotion away so he could think again.

He surveyed the dragons again with a cool detachment that had kept him alive as a young child, that Hogwarts and Dumbledore tried to squash out of him. But he was free now, he felt more himself than he had in years. He was still scared, terrified. While he may not be able to feel it now, he knew logically that he must deep down, he was a scrawny 14 year old expected to face a dragon that it took 5 grown wizards to subdue. He must be scared, but he didn't really feel it anymore, just a slight tremble in his hands and a very slight dizziness when he moved that spoke of slight panic.

But finally, he could think again, and his mind was… well not free, but clearer than it had been in years.

The wizards in the clearing had grabbed onto the chains fastened to leather straps on the dragons and were frantically attempting to control the furious, terrified beasts. Harry watched with detached horror, slightly mesmerised by the beauty of the dragons.

The Horntail was thrashing, her catlike eyes wide, either terrified or furious. Their magic was too strong, too wild and feral for him to make out their emotions within it.

She was making a terrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream, that he almost felt he could understand. It sounded vaguely familiar.
"It's no good!" yelled a wizard. "Stunning, on three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out their wands. Charlie counted off, and all at once, they shouted, "Stupefy!"

The Stunning Spells shot towards the dragons, lighting up the night, creating a shower of red sparks as the spells hit the dragons resistant hide.

Several tons of dragon swayed slightly, her jaws stretched in a silent howl that tugged at Harry's detached heart. She fell slowly. Smoke still trailing from her jaws. She hit the ground with a thud, that nearly shook Harry out of his tree. He was very relieved that she hadn't fallen on her eggs, though. That would have been tragic, he thought.

The keepers hurried forward to tighten the chains securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands. Harry felt a bit sick, looking at such magnificent creatures tied up like that and had to focus hard on not seeing his cupboard.

"Gods, you're stunning," Harry said sadly, not even noticing that he'd slipped into the hissing patterns of Parseltongue, "and they using you for sport."

How could Charlie do that to them, he thought, staring at them.

Chapter End Notes

the whomping willow - I have always envisioned the whomping willow on the edge of the forest, not in the middle of the grounds like JK's map shows. I also always envisioned the forest continuing north of the school to the edge of the village and into the mountains edges, I thought the village being nestled between the two, with the mountains at one end of the road and forest (though the forest near the town would be a lot thinner) at the other. I assumed therefor that you probably could access the shack though both the town and the forest. If its at the edge of the forest the tunnel from the willow to the shack would not be too outrageously long crossing the school and the town. Either way its not actually up for debate, this is how I've written it :)

Charlies letter

SSS, CFB, HH, WG, hopefully there wont be any scrambled eggs.

Translation:

We are on our way, the dragons we are bringing are a Swedish short snout, a Chinese fireball, a Hungarian horntail (watch out for that one) and a common welsh green. They are using real nesting mothers, and their eggs, with will be part of the task. I’m really mad about it, I don’t want any eggs hurt.

Also I'm working next Saturday when I normally post, so the update may be a little later than normal
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!