Harry Potter gets smart and takes control - The Goblet

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 creates 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 wording 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 thats 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.
Facing Hermione

Chapter Summary

Harry writes some letters, asks for help for a change, and faces Hermione

Chapter Notes

For hlharriss, my very first comment, thank you.

I wasn't actually going to put this up for another few days, but I was so exited when I saw people had read it and enjoyed it, I felt I had you reward you all with something. Thank you so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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 brother's 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 brother's 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 Norbera 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
"Now, 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, it's 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 himself. 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, "it's 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 ruffled 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 well?"

"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 suites 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 disbelief.

"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 Alley, 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 someones 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 its necessary and will make 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, Harry's 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. Its not
very conducive 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, with out 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 sniffled 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
"Potter sir." She said slowly deliberately.

"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 Hogywarts 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
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 Harry 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 at 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 on 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 Outsmartr... 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 Metimorphagus 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, Hogwarts 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 Hogwarts 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 maybe.

"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
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. Whisker's 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 Hogywarts 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 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."

"Thats 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 Charmes 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 Dumbledore 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!!

Tags added: mental health
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."

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*Shunned*

Chapter Notes

It's been a long week, please be kind, if I've missed a mistake.
Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"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 mediation 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 doubt 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 her.

"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 FinchFletchley, 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 breed them?" Harry asked reading between the lines, "how on earth did you get them to breed without eating each other?"

"What do yer 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 his friendship with Ron could ever come back from this. 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 Requirement's 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 therefore 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 stairs 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 sniffling 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.

Chapter End Notes

Also, No insult meant to any other Auzzy's, 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 Counter's' 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 it," 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 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 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 Hoolturn 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 just pick up the brewers magic, I don't think there's anything to feel about it. 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 me 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.

It had not even taken him 5seconds 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.
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 knacked."

He woke early the next morning not feeling at all rested, his sleep having been plagued be 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 knowing 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 Bill's 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.
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"
"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 owtery 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 outrunning 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.
Lily

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!

Studying 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 roof 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 jumpy 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 not thought of that. 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.
Rita Skeeter

Chapter Summary

Malfoy is an ass, Hermione is hexed
Weighing of the wands
Rita Skeeter is an awful person but good at her job

Chapter Notes

Some detailed trigger warnings at the end
Sorry its late today, I got tired up slogging through my Gringotts scenes

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.
"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, Malfoy 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 relived 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 like 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 Ollivander, 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 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 was 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 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 Dumbledore'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 19. That was pretty young, especially to be thrown into a war as a teen. 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
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 was 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 don't 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 would have thought that if the elves (on Dumbledore's orders) were only going to let him have salad today, that they would at least let him have a bigger one. 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 caldrons. 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 caldrons. 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 whomping 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 upstairs 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 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 the 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 Protecto 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 pestering 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 wrong.

Exhausted, he cracked open the Gringotts book again instead. He spent most of the morning with he is 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 coast, 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 Skeeter's 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,' he's 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 fancy 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 don't know?!"

"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 practised 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 ith people you know well. It's insulting to just use their first name, its 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 your 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 near 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 Skeeter's 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 blanket, 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
The land, its magic & its people.

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 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 exiting the great hall.

*  

"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
"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 in 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 bow truckle 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 sniffling.

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 hary 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 hiked 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, Hogywarts 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 dobbie," 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 Bezor 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 hurrily 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 Bills 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 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. Bill's 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 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 Bill's 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 had 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 earring 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."

"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 worried about. How could he have he 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, Cursbreaker 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."
"Curslbreaker 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.

“'I'm working on fixing my ignorance. I've been reading to catch up. Master Ripquills book was brilliant! But I think there is something or someone sinister behind it. 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:**


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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.
https://www.hp-lexicon.org/2004/03/13/mapping-the-harry-potter-timeline/

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.
Results and revelations

Chapter Summary

Title says it all
(I'm not too good at summaries)

Chapter Notes

This one is for Clive54 - don't worry I won't talk about cricket or rugby, I think I thankfully missed out of the auzzy sport mania 😄 Eucalyptus trees though, well I won't get started on how awesome they are.

A list of detailed trigger warnings at the end if you want to check them

Happy reading

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"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 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, but 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," rod grip 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 quilt 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 Ignatius 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
Status: Partially Degraded

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
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
30th August 1997 (aged 13)
Target: Severus Prince Snape (trigger word, Potter!)
Target: Slytherin House
Target: Draconis Lucious Malfoy
Caster: Unknown
Status: Broken

30th August 1998 (aged 14)
Target: Severus Prince Snape (trigger word, Potter!)
Target: Slytherin House
Target: Draconis Lucious Malfoy
Caster: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Status: Degrading

Parasites:
Multiple - Magic testing ritual advised

Blocks:
Multiple - Magic testing ritual advised

Recommended tests:
Ward-analysis
Mind magic ritual
Cleansing immediately recommended.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep, steadying breath. There was a burning ache 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 casted, 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 (Amorfamilia)

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
Rodgrip's 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 at all. 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 through.
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 chuckled 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
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 were, 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 pale 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 panic.

"Harry, that's-" Bill started.

"He wants me to die-" Harry went on

"Harry that d-

"He want's 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..."
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 carfully 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 snuffle 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 had Harry 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. xWhen 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. He had to be stronger than 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 base 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 was pleased to see that his mother had included Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as well. He hadn't been 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.

Love you, mum."

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 flipped 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 sat 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.

"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 pretty intense."

"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 pail.

"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 Leglimens. 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 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 castor 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 Hogywarts 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 Hogywarts 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, its 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 cozy 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 outflying 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 Dred 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 nether 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 dismissals, 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 Skeeter's 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 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
"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 through 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 one. 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
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 blubbery 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 disrespects 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 Nevilles 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. It 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 fo 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 worn. 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, flicking 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 Hornitails 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 the 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,
enjoy, 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 it 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 JKs 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
Harry spent hours listening to the dragons, they're speech very similar to parseltongue but not quite. He'd felt he'd had it when he fell asleep. Almost felt as if something had clicked in his brain, he reached out with his mind, feeling their presence, feeling their magic, feeling their emotions and looked at them, willing himself to see, to understand.

And he'd almost had it. When he fell asleep.

His dreams were filled with a hissing language he could almost understand through his shut cupboard door. The dreams were full of a painful yearning sensation as he banged on it, desperate to be let out.

He woke up very early, only the intense sticking charm he'd cast the night before, had stopped him falling out of his tree.

Most of the dragons were asleep now, curled around their eggs, but the Horntail is away, dozing around her eggs, crooning to them, breathing fire on them. It was a different fire from the one she let out when first let out of the cage, it's a blue fire this time. Hotter, and makes the eggs glow slightly. It was fascinating to watch. Harry listened to her, focusing on the cadences of her voice. It was so very like parseltongue.

* 

Charlie had been doing the early morning watch when he thought he saw something twitch in the far side of the clearing from where his boss and colleagues had set up their tents. Frowning and wondering if maybe the centaurs were back, he crossed around the edge of the pens to look.

Curled up in a small ball in the branch of a big old oak was Harry. Wrapped in a shabby but warm-looking hooded cloak, his face turned away from Charlie facing the dragons, was Harry. He rounded the tree to glance at Harry's face; it was half-covered by the hood.

Harry seemed both healthier now that over the summer but also not

While he's clearly gain some much-needed weight, he was still skinny and had huge exhausted
bags under his eyes. Something about the way Harry held himself screamed 'stay away', and it looked as if the boy carried the whole world on his shoulders, even curled up in the tree as he was. Charlie wanted to hug him tight and wrap him in a blanket with a hot cup of tea.

Instead, he glanced up at the glassy-eyed boy and said softly, "Hey Harry, good to see you again."

Harry jerked, was caught by the sticking charm and jabbed his wand in the direction of his attacker.

"Charlie!" He whisper yelled

"Sorry," Charlie murmured, putting a hand on Harry's back to steady him, his wide-eyed at the wand Harry suddenly had in his face, "I didn't mean to startle you."

Harry shifted on the branch, received the sticking charm. Harry rubbed his eyes and straightened his coat, it was still wonderfully warm.

"How are you Harry," Charlie said

"Fine," Harry said blankly he didn't feel much of anything this morning.

"I hope you're fine after this lot," he said grimly, "I didn't dare tell mum, she'd be having kittens already after that article-"

Harry scowled as he cut Charlie off sharply, "its all rubbish, she shouldn't believe it!"

Charlie nodded and said, "I know it was mostly rubbish, but I'll let her know Harry. You sure you're okay?"

Harry nodded but got distracted by the dragons behind him again.

The Horntail was still breathing fire, sleepily onto her clutch crooning softly.

"Beautiful, aren't they," Charlie said, climbing up on to the branch next to him.

Harry held back a flinch at how close he was but nodded.

"How can you do that to them," he asked softly, "chain them up like that?"

Charlie's face immediately darkened, and Harry scrambled back, but Charlie said, "we didn't have a choice, Harry, the ministry got involved. And if we wanted to keep out funding for the sanctuary, we had to do what they wanted this time. I agree they deserve to be wild and free, and at the reserve it's different, they're warded in and safe to just be what they are. But here, we have to keep them under control, so they don't hurt themselves or anyone else. They have little space and are already vicious because its clutching season, add the move on top of it, the only way to keep them safe, is to chain them up, just whole their here, and to spell them when we can't calm them down," Charlie said, looking at Harry with deep, fathomless eyes that held something sad Harry could quite read.

"It's different at home, normally, it's not like this, I promise," Charlie said.

"Why just stunning them, though?" Harry asked, looking at Charlie with such big sad eyes that seem far too old.

Charlie realised what Harry's really asking him he hopes down, so he's looking up at Harry, closer to his eye level and says, "Harry, I promise you, I will never mistreat my dragons or let anyone else
hurt them if I can help it. I promise you. They were agitated from the trip over, normally back home, their in warded areas, we can let them fly it off, burn it off or rage all they like, but here they only have tiny pens and its close to a school of children, and we don't have the same heavy-duty wards here. It's too dangerous to let them be that mad close to the school. It's safer for them and us to stun, they'll wake up a bit calmer. They're okay I promise" Harry looked worried.

"I won't let anyone hurt the dragons," Charlie murmured.

Harry sighed, he didn't like it, but he understood. He pushed the emotion aside and looked at them again, with a slightly critical eye this time.

"I had my suspiciousness about the task, I had hoped to be wrong, but they're going to make us steel one," Harry asked glancing away from the dragons to look at Charlie's face.

Charlie's expression darkened, and he said, "I hope not but, we haven't been told the tasks, but either way, they put a geas on us, I literals cannot talk about the-" Charlie was cut off, looking furious.

"You can't talk about the tournament?" Harry finished

Charlie nodded.

"But dragons are okay?"

"Yes, dragons in general of course, just not why they're he-" he cut off again scowling.

"It's fine, I'm pretty sure I have it figured out. I don't think they just want us to get past it, they're nesting mothers, there would be eggs to and nesting mothers a fierce. I think they want us to steal an egg." Harry said.

"That would be suicide! For the eggs and for you!" Charlie whispered furiously, not wanting to wake anyone else.

"When have wizards ever cared about the health of a player when it comes to Wizarding entertainment. Jut look at quidditch? I love flying, adore it, and I even like quidditch well enough, but if Dumbledore hadn't caught me when I fell in third year, I'd be dead. Few people are powerful enough to actually slow a fall like that, from 50m in the air. I'm skinny and light, but the further you fall, the heavier you get, the more force pushing down. I think it's like a tone for every meter or, 10kg for every meter or something like that? Not sure, and actually, I don't care. But the point is I don't think I would have survived if not for his power, none of the students could have done it, even with a cushioning charm and slowing the fall, I should have broken things."

"So they want you to steal from a mother dragon," Charlie said, finding he could say the words now Harry had already said it.

"yep."

Charlie swore violently, slipping into what Harry thought might of been Romanian.

"I'd hoped they wouldn't, when they insisted on mothers, we'd said it was clutching season, but they had insisted, but promised they would be safe. But this!"

Charlie hopped off the tree branch, "I gotta go wake my boss, this isn't quite confirmation, but we need to talk about it." Charlie said before dashing off around the edge of the pens.
Harry watched him go, turning his gaze back to the dragons. The welsh green was away too now, breathing on her eggs, not fire, but just hot breath. She was also crooning at them. Slipping his invisibility cloak out of this pocket, and put it on and kept closer to the dragons.

He stopped just out of flaming distance, of the welsh green who looked slightly less dangerous than the Horntail. He wasn't stupid, but now he's a bit closer he's hoping to be able to understand them better. He pulled the cloak tighter around himself as the wind picked up in the clearing. The dragons head suddenly lifted, her tongue flicking out like a snake's, tasting the air, Harry froze.

She let out a long his, looking straight at him. It took Harry a moment, longer to get his ear in, her accent was much stronger than a snake's, it had a different lilt and cadence, she emphasised different points on the words, but he could understand it!

"I know you are there, I can't see you, but I can smell you, stay away!" She hissed, "their mine! I won't let you have them!"

"Can you understand me?" He hissed back, curious not daring to hope, hope got you killed or disappointed.

She let out a low rumbling growl and hissed, "stay away thief, I won't let your talking distract me!"

Carefully Harry lowered the hood of his cloak so she could see his hooded head, and said, "I don't want your eggs ma'am,"

She hissed threateningly again at him, and she took a step back.

"Do you know why you're here?" He asked

She curled her body around her nest tighter and stained at him.

"There is a tournament they are making a few students compete in, we don't have a choice." He started but stopped to reconsider his words when she just looked at him blankly.

He tried again, "there is a hunt coming, they are making hatchlings hunt, its dangerous and it may kill us, they want us to face you on the hunt. They want us, I think to take an egg. But I don't want too!" He said hurriedly when her lips pulled back into a silent snarl of fury.

"I don't want to take your eggs, but they'll make us, I'll be killed if I don't try!" Harry said urgently.

"I won't let you have them, you're nothing to me, hatchling maybe, but not my hatchling. I won't sacrifice their safety for one of someone else's." She hissed dangerously, "I will not let anyone take my eggs! Leave!" She hissed flames licking at her jaws now.

Deciding it was better to cut his losses, Harry didn't stay to test out his 'dragon proof' clothes. He'd probably end up torched if he pissed her off any more. He hurried away, his mind racing, yes he could talk to them, but they would not be reasoned with. And rightly so. So he will have to probably rely on out flying it and maybe using a switching spell. He sighed, he'd have to make sure the potions and the broom were stashed nearby so he could summon them more easily.

He spent most of the morning hidden in the shack double and triple-checking his notes and potions. He almost forgot to crawl out and meet Bill until Dobby popped in to remind him.

Harry pulled his broom out of his bag and flew up the hole at the top of the still broken spiral stairs. The attic it seemed, had survived the werewolf. It was dark and dimply lit despite a circular window that Harry though would be just big enough for Bill to fly though. He cast a few intense
cleaning charms and watched in amusement as the dust swirled together in a giant corkscrew getting smaller and smaller before it vanished with a soft 'pft,' noise. He crossed to the window. The latch was stiff but opened when he pushed it. The window creaked loudly, and Harry made a mental note to oil the hinge. He peered out, just in time to see Bill apparate into the ground of the shack. Harry peered around, there was no one else within eyesight.

"Hey Bill," he called softly, hoping his voice would not carry too far in the still quiet morning.

Bill glanced up, grinned and mounted his broom. When he had flown through the window, and followed Harry down through the hole in the floor into the main room of the shake, he grinned.

"Hey Harry," he said, pulling him in for a hug.

Harry didn't really want to resist it. As ashamed as he was, he really wanted another hug, he was still embarrassed about how weak Bill had seen him before. He couldn't afford to be weak. And craving affection; that was weak.

Bill seemed to sense his hesitation though, and dropped his arms, holding out a hand instead. Harry careful shook it.

"Hi Bill," he said, "thanks for coming."

"My pleasure, Harry, but first, there's something you need to see," Bill said, "how do you get out of here onto the grounds?"

"I know about the dragons, I saw Charlie this morning." Harry said, "their brilliant, terrifying but brilliant!" He grinned

Bill snorted, "you look as love-struck as Charlie does when he talks about them. I'm glad you know about them though, he said he'd written to you, and that he'd lent you his book, but I wasn't sure if you knew, they were here yet or not."

"He has. He's been brilliant," Harry said gratefully

"He is that," Bill said, "right let's get to work then, being as the task is on Tuesday, lets first go over your runes for your fireproofing and see if we can test it out, first. Then we'll go over some warding before we finish with occlumency. Occlumency lessons can be challenging and exhausting, so we'll do that last." Bill explained and they got to work, Harry showing Bill his notes and Bill cast quite a few sophisticated detections and testing spells over the clothes he had spelled, potioned and stitched runes into.

Bill walked him through each spell, and what it was for and praised Harry when he got each one right on the first go.

"The runes you've stitched in should work really well together, you have also used tiny stitches, which is good, it keeps the lines strong and continuous," Bill said gesturing to the runes Harry had stitched in with red thread.

"I used red for protection and strength, and it's a lucky colour too," Harry explained, pulling across one of his books, that he had referenced when picking a thread colour, it was that or green, green's a natural colour, but red seemed a smarter choice,

"Brilliant," Bill said, "I think these will withstand dragon fire if you power them up strongly enough, I don't think they will be strong enough just being charged ordinarily. I think you'll need a charging ritual under the moon, or you can power it with your blood." Bill said, carefully watching
Harry's reaction.

But Harry had never been a typical wizard and having read the book on blood magic from the restricted section said, "I had thought about it, but the book I borrowed on blood magic really just talks about the theory not how to actually do it."

Bill nodded, "it's actually pretty simple, blood magic is complex in some ways, but it's all about intent. With these, you can just bleed on the runes, or even just the pain power rune you have here,"

"I was a bit torn between which rune to use as the bower binder, I was tossing up between Laguz or Isa, water and ice, or using Sowuli, the sun as its made of fire so maybe it will help me protect from fire, or even Alzig, as its a protection one. But I ended up going with the traditional Urus power rune, and bound it to the others as a secondary power away," Harry explained gesturing to the runes he had stitched.

"I think its a good choice, water and ice, will help as they the counterbalance agents to fire, which your protecting against, and will help Alzig as the intent rune, I see where you were thinking with Sowuly, but it think as the power rune it would have backfired on you, and it would have caused too much unbalance with the other components especially when its to keep you safe from dragon fire," Bill explained

They picked apart Harry's choice and reasoning a bit more before Bill showed him how to power the runes with his blood, "now you could have done it before you stitched them, its a bit stronger that way, you could have used spit too if your squeamish, but blood is stronger," he explained, "you could either wet the thread first before you stitch them, but as their already done, just cut your finder and rest a bit of blood into each run."

Bill explained as Harry pulled out a knife, "is order important?" Harry asked.

"Yes, same order you stitched them in, so intent first, then the secondary specification runes, then lastly your power rune," Bill said, "remember intent is important, so like you would have done with the stitching, think about each rune and what you want it to do when you charge them with your blood, and what you want the blood to do. Magic is always about intent."

Harry cut his finger and focusing hard on what he wanted, what he intended, pressed blood carefully to each rune, pressing some magic into them as he did so. When he was done he tapped them each with his want to activate it, as Bill has explained and he could feel the cloth come to life in his hands, thrumming with magic.

"Wow," he said grinning, "this is awesome!"

"Well done, let's go test it out, if Charlie's around he'll let us in as long as the captain doesn't catch us," Bill said with a grin, clearly looking forward to seeing his brother.

They left the shrieking shack through the camping willow, Bill pleased by it when Harry showed him how it worked, "wow, Charlie and I never worked this out when we were in school!"

And Harry led Bill carefully into the forest, explain, as he had with Hermione about it being centaur land and that they had to respect the forest, the earth and the centaurs as well if they were going be in there.

They chatted about it for a while but fell silent as they approached the clearing housing the dragons. Firenze was standing in the trees nearly as they approached and nodded to them, but didn't
They lurked in the trees, watching as wizards ran about the clearing doing different things and Bill kept an eye out for Charlie.

"It may be best," Harry said after a moment, seeing all the wizards moving about the space now that the sun was properly up, "if you go in and test it with Charlie. They probably won't question you being there, but if they see a student, we'll be in trouble as no-one is meant to know."

"Probably a good idea, they're used to me showing up at all sorts to visit Charlie," Bill said, "They won't question it."

Harry had him the shirt, "I figured we should just levitate it in front of a dragon and see what happens when she tried to burn it."

Bill chuckled and nodded, "It's a plan, we'll try and get the Chinese fireball to do it, she's closer and burns hotter, so you'll be able to see what happens."

Harry watched as Bill bounded into the clearing, having spotted Charlie now, and called out his name as he approached the closest tent to where Harry was.

A red-head shot out of the tent and tackled Bill into a hug. Harry felt an odd twisting sensation in his chest at their natural warmth and affection. He wanted that. They laughed as Bill caught Charlie, but still fell over and they ended up on the ground laughing and hugging each other. He looked away and viciously shoved that little warm curdle of mourning down.

"It's so good to see you!" Charlie exclaimed as Bill hauled him up, "I didn't know you were coming, today didn't think Harry's lessons would start till after the task."

Charlie clearly knew about the job Gringotts gave Bill teaching Harry. Harry wondered how much Bill had told him, and how he managed it with all the secrecy oaths Bill had. Harry was torn between being uncomfortable knowing he'd told Charlie but also not. Bill and Charlie seemed really close, almost like the twins were. Harry would not have expected Fred to keep anything from George. Maybe Bill and Charlie were like that? He thought about it for a moment, he knew he shouldn't, he really knew he shouldn't but, he realised, he was okay with it, he trusted Bill and Charlie. As much as he scolded himself for taking that risk.

Harry found him envying their easy, close relationship. Especially when Bill wrapped an arm casually around his brother as they walked around the clearing heading briefly into another tent, talking fast.

They both seemed quite tactile, Harry thought. After growing up where he was often only touched with disgust or to cause him pain, he found the idea of such casual, friendly touches very foreign. It sounded nice, though. He wondered what that was like, trusting someone like that, having someone to confide in, to lean on. He wanted that, that closeness, that easy affection and care and hated that he did want it.

He ruthlessly shoved the feelings down again and locked them up tight in the little box inside. It didn't work like that in the real world. Orphaned freaks didn't get things like that, in the real world. Hugs and caring didn't keep you fed, or warm at night, or safe from people stabbing you in the back. He really liked Bill and Charlie, but now that he could think a bit clearer, he knew better than to let them too close.

He looked away but focused on the dragon again as Charlie and Bill came out of the tent. Charlie
held up a hand briefly in the direction of the trees where Harry was, making him smile. The two brothers went up to the fireball. They were not within flaming distance, and Charlie levitated the shirt in front of her cautiously.

She looked at it with beady eyes, letting out a low rumbling hiss that even from here, Harry could hear and understand, "go away."

When the shirt kept approaching, she let out another warning hiss, before flaming it. The shirt was engulfed by flame for a long moment. Bill yanked Charlie back towards the trees, not wanting to insight her wrath. But Charlie just laughed, not at all startled or worried by the flames that were not quite close enough to scorch him. He just kept levitating shirt as the fire went out.

Harry was ecstatic to see that the shirt seemed unharmed. It had worked.

A man was hurrying over though, and Harry quickly scrambled up into a tree so as not to be found. No-one ever looked up.

"Well? Did your idea work?" The man asked Charlie.

"It wasn't my idea sir," Charlie said, "a friend of Bill's made it," to the man who Harry assumed was his boss.

"Excellent, see that they get in contact with us then. I think we would be interested in working with them to develop something like this or even purchasing some off them. It would be good to have something fireproof under our dragon hide pants and vest. Show me again? Let's test a different dragon's fire," He said gesturing to the short snout.

To Harry's great relief and pride, the shirt held up to all four dragon's fire, though it was starting to look a bit singed after being subjected to four long bouts of flame.

"Thanks, Charlie," Bill said, clapping his brother on the back, "we appreciate it," Bill said after the boss had left.

"Any time Bill, you know I'm always happy to play with dragons," Charlie said with a grin, making his brother chuckle, before he said more seriously, "let him know I'm happy to help, and that may be powering something with something cold or even a water rune or something, may increase the length of the shirt's resistance."

"I'll let him know," Bill said, "you going to join us for lunch? Where in the shack, bring your broom and fly in through the attic window,"

"We'll see how this morning goes, we need to settle the gardens back down, and inspect the arena they have put together for the task. I'll send you a message, though, if I can't make it." Charlie replied, pulling his brother into another hug.

"Fair enough," Bill said, as Charlie gave another wave in the direction of the tree's where Harry was hidden and went back to the Dragons.

Bill and Harry snuck back along the edge of the forest and crept back into the shrieking check via the camping willow.

"What next?" Harry asked Bill, "what did you want to go over today?"

"I figured we'd start on some detection charms and simple counters for spelled objects and things, as well as some containment spells and a few basic wards," Bill said pulling out his wand, "there
are also some other wards that we can spell onto your clothes, and if your happy using blood runes
stitched into the lining that opens up another realm of possibilities on ways we can use wards to
keep you safe," Bill said as Harry pulled out a notebook and pen.

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Startled, Harry looked up sometime later from where he was stitching the last rune into another test
shirt, to see Charlie fly through the attic floor and landed in front of him.

"Hi," Charlie said, looking around curiously.

"Charlie, you made it!" Bill said getting up from the table to clap his brother on the back, only to
have Charlie pull him into another hug.

"Yup, the ministry didn't bungle the construction up too much, so I was let off for a proper lunch," he said before turning to Harry who trying to avoid another hug, didn't get up from the table.
Charlie frowned slightly as if puzzled but squeezed his shoulder in greeting instead, making him
jump.

"Well done, Harry!" Charlie said, "that was brilliant."

"Hi, Charlie," Harry replied, "thanks."

"The boss was pretty impressed," Charlie said with a grin, "you should definitely look into
patenting the design when this is over, we really would be interested in helping you test out all the
kinks in the design and buying some off you," Charlie said joining them at the table.

"Really? You sure?" Harry asked

"totally," said Charlie, "we have dragon hide boots and pants, and a vest, but we can't be totally
covered in dragonhide. It's not only expensive, but it's just not practical to wear a whole shirt of it.
It is hard to wash, dragonhide natural retells water, but its also just not that comfortable and the
cheaper stuff is rather stiff. Fine for pants, and a vest but not great for arm movement and stuff, not
every day."

"So having fire-resistant shirts to protect your arms and neck under the vests would be really good," Harry said, thinking on it, "I wouldn't even know where to start. I guess if you send me some
shirts, I can do the spell work and potions and the runes, but it's powered by blood. I'd need your
blood to charge them up, and not many people are comfortable with that," Harry said, thinking
aloud.

"Or we could later, after the task, work out some sort of array to tie it to the wizards magic." Bill
suggested, "You could then set it up, and they would just need to activate it if they really don't
want to use blood. It may actually work better, if they're seriously under fire for a while, their
magic will keep it going."

"Think on it, Harry," Charlie said, "in the meantime, how are you feeling about the task?"

"They defiantly won't be talked into giving me an egg. I'll have to transfigure a rock and so a
switching spell, or summon it, or just outfly her unless they add an imposter egg to her clutch and I
can persuade her to give that up," Harry said pragmatically.

Charlie nodded, "well, I sincerely hope they add a fake at least. Using real eggs is too dangers, I
don't know why the boss agreed to it," he said fuming.
"I'll do my best to keep them safe, Charlie," Harry said, feeling he should probably put a hand on his arm or something to reassure him, but couldn't.

"I know you will, Harry," Charlie smiled, "did you give any thoughts to using a water rune?" He asked

"Yeah, it worked under normal fire but started steaming pretty badly, even with a drying charm. The water rune is just too soggy. Dragon fire is even hotter, I'd end up being burnt from the steam alone. An ice rune helped, it makes the shirt a bit cooler, but there was still a similar problem with steam" Harry explained, showing Charlie the new rune scheme.

"In the end, I revisited my old ideas of using sigil magic. I combined the sigils into the rune scheme, to help balance the ice run. It seems to have given it extra stability." He explained, pointing at the new additions, "it works fine under a long bout of ordinary fire."

Charlie beamed and clapped Harry on the back in congratulations, "Brilliant. Want me to test it for you?"

"Can I sneak down after tea and watch?" Harry asked, "there are two different versions, we'll see which ones work best."

"Sure thing, come past around 8? I should be able to sneak away for a bit then, assuming things go smoothly if they get riled up too much. I may have to send the shirts back via the box, we can chat about it that way" Charlie said.

"Thanks," Harry said greatly.

They spent an enjoyable lunch together, cooked by Winky and Dobby going over the runes on the shirts and brainstorming how Harry could patent the design and get it up and running as something he could sell.

Before he left, Charlie wrapped Harry in a goodbye hug.

"Careful Harry" Bill teased, making Harry jump. "He's a Hugger. He can respect boundaries, but he'll barnacle onto you given half a chance."

Charlie snorted punched his brother on the arm and wrapped him in a bear hug before he mounted his broom and zoomed out of the shack with a jaunty wave over his shoulder.

Bill then looked at Harry in an almost, analytical way.

"If he's making you uncomfortable, tell him," Bill said slowly, "he doesn't want to make you uncomfortable. He'll respect your boundaries."

"What?" Harry asked, looking a bit like a deer in the headlights.

"Charlie." Bill said, "He's a very tactile person with those he likes. Some people need casual touch more than others" Bill explained, "Charlie can be like a barnacle. He craves affectionate touch with those he likes and is very tactile in showing his affection. He's an octopus, a very handsy that one, but a harmless one. He'll stop if you don't like it."

Harry had the self-control not to squirm under the scrutiny as Bill continued, "I've seen you flinch and jump Harry. Don't think you have to put up with it to be friends with him." Bill assured

"I, um I don't," stuttered Harry, torn. He hated the fact he liked being hugged and touched. His
uncle touched him all the time, and it hurt, whether a belt, a fist or a shoe. Could Harry really risk letting anyone else close enough to possibly blow up at him later? Hermione was different, and even then, her touch made him uncomfortable. Why were Bill and Charlie different? Why did he feel safe with their hugs? He scowled irritated at himself.

"I'll tell him to stop okay, Harry," bill said, "you don't need to worry about it," he turned to head out after Charlie.

"No!" Harry called out, reaching out and grabbing Bill's shirt back before he could stop himself, "no, please don't."

Bill turned back to him slightly, looking serious, "You never have to put up with anything that makes you uncomfortable, Harry. Neither of us wants that, it's okay to speak up if you don't want a hug, or if you have an opinion," Bill bent down slightly, so he was at Harry's eye level, "no means no, that extends to hugs and casual touches too. And Charlies a firm believer in that. It's important to him, Harry. He cares about you and doesn't want you uncomfortable. You're allowed to have feelings and opinions and for those to be heard."

"I-" Harry stuttered, confused and conflicted, still clutching Bill's shirt back in one hand.

On the one hand, touch still startled him and was an odd sensation. At times uncomfortable. But on the other hand, he found an odd warmth in casual, friendly touch that he found himself craving like he was starved. And he hated himself for that weakness.

He hated himself for craving how warm and safe and cared for their hugs had made him feel; hated how close to the surface his emotions became when they hugged him, and hated how much it melted all his barriers and for how weak that made him.

But he liked it. And found himself wanting more hugs. The idea of Charlie stopping, filled him with an odd heavy dread and an unhappy feeling inside.

"Don't," he said again, "please. I, its..."

"You sure you're comfortable with it?" Bill asked, and Harry was floored. When had anyone actually cared before?

"I... it's strange, I'm not used to it, but I, I don't mind." Harry got out slowly, "its nice?" He said not entirely sure yet.

Bill studied him intently for a long moment, and Harry found himself unable to meet his gaze, but Bill just pulled him into a brief hug.

"I was a bit surprised myself," he said, "Charlie's pretty friendly, but he normally takes longer to warm up to people before he starts being so easily affectionate. There are very few people he actually likes. So consider yourself lucky to be one of the few."
Bill and Harry spent the afternoon on Occlumency. Occlumency was both easier with another person who knew what they were doing; and harder. Easier, as there was someone to explain it and tell him what he was doing wrong. But harder as someone who knew what they were doing was actually trying to break into his mind. It was also harder to let go and focus inward with someone else in the room.

Bill had assured him that he had the right idea of clearing his mind, he just needed to work on bringing that mental state up more often, and faster.

"Ideally, you want to be able to occlude all the time," he explained, "when you get more proficient at it, clearing your mind is like sinking back inside your self. you'll then be able to build shields around you that you can safely think and feel behind while the outer mind is clear and therefore doesn't show anything to the person who attacks or read it."

"That's pretty advanced, though. So for the moment, we are going to practice you clearing your mind to start accessing that inner self, and have you learn to start sensing someone in or around your mind."

He continued, "as you have a natural aptitude for the mind arts, it should come more easily to you when you have the blocks off. The fact your magic is all screwy could make it hard for you to feel others magic interacting with your own. We'll wait and see, ready?" He asked

Harry took a deep, steadying breath, cleared his mind and nodded, trying not to twitch as Bill raised his wand at Harry. Harry had to force himself to look Bill hesitantly in the eye. He hated looking people in the eye.

"I'll be gentle Harry, I won't push, I promise," Bill reassured, seeming to sense his nerves.

Harry took another breath and nodded.
"Legilimens," Bill murmured.

Harry could already sense Bill's magic from being in the same room. The spell, however, seemed
to amplify it and focus it into a beam or a tendril. Legilimency was odd, Harry thought, he and
Hermione had defiantly been doing it wrong. Bill's magic seemed to reach out to him, not harshly,
but it was an odd focused sort of feeling. Harry got the impression that it could have been harsh
and painful if Bill hadn't been trying to make it both gentle, but noticeable enough for Harry to feel
it.

Bill's magic gave another soft nudge against him. As soon as it touched his own, Harry lost track of
it, getting confused in the sickly swirling ball of wrong, that he could now feel if he focused very
hard on clearing his mind and feeling his magic.

Images flashed past him; Ron storming away, Bill and Charlie hugging giving Harry an odd almost
longing sensation, he was reading Charlie's dragon book so grateful, he was walking through
London with Bill, he was chatting with Hermione about his mum's blanket, he was in his
cupboard... He panicked.

Thud.

Harry was on the floor, panting, his eyes clamped tightly shut, his head a little sore, feeling as if
he'd run a mile.

"I... I could feel you at first," Harry said, getting up slowly, pushing back his mortification that Bill
had seen those memories. A numb feeling washed over him, bring with it a slight unsteadiness.

"You okay?" Bill said, reaching out a hand to steady him.

Harry flinched at the contact, already jumpy from the Legilimency and the memories but made
himself not move away. Bill's warm hand burned against his back almost comfortingly.

"I lost it. When it touched my magic, it was like I couldn't feel it any more," Harry said, letting Bill
lead him to the sofa.

Bill nodded, "let's give it another go now you know what to expect. See if you can keep track of it.
It's brilliant; you can feel my magic before it gets to you. That's not common, and it's brilliant you
can sense it. It gives you a great advantage."

"Hermione can't," Harry said, "she can't feel magic. Not places, not people or objects. She can only
feel her own. I don't understand it, she thinks no-one can feel magic." He started, "I can, though."

Bill nodded, "Sensing magic is a 7th sense, like sight and smell. But not everyone has it. No-one
knows why. Those that do have the sense do not always have it as strongly as you seem to. Charlie
and I have it, but the twins can only sense magic if they're touching things, though they can sense
each other. We're the only ones in our family with any of the mage sense at all."

When Harry looked up and frowned, Bill continued, "mage sense is what we call that sense."

Harry nodded, slightly relieved that he wasn't a freak because of this too.

"Occlumency, will it get easier? Or can I not do it because I can't feel my magic, because it's
bound?" Harry asked.

"We'll have to wait and see. We'll give it a few more goes. If that doesn't work, we'll have to wait
till we get you unbound." Bill said after thinking a moment, "if that's so, there are still things we
can do in the meantime to keep you safe. There are techniques you can use, other than just not meeting peoples eyes."

Harry nodded, very relieved, "brilliant, let's try it again then."

At Harry's insistence, they had continued well after Bill had advised they should stop. Despite his best efforts, as soon as Bill's magic interacted with his own, Harry could no longer feel it and therefore no longer defend against it. Resulting in him, currently, being totally rubbish at that particular method of Occlumency.

"It's okay Harry," Bill assured him, "after you get the bindings removed, it will change. We'll focus on something else for now." He explained, going on to discuss other meditations and mental exercises Harry could use to build up his mental shields.

"Focusing on one thing specifically; something you can see, feel, or hear, is a good way to keep a person out of your head. That focus will mean all your outer thoughts will be on that one thing, so the Legilimens won't notice anything else without going deeper. That is much harder without eye contact." Bill explained reassuringly.

After they had practised that, he recommended another way of Harry learning Occlumency. "Another way is to meditate on yourself. Go deep into your self, like when you look for your magic. Instead of focusing on that, focus on letting your mind drift and centre. Let it settle. Don't think about anything in particular. Let yourself sink inside your mind."

Bill went on, "It's harder this way, but you will get to a point where you find the centre of your mind. It will appear like a vast expanse. Often, some can see their magic there, some can't. It's that place that you can build defences around. It's the inner mind. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing. That is the centre of it all."

"Remember when I said, ideally when you occlude and clear your mind, you'll sink back into yourself?" He asked.

Harry nodded, and Bill went on, "well, that's what I mean. By building shields and visualising shields in that place, you can make an inner defence. While you cannot stop someone getting past the minds natural outer defences while you can't feel your magic, you should be able to work on the inner ones. It relies heavily on visualisation and belief." He explained, "I have another book on it that will be more helpful for you in this method."

Harry nodded, feeling less morose and despite his headache, was eager to get some meditating done. Especially when Bill said Occlumency would help him cope with and handle his emotions better, and he privately hoped, his nightmares.

"You can use Occlumency to push emotions back," Bill said, "it can help you think clearly in dangerous situations when emotions like panic can be an issue," he'd explained, "but it's important to then meditate on them later and let yourself process them. It's really unhealthy to just stop yourself feeling. It makes your magic volatile and can make you really sick. The shields will collapse eventually, and you'll have a meltdown." He explained with a shudder.

"Another thing about this method is - one of the reasons it works if you can't feel magic - is by knowing yourself. By knowing your own mind. You'll have to analyse and watch all your memories, and sort them. But by knowing yourself, you can know what is intruding. Even if you can't feel magic, you'll know what does and does not belong. It can also help fight off compulsions and things, and obliviates. Though that's challenging and should be only attempted with caution." Bill said.
"let me know when you find the place, it's different for everyone," he said, looking at his watch, "then we can discuss the next step with the memories. That has to happen first before you work on visualising shields and what you want it to look like."

Harry, when Bill left, returned to the castle, exhausted but determined. He eagerly pulled Hermione over to one of the armchairs in a back corner of the common room and explained the whole thing to her in a hushed whisper. They ended up discussing it at great length and were late for dinner.

*

Harry snuck back out of the castle that night after dinner and went down to the dragons. Approaching the clearing, Harry suddenly wondered how Charlie would know he was there, without anyone else noticing. Thinking on it, he watched Charlie working around the campsite and inched closer. When he thought he saw Charlie looking towards the forest, he shot green sparks out of his wand and hurriedly climbed a tree incase someone else came to investigate.

Charlie seemed to notice the sparks, and when he spotted them light up a second time, slipped away into the trees.

"Harry?" He asked, looking around.

There was a rustling, and Harry's head appeared from under his invisibility cloak.

"can we test the shirts?" Harry asked, eagerly.

"Yep, spoke to the Boss, he's looking forward to it. But I may not be able to get away or to give them back to you tonight. The dragons got pretty riled up last time, so I may need to send them back through the box, okay?" Charlie explained.

Harry stayed in a tree by the edge of the clearing as Charlie tested the new shirts on the dragons. One was immediately burnt to a crisp, and Harry thought that might be the one that he had tried to use an ambient magic sigil on to power instead of his blood. The other shirt held up very well under all four dragons flames and considerably longer than the first time. He was very pleased with himself.

It took a while for the Dragon keepers to calm them down afterwards, and Harry was sorry that they had been riled up. But Charlie and his Boss were grinning, pleased that the test and worked. Harry, instead of going back inside, stayed on the edge of the clearing under the cloak and tried to understand the different dragons.

The Horntail and the Welsh Green were the easiest. Their dialects seemed to the most similar to true Parseltongue. The Chinese Fireball and the Swedish Short Snout seemed to be harder to understand, but the more Harry listened, the easier it got to understand their 'accent,' or 'dialect' as it were.

Charlie snuck out later that night and returned the remaining shirt to Harry. He was pleased to see it was the shirt powered by his blood, that he had added a few strengthening and balancing sigils to the previous design. After looking at it closely with Charlie, they made a few final tweaks to the design before deciding that if Harry was blasted with dragon fire, as long the magic cloth covered him completely, it should protect him just fine.

Harry went back the Gryffindor tower intent on doing up all his clothes like that, just in case. He stayed up late into the following morning spelling, stitching and brewing more flameproof potions to soak a school robe and clothes in for the task. And by the time he'd coated all the thread in his
blood, that he was stitching the runes and sigils with, he had a number of small nicks and cuts on his fingers.

Waking later that morning after a little sleep, Harry found himself very reluctant to go and be in the hustle and bustle of the village with so many people. Especially when students were still hexing him, making snide comments and nasty glares, and quoting the article at him. If that was students, he hated to think what the villagers would do. Despite knowing he needed to go to Hogsmeade to get his eyes checked, he still wasn't looking forward to it.

"Come on, Harry, it will be good for you to get outside for a bit!" Hermione wheedled.

"I've been outside loads," he protested gesturing to the forest.

"Off the grounds then," she amended, "get your mind off everything. You've been studying so madly this week, I feel as if I've hardly seen you," she said, taking his hand and tugging him towards the gates.

He groaned, "fine, but I'm wearing my cloak. I don't want everyone staring at me."

She huffed, "fine. I don't like talking to you with that on. I never know if I'm actually looking at you or not."

"I'm shorter than you by a good few inches, so odds are if you look down, you'll be right," he joked deprecatingly

She snorted but nodded, "okay, let's go then."

They walked down to the village in the weak November sun, Harry toasty and warm under his invisibility cloak, and the charmed coat he'd liberated from the room of requirement.

It was liberating being out and about under the cloak. Out of the castle and with no-one knowing he was there, no-one was staring. He felt he could let his guard down a little from watching for hexes, and while there were still many of Malfoy's badges on students cloaks, they were not flashing POTTER STINKS at him.

"What do you want to do first?" Harry asked as they approached the main street.

"Well, we should go to the eye place first. Then we have the rest of the day to ourselves," Hermione suggested.

"Not going to spend any of it with Ron?" He asked curiously.

"no," she said shortly, "he's going with the twins and Lea, and he's hanging out with Seamus and Dean now anyway. I still think he'll come round eventually, but I don't want to be around his jealousy and hot headiness at the moment." She said carefully.

Harry nodded, then realising she couldn't see him, said, "okay."

"He's normally pretty slow to anger, except when it comes to Malfoy or his family. I was a bit surprised he blew up at this, but I guess it just got too much for him. And while slow to anger, I guess it's slow to fade too," she went on, and Harry made a noncommittal noise, not wanting to talk about Ron.

Harry ducked behind a tree to pull the cloak off as they got to close the eye healers building. It was a small looking shop front, with a large pair of eyes above the doorway, that Harry thought was a
bit creepy the way they seemed to be following the people around.

Hermione pushed the shop door open, and a bell tingled. One wall was filled with different glasses and monocles, the other had a bunch of cubicles with chairs in it. The back wall had a desk, a couch and a closed door.

The witch behind the desk looked up as they entered. She looked surprised to see Harry but didn't say anything other than, "can I help you?"

"Erm," he said suddenly nervous, "my astronomy professor said to get my eyes checked, but I'm not sure I can afford it."

She frowned at him but said, "the initial visit is covered by your school fees; your teacher wrote ahead to us. Any glasses adjustments, however, will come out of your own pocket. We can do it now, or you can book an appointment." She said.

He glanced at Hermione briefly, but when she shrugged and smiled at him, he said, "er, now please."

"Right," the witch said, moving out behind the chair and directing him to one of the chairs in the cubicles, "when was your last Optiwitch appointment and who did you see?"

"Erm," he said, sitting down, glad he was sitting with his back to the wall, "never."

She made a tutting noise, and said, "Okay then what about a muggle eye healer?"

"Never," he repeated awkwardly. Behind the Optiwitch, Hermione frowned.

The Optiwitch tutted, clearly not believing him but took out her wand, "well then, I'm going to cast some spells on your eyes and that will tell us the state of your vision, what your prescription currently is and what can be done to help your sight," she explained in a concise manner.

That, more than anything helped him not flinch when she pointed her wand at his eyeballs. A muttered spell and a few moments later a slip of paper had appeared, and she peered at it.

"Well, your vision is terrible. And it has been made worse by wearing the wrong glasses. Unfortunately, we can't correct your sight now at all. Maybe when you've stopped growing. But we can get you new glasses today. You can't get contact lenses until your eyes have settled." She explained.

Harry blinked, not sure what to make of it. He pushed back any fury he may have felt, at the implication that his eyes would be better if the Dursley's had just taken him to an optometrist. Instead, he asked, "what are my options, glasses-wise then?"

"Well you'll need prism lenses, your eyes clearly turn in. How you've kept them straight this long, without pain is beyond me."

He frowned, confused, and she said, "when you relax your eyes, you go cross-eyed, don't you? Or when you get very tired, it's hard to keep them straight?"

"Yes, but... isn't that just what eyes do? Isn't everyone cross-eyes when they do that?" He asked puzzled.

"No," she said very firmly, "eyes are meant to naturally be straight. The muscles attaching to your eye on one side, are quite tight, and on the other side weaker. That makes them turn in so badly.
You've managed to keep them straight, in order to see clearly, without double vision so far, but I bet it's really tiring. And your eyes start to hurt pretty easily."

He nodded, and she kept going, "prism lenses will bend the light a bit for you, so you won't need to work so hard to see straight. They will do all the hard work for you."

"Oh!" Harry said, "really?"

"Of course. Easy as a pumpkin pasty. It doesn't happen as often. Most people just need reading glasses, but it's common enough." She said

"We could put fresh lenses into these, but they've been magically repaired so many times, it could break them. They're only muggle plastic. Plastic doesn't hold magic very well. You'd be better being a fresh pair. We have some cheap metal frames like those if you're on a tight budget." She said

"Well, I don't want glasses like these. I really don't like them, but I do need something cheap and something that won't break easily. I have 10 galleons tops," Harry said, not wanting to spend every last penny he had for the foreseeable future, but knowing he really needed new classes.

"Right then. Do you want square, round, oval, half-moon, or rim free?" She asked.

He blinked dumfounded for a moment, looking at the wall of glasses. There were so many options! He'd never had a choice of that kind before. He was feeling out of his depth when Hermione came to his rescue, "try some on Harry, then you can figure out what you like and don't like." she suggested.

After a while, he found he liked the oval-shaped ones, with thin metal frames. He found a cheap black pair and asked about the prices for the additional spells.

"Well those glasses are 2 Galleons, but your lenses will be 1 Galleon each, as they are prism lenses, which cost more. They need a special type of glass to hold the magic without warping. Each charm or spell is an additional Galleon," she said.

"We offer anti-breaking charms, anti-summoning, self-cleaning charms, water-repelling charms, climate adapting charms, (suitable for dark rooms or sunny days) and also offer a low-level mage sight charm (though you need guardian permission for that,) and there are additions to glasses for Aurors and Curse-breakers but you need proof of occupation for them," she said.

Harry thought about it for a minute then settled on the anti-summoning, but skipped the rest. He could cast the water-repelling and anti-breaking charm 'impervious,' himself. He was tempted to get a backup pair but refrained, thinking about how he still needed some money left to find lodgings over Christmas.

"Here," she said, tapping a pair and waving her wand in a complicated pattern over each lens, then over the frames as well.

He put his new glasses on and nearly fell over in shock. He could feel his eyes relax immediately, not working so painfully hard to keep his vision straight. It was so easy! And his vision. Everything was so clear! Before everything had always been a little blurry around the edges, especially when he was tired. Now everything was clearly defined with sharp lines and solid edges. And the clarity! It was all so clear!

He looked across the room and could read all of the text on the diagram on the other wall, and turning to look through the shop window. He could read the titles and signs outside the other shops
across the streets. He'd never been able to read with such little effort before, and with so much clarity.

Hermione was grinding at his awestruck expression, and the lady seemed to find it amusing too.

"For a reaction that good, I'll give you the second pair for free," she said, "haven't had that pleased a reaction to being given glasses in years."

They left the eye shop. Harry back under the cloak, and hidden from sight, let himself look around with the wide-eyed astonishment and wonder that he normally would have hidden had people been able to see him. He didn't need to let them see another of his weaknesses. Hermione led him through a few of her favourite shops, the junk shop, the book shop and the apothecary, before they stopped at the Three broomsticks, narrowly avoiding a very grumpy looking Rita Skeeter.

"I wonder if she'd be in a mood because Luna signed my journalist contract. Skeeter can't write about me now," Harry murmured with a vindicated smile.

Hermione burst out laughing at that, drawing a few looks as they crossed to a table at the back of the pub.

"I look like such an idiot talking to my self" she grumbled, "just as well I brought something to work on," she said pulling out a notebook with S.P.E.W on the front of it.

"I've changed my main goals," she muttered to Harry as he slid his butterbeer under the cloak, "I'm going to partition to get laws changed so that people cannot abuse house-elves. They need to be bound to wizards to stay healthy. But we need laws to protect them so that they cannot be abused. If they're mistreated, they should be able to obtain permission for freedom, or they can refuse an order or ask to be free if they wish," She muttered.

"Still want better working conditions and wages?" He asked curiously.

"Yes," she said, "but I have been talking to Tippy about house-elf culture and what they actually want. We can't come to an agreement on wages and time off. So in the meantime, I'm working for gaining them more rights." she explained, and they slipped into companionable silence as they sipped their drinks.

Harry's mind drifted to Sirius, and the knot in his chest tightened. He was looking forward to it. Maybe. But he was also apprehensive and worried. He was angry at Sirius still, for how he acted in school, for running to Dumbledore. He wasn't sure what to say. On the one hand, he was burning to ask about his father, but also wondering if it was better not to know.

"Look there's Hagrid," Hermione said, nudging Harry's foot with her toe, making him jump.

Harry looked, across the room to see Hagrid leaning down to talk to Professor Moody. Hagrid had a huge tankard of mulled mead in front of him. Moody had his hipflask; to the great irritation of Madame Rosmerta. They got up to leave, and Harry waved before he remembered he was wearing the cloak and Hagrid would not be able to see him.

But to his surprise horror, Moody paused and seemed to look right at Harry. He tapped Hagrid on the back (not being able to reach any higher), and after muttering something, they both headed over.

"Ello' ermione," Hagrid said loudly.

"Hello, Hagrid, Professor," said Hermione, smiling.
Moody limped around the table and bent down as if to look at the S.P.E.W. notebook, but Harry could see his magical eye looking right at him. He froze.

"Nice cloak, Potter," he muttered.

His heart beating a little faster, Harry said, "Your eye, it can- I mean, can you?" He trailed off awkwardly, still on edge.

"Yep. It can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said quietly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. He liked Moody, but honestly, the fact he could see through his cloak made him nervous. He relied on his cloak so much to hide, and now he couldn't, not from Moody. And with someone out to kill him, Harry felt very uncomfortable not being able to hide. That and he didn't know Moody. He didn't trust Moody. Not if he was Dumbledore's friend.

Harry made a mental note then and there to always wear his borrowed black travelling cloak underneath the invisibility cloak, at least with the hood of it up, his face was concealed. That way even if Moody could see through it, he might not know it was Harry. Although not many people had invisibility cloaks...

"Oh, and Potter," Moody said as an afterthought, "nice socks."

Harry blinked and looked down, then pulled up the hem of his robes and baggy jeans up to look at them. He couldn't even remember what ones he put on. He pealed back the top of his black socks to reveal the ones underneath... Oh, the luridly orange ones with purple pineapples. He winced, someone had given them to Dudley as a gag gift. Harry had ended up with them. They were almost more horrible than the rest, but at least no-one else had worn them.

Then he froze.

Moody could see his socks. Moody could see his socks under all his other layers... He shivered but was shaken out of his thoughts, by Hagrid bending down as if reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well.

He said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, come down to me cabin tonight, midnight under that cloak."

Harry startled, Moody must have told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid straightened and said loudly, "good ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and left. Moody following him out.

"Moody can see through the cloak," Harry said breathlessly when they'd gone.

"I had wondered. That really just confirms it. He knew Parvati was reading a magazine under the desks in one of his lessons," Hermione said, seeming slightly less disturbed than Harry.

"What else can he see-through?" Harry wondered, worriedly.

"What did Hagrid want?" Hermione said, changing the subject not quite as paranoid as her friend.

"Wanted me to meet him tonight at his hut, at midnight."

"I wonder what he wants?" She pondered, "its odd for him to ask you so late. Unless it's to see something in the forest that prefers the dark." Hermione wondered.
"No, I don't think so," Harry said, curiously, "I reckon he knows about the dragons. I'd be surprised if he didn't" he said feeling warmth bloom in his chest.

"You'll only have an hour before you meet Sirius," Hermione said, "that's cutting it fine."

"I'll keep an eye on the time. I think it's worth going. Hagrid might know something," Harry said as they walked back up to the castle.

And indeed Hagrid did.

Harry snuck down to Hagrid's just before Midnight later that evening. By this point, he was an old hand at sneaking in and out of the common room despite there still being people up. He'd gotten very good at putting up short-term notice-me-not wards around the portrait hole, allowing him to open it and slip through without people noticing it moving on its own.

He was a little more cautious sneaking out this time, checking the map before every doorway and turn in case Moody was around. He'd have to work out how Moody's eye worked and what its limits were. He needed a way to hide from it. He shuddered at the thought of Moody not only being able to see through his cloak, but also his clothes.

But he didn't notice Moody on the corridors in the map, and nor did he run into him. Moody seemed to be in his quarters behind the defence office along with... Barty Crouch of all people.

Though Crouch had been head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Maybe they were friends? Or discussing the tournament? Harry thought it odd, but honestly, had more important things to worry about right then.

Hagrid, when Harry got there, was looking very odd. It was clear that he had put a lot of effort into his appearance that night. Not only was he wearing an artichoke like flower in his buttonhole, but seemed to have doused his hair in axle grease in an attempt to tame it, leaving tiny bits of broken comb in his beard.

"That you 'arry?" He asked

Harry pulled the hood of the cloaks back enough so Hagrid could see his face, "what's going on Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"I got sommat so show ye," he said before striding off before Harry could get a word in edgewise, clearly very excited about something.

Curiosity peaked, but cautious too, Harry silenced his feet and pulled his cloak over his face again as he followed Hagrid to the... Beauxbatons Carriage?

"Hagrid, what?" Harry whispered only to be shooshed.

When Hagrid knocked, Madame Maxime opened it wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled at Hagrid.

"Ah, 'Agrid . . . is it time?"

"Bong-sewer," said Hagrid, beaming, holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Harry followed them past the paddock with the Abraxian horses and into the forest, Harry running to keep up.
It seemed Madame Maxime was as curious as Harry for she asked, "vair is it you are taking me, 'Agrid?"

"Yeh'll enjoy this," said Hagrid gruffly, 'worth seein', trust me. On'y - don' go tellin' anyone I showed yeh, mind? Yeh're not s'posed ter know."

"Of course not," said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And Harry had a sinking feeling that he knew where this was going, as he followed them into the forest and along the path to the dragons. Despite knowing what Hagrid wanted him to see, and it did warm him to know his friend was looking out for him, Harry was keen to get back to the common room. As much as he was conflicted about Sirius, Harry didn't like being late for anything. He couldn't resist seeing the dragons again, or Charlie, though.

As they approached the dragons, Harry could hear them before he could see them. They were angry tonight, and Harry wondered what had provoked them. He could hear the handlers shouting and the dragons letting out deafening, earsplitting roars.

The initial effect the dragons had on Harry had not diminished. They were still awe-inspiring and terrifying, still captivatingly fascinating and so beautiful it was hard to tear his eyes away from them. Harry wished he was seeing them for any other reason than having to go up against them.

He was drawn out of his musings when Hagrid turned to Madame Maxime and asked, "Wan' a closer look?" The pair of them moved right up to the fence, that was now around the edge of the clearing.

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled Charlie near the fence. He was straining on the chain he was holding. It seemed that the Horntail had broken free of her initial pen. One of the ground pegs looked to have come loose.

"They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!" Charlie called out, and despite himself, Harry grinned.

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand and shout, "Stupefy!" in unison. Like the other night, the dragon teetered dangerously on her back legs; then, very slowly, fell. Several tons of sinewy dragon hit the ground hard. Charlie and the other tamers frantically levitated the dragon back into her own large pen and refastened the pegs into the ground before re-warding the pen tightly.

"All right, Hagrid?" Charlie panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now - we put them out with a Sleeping Draft on the way here, it lasted longer than we had anticipated. But with those ministry fellows stomping around this arvo, well, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all."

"Saw that ministry fellow dropping off gold eggs. They going to be used in the task Charlie?" Hagrid asked

Relief washed over Harry. If they had fake eggs, he wouldn't have to steal a real one. He wasn't sure if he could bear stealing and risking a real dragon egg. All for a stupid wizard game...

"Can't talk about it, Hagrid," Charlie said, "did you have to bring her?" He asked gesturing to
Madame Maxime, "she'll tell her champion."

"Thought she'd like to see," Hagrid said

Charlie narrowed his eyes at Madame Maxime strolling around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the stunning dragons.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," said Charlie, shaking his head.

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, changing the subject.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail, a Common Welsh Green, a Swedish Short-Snout, and a Chinese Fireball," Charlie said proudly.

"Four. . ." said Hagrid, "so it's one fer each o' the champions, is it?"

"I literally cannot talk about it, Hagrid," said Charlie. "But we'll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. I can tell you this, I don't envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Her back end's as dangerous as her front, look."

Charlie pointed toward the long, bronze-coloured spikes protruding every few inches along the tail. They looked more intimidating in real life than in Charlie's book. Harry looked away. Charlie had pointed them out to him already.

Some of the keepers dashed up to the dragons now they were stunned and placed in their clutches, what looked to be one golden egg each. Hagrid let out a moan of longing, noticing the eggs for the first time.

"I've got them counted, Hagrid," Charlie said sternly.

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn't miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle, neatly avoiding headmaster Karkaroff on the way back.

Damn, he thought as he hurried back to the tower. This meant Diggory was the only one that wouldn't know. Which meant it would fall to Harry to tell him. He swore again, irritated at his inane sense of fairness and irritated that he cared and that Dumbledores compulsions stopped him from just looking after himself. He didn't need the extra attention that warning Diggory would get him.
The common room was deserted when he got back, and by the smell of it, Hermione had not needed to use a dung bomb to clear it. He had no sooner sat down in an armchair and pulled the clock off from around his head when the fireplace flashed green for a moment. Sirius's head appeared.

"Sirius," Harry murmured, putting up a privacy spell just in case.

Sirius looked healthier now, tanner than last time Harry saw him. He'd filled out and looked like he'd managed a few good meals. His hair was cleaner and had been trimmed, no longer the shaggy mat it had been last time. He looked more like the man in his parent's wedding photos now. Harry bit back a grimace at the thought of his father.

"How are you? You look better," Harry said

"I'm doing okay. Better than last year, but how are you, Harry?"

"Been better," Harry said, then hesitated, what would Sirius tell Dumbledore? And how much could Harry afford Dumbledore to be told?

"You going to tell Dumbledore I talked to you?" He finally asked

"Nah," Sirius said to Harry's relief before he added, "he already knows. How do you think I got into the castle fireplace without the password. Not everyone can floo into Hogwarts, especially without a password."

Harry froze, "why did you go blabbing to him, Sirius? I asked you, not him."

"He's worried about you Harry," Sirius said as if it was the most obvious and logical thing in the world, "he knows you talk to me, so he's asked me to keep an eye on you for him. Make sure you're
doing okay."

'Make sure I'm playing his game more like,' Harry thought cynically.

"He means well, Harry. He cares about you a great deal," Sirius chided gently, is if it were nothing, "you're being silly."

Harry felt like Sirius had just tossed a cup of icy water in his face. "Course," he said detachedly, "how silly me."

And Sirius beamed at him as if it meant the world to him that Harry had agreed with him.

Harry'd never been able to rely on adults before. He shouldn't have hoped that Sirius would be any different. *Never hope. Hope gets you hurt*, Harry thought remembering one of his main rules from the Dursley's.

*Never hope for anything*,

Harry had already broken that rule with Sirius once, when Sirius offered him a place to live, an escape from the Dursley's. Look where that had gotten him. He had kept making that mistake, in thinking he could actually rely on Sirius for guidance and advice. Now look how that had turned out.

Harry had sworn to himself; he wouldn't take unnecessary risks this time. And now here he was, taking that same risk with Bill and Charlie. Did he really want to continue making that same mistake?

He cursed himself for his weakness and infuriating inability to stand on his own without anybody. He scowled. He'd be better. He'd be stronger. He wouldn't be stupid enough to depend on anyone else again.

Sirius broke him from his angry internal rant by saying, "now what's going on?" and Harry had to stop himself scowling coldly at him.

He debated what to tell him. He couldn't say anything about Dumbledore or Gringotts and wasn't sure he wanted to bring up his father. He also wasn't sure he wanted Dumbledore knowing that he already knew about the dragons.

Instead, he settled on, "do you know any good wards or anything I can use to protect my belongings?"

It was an innocuous enough topic.

"Wards? What do you need wards for? You can trust your housemates Harry, they're Gryffindor's. They're your family. We never had problems with needing wards! Don't be so paranoid."

Harry bit back a snort and said, "I'm being hexed in the corridors."

"Work on your protago then. That will help. And don't go anywhere alone. Your housemates will stand up for you."

Harry bit back a snort, as Sirius continued, "go to McGonagall if they keep pestering you. She's fair. She's your Head of the House, she'll look out for you, Harry. Now listen, I don't have much time."
Harry frowned slightly and peered at Sirius, who looked concerned. Harry wasn't sure Sirius's concern was for Harry or himself. Harry thought that though Sirius looked better than he had last time, his eyes still had that deadened, haunted look Azkaban had given him.

"I haven't got long here... I've broken into a wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, his spirits sinking... Surely there could not be anything else coming. But knowing his luck, it wouldn't surprise him.

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

Of course, he knew what a Death Eater was. But maybe he should do some more research into the war, the trials, and who the Death Eaters were. He couldn't afford to be blindsided.

"The Durmstrang headmaster is a Death Eater?" He asked incredulously.

"He was. I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wanted Moody at Hogwarts this year - to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff and put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said, still shocked, "why? Why him and not you?"

Sirius snorted bitterly, "He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic. He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he named names... he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place... He's not very popular there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But... are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he's an outstanding actor. He was furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing. He and Madame Maxime were pretty much the only ones."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now, I've been keeping an eye on the Daily Prophet, Harry..."

"- You and the rest of the world," cut in Harry bitterly.

"- and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely. Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"So... what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But... why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've heard some bizarre things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark... and then, did you hear about that Ministry of Magic Witch who's gone missing?"
"Bertha Jorkins?" asked Harry.

"Exactly... She disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumoured to be last... and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah, but... would she have really walked straight into Voldemort?" Harry asked, trying to figure out why her name felt strongly familiar. It felt important.

"Listen. I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was; a few years above your dad and me. She was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

"I know her name though, Jorkins... Jorkins," Harry murmured, trying to figure it you, "she's dead!" He said suddenly, "he killed her, that dream I had. He killed her! He and Wormtail are planning something. They have someone here. They need to get to me!" Harry said, remembering bits and pieces of his dream.

"So... Voldemort found out about the tournament... And is using it, to get to me. How though? And for what?" Harry murmured still thinking, "and is Karkaroff here on his orders, do you think?"

"I didn't know you remembered that much of it," Sirius said, "you'll have to tell Dumbledore!"

"I didn't remember; till now," Harry said, still frowning, "I'm assuming you'll be passing it on to him regardless," he said snidely, but it seemed to go right over Sirius's head.

"Course I will. He can't keep you safe if he doesn't know," said Sirius and Harry had to bite back a snort of derision and a few sharp words.

"Hmm," Sirius said slowly, pausing a moment to think, "I just don't know... Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident."

"So it's someone else then..." Harry mused, with a frown trying to think of who else it could be. The only new people other than the Ministry people were the foreign students and school heads and Moody. Moody, who had been attacked before school started.

"Good plan really," said Harry bleakly. "They'll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff. They're the first task."

"Right - these dragons," said Sirius, babbling now. "Don't try a Stunning Spell. Dragons are too strong and powerful to be knocked out by a single Stunner-"

"Yeah, I know," said Harry.

"But you can do it alone," said Sirius. "There is a simple-"

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as he heard footsteps coming down the spiral staircase behind him.

"Go!" he hissed at Sirius. "Go! Someone coming!"

There was a soft crackling noise in the fire, and Sirius vanished. Harry pulled the cloak over his head again making himself invisible. Ron came downstairs, looked around with a frown, then
turned and went back upstairs.

Harry sat there for a long time. Was Ron worried? Was he having second thoughts?

Harry dismissed the thought and instead pondered over who could possibly be Voldemort's inside person. Really, it had always been the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher who was up to no good. From history alone, it indicated that it should be Moody. But Moody was Dumbledores friend. Would Dumbledore not realise then if his friend was acting oddly? Was his friend acting strangely? Or, was Dumbledore in on it? But then Moody had been attacked over the summer. Maybe he was under the imperious? Or... an imposter? But the map never lied, and Moody had been on the map. Or maybe Crouch was in on it. Crouch was often with Moody in his office on the map, and that didn't make any sense at all...

What on earth was going on?

*

Harry didn't dismiss the idea that something was indeed going on, but with the first task rapidly approaching, he tabled it temporarily. He was more concerned with living through the first task than working out what Voldemort was doing.

Sirius probably wanted him to use the Conjunctivitis curse, Harry thought. It was a simple spell that could easily distract a dragon. Their eyes were the only vulnerable bit not covered in shield-like scales. But that would hurt them. It would really hurt them. No. Harry liked his plans better. Lots of fireproofing, asking nicely, summoning the egg if that didn't work, or using a switching spell, or if they all failed, outflyng it. He felt relatively prepared for the task, but there was nothing sure about several tonnes of protective mother dragon.

But first, he had to warn Diggory. At least by warning Diggory himself, Diggory would ow him one. Maybe that would get Hufflepuff of his back if he could use his warning to prove he wasn't out for the spotlight.

Despite his usual low profile in the halls, Harry didn't don the cloak immediately after leaving breakfast on Monday. Instead, he rose when he saw Diggory leaving the table. By the time Harry got out into the entrance hall, Diggory was already at the top of the staircase, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers from all houses.

Harry sighed. He really didn't want to do this. He didn't want the attention, especially not from older students looking to hex him. He didn't want to talk to Diggory or help him at all, really. Diggory also thought he was a liar. Harry wasn't feeling particularly charitable to his fellow students in general, actually. But if it got out that he, Harry, knew and didn't warn Diggory, he'd be damned for not being the 'Nobel Fair Gryffindor.' And if he did warn him, he'd still be damned. Especially if a teacher found out, he'd cheated, or Diggory reacted badly and ratted him out. That's just how it worked.

Harry sighed, not really much of a choice either way.

He discreetly took out his wand and shot a severing charm at Diggory's bag. Books went everywhere, parchment, quills, and homework spilled out onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed over the lot and Harry didn't really feel at all sorry for the mess. He was relieved when Diggory nearly groaned and sent his friends ahead to class.

Harry slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Diggory's friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the now empty corridor.
"Diggory," Harry called out quietly as he approached, not bothering to stick to the high formality's that most, outside of Slytherin, ignored while at school.

"Hi," said Cedric, picking up a copy of A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration that was now splattered with ink. "My bag just split... brand-new and all..."

"Diggory," repeated Harry ignoring the irrelevant small talk, "the first task is dragons."

"What?" said Diggory blankly.

"Dragons," said Harry, speaking quickly, "they've got four. One for each of us, and we've got to steal an egg."

Diggory stared at him. Harry saw panic in his grey eyes.

"Are you sure?" Diggory said in a hushed voice.

"Of course I'm sure," Harry snapped.

"But how did you know?"

"Not relevant," said Harry snapped again, "the others know too. Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons."

Diggory straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, with a puzzled suspicious look in his eyes.

"Why are you telling me?" he asked.

"I get hexed enough as it is for being in this stupid game. I don't care about winning, but I don't want people to think it's my fault if you get hurt, if they find out I knew and didn't tell you. You're housemates hate me enough as is."

Diggory was still looking at him, puzzled.

Harry sighed. He'd lingered in the halls to long as it was. He wasn't interested in persuading Diggory or having any conversation with him at all, really. It wasn't his problem if Diggory was suspicious.

Diggory was still looking at him in a suspicious way when Harry turned to walk away, but Harry stopped when he heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He sighed again, bristling, as Mad-Eye Moody emerged from a nearby classroom.

Great, thought Harry, just what I need.

"Come with me, Potter," he growled. "Diggory, off you go."

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them? Harry was relieved to be away from a suspicious Diggory, but not pleased to be around Moody. One, he was a teacher, he didn't fancy detention for breaking tournament rules and two, because Harry wasn't sure who he was and what he really wanted.

"Professor, I'm supposed to be in Herbology," he said.

"Never mind, Potter, my office,"
Harry followed him with extreme, but well hidden, reluctance. And had to force himself not to visibly tense up when Moody shut his office door behind them. Moody turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

"That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter," Moody said quietly.

Harry worked hard to keep his face blank; not having expected that response.

"Sit," said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

The office had changed from last time Harry had been in there. It was now filled with a number of exceptionally odd objects, some of which he had seen in the Room of Requirement when Harry had asked for a safe place.

On Moody's desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass Sneakoscope. Was it broken? Why? In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like a squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. Harry frowned. Weren't they meant to hum that around lies?

What appeared to be a cracked mirror, hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it; none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you Potter?" Moody asked, still watching Harry closely.

"What's that one called?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies... no use here, of course, too much interference. Students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their homework. It's been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope too because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive. Picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

Or maybe it's picking up you, Harry thought suspiciously but didn't say anything, not meeting Moody's eyes. He'd have to look into dark detectors later too.

"And what's the mirror for?" He asked. He'd seen that in the Room of Requirement too.

"That's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I open my trunk!" He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window.

It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, for one wild moment, he wondered if Moody had Crouch in there. So often had Crouch shown up in this very room, in that very spot, on the map. But Moody's next question interrupted him.

"So... found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry said nothing and pretended to gape at Moody stupidly instead.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "I just found out."

Moody's gnarled face morphed into a grin, "wasn't accusing you, laddie." And Harry bristled at the
familiarity, "I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but
you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won't be. They'll have told their champions everything they
can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to prove he's only human."

Can't blame them, Harry thought savagely. He'd love to see the look on Dumbledore face too.

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swivelled around so fast it made Harry feel
uncomfortable and dizzy on Moody's behalf.

"Sir?" He said after Moody had been quite a moment.

"So, you know about the dragons," Moody said again

Harry said nothing.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Moody demanded.

Which genuinely threw him... Why did Moody care? Was he here for Dumbledore or Voldemort...
and did they want him alive or dead?

"Sir?" He asked

"I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favouritism. I'm just going to give
you some good, general advice. And the first bit is. Play to your strengths."

"Sir..." He said, not sure what Moody was actually aiming for. What did he want?

"What are you good at, boy?" He asked slightly exasperated.

Harry bristled at the name, and hurriedly picked something innocuous, that couldn't be used
against him.

"flying..." He said

"Good, play to your strengths. My second piece of general advice," Moody said loudly, interrupting
him, "is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to get what you need."

Harry looked at him, blankly. What did he want and why was Moody helping him? Moody must
have interpreted his expression as confusion and said, "Come on, boy..." whispered Moody. "Put
them together... it's not that difficult..."

"You're telling me to summon my broom and outfly the dragon for the task?" Harry said
deliberately not narrowing his eyes.

Whoever Moody was working for, (if it was indeed Moody) they wanted Harry alive. At least for
this task; maybe, the whole tournament. If it was Dumbledore, that made sense. Dumbledore
wasn't finished with his puppet. But if it was Voldemort, what did he want? What did he have
planned? Harry wished he could pull out the map and check who he was actually talking to. But
even if it just said Moody, that didn't tell him what was really going on.

"Thank you for your general advice, sir, but I really do have to get to Herbology, or I'll get
detention," Harry said, not able to sit there any longer.

The moment he was out of the room, down the staircase and out of the castle, he cast a
precautionary notice-me-not charm around himself, in case Moody's eyes could see through floors
and walls, and pulled out the map.
Alister Moody and Bartimius Crouch's dots were both now standing stationary in Moody's room's. Where did Crouch come from?

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Luna found Harry at lunch as he was about to enter the Great Hall.

"Well Met Luna," Harry said startled as she linked her arm thought his and lead him in the opposite direction.

"Well met Harry Potter," she said airily, "we're having lunch in the kitchens so we can talk. You have a few less Bumble-zingers today." She added, looking at the empty space around his left ear intently.

"Thanks, Luna," he said.

Remembering the contract suddenly, he asked, "Will I be talking to Luna, my fellow student or Luna, the reporter?"

She smiled, dreamily at him and simply said, "why can't it be both?"

Harry sighed but sat down at the back table in the kitchens and thanked Dobby for the tray of sandwiches he'd put down. Luna pulled out a notebook and a quill from her ponytail.

"What do you want to know, and how do you want this to work?" Harry asked cautiously.

"I'll interview you now, and then after the task. I will also be around tomorrow, watching things, and I'll take some photos" she said peering intently at the space above his right ear this time

Harry frowned, but said, "okay. Will I see your article before it comes out?"

"Maybe," she said, "I meant to find you over the weekend so we could have more time, but you were out," she said dreamily, and Harry froze. How did she know? Who would she tell? And what would she do with the information?

"but," she continued lightly, "tell me if there's something you don't want mentioned," as if it were nothing.

"Okay, just make sure you print the truth," Harry said after a moment, "I don't really care, as long as it's the truth," he said hoping against hope he would not regret it but felt he probably would.

She nodded, "tell me about how you got into the tournament? And is there anything you want to rebut about Ms Skeeters article?"

"Yes!" He said, "there is. All of it. I did not enter my name. I was really looking forward to a school year where I did not almost get killed." Harry started, and after a long very hesitant pause, started to explain about each attempt on his life, or to harm him while he was in school.

He didn't implicate Dumbledore in it, just the general plots, and the dangers that often the defence professors posed. Most of which had already circled the school in some form of roamer anyway. No harm in clearing it up, he thought. And if people were smart enough to realise that Dumbledore should have stepped in but didn't, well, that wasn't Harry's fault. After all, he was an ignorant and naive little Gryffindor.

Finally, he finished on, "I was really looking forward to a quiet year when I heard about the age
line. It meant there was no way I would be dragged into the tournament. I thought it sounded mildly entertaining but foolishly dangerous kind of stupid. I didn't and don't want any part of it. I was appalled and dismayed at my name coming out."

"Why didn't you make an oath saying it was not you that entered?" She asked as if merely offering him tea.

"That's simple," Harry said, "I didn't know. I was raised ignorant."

She frowned, "so Ms Skeeter lied that you were pampered?" She asked, with what Harry thought was a worrying level of perception.

He considered, "I was raised muggle. Hagrid took me to get my things. My relatives did not want me to be magical, and Hagrid didn't give me the introduction pack. It's possible he didn't know, and I didn't know anything about the magical world at all until he showed up, so I didn't know to ask for it."

That would be innocuous enough to not raise too much wrath from Dumbledore and would keep Harry looking naive. Though anyone who read between the lines, mite figure it out too. That would hopefully get people to start questioning the old man's judgment.

"How odd. Who's your Guardian? Your magical one?" Luna asked still in her dreamy slightly unfocused voice.

Harry thought for a moment, considering what he didn't mind people knowing, "I didn't know such a thing existed until now. No-one here has been able to tell me."

It was not a lie, but not the whole truth. And if he said Dumbledore, Dumbledore would know he knew. But if people could work out Dumbledore had not been playing his part with Harry right, maybe it may get him some public heat and distract him from messing with Harry.

Luna looked at him a long moment then nodded and started scribbling on her piece of parchment frantically; occasionally asking him a followup question. Harry finished his lunch and went to class. Divination was filled with Trelawny predicting his fiery death, and Harry spent the lesson angrily contradicting every one of her predictions with better ones, with references to his star chart and textbooks. He may not be able to call her a total fraud, but he could at least rebut her with astrology. It ended up getting him good marks, and he left the class, still irritated but feeling slightly vindicated.
The night before the task, Harry was so terrified, he didn't feel anything at all. He tried to go for a run but just ended up in front of the dragons, hands tingling, legs shaking, a bit dizzy but other than that not feeling anything at all. It was an odd feeling. Disconcerting. Like being untethered from the earth; emotionally detached from everything.

He found he didn't care. He knew he needed sleep and he'd done all he could to prepare, but all he could think of was dragons.

He ended up taking out his broom and flying. The Thestrals joining him. But he still ended up at the dragons. So he decided to talk to the dragons again, instead.

The dragons were being moved from their clearing, and into pens outside a large arena, that Harry assumed would be where the task would be held. The dragons were clearly not at all happy with the move, and the handlers were running this way and that, frantically; trying to calm them down and put out small fires. Harry wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed that even if Charlie knew he was there, he was too busy to get away and talk to him.

Harry ended up under his Invisibility cloak, using Parseltongue trying to calm them down. He crouched invisibly on the back of a Thestral and spoke to them. He introduced himself and tried to explain what was going on. The Thestrals had followed him down. They seemed to be fond of him. He did like the odd creatures. He often said hello or brought them something when he was out in the forest. They did not seem at all bothered by the dragons and seemed perfectly happy to keep walking between the four dragons as Harry tried to talk to them. The Dragons would not be swayed though. They believed that the fake eggs were real.

(The eggs were spelled, he'd learn later. They'd used something to trick the dragons. They potioned them. That was what had riled them up. Charlie couldn't tell him because of the Geas.)

Eventually, Charlie figured out what was going on as the dragons were all acting oddly, looking into space, though no-one is there. Cocking their heads to the side as if listening, growling and hissing at each other in return.

Charlie found Harry, (or more to the point he finally noticed the Thestrals) at two in the morning. He'd thought it odd that the Thestral was walking back and forth close to the dragons. He dragged a numb Harry off to his tent to sleep.
Harry didn't really protest when Charlie led him into his tent and enlarged the bed to fit them both comfortably. Charlie's gentle hand on his back burned though, and he shifted away from it, his brain too foggy to think straight or make any decisions at all, let alone complex ones about his opinion on the touch. Charlie just hugged Harry briefly and wrapped him up warmly in blankets.

Harry looked at them as if he'd never seen them before. Harry was shivering. His teeth chattering, he frowned briefly, but just sat there. Charlie cast a strong warming charm over him and curled up next to him under his own blankets, tugging Harry sideways, so he ended up lying down before he put out the lights.

Harry just lay there stiff as a board, not feeling the warmth of the blankets or of Charlie, who pulled him closer and wrapped an arm around him protectively. He stared at Charlie's hand in the dark, that was running a scorching line of heat up and down his side, soothingly. Slowly, he defrosted. Slowly, he relaxed. He watched the hand still as Charlie fell asleep, still draped limply over his side. It was warm and maybe comfortable?

He was still a ball of distant and detached anxiety, but finally drifted off his dreams filled with hissing and fire. But he was, for once warm.

He woke still numb, to Firenze poking his head into the tent, "Come youngling. We shall check the herd's snares before you go to your next lesson."

Harry got up robotically and found that Dobby had put his bag next to Charlie's bed, with a fresh change of clothes. He got dressed mechanically and noticed dimly that Charlie was already gone. How did he manage that without waking him up? Harry was a very light sleeper.

There were Thestrals outside the tent. They nudged him with their bony faces nosing at his fingers hoping he would rub at their velvety (if slightly scared and tattered) ears. Harry just stared at them, not really seeing.

Firenze went up to Charlie, speaking to him, "Keep your people out of the deep forest, Fire-Hair." Charlie nodded at him, saying something back, but Harry's ears were not working. Charlie lifted a hand in greeting in Harry's direction but Harry just stared. Charlie's face shifted into a slight frown and Harry's gaze shifted once more to the dragons.

He jumped when Firenze put a hand on his shoulder and led him into the trees. He obeyed without protest; glad to be out of sight, safe in the trees.

* 

Harry skipped breakfast. Not managing to even eat the toast Winky brought him, so she plied him with a bit of extra nutrient potion instead. The school was in a state of nervous anticipation, and while people had finally eased up on hexing him and quoting the article, they all seemed eager to see him fail. The Gryffindors seemed to be rooting for him out of principle. But the rest of the school seemed to be booing and hissing at him, and some had even gone as far as to say they'd have tissues ready for when he was picked up in pieces afterwards.

Harry just snorted at the idea of anyone picking up the broken pieces of him if it went wrong. When had anyone ever done that?

He did not remember History of Magic and before he knew it, Hermione was leading him into the Hall for lunch. Harry could not have said whether he had gone to Transfiguration at all.

He picked at his lunch; not eating any of it, but managed to subtly identify that Winky had added
some more nutrient potion to his goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Potter," a voice called irritatedly, "Potter!" He turned to find McGonagall behind him calling his name. He would have cursed himself for not paying attention to his surroundings, if he'd felt enough of anything to care.

"Ma'am," he said in a hollow, detached voice.

Her expression softened slightly, and he wondered why.

"Potter, the champions have to come down to the grounds now... You have to get ready for your first task," she said, moving as if to place a hand on his shoulder, but he stood up out of reach.

"right," he said hollowly.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

He must have followed McGonagall out of the Hall, but he didn't remember it. He thought she may have been talking to him, but he didn't seem to hear her as she led him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon.

She tried to put her hand on his shoulder again. Was she trying to comfort him? Why on earth would she do that? He stepped out of her reach. She was talking to him again, but it seemed to just buzz in his ears, as she led him around the edge of the forest, to the dragon arena.

Harry saw that a tent had been erected. Its entrance faced them, screening the dragons from view. She was calling his name again; looking faintly concerned. He turned to look at her. It was an odd expression on her face, her eyebrows were slanted down slightly, her forehead crinkling. She didn't normally look at him like that. He wondered what was wrong with her. He wondered briefly if he should ask, but decided it would be unwise. Adults didn't like you questioning them.

"You're to go in there with the other champions," she said, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr Bagman is in there... He'll be telling you the, the procedure... Good luck."

"Thanks," he managed, and turned back to the tent, only to see Luna appear next to him. He blinked at her.

"Good Luck, Harry," she said, "how are you feeling?"

He blinked at her numbly, not quite computing what she'd asked. Luna nodded perceptively and headed inside.

Taking a moment, Harry pulled out a few fire-proofing potions from his bag and downed them. The now familiar icy feeling washed over him. He shivered slightly. He took another breath, tucked the empty vials back in his bag and considered activating the runes on his cloak and clothes. But decided against it. He didn't want them confiscated if they were noticed to be magical. He supposed technically they would probably consider it cheating.

He didn't care.

He didn't want to be BBQed. He fully expected that if something went wrong, the tournament judges would all just stand back and watch.

He stepped into the tent. Bagman and the three school head's were inside, along with Rita Skeeter and her photographer. Harry suddenly remembered he was called 'Bozo.'
Delacour was sitting in a corner on a stool, looking clammy and far less composed than usual. Krum just looked grumpier than normal, and Diggory was pacing but offered a smile when Harry entered. It was the first smile anyone had directed at him other than Hermione and Luna all day. He just looked at Diggory blankly. Why was he smiling at him? As far as Harry could remember, Diggory thought Harry, a liar about entering and was up to no good.

"Harry! Good-o!" said Bagman happily, looking around at them. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!"

He looked somehow like an overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions and proper officials. He was wearing his old, too small Wasp robes again.

"Well now! We're all here. Time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly, only to be cut off, by Dumbledore, "Miss Lovegood, you need to return to the stands now."

"I'm here for the Quibbler sir," she replied, looking around curiously, fiddling with the strap of her camera.

"Ah, but Ms Skeeter is here to cover the tournament. You're not needed, my dear." He said in that grandfatherly voice of his.

Harry watched wondering distantly if Luna would leave or stay.

"Ah, but she's not allowed to write about Harry. Harry has a contract with the Quibbler, only I can write about him, sir" Luna said, turning to Skeeter, "isn't that right, Ms Skeeter?"

Skeeter grimaced, and Harry saw something move across Dumbeldores face. He couldn't identify it, his brain moving too slowly. He felt his insides tense seemingly impossibly tighter.

"Harry, my boy, what have you done? We have a contract with Ms Skeeter," Dumbledore said, turning to Harry.

Harry was starting to feel a prickling tingling sensation in his fingertips again, dizzy. His heart seemed too big for his chest, beating painfully.

"You should not have signed anything without my permission, Harry-" Dumbledore continued.

"Mr Potter," Harry said softly.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore asked, confused.

"My name is Mr Potter, sir," Harry repeated.

"Now Harry, don't make a scene, my boy," Dumbledore dismissed, "Now, I'm just here to confiscate any magical items except for our champions wands."

They were all scanned, Diggory had a Gringotts key and Delacour, a hair comb, which she gave to Madame Maxime. Diggory called a house-elf in a pillowcase, with a crest Harry didn't know and give it to him. The strange elf popped away again, taking the key.

When they get to Harry, he handed Luna his bag, and let them scan his glasses. But when he went to put his own Gringotts key, and the Bezoar necklace in his bag, Dumbledore requested Harry hand the key over.

Harry frowned slightly but put it in his bag anyway. It was blood warded, no-one can get into, and
it would certainly keep it safe from Dumbledore.

Dumbledore said, "surely you don't want to leave something so important in a mere school bag, Harry? Let me keep is safe for you, my boy."

Harry felt a tingle of magic along his skin, and it made his skin crawl. He was uncomfortably aware of everyone staring at him. He could hear the scratching of quills.

Dumbledore went on, "surely you trust me, my boy! I'm your guardian. It's my job to look after it for you. Something that important won't be safe in a mere bag."

Harry was startled that Dumbledore was willing to reveal his guardianship. He was also starting to feel irritation penetrate the fog of numbness. He pulled up the same confusion he had felt when Bill first mentioned magical guardians.

"What? No you're not. My muggle aunt is. You said that's why I have to live with her." Harry put as much confusion into his voice, hoping his supposed naivety may start to paint Dumbledore in less of an all-knowing brilliant light.

"Ah but I'm you magical guardian. Surely you haven't forgotten?" Dumbledore said, and Harry had to hand it to him, it was a good counter-play.

"What's a magical guardian, Professor Dumbledore sir? I've never heard of it before. Does that mean I don't have to live with the Dursley's any more? They'd be ever so pleased to be rid of me," Harry said, playing it up, only a little.

He wanted to go on, mention the tournament contract, but he didn't want to directly confront Dumbledore. The man was too powerful. It was better to be sneaky and subtle; to slowly paint him grey instead of light. Especially now that the man was looking flustered.

Before Dumbledore could reply, Dobby popped in, and Harry thanked him when he took his bag from Luna and popped away again.

Looking irritated at being derailed, Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, but Bagman cut him off again, ushering the headmasters, and headmistress out of the tent. Harry watched him go with detached relief.

"The audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" - Bagman held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them - "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different - er - varieties, you see."

Harry glanced around. Diggory had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words, and then started pacing around the tent again. He looked slightly green. Delacour and Krum hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths. Harry imagined he'd probably feel like that if he could feel anything.

Rita started flitting around questioning the other champions, taking photos, and being a general nuisance. Luna, however, stayed in a corner, scribbling on a bit of parchment.

In no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent. Their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking... Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then - it seemed like about a second later to Harry - Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

"Ladies first," he said, offering it to Delacour.
She hesitantly put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a Welsh Green, holding a number two in her paw. Harry watched Delacour's face carefully. She showed no sign of surprise, but just a determined resignation. He had been right; Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

Krum was the same. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball, with a number three. He didn't even blink. He just put it on the table and sat back down, staring at the ground.

Diggory, put his hand into the bag and out came the Swedish Short-Snout, with a number one. Harry didn't even blink in surprise at his luck of drawing the most dangerous of the dragons. But he peered curiously at the little dragon, when he put his hand into the bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, with the number four. She stretched her wings as he looked down at her, and bared her minuscule fangs.

Rita flitted around directing Bozo to take photos again, and Harry didn't protest when Luna snapped one of him as well. Though, hers was not of him but of the little model dragon. He handed it over to her, and she beamed, stroking it's back and said, "I'll hang on to her for you."

"Well, there you go!" said Bagman grabbing their attention again. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons. Do you see? And I have to tell you something else too... ah, yes... your task is to collect the golden egg! Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Ms Skeeter, you'll want to go over to the judging box for a good spot, you too I guess Ms Lovegood, Ms Skeeter will escort you."

They left, taking Bozo with them.

"Mr Diggory, you're first. Just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now... Harry... could I have a quick word? Outside?" Bagman said hurriedly.

Harry frowned at Bagman using his first name and responded cooly, reluctantly following him out of the tent. Bagman walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face. It immediately made Harry tense and bristle suspiciously.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?" He asked patronisingly.

Harry frowned at him, "no thank you, sir" he said with curt politeness.

"Got a plan?" Bagman said lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice even further, "you're the underdog here, Harry... Anything I can do to help..."

"No," said Harry quickly, "no thank you sir."

"Nobody would know, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, thank you, sir. I'm fine," said Harry, irritated now. He was already being accused of cheating, he didn't need Bagman blackmailing him with it later.

A whistle blew somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and ran off.

Harry watched him go and walked back into the tent as Diggory left it, greener than ever.
Harry went back inside to Delacour and Krum. It was just the three of them now.

Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Diggory had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model.

Harry drifted over to the table in the corner of the tent, which had the purple bag on it, and the three discarded dragon models. Abandoned. Harry frowned at them. They were kind of cute.

"Pity your real-life counterpart are not as small and agreeable," he hissed under his breath to them in Parseltongue.

A roar.

A whistle blew.

Delacour left.

Harry was dimly aware of noise in the background.

Another whistle.

Krum slouched out, leaving Harry alone.

Harry looked at the little dragons instead and wished that he wasn't about to face their real-life counterpart. He felt sorry for them then, the little models crouching on the table, forgotten by their champions. Was he going to be abandoned too? Would the wizarding world abandon him like the other champions did the model dragons when Harry had done whatever it is they wanted of him?

Harry flinched when Krum's dragon let out a screech of pain, and he thought she was screaming something about eyes. He felt sick now and stood up.

His legs weren't working properly, and it took him two goes to make them hold him up. The floor tilted alarmingly, seeming to move in its own. He put a hand on the table to steady himself. He couldn't feel the tiny mushroom clouds of fire, that the tinny model Fireball was puffing onto his fingertips. He looked at them.

They were being abandoned.

He pocketed them.

He could feel them squirming in his pocket as he waited by the door. He tapped the runes in his cloak, and clothes, activating the protective magic. He couldn't feel the tingling of the magic. He hoped it worked. He hoped he didn't need it.

He exited the tent at the whistle.

He was aware in a detached way, of the noise the crowd was making, that Bagman was making. But he couldn't hear it. He couldn't make sense of it. It was just noise. He walked mechanically past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

Everything in front of him seemed like a highly coloured dream. Colours blurring together, not making any sense. Hundreds and hundreds of faces in the stands, stared down at him, blurring together into a sea of meaningless colour and noise.

There was a dragon in front of him. The Horntail. She was crouched over her eggs, her wings half-furled at the other end of the enclosure.
Her eyes were very yellow, standing out against her dark scales. She was snarling; he noted, "stay away, stay away" and "leave us alone."

She was thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground around her, like an agitated cat. She was terrified for her eggs, and it was coming out in fury, he realised.

He felt for her then. Really he did. He took a step back, slowly, so not to startle her, and remembering his plan, lifted his wand to his throat briefly.

"Sonorus Homodeus" he murmured, so the crowd could hear him, but his voice would not disturb the dragon.

"I swear, on my life and magic," Harry said, speaking the carefully chosen words, "that I did not enter my name into the goblet of fire. I did not ask anyone else to enter it for me and had no knowledge of how it happened. I furthermore swear that had I known at the time that an oath would have removed me from this tournament when my name came out of the cup, that I would have done so. I had no idea about contracts or oaths. I was raised muggle, but I didn't get the introduction like the muggleborns. I didn't know that there was a way out, or I would have taken it. I participate only under protest because it will kill me if I don't. I am no TriWizard Champion. I have no interest or intention of winning. The real champions are Delacour, Diggory and Krum. This tournament is, as far as I am concerned between them. I'm just an extra, being dragged along for the ride, while trying not to get murdered.

So as I say so mote it be.."

He took another breath, and lit his wand, shooting red sparks into the air, to prove what he said was true as he still had his magic.

Satisfied, they would now know he was not a liar, he murmured, "Quietus,"

He turned back to the Horntail. She was watching him, her eyes narrowed. He walked slowly towards her and pointed his wand at his throat again, "Sonorus Draconis."

He didn't particularly care if they heard him, but he needed her to be able to hear him without him getting too close. He knew she had excellent ears but wasn't sure if that would be enough over the racket that the crowd was making.

"My lady?" He asked cautiously, moving slowly closer to her.

She hissed, and he stopped, "what do you want speaker? Stay away!"

"There is an imposter in your nest!" He said, pointing.

She let out a snarl, and her head swung around to look at her eggs. But she turned back to him and hissed, "Lies! Thief!"

"They put a gold egg in your nest. They want me to steal it!" Harry hissed back, "I don't want to! But I'll die if I don't."

"Why should I value your life over one of mine?" She hissed back, and she had a point, Harry, though detachedly.

"It's not a real one. There's a gold one. They've charmed it so that you think it's real. It's not. It's the one on top. They fool you for their games." He said, stepping closer again and pointing. She hissed, and he was glad he was not within reach of her claws. He had forgotten about her tail though, and
he leapt back when it came swinging towards him.

It caught him, but only on the ankle. He fell, scrambling back. Bugger, he thought, as his ankle burned. He could feel the poison from her spines already.

"Accio Golden Egg," he tried, holding out his wand.

The egg came hurtling towards him, but the Horntail whipped around and caught it in her jaws. She spat it out immediately; however, hissing furiously, and opened her jaws. Flames engulfed the egg.

Harry's shoulders slumped but other than that, he just watched.

The flames went out eventually, and the egg still sat there, shining, seeming even more gold than it was before.

"Told you so," Harry muttered.

Her head swivelled towards him again, and he scrambled to his feet, "I don't suppose I can have it now?" He asked.

"No, it's shiny. It's mine!" She hissed back, picking it up in her teeth and placing it back in her nest. Harry sighed. Of course she would be a hoarding dragon too.

"You really want my gold egg?" She asked, peering at him, and he took a step back.

"Yes," Harry said, "well no, actually. I don't, but they do," he jerked a thumb in the judge's direction, "they want me to get it for them, for this stupid game."

"What?" She hissed, confused.

"Entertainment." He said simply wondering if game was not a word that translated into Parseltongue, "I have to do three tasks for them, or I die. One of them is to get the egg off you, and it will tell me what I have to do for them next. I didn't want any of this any more than you do. But I'll die if I don't, and it will probably hurt. I don't want to hurt anymore." He finished quietly, "so yes, I guess I need your egg, but I don't want it, per se."

"They make a hatchling dance for them or die?" She spat out, furious again.

"Yes," he said bluntly not really caring if she was mad at them. He would have been mad too, if he'd not been so numb. But she seemed to have enough anger at the situation for the both of them.

She looped her tail around Harry carefully, pulling him into the shelter of her wing and roared at the judges. It was a deafening noise, and a tongue of fire shot out from her jaws and all the way over the arena to the judges. The handlers quickly put up flame repellent shields, but when Harry peeked up over her wing joint, he noticed happily that the top of Dumbledore's hat was smouldering. He grinned, "thanks."

"Fine," she said, turning to Harry, who was now sitting gingerly on her tail between the spins, "but what will you give me in return?" She asked

"What do you want?" He asked

"Well, you don't really have much do you?" She said, looking at him, "I suppose there are some nice spiders in that forest. I want one. A big one."

He blinked at her a moment, then figured that if he was a dragon that big, a spider like Aragog
would probably be a good meal.

"Hagrid won't like that, and I'm not sure how I'll manage it. They tried to eat me last time, but I'll do my best."

"They sent you in there?" She asked.

"Not that time, they did when I was 11, but that time I was trying to rescue a friend and ended up in there."

"They don't seem to like their young much, these wizards," she said, looking thoroughly puzzled.

"I know, right?" Harry agreed conversationally, less numb and terrified than before, now he was sitting with her in her nest talking as opposed to fighting her.

She made a deep humming rumble in her chest, making smoke tendrils coil out her nostrils before saying, "Well then, you come back tonight, and try your hand at getting me my spider. If only you could fly, it would make your hunt, so much easier. If you can get a big one, that would be lovely. But a few little ones would also work I suppose." She reasoned.

"I can do that, I have a broom. I can fly," Harry said after thinking on it for a moment.

"We have a bargain then," she said, reaching over and touching her nose to his and huffed softly. His face tingled and he coughed as felt her magic slide over him.

"You will keep your word," she said, and he felt that the magic of their agreement settle bindingly. But it wasn't uncomfortable this time.

"I will do my best," he said.

She nodded and said, "get off."

He carefully climbed off her tail and onto the ground again. She tossed the golden egg so that it rolled out a few feet from him. He walked over and picked it up.

"Thanks," he said, before turning to look at her again, curiosity starting to penetrate through the fog, "Um one other question though, can I ask you a few questions later? Are you guys here long?"

She looked at him, curling protectively around her eggs again, "one more night and yes youngling, you can," she left out a rumble that made him jump before he realised she was laughing at him.

He grinned, "can I touch you?" He asked, hopefully.

She blinked at him and stared as if he were a particularly odd insect, then extended her head with an air of someone humouring a very small child's rather odd request. She let him stroke the smooth scales of her nose. They were warm, hard and smooth like glass. Close up, he could see that she wasn't just black, but her scales had a slightly metallic iridescent sheen to them.

"You're lovely," he hissed, "thank you. For everything, I'll see you tonight."

"Sunset," she preened under his praise.

Chapter End Notes
Trigger Warning
Disassociation - Harry is experiencing such intense emotions around the task that he disassociates and stops feeling his emotions.
Harry turned and limped back across the enclosure towards the door. He was numbly aware of the throbbing in his ankle, and of noise in the crowd and of Bagman, but he couldn't make any sense of it.

And quite frankly he did not care enough to bother.

He was distantly aware of keepers rushing forward to the Horntail to prepare to move her when he paused.

He turned back to her, "I think they want to move you back to the other area. Those ones," he pointed to the keepers, "really like you, and just want to take care of you. It's probably easier for everyone if you just go along with them. They mean you well, especially the fire-haired one," he finished recalling their name for Charlie.

She swivelled around to look at him, making the keepers jump and take out their wands, but she just let out another huff and curled up, calmer and more docile than Harry had ever seen her. He grinned.

He watched for a moment, as they activated some runes on the floor around her, and all of them vanished. He wondered if it had been an advanced switching spell to take them back to the clearing?

He kept walking over to the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody, and Hagrid were hurrying to meet him from the edge of another tent with a mediwitch symbol on it.

He expected to be relieved to have survived the task, he thought, as he limped towards the teachers. But all he felt was a dull weariness that penetrated his exhaustion as they approached him.

"That was... a different approach, Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall looked relieved as he got to the door of the Medi-tent. Harry frowned at her, wondering if she'd gotten into Mrs Norrise's catnip. It was a bit out of character for her to be so pleased to see him, he thought. Her hand shook as she pointed at his ankle. "You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score,
she's had to mop up Diggory already..."

"Yeh did it, Harry!" said Hagrid hoarsely. "Yeh did it! An' agains' the Horntail an' all, an' yeh know Charlie said that was the wors'-"

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said, cutting him off, so he wouldn't reveal that he'd shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked irritated, but pleased; his magical eye was dancing in its socket, "Good on you for surviving Potter, could have done a bit more magic for it though," he growled, "won't get many points for that."

Harry held back a sigh and wondered what Moody's game was. Did he enter Harry? Would he not be disappointed, Harry didn't end up dead? And if he didn't want Harry dead, what did he want? Surely no-one would care he didn't use magic to do the task.

"Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please..." said Professor McGonagall.

Harry called Dobby and stepped into the tent. Dobby potted in with his bag, and Harry put his necklaces back on, then took out a vial of antivenin he'd prepared earlier and downed it. He then, ignoring the occupied mediwitch in the next cubical over with Diggory, pulled out a pot of disinfectant salve.

Sitting down on an unoccupied bed, he directed a stream of water from his wand to wash the wounds before he used the disinfectant on them. It hurt but almost immediately started to feel better. He then pulled out a specially prepared ointment for the horntail venom. He was very pleased he'd been prepared.

The pot was snatched out of his hand; however, before he could put it on, he looked up irritably.

"What are you doing?" Madam Pomfrey demanded.

"Salve for the horntail poison. I've taken an antidote, I was just going to patch up my ankle now." Harry said flatly.

She made a humph, sound and waved her wand casting diagnostic spells on his ankle.

"Was it a general or a specific antidote" she demanded frowning at the pot of healing ointment.

"Specific," he said, reluctant to admit to being prepared.

She handed him back his pot of ointment and demanded, "how on earth did you find out about them beforehand?"

"It was pretty bloody obvious when they keep dragons in the forest a few days before the task," he said, avoiding the question, but not lying.

Pomfrey looked appalled, "what on earth were you doing in the forest!?"

"I help Hagrid. It's also nice to fly over, it's only being in it unaccompanied, that is forbidden."

Which was also true, he'd been taking trips around the school towers and over to the forest on his broom for years now.

She let out a huffing noise and poked his angle with her wand. He felt it heal up, though it still ached and was rather red. She put a thick layer of his ointment on it, and then pulled out a bandage
that she dipped in what smelt like Dittany and Essence of Murtlap. He'd brewed a similar one before.

After spelling the bandages on, she said, "Now, just sit quietly for a minute, let that settle, and don't move it while the magic sets. Then you can go and get your score." She said before bustling back over to Diggory.

Harry sighed, he didn't really care what his scores were. He really wanted to curl up in bed for a nap, or find a nice tree in a patch of sun if there was any and just not think for a bit. Maybe escape in a book to somewhere else for a bit. Or maybe just sleep for a week.

He got to his feet, wanting to leave and do exactly that, but before he'd reached the opening of the tent, two people had come darting inside. Hermione followed closely by Ron. He held back a groan. While he was pleased to see Hermione, he really just wanted some peace, and Ron would not bring that. He watched Ron wearily.

"Harry, well done!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear.

"You were Brilliant! You really were!"

But Harry was still watching Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

"Harry," he said, very seriously, "whoever put your name in that goblet - I - I reckon they're trying to do you in!"

Harry just stared. Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. "What are you doing here?" Harry asked, finally.

Ron opened his mouth uncertainly, then closed it again, then, "I'm your friend," Ron stuttered.

"By your own words last week you're not," Harry reminded hollowly, "friends don't physically shove each other to the ground when they get mad. That's assault."

"Come off it mate," Ron shot back, "it was just a little push... lighten up," Ron said, seemingly oblivious to the fact that that one action had damned him in Harry's eyes. That one action that had been too much like his relatives.

"Anyway," Ron continued batting a hand as if it were all nothing, "that dragon, huh? It was huge!"

When Harry just stared at him with cool disbelief, Ron continued, "you could have at least used your broom mate. Moody told us you were going to outfly it!" Ron said, "would have been a bit more Gryffindor mate, what did you do? Ask it nicely?"

"What do you want?" Harry asked bluntly, momentarily shelving the fact that Moody had been talking about him.

"Well, it's just not very Gryffindor, taking the cowards way out." Ron said like it were obvious, "Not very brave and daring to just 'ask it nicely'. That was beside the point of that task! This is meant to be a competition of magical brilliance and daring. It would have been so cool if you could have outflown it, that's all. It was just a bit cowardly, not too." Ron went on, and Harry started to feel anger melting though the fog of nothingness.

"Leave," Harry said in a cold voice. He did not want to blow up. He was too tired to waste the
energy on Ron.

"What? but, mate, I apologised! you know how I am, you can't just-"

"No," Harry spat, "no, I will not see this farce as an apology for your despicable behaviour. Nor will I accept it as justification of your poor treatment of me. I will not be forgiving you or forgetting. So no. Get out." He said flatly.

When Ron looked about to argue Harry spat the words back spitefully in his once friends face, “as you said, we are done, Mr Weasley.”

"You said yourself; we are not friends, that I was a selfish prat who did this all for attention. You shoved me to the ground and said we were done, as you'd had enough of me. Please leave. Hermione, I'll catch up with you later."

Hermione looked at him worriedly and nodded, seeming to understand. She pulled Ron out of the tent, casting a worried look back at Harry before Ron could start shouting at him again.

Harry sighed and then put the egg and the dragon models in his bag. They wriggled but curled up among the textbooks. Standing up carefully, he tested his weight on his ankle and was pleasantly surprised to find it no longer hurt. He walked out of the tent and back into the enclosure.

He wondered how the other champions had gotten past their dragons. He'd have to ask Charlie. He hoped the other dragons were okay, especially the one that had been screaming. Harry turned to the judges. Dumbledore's hat had stopped smouldering though the tip was blackened and charred. He tried not to smile spitefully at it.

Madame Maxime raised her wand in the air. A silver ribbon shot out and twisted itself into a large number one. Harry blinked, he supposed Ron was right. His lack of wandwork in the task was being counted against him. Mr Crouch, Karkaroff and Dumbledore all gave him Zero.

Harry held back a shrug and an eye roll. He survived and was still alive and in one piece. That's all he cared about. But Mr Bagman's score made him stop and stare.

Ludo Bagman, a ten.

"Ten?" Muttered Harry in disbelief, he got hurt, and he didn't actually use his wand in the task. Sure he used it for the oath, and to try summoning the egg, but the oath was not part of the task, and the summoning didn't work. In the end, he just asked her. That was so inconsistent.

Harry shrugged mentally, he didn't care. He had a whole three months before the next task. He turned and had intended to go back towards the forest to check on the other dragons, but was interrupted by Charlie.

"Well done, Harry!" Charlie said, pulling Harry into a quick hug. Harry stood there mechanically, and by the time he remembered to he was meant to hug back, Charlie was already pulling away. Harry felt strangely bereft and surprisingly, a little teary. He shoved the feeling away ruthlessly.

Charlie's face was ashen, and while he looked pleased to see Harry, he was obviously upset.

"Is everything okay? What's wrong? Are the dragons okay?" Harry asked.

"Listen," Charlie said, "I've got to run, I've got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened - and I have to get back to the dragons. Krum cursed his dragon, and she trampled some of her eggs! She's only got 3 of the 15 left," He said, sounding furious, "we'll talk about it later. Oh
yeah - and they told me to tell you you've got to hang around for a few more minutes... Bagman wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

Harry groaned and watched as Charlie ran off toward the clearing before he turned and reentered the tent.

Delacour, Diggory and Krum were all together. One side of Diggory's face and torso was covered in a thick orange paste that was mending his burn. Harry thought he could probably have figured out which burn past it was, but was too tired to care that much. Diggory grinned at Harry when he saw him, and Harry wondered again why he was suddenly trying to be friendly.

The others also seemed to suddenly be more friendly. He held back a frown of puzzlement, as Diggory asked, "what did you do to it?"

"Dragons speak Parseltongue too. They're related to snakes. So I explained it to her, and asked nicely," Harry said bluntly, "it was the most logical solution. They're not stupid mindless beasts, you know."

"Not very showy of you Harry," Diggory teased, going to thump Harry playfully on the shoulder.

Harry stepped smoothly out of the way before Diggory could get close enough to and said coldly, "I'm not here to put on a show, Diggory, just to survive." He put a slight emphasis on Diggory's last name. Harry had not given him the liberty of such familiarity and did not appreciate it. He'd been doing that a lot over the last few weeks since he'd realised. It was really starting to irritate him.

They were cut off by Bagman bounding back into the tent, "Well done all of you!"

He looked pleased, as though he personally had just got past a dragon.

"Now, just a few quick words. You've got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half-past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth - but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open... see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg. It will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then! Harry, I want a word"

"Now Harry, not very brave of you, sensible, but this is a game Harry, a show! You'll have to do better than that if you don't want to lose," he said once the others had left the tent.

"Why would I care if I lose sir?" Harry asked bluntly, "I wanted no part of this, I'm only participating to stop the contract someone tied me up in, from killing me."

"Now, Harry!" Bagman scolded, as if Harry was a naughty child, "you'll have to try your best! You're embarrassing Hogwarts! You're embarrassing the Ministry, by not trying harder."

"Well sir," he said, noticing that Luna had slipped back into the room and was scribbling, "the way I see it, Hogwarts and the Ministry should be embarrassed. They let an underaged contestant be entered and forced to participate right under their noses. That's a breach of their duty of care. I would be embarrassed if I was them." Harry clenched his jaw and tried not to glare too openly. He was mad, but he did not want to make an enemy. He couldn't afford to while he was vulnerable with all Dumbledore's magic on him.

Harry clenched his jaw and wondered why Bagman cared. Though he had clearly been betting on the world cup. Maybe he'd placed a bet on Harry and just didn't want to lose.
But then the whole tournament was an embarrassment. He pushed all the growing irritation aside and just stared as Bagman went on about how Harry was Gryffindor, like his parents and he was meant to be brave and daring and the perfect candidate to put on a good show of 'magical daring' which is what that task had been all about, that Harry had failed to show.

He went on and on, ignoring Harry's pointed, "if I failed, why did you give me a such a high score?"

But Bagman just breezed over it as if he hadn't heard and went on about how the rumour of him out-flying the dragon would have been a much better show; far more Gryffindor and daring!

In the end, Harry just walked off, crossing the grounds towards the forest. Not interested in Bagman's ranting, not interested in hearing how much of a failure and a disappointment he was.

Luna followed him. She held out the little model Horntail. It nuzzled his hand when he picked it up and let it perch on his shoulder.

"Well done Harry," Luna said, "would you like to do the post-task interview now?"

He blinked, and said, "I guess," now he was out, now it was over, he found he didn't remember much of it at all. It seemed to be one big haze in his mind.

She cast a warming charm on the ground and sat. Harry copied her.

"Was she nice?" Luna asked.

Harry blinked, and she added, "the dragon? You talked to her, didn't you."

"Yes, she was very protective of her young," Harry said after a moment, "but nice enough once she knew I didn't want her eggs. She was pretty funny, actually. They were horrible to the dragons, the Ministry. The keepers were put in a hard position having to do what the Ministry wanted and still be able to look after the dragons. The dragons should not be under so much stress while nesting. The keepers didn't have a choice but to bring them, though. It's horrible, and now eggs are destroyed, and we have lost all but 3 out of 15 Fireball eggs because Krum cursed his dragon. We couldn't afford to lose them. That's on the Ministry. Of both countries. The keepers tried to insist on fake eggs, but the Ministry didn't think it would be exciting enough."

Luna looked sad for a moment, and then asked, "why did you talk to her instead of doing something more magical? People are saying you took the cowards way out?"

"Why shouldn't it?" Harry asked, "It was safest and most sensible. I'm not interested in fame or glory. Someone wants me dead with this thing. All I want is to survive. It may be more Slytherin than Gryffindor, but I don't really care. I'm not going to play their game and put on a show. I just need to make sure I don't end up dead."

"So you asked it nicely," she said, "very sensible, I would have done the same."

"Yes. I had plenty of other plans if it didn't work, but why not take the simple solution first? Any anyway, Parseltongue is a magical language, so it's not as if it was a totally muggle solution."

"And your oath?" She asked

"To prove I didn't do it. I did it so I can confirm once and for all that I didn't do this and don't want it. I'm sick of people hexing me in the corridors in retribution for idiocy that's not my fault."
Luna hummed, "can I quote your oath?"

"Please do," Harry said earnestly, "I would appreciate it."

"So what did the dragon and you talk about?"

Harry blinked and told her what he could remember. That prompted a long and detailed discussion about dragons in which, after swearing her to secrecy in regards to his prior knowledge, he told her all about the dragons in the forest and what he'd experienced.

"Some interesting information came to light," Luna said after she had finished scribbling down notes.

Harry stiffened slightly, but forced himself to relax, "yes, I imagine it did."

"There's more to it than that. The Blibbering-Humdingers said so," she said serenely.

He froze, then said, "yes, there was. How much do you know? And what are you going to do with the information."

"What our paper does; show the truth," she said vaguely, looking at his right ear, "Your wrackspurts are all in a tizzy. They needn't be so scared, you know."

Harry filed that bit of information on Luna and wrackspurts away for later and said slightly defensively, "if too much gets out too soon, it will bring a lot of danger my way."

"Yes it will, I won't mention what they whispered then, just what he said today. It will lay a nice foundation for later." She said vaguely, and Harry knew she was referring to Dumbledore and possibly Bagman too...

However, it left Harry only somewhat reassured.

*

Harry wasn't sure what to do with himself after Luna had left to write up her articles. He could only imagine all the attention he'd attract if he went into the castle now. He couldn't stomach the idea. He didn't want to be confronted by people judging him for how he did the task. So he went into the forest, intent on keeping his promise to the Horntail.

Harry used his broom to find the spiders. He remembered roughly where they were. But it was easier to find their webs from the air. The forest was dark that far in, with the dense canopy and the sticky webs blocking the dimming light.

The deeper in he went towards Aragog's lair, the bigger the spiders got, and the more numerous and he dove down under the canopy. It was harder to fly there with the webs and branches so close together.

Harry hovered on his broom, not too far from the centre of Aragog's lair and waited. He couldn't wear his cloak, it would get caught in a web, and if he triggered a web, they'd know he was there. There were too many of them for him to fight, but he hoped, with his still weak disillusionment charm, he could sneak up on one.

He watched the spiders for a while, looking for a larger one, that wasn't bigger than him, that might satisfy a dragon. He wondered how he would get one. If they were anything like dragons, he wouldn't be able to stun it. He couldn't use his bow as he wasn't good enough yet with moving
targets. Eventually, he figured a piercing hex into the belly or through an eye would probably work.

A plan made, Harry carefully poked at a strand of web causing it to vibrate. There was a series of clicking noises, and Harry flew back away from the nest as he heard something large moving along the web. He picked another section to draw it further away, and carefully, drew the spider away from the nest. When the webbing opened up a bit, he poked the web harder and waited below, his wand raised.

The spider was bigger than he expected, about his size. Maybe a bit bigger if he was honest. But thankfully much smaller than Aragog was. It was hissing and clicking, and its shiny black eyes glittered menacingly.

Harry shot a piercing hex at its belly. It bounced, causing Harry to have to duck out of the way as it ricocheted and the spider screeched. Harry frowned and took aim again, aiming for an eye this time. He got it on his second try, and the spider fell with a loud crash from its web through the trees.

Hurrying now, Harry flew down, weary of all noise coming from the nest. The other spiders would be coming to investigate. With several overpowered feather-light charms, Harry managed to float the spider through the trees and further away from the nest.

It was a challenging job, and Harry was pretty sure that when it was all done, he would probably be sick. He'd never killed anything before, other than catching small things with snares. This was a little horrifying, and he was a bit disgusted with himself.

But a deal was a deal.

He was nearly caught by other spiders a number of times. The weight of the dead spider, was considerable, even with the charms and slowed him down, dragging on his broom.

He eventually reached the dragon clearing and set the spider down. The keepers were still running around, restraining dragons. The Chinese Fireball was responsible for the racket that was nearly deafening Harry. The Fireball was shrieking in pain between long keening wails of distress, grieving her lost baby's as she huddled around the remains of her nest, curling protectively around the surviving 3 eggs.

The keepers were frantically trying to subdue her so they could treat her eyes, which Harry could see where swollen shut and had gone a horrible crusty puss yellow colour. He winced and looked around for Charlie. Charlie was in a heated discussion with the boss, gesturing angrily towards the Fireball. Harry went over, levitating his spider behind him. They must have had a silencing ward up. Harry couldn't hear them. But he watched as the boss gestured angrily back towards the arena, away from the dragons and Charlie stalked off furiously.

Harry waited at the tree line, not sure what to do. The boss caught sight of him and grinned before he noticed the spider.

"what's that?" He asked, his accent thick.

"I made a bargain with the Horntail. I'd bring her a spider if she gave me the egg." He said, hesitant around a man he didn't know, "I keep my promises."

"Oh," he said, mildly surprised, "right then," he held out a hand, "I'm the Captain."

Harry hesitantly shook his hand and gestured to the Horntail.
The Captain snorted, "you dragon types! Always more interested in them than in people, just like Charlie boy. Off you go then" The Captain said, walking off.

Harry cautiously crossed over to the edge of the Horntails enclosure, mindful to stay out of the way of the handlers, feeling out of place, exposed in the middle of the clearing without his cloak. The Horntail while agitated, was clearly the quietest of the lot, and her handlers were not running around frantically but were helping the Fireball's team instead.

"Great mother, I have your spider," Harry called out in Parseltongue, as he approached.

She turned to look at him and bared her teeth. Harry froze, then realised it may be a smile. He levitated the spider over, sweating slightly from maintaining the charm so long on such a heavy spider.

The spider was gone in a few sickening crunches, and Harry felt the magic binding him to their bargain dissolve.

"Our bargain has been fulfilled young one," she said, licking her chops.

"what's it like flying?" Harry asked suddenly, moving over to sit on the pen's fence.

"It is freedom," she said simply, "at home, I can fly whenever I want. Here I am chained down. I hate it."

"I hate it too," He looked at her wings, wistfully, "I wish I were a dragon."

She laughed, an odd hissing sound, making small tongues of fire slipped out of her mouth.

"I wish I could go flying with you," Harry told her wistfully, "I wish I could fly all the time; on my own. I bet that would be wonderful," he said his voice full of longing.

"Come back when my eggs have hatched, young one, we can go flying then. I will teach you and my young to fly properly."

"What's it like back home?" Harry asked, "do you like it?"

"Yes." She said shortly, before continuing, "land and sky for miles, and less human wizards to get in the way. We like it there, as a whole. But it would be better if they asked us, we understand some human tongues, instead of chaining us and stunning us when they need something."

She hissed as the Captain approached, "stay away from my eggs!"

She turned to Harry and ordered, "you tell the well-meaning lead moron."

Harry snickered and looked over at the Captain before translated the conversation he'd had with the Horntail who's name was Night-Sky-Scales. The Captain looked at her for a long moment before nodding to her.

"See if you can talk some sense into the Fireball, will you then kid?' The Captain said, "we don't have any Parselmouths on staff. It's hard enough to get one to travel to Europe what with the prejudices and all, let alone to live and work there." He scowled.

Harry looked at the man cautiously but nodded, "what do you want to tell her?"

"Just that we need to treat her eyes. We can't use a counter-spell, so we need to put ointment on them. She keeps thrashing so much we can't hold her down and hit her with a stunner at the same
time. She's pushing against the wards too hard as it is."

The Captain followed Harry over to the Fireball's pen. He could feel them all watching him; some
dubiously, some curiously. He felt like a zoo exhibit and wished Charlie were there. The Fireball's
head immediately snapped towards him, her tongue flicking out, tasting the air.

"I mean no harm," he said to her.

She didn't say anything but continued her long high pitched keening wails.

"What's she saying?" the Captain asked.

"She's not. You're hearing what I'm hearing right now," Harry said, "she's not speaking, she's
mourning."

He took a step closer to her and said, "great mother, they are worried for you, the well-meaning
morons, they want to help your eyes." He tried again, using the Hortail's name for the keepers.

She hissed at him, "stay back, stay away, get back child slayer!"

"It wasn't me!" Harry called, "I mean you and your eggs no harm. I am truly sorry for your terrible
loss!"

"Are you really? What do you care of hatchlings?" She hissed.

"I care because all life is sacred. Children should be protected. They should always come first,"
Harry shot back fiercely, "what they have done to you, to your children, is a travesty. It's
sacrilege."

She let out a wail again and breathed fire over her remaining eggs, coiling tighter around them,
letting out a moan of pain, "leave us alone!"

"Please let me heal your eyes," Harry pleaded, "we can ease some of your pain by healing your
eyes. Please, let me help you."

She hissed at him, "how do I know you don't want my eggs!" And he could see the fire welling in
her jaws. He took a step back hurriedly.

"I don't! I can't look after one baby dragon let alone more of them! What would I do with them?
You're their mum! I don't want to raise children!" Harry blurted out the first thing that came to
mind.

"Get away from my eggs," she snarled, and he sidestepped, crossing around the other side of her,
so her body was between him and her eggs. That seemed to appease her.

"Captain," Harry murmured in English now, "what do I need to do to her eyes?"

The Captain held up a large bottle with green gel in it, "we need to wash her eyes, then get this on
them. It needs to completely cover her eyes. It shouldn't hurt, but her vision will be blurry for a bit,
before it dries and falls off by itself."

Harry took the bottle and took another step closer to her. He was now in range of her fire. He took
another careful step, "great mother, this will help your eyes," he hissed gently, holding it up for her
to inspect.

She leaned over and sniffed at it. And sneezed.
Harry jumped back, wincing as the heat of her flame made his skin feel tight under his hood, but his robes protected him. When it was gone, he grinned, inspecting his robes, which looked no worse for wear. They had worked.

"Let me put it on your eyes great mother." He asked again, "first I need to wash them though," he said, transfiguring a pebble into a cloth and wet it with his wand.

Slowly she lowered her head enough for him to reach it and let him gently wash the crusty goop from her eyes. Then, with a hissed warning, he poured the ointment on her eyes. He could practically feel the eyes of the other keepers boring into his back, and he had to stop himself from curling in on himself under their scrutiny.

He jumped when the Fireball, let out a sigh of relief and tilted her head, so he had better access to the other eye. Now he was up close he could see the broken mess at her side of what was left of the trampled eggs. His heart hurt. He let out a small, sad little noise and rested a hand on her cheek, rubbing at the warm scales under her eyes.

"I'm so sorry about your children," he murmured, resting his head on her much larger cheekbone, "I'm so sorry you were all dragged into this and that they suffered for it."

"Me too," she said before she withdrew her head and curled up, now silent around her remaining eggs. Apparently done with them all.

Harry then, at the request of the Captain, went around to each of the other dragons to talk to them, and explain what would be happening and how they would be getting home in the morning. By the time he was finished, he was exhausted, and Charlie still wasn't there. He didn't like being around so many strange adults.

Chapter End Notes

What I’m trying to say with the Ron bit is that while some may think it nothing (kids just letting off steam, and having a bit of a push around) having someone so angry they resort to being physical, even if it’s ‘just a little push’ - It. Is. Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. Especially if you trusted them.

If it’s a shove now when will it be a fist? It may seem minor, but it’s still assault. You should never ever touch someone in anger, and never without permission. Ever. It’s assault and thats not okay. It may not be as extreme as being beaten or other extreme ways people can be touched with out permission and assaulted. But any sort of touch in angry or without permission (even if its just a hug) is not at all okay and is not acceptable (in my book anyway)

Anyhow thats just my opinion, and thats the end of my rant.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter, next week’s will be a doozy!
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Post melt down chats, and Harry and Charlie have a few (more) heart to hearts in which Harry gets some much needed advice and guidance.

Chapter Notes

There are a few Australian phrases used below. It was recently pointed out that they may not be used as commonly in the rest of the world, and I should provide a translation for those not familiar with them.

Gas bagging - talking, chatting, gossiping, yabbering.

Whoop-whoop - the middle of nowhere, a fair out of town. Fun fact, its also known as 'cut lunch territory’, and ‘beyond the black stump; (don’t ask me why, I don’t get that one either)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The captain insisted Harry joined them around their campfire for dinner. And not knowing how to politely turn it down, Harry spent the whole time listening to their admittedly, fascinating stories. If he wasn't so exhausted and done with people, and desperate for some quiet, some alone time, he probably would have enjoyed it.

Harry kept his emotions ruthless under control and staying out of reach of people, not letting anyone touch him. He listened attentively to their stories soaking up as much knowledge as they offered, but longed for a reason to leave, to just be on his own, or to check on Charlie.

But by the time Charlie stalked back into the clearing, Harry was about ready to vibrate out of his skin with the tension of being around so many strangers for so long. He was starting to feel the stress of everything that had happened today. His mind was starting to de-frost from the fog of detached numbness. And all he could feel, as Charlie crossed back into the clearing was the tension in Charlie. The anger and the sorrow permeating Charlie's magic was making Harry's head spin. He stood up shakily as Charlie got to the captain, but before he could do something, Charlie spat out, "the arena has been dismantled. All our things have been shrunk and boxed."

Harry stared. He'd never seen Charlie talk so coldly, so furiously.

"Sit down, Charlie boy, eat some food. It will all seem better in the morning," the captain started, but Charlie cut him off suddenly, shouting at him in Romanian.

Harry couldn't understand a word of it, but he could feel the anger pouring off Charlie. He was gesturing to the dragons and in the vague direction of the castle. Harry got the gist and shrank back, despite himself.
Charlie was upset about the crushed eggs and wanted to do something about it. The captain wouldn't let him. Harry was torn between the desire to hide in the trees away from the anger, to hide behind the Horntails wing again (that seemed a pretty solid option), to run and never come back and to step in and stop Charlie before it ended in a duel where he'd get killed.

But the captain was yelling now too. Harry couldn't take it. He leapt up and grabbed Charlie's hand. He was scared the captain was about to go for his wand. Harry used all his weight to get Charlie moving, desperate to get them out. He dragged Charlie back into the trees, casting a frightened look back at the camp, at the captain.

Once they were out of the clearing, Charlie didn't resist and followed Harry silently as he broke into a run. Harry led them noiselessly through the trees along one of his favourite running paths. As exhausted as Harry was, as much as he wanted to just go, and be alone. He could not leave Charlie like that. So he ran, and eventually, Harry could feel the turmoil that Charlie was in; the sorrow. Now the anger seemed to have faded, just like Harry had intended.

He couldn't not say anything. "Charlie?" He asked hesitantly, reaching out a hand when they came to a stop somewhere behind the Whomping Willow.

Charlie just looked at him then, looking sad, and angry and exhausted and defeated. And Harry was reminded suddenly how young Charlie was. He was only 20. But he had that look in his eye, that Harry saw whenever he looked in the mirror, of someone who'd seen too much and had the weight of the world on their shoulder. An old soul.

"Charlie," Harry said again, hesitantly reaching a hand out and placing it gently on Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie just stared at him, not really seeing. He was so tired. It'd been a really long week preparing for the task and moving the dragons over. Between the dragons and the task, no-one had had much sleep. Charlie felt really bad for the dragons and the Fireball specifically. He was so spitting mad at Krum for cursing the dragon and at the ministry for putting them all in that position.

But now all that was left was sorrow.

Charlie could feel himself falling apart, and Bill wasn't there. His mirror, to call his brother, was back in his tent, and he didn't want to see the captain at that point.

Charlie sighed. He was on his own in England again, feeling like everything he left behind was back at the forefront, and everything sucked again. And those poor baby dragons!

Before he realised it, Charlie was on his knees, crying. Harry was hesitantly sitting next to him, a hand on his shoulder. It was not as good as his brother's hugs, but Harry seemed to comfort him, as best he could, reluctantly taking one hand in his. Charlie grip's it like a lifeline. Sobbing.

"Those innocent baby's Harry. They were just baby's. And no-one is going to do anything, because people here don't care about anything but themselves. It's their way or not at all," Charlie bit out sobbing pressing, his face into his hands, one of which was still tightly gripping Harry's.

Slowly his tears stopped, and he scrubbed at his eyes with his free hand after he'd eventually pulled himself back together.

Harry leant against Charlie, shivering suddenly, as he tried to comfort him and simultaneously hold himself together. Charlie's magic was swirling around them wildly. It was so strong, chipping away at all of Harry's shields. All the stress of the last week was overflowing, and bursting out from the
little box he buried it in. He wanted to cry too.

Harry swallowed and pulled Charlie to his feet. They had to get out of there. He led Charlie, back to the clearing and into his tent. He cast a fearful glare at the captain as they passed, but the captain just nodded at him. Harry flinched in surprise but was too tired to try and decipher the look. Instead, he just deposited Charlie on the bed, wrapped the blanket around him and put the kettle on.

Harry was numbly aware of Charlie picking something up, and starting to speak quietly, probably the communication mirror. Harry could hear Bill's voice softly in the background. He'd have felt curious ordinarily, but he was hanging by a thread, so he wasn't.

Harry made a cup of calming camomile tea and pressed it into Charlie's hands, dimly aware of Bill greeting him and Charlie telling him something along the lines of he's welcome to stay. But Harry just curled up on the hard wooden chair at the table and sipped his tea. He focussed only on the hot cup in his hands and anything but the sight of the distraught Fireball, the furious horntail, or the dead spider.

Harry tried to hold himself together, to pack everything back up so he could put himself together enough to go back to the tower now that Charlie was okay again... Just the idea of going back was making his stomach turn. He couldn't seem to make himself move.

The spider... He'd murdered a spider. Hagrid would be furious when he found out, Aragog would eat him if he was ever caught. He'd be called a kinslayer.

The terror at having to face the dragons, the horror at what people were making him do, were making the dragons do, the sight of all those wizards stunning the dragons, chaining them down, the crushed eggs his heart was starting to break in two-

Harry jumped a mile and fell out of his chair when Charlie put a hand on his shoulder. He scrambled back, not quite sure where he was suddenly. He scurried back into the corner, breathing hard. His heart was pounding in his chest as if his ribcage was suddenly too small, and he couldn't breathe. His vision was spotty, and where was he? Where was the next blow coming from?

Harry flinched at the contact when Charlie put his hand on his shoulder again, and Harry tried in vain to push everything back. Charlie was crouching in front of him, his eyes wide, worry on his face. Why was Charlie worried?

"Harry?" Charlie said softly, "are you okay?"

Are you okay? The words echoed in Harry's mind, and he shoved his fist into his mouth and bit down hard to stop any noise escaping. Don't make any sound.

"It's alright, Harry, just let go. Let someone else hold you up for a bit. It's okay, Harry, I got you. It's okay to let go. You're safe here, I promise," Charlie murmured reaching out slowly and pulling Harry to his chest. Harry tipped forward still crouched in a ball. He panicked at the overwhelming contact when Charlie pulled him into his lap.


But it wasn't okay, and all the memories were twisting in his head, and even when he went to sleep, even if he didn't see them, he'd see something else that would leave him waking up in a hot sweat, panic flooding through his veins instead of blood.

"It's okay, Harry, it's going to be okay," Charlie murmured holding him tighter. Charlie was warm.
His warmth seeped into Harry's skin. It was hot, it almost burned, it itched. Harry's skin was too small. He' was not used to this. It was too much.

He sobbed. He sobbed because it was too much and too hard, and it was never going to end. He sobbed in fury at the injustice of it all, at constantly having to fight the world that continually punished him for existing. He was so tired of fighting all the time. He didn't know how he'd manage to keep going and make it through the term, let alone the whole year.

Charlie just picked him up and sat down on the bed, as opposed to the floor. He wrapped a blanket around them both and just held Harry tight. Harry'd never had that before. He'd always had to look after himself and Charlie was rocking slightly, murmuring something in Romanian in his ear.

It was so soothing.

He was so warm and gentle, and it felt like heaven. Harry could have melted. Charlie's hugs were so much different from Hermione's. Charlie was bigger, and Harry felt like he was safe, and like everything would be okay when Charlie hugged. He never wanted it to end. He wanted to crawl inside Charlie's breastbone and live there.

He wondered distantly if Charlie learnt that from Bill. Bill's hugs were like this too.

"Will they do that to me?" Harry asked softly awhile later, his eyes still damp. He was tired now, warm and comfortable for what felt like the first time in weeks, still curled up in Charlie's lap, his head under Charlie's chin.

"Do what?" Charlie asked curiously, content to just sit there in the blankets.

"Stun me and chain me up. Like they did the dragons. When they think I'm too much to handle? Will they just stun me? When they get sick of me?" Harry said, and there was something haunting about his voice that made Charlie shiver.

Charlie wasn't sure who they were, but either way, it wasn't good, "no, Harry. I won't let them. I promise, and neither will Bill. While we're here, you're safe, promise. I can't make everything better, Harry, but I can promise to have your back, okay? To stick by you."

And Harry, despite himself, believed him. He nodded, his throat tight, and pressed his face back into the crook of Charlie's neck, and hugged him wrapping his arms around Charlie's chest and holding on tight.

Charlie wrapped Harry more securely in his arms and talked while rocking slightly as Harry slowly relaxed, his tears slowing to a stop. Charlie talked about how he liked dragons better than people, except Bill. He loved Bill. Charlie liked the twins too and his friend Tonks, the Metamorph. Charlie talked about how he was open with those that he liked, (which was not many, but I like you, your okay,) but as an introvert, he didn't really like people and didn't like being touched by those he didn't know or like. Charlie got being weird. It was fine to be cold and detached against the world to protect yourself, but don't forget to give yourself a break. Charlie talked about how he didn't always trust. How he understood what it was like to have to stand alone. It was okay to lean on others sometimes though; those you trust.

"It's okay to lean on others, Harry. It doesn't make you weak. This month has been really hard, hasn't it? It's okay. Sometimes strength means letting yourself feel. Because sometimes feeling is the hardest thing of all."

They fell asleep like that, curled up with plenty of blankets.
Charlie was woken very early by something, or someone knocking on the wards of his tent. He blinked but froze at the warm weight on his chest. Harry.

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and the night before came back to him. He ran a hand over Harry's messy hair. Harry looked so small and frail like that, but more relaxed than Charlie had ever seen him. Charlie reached out with his magic to the wards. It was the Captain.

He winced, not wanting to disturb Harry, and went to slip out of bed, but Harry just tightened his arms around him like a barnacle and didn't let go. Charlie let out a soft laugh and flicked his wand to wrap Harry in a silencing charm before pulling the blankets up a bit higher around him. He then flicked his wand again at the tent flap, opening it. The captain stepped in, and immediately caught sight of Charlie and the top of Harry's head.

He blinked, then asked, "Is that....?"

"Yep," Charlie said, with a slightly defensive glare, but not bothering to lie.

The captain raised his hands in a gesture of peace and asked, "I meant to ask did you tell him? About dragons being the first task."

"I did not say a word," Charlie said honestly. He hadn't, he had written it.

"Good," the captain said, deciding not to question it, "I think I scared him yesterday. When we were yellin' at each other." he said, scratching the back of his head, "weird he is. Will stroll up to dragons for a chat, but people make him twitchy as hell that one."

"Don't you judge him," Charlie said firmly, tightening a protective arm around the still sleeping Harry. Harry mumbled something into Charlie's chest and clung onto him tighter. Charlie glared up at the captain.

The captain put his hands up in surrender, "wow, Charlie boy, I ain't meaning anything by it, just an observation. That's all. I didn't mean to scare him."

Charlie sighed and made a dismissive gesture, "'t's fine. Sorry for losing it yesterday, Boss," Charlie murmured, heat rising to his cheeks.

"Don't worry about it, Charlie, boy, I understand. Really, I do. We're just in a tight spot here. I wish it was have been different." The captain said.

Charlie nodded, and scrubbed at his eyes with a free hand, "what do you need?" shifting slightly, careful not to wake Harry, who was plastered on top of him. The poor boy hadn't slept properly, by the looks of it, in months.

"We have to be gone by noon. The dragons are too unsettled after yesterday. They want to go home, best to get out now. I've managed to weasel out portkeys for the dragons. If we dose them with more sleeping potions, and crate them, with their eggs, and have their handlers sitting on top of the crates, we can all go back via portkey, so we just need to pack up camp." The captain explained.

"Right, can do boss, what time do you want us up?" He asked, checking his watch, and wincing, it was 4am.

"0700 Charlie boy," the captain said
"Why the hell are you waking me now then?" Charlie said irritably with a yawn.

"End of my shift on watch wanted to check we were good before everyone was up and about." The captain said with an easy smile.

Charlie sighed, but smiled back, "yeah we're good, I'm still upset about the fireball, and this whole stupid thing, but so are you so... again sorry I lost it."

"Already forgotten. You have some nice swearwords though Charlie boy, impressive that was. I didn't know half of them. Who'd a thought, a polite, dragon-loving introvert like our Charlie-boy would have such a filthy mouth" The Captain teased with a grin before leaving Charlie to go back to sleep.

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Harry came too slowly. He was warm and cozy and content. His mind wasn't clouded by the panic of half-remembered dreams; instead, he felt content, safe and for the first time, could probably go back to sleep again. He lay there for a moment, listening to a steady rhythmic sound in his ears. There was breeze nearby, it was nice.

His pillow was exceptionally warm, he nuzzled into it, clutching at the white fabric... it was freckly... He frowned at it and poked it gently with a fingertip.

It grunted.

He poked it again curiously, it moved again, and grunted as a hand batted his finger away, "stop pokin', go back t' sleep," croaked a sleepy voice somewhere above him.

"Your not my pillow," Harry blurted out stupidly, his brain-mouth filter not awake.

Charlie snorted sleepily at him, smiling softly. Harry blinked at him owlishly, as an arm snaked around Harry's waist and hugged him close.

"No, not quite. Happy to stand in for you, though. Anytime. Just for you, though." Charlie said, before considering it, "and Bill. I like Bill too. He's on the exception list. Anyone else can go without though," he replied fondly at Harry.

"The exception list?" He asked yawning.

Charlie blinked and yawned too, "I don't really like people," he said, and Harry remembered distantly the conversation they had the night before.

"but there are some exceptions to that rule." Harry finished, "people you don't dislike, like Bill," Harry said, "and the twins sometimes? Oh and your Tonks friend?

"The twins in small doses, yes. Mostly it's just Bill who I never don't want to be around, and Tonks, who is a close second" Charlie mumbled. And Harry felt a wave of relief that someone else felt the same way about people.

He hummed tiredly.

"And you." Charlie added, "I'm coming to like you. You're not too bad," he finished with a cheeky grin.

A smile grew on Harry's face, and he blinked sleepily and yawned again, "I like you too. You're a
good friend" Harry murmured, putting his head back down on Charlie's chest.

He should probably get up and go for a run, or at least check the time, or figure out how he felt after having a meltdown in front of Charlie last night. He felt he would probably be embarrassed. But he was warm and sleepy and comfortable instead. Sleep was pulling at him, and Charlie was warm. He snuggled in, pulling the blanket tighter around them instead, hugging Charlie closer like a particularly solid, warm pillow.

"Mmmm," he hummed, "'S comfy. You're warm," he mumbled, half asleep again.

Charlie chuckled and mumbled, "mm 't's too early Kiddo, go back to sleep." Harry smiled at the that and snuggled a bit closer still and closed his eyes again. He'd never been called that before, he thought sleepily. It was nice.

* 

"You gotta wake up now kiddo," Charlie murmured sometime later, pulling Harry, reluctantly, from what felt like, possibly one of the best, and deepest sleep of his life.

"naaaw....don' wanna" Harry mumbled, pulling the blankets up higher over his head and snuggling down into the cocoon of warmth, tightening his arms around Charlie. He was not at all awake, or he would not have been nearly so unguarded.

Charlie snorted. Harry reminded him a little bit of a cat, reluctant to leave his nap in the sun. He wrapped an arm around Harry in a brief hug and said, "well, I have to get up now. We're going back home today, and I can't do that with you on top of me."

Harry could hear the laughter in Charlie's voice and blinked again, sitting up suddenly as awareness flooding him. He almost felt embarrassed. He had a meltdown in front of Charlie. He'd had a meltdown in front of Charlie. He'd crawled into his bed and clung to him like a weak child. He almost wanted to run and hide. The closeness was frightening, the simple trust and comfortableness he felt terrified him.

He almost hated how safe and comfortable he felt with Charlie. He almost disliked the fact he wanted to hug Charlie tight and not let go. But Charlie's soothing words from the night before echoed in his mind again, 'its okay to lean on others.' It was okay.

Besides he didn't actually want to be embarrassed and awkward about it. It was the best sleep he'd had in... Well, since he'd been here last. And, he was warm and snuggly and felt to content to be upset, besides, Charlie didn't seem to mind. Harry snuggled closer instead.

Charlie seemed to catch onto his momentary turmoil; however brief it had been, (he was a ninja like that) and said, "none of that now, I can feel all your conflict. It's way too early."

Harry nodded yawning. He was starting to enjoying that odd warm tingly feeling that hugs filled him with.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I have been known to call Bill over the mirror at 3 in the morning, upset about something, or crawl into his bed when we're in the same county and I'm feeling miserable. That's okay, Harry. It's okay to lean on others."

Harry nodded uncertainly, "yeah, I'm too grateful for a good night sleep honestly to be able to be properly embarrassed about," he said after considering it, "do I have to get up?" He added, looking at Charlie pleadingly.

Charlie snorted and smiling fondly, "'fraid so. If I have to, you have to."
Harry sighed and got up, pulling his robes back on over the clothes he slept in.

"There's a small shower in there," Charlie said, pointing to a door in the tent wall.

"I'll shower back up at the castle. What time is it?" Harry said, fishing out his socks and casting a cleaning charm on them.

"7, we need to be out of here by lunchtime, and there's still loads to do," Charlie said, as he went to the trunk at the end of the bed and pulled out his leathers and a fresh change of clothes.

"I should head back up to the school then, I haven't been back since before the task," Harry said, feeling reluctant to go back and face the words of people in the castle.

Charlie sat down on the bed next to Harry, slinging an arm around his shoulder.

"You did good. Whatever they say, whatever score they gave you, you were outstanding." Charlie said, and Harry sank into it, relishing in the contact now that he had given himself permission, "and you didn't hurt my dragons!" Charlie added, making Harry laugh.

"Oh! The robes worked Charlie! They worked!" Harry exclaimed suddenly, as Charlie got up and crossed over to the bathroom.

"What?"

"Yesterday. I almost got caught by the Fireball. The warded robes we made worked," Harry said, crossing to sit by the bathroom door so he could tell Charlie what had happened, while he was in the shower.

"I'm so glad they worked, and you didn't get burnt," Charlie said, "what happened?"

Harry told him

"well, I'm glad you managed to get the Fireball to take that ointment," Charlie called through the crack in the door, "it's a huge relief! She'll be in a much better mood today, hopefully. And those shirts are great! I'm a bit jealous."

The water shutoff and Charlie stepped out fully dressed a moment later.

"It's a pity we don't have long. We'll have to go back to sending messages via the boxes, but we can talk about working something out for the shirts. Maybe find a way to power them without blood so you can sell them to the reserve," Charlie said, crossing to the kitchen. They discussed it over breakfast.

"Charlie," Harry said sometime later.

Harry had put off going back to the castle again. Instead, they were coaxing the dragons into taking sleeping potions for the trip home. Or more to the point, Harry was coaxing them, to take their nests into the crates and let Charlie give them potions.

"Yeah?" Charlie asked, glancing at Harry.

"What are the rules?"

"Huh?" Charlie asked

"What are the rules, for hugging, and touch and stuff. I'm not used to this," Harry said stiltedly, "I
don't normally get touched at all let alone hugged."

Charlie's face fell and did something complicated before he pulled Harry into another tight hug as if Harry's admission physically hurt him.

"There aren't really any rules. As long as the other person doesn't mind, hug away, as much or as little as you want. Some people are more touchy-feely than others. Some with everyone, some only with those they know. Bill has, on multiple occasions, likened me to an octopus or a barnacle. But I only with those I aptly really like."

"The exception list?" Harry asked.

"Yup," Charlie said, tapping Harry's nose, making him go cross-eyed.

Charlie laughed, and Harry pushed him back playfully. Charlie grabbed him in another hug, and they almost fell over, laughing.

"Do people mind, though? You and Bill are really close, but some don't touch."

"It's a personal preference thing," Charlie explained, "but if you're asking if people think it weird? Sometimes; especially the more tactile you are. Someone actually thought Bill and I were dating once," Charlie said, screwing his face up in disgust, "But generally I don't really care. I value having people I like and can touch too much to care about the opinions of people I don't know or don't like."

Harry frowned and said something else to the Welsh Green they were dealing with. She hissed something back before he handing her the sleeping potion. She drained it, and let him take the empty flagon sized potion vial from her jaws before her eyes slid closed and she curled up around her eggs safely in the dragon-sized travel crate.

"Why is touch so important to you, Charlie?" Harry then asked carefully after they had sealed up the crate, ready to let the others to later attach a Portkey to it.

Charlie thought about it a minute, then said, "it feels nice. It's that warm and fuzzy feeling that says, I like this person, care about them, and I trust them. With a touch, I can express all that without actually having to use any words."

"I'm Ace," Charlie continued slowly after thinking for another moment, "asexual," he clarified at Harry's confused look, "I don't feel sexual attraction, and I'm not interested in sex. Actually I never really grew out of that whole, sex is ew phase," he wrinkled his nose again in disgust, making Harry laugh.

"So as long as touch doesn't mean, sex. I think touch is pretty important. And not even in a romantic sense. I'm not interested in a romantic relationship at the moment. I'm way too busy with my dragons! Don't tell mum though" he said, looking serious, "she never leaves me alone about finding a bird and settling down to give her grandkids." He made the disgusted face again.

Harry bumped his shoulder against Charlie's, in a friendly manner and nodded. Charlie smiled at him and went on, "I don't have a lot of intimate connections with people. I'm an introvert. I prefer animals, and I live and work in the middle of whoop whoop. So touch, to me, is an important part of connecting to those I do actually like being around and it's an important part of conveying that I care for and trust those people." Charlie said

Harry stared at him for a long moment after all that, his mouth gaping, "so it's normal? I'm not a freak, for feeling like that?"
"Wait, what?" Charlie said.

Harry bit his lip then let out in a rush, "Am I a freak for only wanting touch some times with some people like, like you and Bill, but if it's anyone else it makes me super uncomfortable and I want a bath." Harry said earnestly, still looking confused. "Even Hagrid and Hermione are a bit hit and miss. I thought I hated touch, but now I think I might kind like it? Now I'm getting used to it. I kind of crave it? I think it's weird." Harry said both honestly confused and awkwardly mortified all at the same time. "I like your hugs, you and Bill give good hugs. Sometimes I think I don't want to let go," He scuffed his toe in the dirt, not looking up.

Charlie pulled him into yet another hug, and didn't let go this time, "Sure it is," he said, "its called having boundaries. And that's okay. You're not a freak. Never a freak, Harry. It's normal and understandable and totally okay. You can have as many hugs as you want. I love hugs. They're one of my favourite things in the world after Dragons. It's called skin hunger or being touch starved. It's okay. I promise that it's okay, Harry. You're not alone. Hug and touch whoever you want Harry. You can hug me as much as you like and I can tell you Bill won't mind either. He likes hugs too" the older boy reassured.

Harry paused for another long moment.

"So, is it normal to think sex is ew?" Harry whispered blushing scarlet, but looking just as grossed out by the thought of it, "because it is," he said seriously as he wriggled out from Charlie's arms. He hopped up to sit on the railing of the Fireballs now empty pen.

"People look at each other with this funny face," he went on, still looking disgusted, "and I catch them with their tongues down their throat. I don't get it! Its just ick! Boys talk about sex a lot, and how hot girls are, though sometimes boys too. I don't get it!" Harry went on, definitely looking disgusted now.

"How is swapping bodily fluids anything but disgusting? How is putting your body parts into someone else's not gross? It's just gross Charlie. Is that okay? Is that normal?" Harry asked worry in his voice, looking up at Charlie earnestly, very concerned.

"Yes. That's normal and okay too. And as to why people do swap bits and fluids, you're asking the wrong person. I don't get it either." Charlie said hopping up onto the railing next to him and putting an arm around Harry again, "But whether it's that your ace as well, or maybe just not there yet, that's okay. You don't have to like it, or feel attracted to people that way."

"If I hug people though, will they think I want the sex thing though?" Harry asked, crinkling his nose at the thought, much like Charlie had and leaned happily into Charlie's side, soaking up his warmth.

"Maybe? Sometimes? If you're worried, say so. Tell them you don't want the sex thing or that you're not interested and you just mean the hug as a friend. That's what I do. You're a bit young to have to worry about it yet, though. I think? I'm not too sure about that sort of thing."

Harry nodded into his shoulder but jumped when a loud voice interrupted them, "Oi you two, stop gas-baggin' and get back to work. We gotta be gone in an hour and still have to crate two dragons. They moved the schedule up." The captain called walking over to them. Harry flinched back into Charlie at the man's approach. The captain was a lot bigger than him, and he'd been really loud the night before.

"You," he said, pointing to Harry, who flinched and crunched further back into Charlie as he continued, "come see me when you're sick of this place, you're hired."
Harry blinked, "what?" He cracked out, letting go of his tight hold on Charlie's shirt in his surprise.

Charlie laughed at his dumbfounded expression and said, "Good choice, captain. This is that friend of Bill's who worked on that fireproof shirt. It worked."

"Sneaky little thing aren't you?" The captain said, looking at Harry appraisingly, "Double hired! Clever too. In that case, you write to Charlie-boy here. He'll pass it to me, and we'll talk about you making some of those fireproof clothes for us, okay?" The captain said, holding out his hand to Harry.

Harry looked at it a moment but straightened his spine and shook it firmly, "yes sir."

"Good to be doing business with you then kid. You survive this bat trap first okay? And Weasley, get onto the next dragon. Oh and kid?" he said, turning back to Harry in afterthought, "didn't mean to scare you last night." The captain said before stalking away.

"He's odd," Harry said quietly watching him go, feeling slightly stunned.

"Yeah, he's alright though," Charlie said, resting a comforting arm around Harry's shoulders, "he's big and loud, but he's an okay bloke.

Harry nodded, "thought he was going to hex you last night," he said not totally convinced but rested his head briefly on Charlie's shoulder.

"Probably. I deserved it, though. He wouldn't have hurt me."

Harry nodded slowly, "I'd better get up to school. It's nearly breakfast time, and I should make sure Hermione isn't worrying about me too much. Do you want me to talk to the last two dragons first?"

"Nah we'll be right. You said they could understand us. I'll just ask them nicely. You should get back up to the castle," Charlie said.

Harry just hugged Charlie hard, "I'm glad you were here. Thanks for the advice."

"Any time, Harry. Stay in touch, don't be a stranger, and look after yourself. It's okay to be yourself Kiddo, even if it's a bit different from everyone else."

Harry nodded into his chest, then let go and hurried up to the castle.

Chapter End Notes

Okay just incase your wondering, there is nothing inappropriate between Charlie and Harry.

(Or Bill and Harry, or Charlie and Bill, just in case you're wondering)

(Also Charlie was talking to Bill via mirror, they often do this, we’ll talk about it later)
There may be some kind of pairing later on, but probably not in this book (and I don't write slash)
Chapter 29 Un-housed

Chapter Summary

Shit hits the fan

Chapter Notes

This one has some trigger warnings details are at the bottom of the page for anyone who wants to check them.

This one is a big one! I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry joined Hermione in the hall for breakfast, after sending Sirius a very quick perfunctory note saying he’d managed the task but not much else. When she caught sight of him, she squealed and launched herself off the bench at him in a hug. It was only due to quick reflexes that he managed to catch her.

And tentatively hugged her back.

She beamed at him, "I was so worried you didn't come back! Are you okay? What happened? Have you seen the paper? Or the Quibbler? Luna dropped one-off for you. Have you been to the tower yet?" She fired off questions one after other at him.

He laughed and took a seat next to her.

"Sorry, I went to check on the dragons, and help the handlers persuade the Fireball to take the ointment for her cursed eyes. She was a mess after having her eggs crushed," Harry explained.

"I stayed down there last night, fell asleep before I could come back to the castle. Charlie let me crash in his tent. What was in the paper?" He asked.

Hermione sighed, "well, she didn't mention you directly, and didn't name you... But she went into great detail about how heroic the other champions tasks were. She didn't name you, but she did say that the fourth champion did not use any magic at all, but merely took the cowards way out. She then went on to look at the 'evil' dark history of Parseltongue." Hermione said, frowning.

Harry sighed, his good mood vanishing, "well it's better than it could be. I can't stop them mentioning me completely, but it does stop her from naming me and claiming to have interviewed me, or others about me. So it's an improvement."

"The Quibbler's actually better. Surprisingly so for a magazine that writes rubbish." Hermione said.

"It's not rubbish, read it with the glasses," Harry said absently opening the Quibbler, and ignoring Hermione's, "what?"
The front page had a huge photo of him, nose to nose with the dragon. The first 5 pages were exclusively on dragons. A lot of the conversation he had with Luna was in the piece. She seemed to have interviewed some of the handlers as well. Harry was pleasantly surprised to see that the article wasn't about him, just the dragons. Though there were plenty of photos, especially of him, sitting with the dragon, looking over the dragon's wing at the judges and of him stroking the dragons cheek. The piece also explained about dragon bonds, bargaining, and the magic behind it. It was brilliant.

The next few pages had more articles about him. One double spread went into detail rebutting Skeeters original article and explained what really happened to get him into the tournament and possibly why. One talked about who could possibly be behind it. It pointed potential fingers at everyone from Voldemort, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Moody to Minister Fudge. Harry thought it was a good subtle dig at all of them, really.

The next page was completely devoted to an article all about how he managed the task and his scoring. It also covered his oath, why he made it, and why he only made the oath then. It was a surprisingly good article, not playing him up, but not playing him down either. There were more dragon photographs too.

He flipped through the rest of the magazine, reading the other articles Luna had written on how the other champions had faced their dragons. It was clear she had interviewed Diggory and Delacour too, but she seemed rather scathing of Krum who had hurt his own dragon. She had not spoken to him at all.

When he put on the Spectra Specs, he used them to read the Quibbler's hidden articles. Harry had been worried about how much the articles about him would look into Dumbledore. Harry was taking a risk already by working with Luna, as it was without the old farts permission. He was worried that if the Quibbler painted Dumbledore in a too unsavoury light, it would have drawn the man's eye onto Harry again. Harry was in a very awkward and vulnerable position at that moment of not being able to do much other than fly under the radar until he was free of the man's magic.

The first article was on Bagman. It covered his odd scoring of Harry, his offer to help Harry cheat, which Harry had turned down, and his totally out of line post-task berating of Harry for not taking enough risks with his life in the task. It then brought up many of the unsavoury rumours about Bagman's Gambling debts and issues with the goblins to name just a few, a couple of which she'd presented some interesting evidence towards. Some of of the rumours seemed plausible, but some of which sounded completely outrageous.

It was in true Quibbler style however; hiding the truth under outrageous ideas. All in all, it painted a picture of a somewhat desperate man in-debt, who may have been trying to bet his way out of gambling debts, which didn't seem to be too much of an intelligent choice. Harry wondered if it was true, and how Luna found out all those things.

Next, there was a piece about Hogwarts and how it may not be that safe after all. It touched on things that would be common knowledge if you know where to look. It looked at muggle war orphans being forced to go back to orphanages during the bombings. It looked at the death of Myrtle Warren. It looked at the string of incompetent Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers, including but not limited to Quirrel, who was possessed, incompetent, and a thief. Then there was Lockheart, who was an incompetent fraud, Lupin, who forgot his wolfsbane one night despite actually being competent, and several other teachers Harry had not heard of. The article then went on to discuss the Philosophers Stone being housed in a school guarded by a Cerberus and continued on to cover the Chamber of Secrets. The school had not been closed either time the Chamber was opened. And then the article went on to cover numerous other incidents that Harry
suspected were before his time.

Luna's article, again, was well written, and had obviously been taken from multiple sources; nothing that would directly point to Harry. It was obvious Luna had been working on it for a while, and he wondered what prompted her to publish it then.

The next article moved onto Dumbledore and the ministry.

It started with a critical look at how they had run the pre-task preparation. The Quibbler poked holes again in Harry's name being drawn, Bagman's offer of cheating, the fact that no-one had looked surprised at dragons, and also looked at the harsh scoring.

It then mentioned Dumbledore being Harry's magical guardian and that Harry had not been aware of such a thing at all, let alone who his guardian was. He had been raised by muggles and been kept ignorant of his heritage. It didn't directly point fingers, just looked at a large and alarming number of 'coincidences.' Coincidences such as Harry not getting the introduction pack, not being told he had a guardian, and not being kept from the tournament by said, guardian. It didn't actually antagonise or criticise the man. Still, it did paint him in a subtly neglectful light. It also openly questioned how the ministry could have let anyone slip through the cracks in the system; let alone the Boy Who Lived.

For once, Harry didn't mind the use of that shocking monicker.

It was subtle. Good work; definitely something he could build on. It was proof he could probably trust her. It also went rather nicely towards rebutting Skeeters article in the Daily Prophet.

Luna's article then went on to critique what an appallingly inhuman use of sentient beings the first task had been. It discussed that it not only put the dragons in a horrible position of having to protect their young, but that the ministry had threatened, and forced the handlers to chain the Dragons down.

Luna had obviously talked to the Captain as she went into detail of why the Sanctuary had had to agree to the work and why they had not wanted to. The ministry should have prepared stable and suitable enclosures for the dragons and been prepared to bring them over and get them settled months in advance. This would have meant they could be treated and looked after properly. After all, dragons were real living wild animals, not trained handbag dogs to be carted around at will. It then went on again, about how much damage the task had done, by forcing school students to steal from protective mother's, which had meant a champion got hurt, a dragon got hurt, and multiple unborn dragons got killed.

The article went a step further and poked some more fingers at the ministry, bringing up the muggleborn pureblood divide, a number of other blunders the ministry had made and referenced past Quibbler articles. Apparently poking accusatory fingers at the ministry and at prominent members of Wizarding society was rather common for the Quibbler.

Overall, Harry was very pleased with Luna's work. Hopefully, it would draw a little heat to Dumbledore from the ministry, without drawing attention to Harry. He would definitely be talking to Luna as they approached the holidays to work out some other articles to get things going once he was free of Dumbledores magic. He couldn't wait!

Harry passed the Quibbler and the Spectra Specs over to Hermione when he'd finished. An envelope fell out of the back with his name on it.

Inside was a stack of photos of the dragons, and of him with his dragon that Luna had taken. Some
of which had not been included in the Quibbler. Smiling, he put them away to look at later and took a moment to survey the hall and try to get an idea of the students' mood.

As usual lots of people were staring at him. But he could tell that attitudes had changed. The Hufflepuffs no longer looked hostile and angry. They seemed more indifferent now, as did the foreign students. Judging by their dismissal, he supposed Hufflepuff had heard about his warning to Diggory and had, like the foreign students, decided that due to his supposed lacklustre performance he must not be a threat to their own champion and therefore not worth the attention.

The Slytherins, however, were looking at him too, but slightly more covertly. They were giving him appraising looks as if assessing something for the first time. It was a little unnerving, but not altogether hostile.

The Ravenclaws were a bit of both, some looking at him curiously, most still glared believing him a cheat and a coward, and some decided he was a fool not worth their time.

It was the Gryffindors; however, that were a little worrying. A lot of them were glaring at him. Especially Ron further down the table with Dean, Seamus and a couple of older boys, one of whom Harry thought may have been called Cormack McLagan.

Harry frowned. He was getting a lot of dark looks, similar to those of when the house turned on him in his second year when they thought he was a dark wizard. He winced, he had a feeling his standing in the house was about to take a nosedive. Again. Probably more so than it already had.

He had been hoping that the hexing in the corridors would ease up. But he had a nasty feeling about his fellow Gryffindors.

"Wow," Hermione said, interrupting him, "This is actually brilliant! I wonder what spell work is in it! I'll have to take out a subscription! There are so many controversial articles with really interesting news in it! It goes into much more detail looking at the whole plot behind your life really, and why you're in the tournament. It really picks the whole thing apart from all angles very well."

"The question will be," Harry said carefully, "will it change anyone's opinions of me. While this is more positive, it's clear the Prophet has not changed its stance on me."

"No," Hermione said, "Gryffindor didn't react very well last night. I had a huge row with Ron about it." She said with a sigh, putting her napkin down, and getting ready to go to class.

"Yeah?" Harry asked wearily, pulling his wand out in preparation to brave the halls.

"Yes, they reacted badly to you 'snake-like' cowardly method' of doing the task. It was too dark and Slytherin for them and not nearly Gryffindor enough." Hermione said mockingly as they left the hall.

Harry clenched his jaw but smiled at Neville tentatively when he joined them on the way to charms.

"Nice one with the Dragon yesterday Harry," Neville said

Harry smiled, relieved, "thanks. Pity not everyone is going to see it that way."

"Unfortunately, wizards, particularly Gryffindors, are not the most logical people," Hermione said.
Neville nodded and to Harry's relief, changed the subject, pulling Harry and Hermione into an interesting discussion about the book he was reading, Mediterranean Water Plants and their Properties.

"That's the one Moody gave you right?" Harry asked

"Yes. It's really interesting. It mentioned Gillyweed, as well as a bunch of other plants I think, may actually grow in the lake!" Neville said excitedly.

"Can I read it once you've done Neville?" Hermione asked, curiously.

"Sure, as long as the Professor doesn't mind," Neville said, "I wondered if there was any Gillyweed we could use to look in the lake. I was thinking of maybe trying it and see what plants were down there. There are meant to be loads. I think the merpeople down there, farm some of them," Neville said eagerly as they neared the Charms classroom.

That piqued Harry's interest. He didn't know there were merpeople in the lake, or that there was really anything in the lake other than the squid. He had seen people playing in the shallows with the squid in summer. Maybe exploring the lake would be fun.

"I'm game," Harry said, causing Neville to grin, as they took their seats at the front of the class.

"Let's wait for summer first, though?" Hermione suggested, eager at the idea.

"Despite Gillyweed protecting us from the cold, it would still be mad to swim in the frozen lake at this time of year." Neville agreed, falling silent as Professor Flitwick called their attention for the start of class.

Harry lingered behind at the end of class, hoping Professor Flitwick would offer to tell him about his mother again over lunch, as he had before. Harry was interested to note that Flitwick automatically met his eyes but didn't immediately speak. Harry had wondered and held back a grin as he waited.

"Well met Mr Potter," Professor Flitwick said with a grin after a moment, "do have a seat."

Harry grinned and replied in the goblin fashion, "Well met Master Flitwick."

The Professor beamed and said, "just professor is fine Mr Potter. I see you have been reading."

"Yes, sir. I wasn't sure, but I thought it couldn't hurt to try."

"Yes, you were correct." He replied, "I am indeed half-goblin. Though you are one of the more polite students in questioning it. If you have any questions about the book, you're welcome to ask."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied gratefully, "A friend mine lent me some of his other books. I'm enjoying his writing style. He's pretty funny!"

Professor Flitwick grinned, "We think so too, though not many wizards do."

"Have you got the one on goblin language? I'd like to learn but hadn't managed to find one." Harry asked eagerly hoping Flitwick would offer the book his mum had mentioned.

Professor Flitwick grinned, "I'll give you a book that's an introduction to many magical languages. Have a look, and if you can show me you really are interested in the goblin tongue, I may be able
to assist you." He said, crossing over to his bookshelf and rifling thought it for a moment before handing Harry a tick tome on magical languages.

Harry was indeed very pleased to see, it was the very book his mum had recommended.

"Thanks, sir," Harry said flicking through it curiously. It seemed to have a chapter or two on many different languages ranging from troll, centaur, giant and ghoul, just to name a few. There was a bookmark in the section on Goblin tongue.

Harry considered how to phrase his question before asking, "Is it really called gobbledygook? It just sounds like such an insulting name."

Professor Flitwick snorted, "no, that's just what wizards call it. We call it something else in our own language. Read the section on Goblin tongue, and then we can talk."

Professor Flitwick called up some lunch, and Dobby popped in, beaming, with two bowls of pumpkin soup, and thick slabs of crusty buttered bread.

They tucked in, and Professor Flitwick said, "now tell me about that sonorous charm you used for your task, it was very interesting!"

Which prompted a long discussion over pumpkin soup about the charms Harry had been modifying and some of the charms his mother had modified in the past.

"One thing I wanted to ask you, Mr Potter, was why you continue to skip meals in the hall when you know it loses your house points." Flitwick asked after a while, "I would not have thought it would endear you to your housemates."

Harry stopped short, "pardon?" he asked, confused.

"There was a staff meeting last week, Dumbledore brought it up," the professor started, "he was worried about you missing meals. He suggested reinstating the old rule of 5 points lost for each meal missed, as an incentive not to miss more. Minerva said she would inform you. This was some time ago."

Harry bit back a snort of disbelief at the thought of Dumbledore being concerned and held back a snarl at the old man's latest bid to manipulate him.

"Why are you asking professor?" Harry asked, instead, not sure what his angle was.

"Well, it is concerning that you're missing meals. You can't really afford to Mr Potter. Though, I have noticed you've been looking a little less sickly lately."

Harry couldn't hold back a snort this time and instead said, "this is the first I have heard about losing points for not attending meals, sir." Not bothering to bring up his issues with eating in the hall.

Professor Flitwick peered at him for a moment, and sighed, "Minerva said she would tell you. Maybe she assumed your housemates would pass on the message. She's so overworked at the moment, the poor thing. What that man is thinking of, denying her request for a replacement Head of House or even just an assistant!" Professor Flitwick tutted and shook his head.

At Harry's frown, he said, "she's dealing with teaching a full course load, being deputy head, which is busy enough without her taking over for Dumbledore when he's called away to the ICW and the Wizangamot. On top of that she's also been put in charge of dealing with the other schools, and
being the Head of Gryffindor House. I know she's not the most hands-on Head of House, Mr Potter. It's not that she doesn't care, you have to understand; she's just stupidly overworked. But you didn't hear that from me." He said, looking at Harry sharply.

Harry nodded and sank back in his chair a bit. It had been nice eating away from the hall while it lasted.

Professor Flitwick then said, "I don't mind you eating in the kitchen if that's where you were. I do not begrudge you wanting some peace and quiet. But you need to be at the hall for lunch and dinner. Only breakfast can be taken out of the hall with you. You still need to go there to get it, or you will lose points. It's an older rule that has recently been revived. It's in the charter." Professor Flitwick explained, and Harry heaved a sigh.

He'd have to get a copy of the charter to read, "do you have a copy of the charter I can read sir?" Harry asked wearily. If he was going to break the rules and jump through hoops, he might as well know which ones existed.

Professor Flitwick went rifling through his drawers, pulled out a thick scroll, and with a tap of his wand, duplicated it. He returned the original to his desk and handed the other to Harry.

"Thanks, sir," Harry said, putting it in his mum's bag with everything else.

"Is everything alright, Mr Potter?" Flitwick said after peering intently at him for a moment.

"yes, sir" Harry dismissed, "thanks for lunch, sir and the books."

Professor Flitwick peered at him again, his eyes glinting, but he just said, "You can come to me if you need anything, Mr Potter, my door is always open."

"Thanks, sir," he said, not even considering it. Adults could never do anything. He didn't expect anything to come of it; why bother?

*

Harry was called up to Dumbledore's office on Wednesday night. He was irritated and apprehensive about it, but unsurprised. Harry approached the gargoyle, breathing deeply as he tried to clear his mind in preparation. He was somewhat successful and gave himself a stern talking to, to not meet the man's eye, to not be obvious about it, and to control his emotions and be careful what he thought of.

Upon reaching the gargoyle, he realised that Professor McGonagall had forgotten to give him Dumbledore's password. He sighed and shoved the irritation to the back of his mind as he waited.

He did not want to list off all the ridiculous sweets he could think of and look like an idiot trying to guess the man's password. Surely a headmaster, who should be accessible to those in his school, would have some way of people contacting him when they didn't know the password. Surely he would know when people were waiting for him. He seemed to know everything else.

After standing there for ten minutes, he turned to the gargoyle, "Professor Dumbledore summoned me. I don't suppose you could let me in? Or let him know I'm here, could you?"

After a moment, to Harry's surprise, it blinked at him, "bout time one of you lot actually just asked, instead of throwing sweet names at me. What are you lot? Idiots? What do you think we guardians are here for..." It grouched before turning and letting a slightly bemused Harry, ascend the spiral staircase.
The door was open when he reached the top. He could feel the man's magic as soon as he stepped over the threshold. It saturated the room. Soft and deceptively gentle. But under all of it, he could sense a prickling feeling at his feet. Just like the man himself, a mask of lies. Harry almost panicked and had a strong urge to run. But he shoved it down so ruthlessly that he felt little at all, detached. It would help keep the man out of his head. It would all come out afterwards, when the encounter was all over, in a flood of intense panic.

"Ah Harry," the man said, skipping all of the proper greetings and manners Harry noted, "I wondered how long you were going to wait out there before coming up." The man said with a grandfatherly smile, his eyes twinkling. Harry peered carefully at the man's temple instead of his eyes and forced back the irritation. Instead, he said in as reasonable and polite a voice as he could manage, "Well met Professor. I didn't know the password, sir. I was waiting for you to let me up."

"Ah my boy, surely you know I only ever use sweets! That's easy enough to guess."

Harry recognised it for what it was. A power-play. Making people use or guess ridiculous passwords or wait until he let them in. It was a power-play. A subtle reminder of Dumbledore lording over them all. Harry fumed silently for a second before forcing it back too. He could not afford to slip in front of this man.

"My name is Mr Potter, sir," Harry reminded politely, "what did you need me for sir?"

Dumbledore just smiled, in that way of his, that Harry now thought was rather patronising and said, "of course Harry, my boy," and ignored Harry's request completely, "I wanted to talk to you about the first task, Harry."

"Sir?" Harry asked. He hadn't done anything wrong.

"Well, Harry, my boy. It wasn't very Gryffindor of you, the way you tackled it. The only magic you used failed, and then you didn't even bother to show off any daring like the task was testing for. You had even less courage in using a dark gift to accomplish the task." Dumbledore went on and Harry had to bite his tongue in irritation at the man's audacity.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, sir," he said calmly, "I was just doing what I thought best. I didn't think I'd manage any brilliant feats of magic," he bluffed.

"I heard you were going to outfly it on your Firebolt. That would have been much better than using something dark, Harry." The headmaster chided gently trying to come across as disappointed.

Harry held back a sigh and said, "Moody told me to do that, but I didn't want to be accused of cheating again. And it's not a dark power, sir, I just asked her nicely, it's only a language, sir."

Dumbledore frowned at that. "I know that Harry," he said placatingly, "but the rest of the world won't. They will think you have gone dark! I thought you knew better than to flaunt a power you got from Voldemort, Harry," he said, sounding very disappointed.

Seeing that he could not win the argument or dissuade the man, and frankly not thinking it safe enough to do so, Harry backed down. He wanted to get out of there as fast as he could before Dumbledore could do something to him.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I won't do it again. I'll do better next time," Harry said, an image of chastised and remorseful.

Dumbledore beamed, "I knew you'd understand, Harry my boy," he said. Harry fumed as the old fool, kept insisting on taking calling him by his first name and having the audacity to call him his.
Harry did not belong to anyone.

He knew better than to bring it up again though, as Dumbledore started picking up steam and going on and on about why Harry's actions had been wrong, and cowardly and why he needed to do his parents and his house proud by being brave and courageous and not taking the cowards way out of the tasks when he knew Harry was more Gryffindor than that. Harry, despite inwardly seething, nodded, and apologised and agreed at all the right moment.

Just when he thought Dumbledore would finally let him leave, Dumbledore said, "and what's this about a media gag order, my boy!"

"Sir?" Harry asked, not sure where the headmaster was going with that.

"I didn't have a chance to properly address it at the task, but you really had no right to sign an independent contract my boy," he said in that kindly grandfather tone, that hid condescending, "the ministry has a contract with Rita Skeeter, allowing her to cover the tournament. You making your own contract damages that Harry. You have seriously let Hogwarts down. It's a great embarrassment, my boy." He finished looking at Harry sadly.

"Sorry sir," Harry said quickly seeing that the road of placating Dumbledore and playing ignorant was still the safest choice, by far. And it seemed, the quickest. He knew the look on Dumbledore's face. It was the same one his relatives used when it didn't matter what Harry said, he'd still be wrong because he was Harry and everyone always knew better than him. The man looked calm if disappointed, but he felt angry, and his magic felt 'louder' than it had been before.

"I didn't know, sir. After she wrote all those horrible things and people started hexing me, someone suggested I get my own journalist, sir." He said, hoping the man would take it.

"I'm very disappointed in you Harry, signing a contract without my say so, or at least your Head of House. You never know what you'll get yourself into, my boy." He finished looking at Harry sadly.

Harry bit back a snort and forced back the anger at the man's words.

"You should know better than to listen to others and the paper and let it get to you, my boy. I am very disappointed at your rash actions for a mere hex or two Harry. You have seriously embarrassed Hogwarts." the man said, "you will dissolve the journalist contract and will sit down with Rita after the holidays in compensation."

Seething, Harry pretended to agree. Thankfully the man only seemed to want to go on and on about his disappointment in Harry, instead of pressing Harry for why he'd taken such actions. He seemed more interested in guilt-tripping Harry than actually looking at his behaviour. As far as Harry could tell, he had not used any Legillimency and was only trying to guilt-trip and emotionally blackmail him into doing what he wanted.

Harry politely apologised and parroted the empty words that Dumbledore had wanted to hear. It worked just as it did with the Dursley's and when Dumbledore got tired of hearing himself talk, and hearing Harry agree with him, he let him go.

He was tired and seething by the time he got back to the common room, shaking under the weight of the repressed emotions and the repressed panic that the man's presence had invoked. He wanted a hot shower and to crawl into bed under all the blankets with a book, and just be somewhere else for a bit. To escape, to not think for a bit, to not be Harry Fucking Potter for a bit.

Harry didn't want to face the Gryffindors, but he'd been putting it off too long. He didn't want to get
blindsided by them later. If Dumbledore was unhappy with him for his action in the task, he could imagine that Gryffindor would be too. Better to get it over and done with now. The day couldn't get much worse as it was.

Later he would berate himself for baiting the gods of irony.

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Unfortunately, he did get blindsided. And it did get worse.

When he got into the common room, he wished he hadn't. It was packed with seemingly every Gryffindor. Everyone was yelling and in the middle of it was Ron, having another screaming match with Hermione. Neville, Fred and George were standing nearby, with an irritable Lee Jordan arguing with Fred and George over something. It looked like several older students, along with Seamus and Dean were backing Ron up.

What on earth was going on? There was so much yelling, so much agitated magic swirling around the room, he couldn't make heads or tails of it.

When they noticed him, everyone immediately fell silent. His heart sank. This was about him, he thought; dread filling him. He looked desperately to Hermione, her hair was looking wild, and her face was red with yelling, tears of fury leaking out of her eyes.

"What's going on?" Harry asked slowly.

"You!" Cormack McLaggen yelled, jabbing a finger at him accusingly, "The Cowardly Lion finally returns! Not so Golden now are you? Less of a lion and more of a snake! A filthy dark wizard you are!" He went on.

Confused, Harry said, "what?"

Ron cut in next, not answering Harry's question, "You got to see the dragons!" Ron cut in.

"Well yes, that was the first task," Harry said bluntly, not sure how that was related to McLaggan's accusation. "I then went down to see the dragons afterwards, to check on the hurt Fireball."

"And they let you?!!" Ron said incredulously, "Charlie did? My brother Charlie?"

"I can talk to them..." Harry said shrugging, "and she was distraught. They wouldn't have been able to help her so quickly otherwise. So yeah, the Captain asked me too."

"Unbelievable," Ron fumed, "Charlie never let me anywhere near them!"

"Wait, did you know?" Harry demanded, suddenly.

"Know what?" Ron said, still fuming.

"That Charlie was coming. That he'd be here? Did you know the first task was dragons and not warn me?" Harry said sharply.

Sure, Charlie had told him himself, but Ron didn't know that, wouldn't have known Harry knew about the dragons. Had Ron been prepared to let him go into the task blind, against a dragon?

"'course I did, he's my brother!" Ron spat out, and Harry thought he heard Fred or George swear, but people were muttering again, and the volume was going up.
"And you didn't tell me?" Harry said incredulously.

"Why would I? You got yourself into it. You can get yourself out of it. Anyway, it's not as if you're not used to going into stuff blind. You do it all the time; the stone, and the chamber, the shack," Ron said nonchalantly.

Harry just stared at him, gobsmacked.

"Do you know what some people are saying, Potter?" Cut in McLaggen, "They have been saying, we Gryffindors are not so good as we say we are. That we're harbouring a dark wizard. That we're the cheating house. Normally that's Slytherin! They are comparing us! To Slytherin! Because of you! You're an evil dark wizard and a coward. You bring shame to our house."

"What?" Harry said incredulously, what were they on?

"Is he stupid too, Ron?" An older prefect said, addressing Ron, before continuing where McLaggen had left off, "We don't care what oath you gave. You cheated your way into that cup. Fine, at least it was a Gryffindor, but then you try and back out. Like a coward. No Gryffindor would do that. Then you didn't even bother to do the task properly-"

"What?" Harry exclaimed starting to feel angry despite how anxious everyone's eyes on him was making him feel.

"I did not enter my name in that stupid cup! I have told you that, and I am no liar! I wanted no part of this!"

"Your a liar and a coward," a seventh year yelled, "too scared of a big bad dragon!"

"This tournament has killed people," Harry yelled back, "They're dragons! She was big enough to eat me if she wanted to! Or BBQ me! Any sane person would be afraid!"

"Yeah, just not Gryffindors." Said another one, "But you're not a Gryffindor, are you? You're a closet snake!"

Another person yelled, "you're a dark wizard! I knew you were bad, the year before last!"

"You should have been in Slytherin! You don't belong here."

"We should have realised properly in second year, that you were behind it, but we let ourselves be fooled," Someone who sounded suspiciously like Seamus yelled, "you really were the heir of Slytherin."

Harry felt the sharp sting of betrayal, but before he could say anything, someone else yelled out over the din, "Only evil wizards, Slytherins, can talk to snakes."

"I bet you only rescued Weasley so you could place the blame on someone else, to cover your tracks!"

"Dark wizard! Slytherin!"

"Wait? What?" Harry yelled out over the roar of people all talking over the top of each other, "this is because I asked the dragon nicely to give me the egg? Instead of some hair brain scheme that would have gotten me eaten? Are you lot nuts?" Harry asked, incredulously, "What did you want me to do? Summon my broom and outfly it? Risk getting burnt to a crisp when it wasn't necessary? Why would I? When there was a sensible option?!"
"Yes!" Cried Ron, "that's what Moody said you'd do. I overheard him speaking to McGonagall."

And that was where that piece of gossip came from; Ron. Harry fumed.

"That's a proper Gryffindor would do!" someone else shot in.

"Are you kidding me?" Harry said disgusted, "being able to talk to snakes is A - hardly my fault, and B - it's a language like any other. It doesn't make you evil." The undertone of 'you morons,' did not need to be said.

"Sure, it does!"

"Only dark wizards use it!"

"That makes you a dark wizard," someone else added in.

"Yeah, maybe you-know-who gave it to you when he tried to kill you," another called out, making Harry freeze.

"Maybe you're working for him!"

"Maybe you're really his son!" Someone else shouted.

"Look," Harry said coldly, "I will never work for that ass-hole. He murdered my family. He is responsible for 14 years of misery. I will never work for him. And he is certainly not my father! I asked the dragon nicely because I could. Why not? Why take a hard and dangerous route when there was an easier and more safely available option, for everyone." Harry said, trying to keep calm, not very effectively.

"Yeah well, you're losing us points faster than Neville!" One of the chasers calls out.

"Hey!" Called out Neville

Harry felt another sharp sting of betrayal, "What?"

"Didn't you hear McGonagall say if anyone was to miss another meal, it would be points from our house? And yet you've kept missing them! We've lost loads of points because you're not going to meals. Being too good to eat with the likes of us," spat Ron

"I didn't know!" Harry spat back, "Professor Flitwick only just told me today!"

"Yeah well, it's not the only thing you're doing to sabotage our house! Duelling in the corridors!"

A 7th year yelled, "you're losing all the points I get in transfigurations and charms for the right answers!"

"I'm being hexed! It's self-defence!" he yelled back looking around at them all, he didn't recognise them. He suddenly noticed that most of them were wearing the support 'Cedric Diggory, Potter Stinks' badges, pinned to their Gryffindor robes.

"You're a coward, a Hufflepuff!" Ron called out, angrily, "a true Gryffindor would have done something heroic. A true Gryffindor would have thrown themselves into it, and accepted the glory it would have brought our house. A true Gryffindor would have forgiven their friends when they make small errors!" Ron spat out.

"Yeah" someone yelled, "Even Diggory was more Gryffindor than you!"
"Yeah, you're no Gryffindor! You spend more time in the library than any of us, you're too Ravenclaw!"

"We looked aside, in your first year, when you lost all those points and missed the Quidditch match. We could look aside in the second year when you first talked to snakes. You could hardly help it, not knowing it was bad," a seventh year said, "but now you're sabotaging us with point losses and willingly walking along that dark path. That's unforgivable."

"That's Slytherin, Harry," Ron said.

"Yeah mate," Dean said, "we don't want a snake in our lion's den."

Harry was exhausted and irritated, surrounded by turncoat backstabbers that he'd once seen as his housemates, his friends.

He snapped "I'm not a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff, and there is nothing wrong with those houses. Each of us has a bit of them within us. I chose Gryffindor. What matters is our choices. The Hat put me in Gryffindor; that's what matters. Not that I was almost a Slytherin. You're acting like a bunch of closed-minded Morons!" Harry snapped but clapped a hand over his mouth. He'd never told anyone that, never meant to. What had felt good at the time, was not such a smart admittance. He cursed his temper again for getting him in trouble.

There was deafening silence in the room. But Ron turned to him, rounded on him and grabbed his collar yelling, "you slimy snake, you don't belong here-

Harry supremely irritated now, stupidly cut him off, "actually snakes are not slimy. They're smooth, and remarkably good conversationalists. Better than you, that's for sure. If you're going to try insulting me, at least make an effort to be accurate about it. Not that made-up rubbish that makes you sound like an idiot. But I digress. I'm a Gryffindor. That's where it put me. That's where I belong. I am a Gryffindor." he said firmly, hoping to sound far more confident than he actually felt.

Was he really a Gryffindor?

"But it wanted you in Slytherin! You filthy snake. And you're a lying liar who lies and a bloody coward!" McLaggen yelled, managing to speak up over all the voices. It just triggered everyone else yelling now over the top of each other, stepping closer and closer to him, backing him up against a wall, pressing in on him.

The noise was deafening, and it took everything he had to stand up tall and not cower away from them all.

He could make out Ron and Hermione arguing with Neville backing her up. Fred and George were arguing with Lee Jordan and the three Gryffindor chasers, on the edge of the crowd. The noise was growing, he wondered how they hadn't disturbed McGonagall. Would she put a stop to it all?

Probably not.

He couldn't make sense of all the yelling. It all sounded like they were chanting a mix of, 'he's no Gryffindor' and 'get out.' At that moment, he finally understood what the phrase 'mob mentality meant.' As they pressed in on him from all sides chanting down at him as Ron pushed his way through, backed up by one of the seventh years.

Someone's voice cut over the rest, "un-house him!"
The crowd picked it up, drowning out the few cry's of protest or confusion, as people started raising their wands as if in a vote, chanting, "un-house him! Un-house him!"

Someone let off a bang from their wand, and the house fell silent.

"The vote has been cast. Majority rules," said a seventh year, "the traitor has been un-housed."

Harry's heart sank, he felt sick.

"You can't," yelled Hermione sounding horrified.

But Brown and Patil just clapped a hand over her mouth. She started struggling. Ron grabbed Harry by the robes and shoved him up the boys' stairs, the others getting louder and louder as they egged him on.

"Get out," Ron spat, "get out. We don't want you here."

Harry stumbled backwards and practically fell up the stairs. He was not used to seeing such anger in his once friend's eyes. He froze for a split second. He did not recognise the person in front of him. So much so that he suddenly looked like one of his relatives.

Please let it be some kind of compulsion making him act so out of character. Please let this not be Ron, he thought desperately. Ron took a step forward, and Harry scrambled out of reach and hurried up the boy's stairs at a desperate run.

Harry could hear Fred and George rounding on Ron, but it didn't make him feel any better. Gods, let them not all chase him up, he'd never make it out of the tower in one piece otherwise. Hermione broke free of the girls, and followed him up as the house started yelling and chanting again, "get out."

He stumbled to a halt when he got into the room. The Dorm was a mess, and it stank. He stood there, gaping in shock.

His wards were broken. His curtains and bedding was smouldering and had been burned and slashed. His trunk was in tatters, broken open, scorched and sliced up, where the wards had been overpowered and imploded. He had felt something out in the forest earlier, but not familiar with wards, he had not recognised it for what it was; someone breaking his wards.

He shivered. This place had always been safe. Safe from the rest of the house, safe from the rest of the school, everyone. But now... he hadn't expected this. Sure Ron and sometimes the others would rifle through his trunk, borrow things, copy homework, but he'd never really cared before. He was used to no privacy and not owning anything of his own before. That's how it had always been at the Dursley's. But he had not expected this!

Dudley and his father's clothes were all over the floor, torn and cut up into pieces. They were smouldering slightly, burnt and blackened and covered in something wet and smelly.

Revulsion coiled in his gut, the scent of ammonia filled the room, and his gut rolled. He turned to his trunk again, fingering one of the blackened pieces. All his old assignments, class notes, all his original textbooks, all burnt and gone. All the revision things he'd been keeping for his exams, for his OWLs... and his textbooks. He'd been going to sell them second hand, so he had enough money for a room over the break. And his dress robes, he wouldn't be able to return them now.

Dread pooled in his gut when he realised he'd left his mother's blanket on the bed, and his photo album. He ran across the room and let out a strangled yell. His photo album was on the bed. The
pages were torn out, some of the photos ripped. The blanket had been cut with a slashing hex and was in pieces.

He let out a strangled sob, and grabbed his slashed pillow and swung it hard against the post of his bed in fury. It exploded in a cloud of feathers. His face crumpled, and he balled his hands into fists, not sure if he was trying to stop himself from screaming or crying.

He picked the torn blanket up gently in shaking hands, his fingers barely obeying. It felt different now. It smelt different now. His eyes stung, and he jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder.

"It was my mums," he said forlornly, turning willingly into Hermione's embrace.

She held him tightly for a long moment, and he shuddered but sank into her offered comfort. Softly Hermione called, "Winky?"

There were a pop and a gasp. Followed by another pop and a squeak.

"What has they been doing? Mr Harry Potter sir!" Dobby squeaked, his voice going impossibly higher with agitation.

"Miss?" Winky asked while Dobby sped around the room, snapping his fingers as he went, at the mess on the floor.

"Winky," said Hermione slowly, not letting go of Harry, "this blanket, on the bed, has been cut with spell work. It's very precious to Harry. Is there any chance of fixing it?" She asked gently.

Winky looked at it for a long moment, before climbing up onto the bed and peering at it so closely her nose almost touched it. She then sniffed it, then clicked her fingers and pressed her ear to it as if listening for something no-one else could hear.

"Winky can fix it, Miss," she said finally looking up at them, "It was cut with a knife, not a hex. Its ill intent broke Miss Lily's magic. Winky cannot bring back the smell or Miss Lily's own magic, but Winky can fix it. Winky be fixing it so it looks as it did and can mends the spell work. It won't be Ms Lily's magic, but it will be warm and soothing as it was before." Winky said, her eyes wide and sad.

She surveyed the mess on the bed before clicking her fingers again. The photo album mended itself, another snap of her fingers and the torn pictures flew back together as good as new. A third snap and each photo slid itself back into his correct page. She tapped the cover with a long finger, and handed it to him, "it's protected now, with elf magic, sir."

"Thanks," Harry croaked, gingerly taking the album, and hugging it to his chest. He was so grateful now that he'd put nearly all his important things in his blood warded bag. All his mum's letters and books were in there, and his dad's books. He only had one change of clothes now, other than what he was wearing, some socks, a clean uniform, and his black cloak. He'd only had them in his bag in case he fell asleep by the dragon's again, or in the shack. Now he was glad. He sighed, he'd have to go to the Room of Requirement. He wondered if he could stay in there. But anyone could get in there...

"Winky is taking Ms Lily's blanket now, young master Harry, sir," Winky said tugging on his sleeve to get his attention, "Winky is being looking after it, sir. She be taking good care of it, sir, and be returning it to you soon, sir!" She squeaked sincerely, "don't you be worrying, Winky, be taking cares of it!"

Harry bent down and pulled the startled elf into a quick hug. She squeaked again, patted him
awkwardly on the shoulder and popped away with the blanket.

Harry sniffled, scrubbed at his face and looked around the room again. A huge weight was on his chest, too numb to be angry. Dobby had fixed the furniture and vanished the smelly mess of ruined clothes and books in the centre of the room. His trunk was gone too, but the scorch marks on the floor were still there.

"Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter, sir," the elf squeaked very quietly.

It was the most sombre he'd ever seen the elf, "Dobby could not fix the mess, it was too magicked, sir, too much ill intent sir. There was not enough bits left to repair properly sir. Magic of ill intent is hard to fix, Harry Potter, sir. And they is knowing it!" The elf said sadly.

"It's okay, Dobby. They didn't get anything that important, my school things were in my bag, along with most of mum's things," he said wearily.

Dobby beamed and hugged Harry around the knees. Harry patted him fondly on the head.

"Thanks, Dobby. You're the best. You and Winky."

"Harry," Hermione said, "you have to go to McGonagall. You can't stay here. Not if they've done this. They want you out. There's no telling what they'll do. And your wards are not enough to keep you safe from the older years. This isn't right, Harry. They shouldn't be able to do this!"

"I know," he said tiredly, he was so tired now, "I'm not going to her though. There's no point. I'll find somewhere else to sleep. There are a few bolt holes I can borrow," he said.

"What about clothes and things? Bedding!? Harry, where are you going to sleep?" Hermione said worriedly, "I can lend you money if you need to owl order? I know you have hardly any budget, my parents are very well off. it's no trouble, honest."

"I'll manage Hermione. Don't worry," Harry said, squeezing her hand reassuringly, though who he was trying to reassure, he didn't know, "thank you for offering though. It means a lot to me, but I'll be fine."

"If you're sure. Come on then," she said, sounding equally tired, but as if she were trying to be strong for him, "let's get out of here before they come up and hex you." She said, pulling the door back open.

There were a bunch of sixth and seventh years on the stairs, angrily lining the way down as if to make sure Harry left and didn't get any ideas. The staircase was packed. There was barely any room for him to get past them at all. He wondered for a moment if he should go back in and fly out the window, but he'd left his broom in the broom shed on the Quidditch pitch. He'd have to get that to keep in his bag now too.

He went down the spiral staircase and didn't look at anyone as he crossed the silent room. It was awful. Just as well Ron seemed to have disappeared. Neville, Fred and George were by the portrait hole, looking horribly upset.

"Mate," the twins said, and he flinched but didn't fight as they pulled him into a hug, just allowed them to, and stood stiffly against them. He jumped when Neville laid a hand on his shoulder. It didn't fix it, but it did help. They were on his side, even if they were outvoted. He shuddereded again, as he let himself, for a moment, lean on his friends. They held him steady, a warm solid presence around him.
"Oi!" Yelled a seventh year, "get away from them; traitor!"

Harry flinched as hands grabbed him and shoved him away. He fell and saw others yanking his friends away from him, holding them back. Fear coiled in his gut. Were they okay? Would they kick his friends out, too?

Ron.

Rage boiled in his gut at the sight of him again, "how can you do that, Ron!" Harry yelled, seeing his tattered blanket and photo album all over again.

But Harry's arms were being pinned back before he could even draw his wand properly, and Ron was yelling, "you traitor! Eat slugs, snake!"

His spell hit Harry in the stomach in a jet of sickly grey light. It burned, a horrible, sickening squirming sensation like something was moving inside him. If the spell hadn't made him suddenly nauseous, that alone would have. He doubled over, as something squirmed inside. Gods it hurt. Gods help him, there were things moving inside him! He clamped a hand over his mouth automatically, clutching his stomach, choking as something moved in his throat.

People were yelling again. Harry thought it may have been Hermione, but his insides heaved. There were slugs in his throat! Fat glistening grey slugs spilt out of his mouth, wriggling and squelching as they hit the floor. People screamed and squealed at the sight. Someone let go of him hurriedly with a noise of revulsion as if he was a disgusting contagion.

He heaved again. Slugs spilt out of his mouth again. Gods, it was gross! He felt violated, contaminated. The sight alone would have made him sick, but the smell and the taste along with it, had him heaving violently. More thick glistening grey slugs splattered onto the floor, covered in thick mucus, choking him. His insides ached. He heaved again. And again.

People shrieked. Harry was too busy puking slugs to try and cancel the spell. It was awful and disgusting, and his insides were squirming and crawling. There were things moving inside him! It was so profoundly disturbing and gross. People were looking at him like he was disgusting and moving away from him in revulsion. Those that were not disgusted with him were laughing and pointing.

Hermione was trying to fight her way forward towards him but was being held back by her dorm mates and the older girls. Her wand was out, and she looked seconds away from hexing the lot of them. The twins were elbowing people, too, yelling. He thought he heard a camera go off, and he groaned his face burning. More slugs come spilling out of his mouth, the acid burning in his throat and mouth. Only this time they don't hit the floor...

A bucket.

George.

He tried to thank him, but all that came out was more slugs. They were green now. Harry would have found the colour gradient slightly interesting if it wasn't so horrible and uncomfortable if he wasn't so busy being sick. He clutched his middle as cramps ripped through him and his insides heaved, again and again, squirming all the while.

He curled into a ball as George stepped forward as if to try and cancel the spell. Someone yanked him back. Harry froze as he caught sight of Ron, standing there laughing.

Looking just like Harry's father had in the photos.
It's not magic, Harry thought. That's just Ron. Harry had been familiar with the feel of his friends magic for years and as much as he hated it. That was all Ron. Harry'd just never noticed it before, always somehow turned a slightly blind eye to this side of his once-friend. Someone grabbed Harry by the scruff on the neck, and shoved him out the portrait hole, with a "yuck," as Harry vomited all over the person's shoes. Served them right, he thought savagely, spitting another slug at the person.

"If you come back Potter, we'll hex you so bad you won't be able to see straight!" Another yelled and gave him a sharp kick out the door. He fell forward, narrowly avoiding landing in the bucket of slugs and vomit that had been tossed out after him. His hands stung as he landed on the stone floor, despite the slug slime. He almost fell down the stairs.

He tried to scramble up, to get back in, not even really thinking about it, but the Portrait hole was slamming shut in his face. He scrambled backwards instead and nearly fell down the stairs, again, in his hast, vomiting slugs all over them. He tried to vanish them or to cancel the spell on himself, but he was still puking slugs up so fast, he couldn't get the words out. He couldn't draw his mind away long enough to cast it silently. All he could think about was the horrible squirming sensation that was the slugs crawling in his insides, the ache in his guts from the spell and the vomiting. He couldn't even think of a counter-spell. Gods, everything hurt.

He tried to stand up but stumbled as his insides cramped. Then he was puking all over the floor, *again!* His side burned where he had been kicked. He crawled into an alcove behind a tapestry instead and waited for it to pass.

Hagrid has said, back in second year, that the only thing to do was wait for it to pass. It wouldn't kill him. Just be really gross, and rather painful. He'd just have to wait it out. So, he sat there, puking his guts up into a conjured bucket for a long time, praying, in mortification, that he won't be found. And that the conjugation on the bucket would last long enough.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings:

Vomiting & Slugs

Mob mentality - they gang up on him

He gets pushed about a bit

And he gets kicked

Other end notes:

Yes the ammonia smell is piss.
Harry knows this smell two reasons, piss smells like ammonia, he has used ammonia and bleach to clean with since a young age. Particularly the upstairs bathroom that dummy uses a lot. Dudly was a horrid messy kid, harry spent a lot of time as a very young kid having to clean up Dudly’s messes, especially in the bathroom. And being the little horror he was, Dudly would often make a mess knowing harry would have to clean it. So yes, harry is very familia (unfortunately) with what piss smells like. Poor sod. Its also probably something the muggle bullies used in primary school, pissing on harry’s things. Harry was also locked in the cupboard for days on end… think about it.
It was well past curfew when he stopped puking long enough to stand up, and vanish all the mess h'ed made. Some of the slugs had crawled away out of sight, and he didn't have the energy to chase them, so he left them for Mrs Norris and Crookshanks.

Everything hurt, particularly his ribs and stomach. He vanished the mess, the bucket, and what he could see of the slug trails leading down the steps from the escapee's. He didn't need to make more work for Flinch and get on his badder side. As if the man had a good side.

He pulled out his cloak and donned it snd immediately felt safer. He looked around, the corridor was deserted. He approached the fat lady tentatively, "ma'am?" He asked, before pausing to cough up a single small slug. He winced.

She made a sympathetic face, "they've changed the password, dear," she said, sounding apologetic, "you'll need to wait to be let in."

Turning on his heal, Harry trudged down the corridor. If before was anything to go by, that would never happen. He wasn't sure he even wanted to go back now. He just hoped Hermione, Neville, Fred and George were okay. He'd have to find somewhere else to stay.

He dismissed the shack, he liked it, but it was cold and dilapidated. He didn't have the energy to fix it up and ward the whole thing right now. Se wanted somewhere small and dark. Somewhere safe. Somewhere he wouldn't be found. That few people knew about. And the magic of the castle was stronger, friendlier, and as much as he hated being inside somethings, the castles wards were safe. He'd have to find somewhere in the castle.

His mind started turning over the different places. The Room of Requirement wasn't one place. It was many, it could be anything. But he wasn't the only one that knew about it...

The dungeons though, they were cold and Slytherin territory but were dark and mostly deserted, especially the lower level below the mail dungeons that the Slytherin common room and the potions classroom's inhabited.

It was old and deserted and had plenty of old rooms and store cupboards, that Harry had spent many a sleepless night exploring. He'd never once seen anyone down there. That would be safe. That would be secluded and empty, abandoned. It would suit him perfectly.

He went to the Room of Requirement first and asked for the room of hidden things. He needed clothes and to replace his possessions. But he was so tired, he figured that could wait until the morning. But he required PJs, a doona and blankets to keep him warm at night, as well as a pillow. He was hoping he could find some in the room.

The room was just the same as it had been last time, and Harry was still little overawed by it all. There was so much stuff there. So much unclaimed, unowned stuff. So many hidden treasures. Harry was struck suddenly by an odd longing. He'd never really had anything of his own, except for his Hogwarts things, and yet here was all this unclaimed stuff here for the taking. It took him a while to identify that feeling of want.

He flushed, feeling ashamed. He did not want to be like Dudley. Just because there were piles and
piles of unclamped junk and treasure, didn't mean he should just take whatever he liked. He didn't need all that stuff. Some clothes and essentials were required, but nothing else. He did not need to be greedy. He did not need lot's of stuff to get by. Just the minimum.

Harry set about finding some fresh bedding to use. He ended up finding a bunch of blue pillows, that had the Ravenclaw crest on them, some black blankets and a very fluffy Slytherin doona. After casting some intense cleaning charms on them, Dobby helped Harry fold the bedding and put it in his bag.

Harry was very glad it seemed to have endless pockets for everything and space-enhancing charms on all of it. With everything he'd been keeping in it now, the pockets sure helped.

"I is finding clothes for you, Harry Potter sir. Hogwarts has lots of old clothes sir, Dobby be finding some for you sir," The elf explained, then at Harry's slightly worried look said, "I is picking people ones though Harry potter sir, not elf ones."

Harry smiled weakly, hoping that meant there would be no garish colours, and started looking around. The room of hidden things seemed to have very little order to it, but there was indeed plenty of forgotten and abandoned clothes, lying all over the place.

Some were clearly very very old, some more modern and Harry winced at the bright orange muggle flare pants covered in flowers. He settled on some plain button-ups, that looked to be once part of a uniform, black woolen slacks, a bunch of pants (a few jeans, and a few cargo pants, with pockets that looked useful), a 'new' belt, some long sleeve plain shirts and a few extra waistcoats (they always seemed so cool on Bill) and a lots of jumpers to keep him warm under his robes. Hopefully Winky could add warming charms to those ones too. It was getting colder now, and he was starting to feel it in his bones.

The robes styles too had changed over the years. He decided he didn't really like the school robes very much. They were very similar to muggle academic gowns or smocks. He preferred the older open styled robes that were more like frockcoats or even the fitted robes that were buttoned to the waist and then flared out, with slits around the legs to allow for a full range of movement. He put aside a few black pairs and a few more school robes, and a 'new' hat and cloak for outside. He handed them all off to Dobby, who was eager to clean, mend and re-dye them all black for him.

It took him a while, but between him and Dobby, they found replacements for his things, and Dobby had gotten fresh toiletries for him from somewhere, and Harry had found some warm fuzzy green and black pyjamas.

"You is needing socks and under things too, Harry Potter!" Dobby squeaked, "Dobby be finding some."

"Thanks, Dobby I appreciate it." Harry sighed, resigning himself to again, to using second-hand socks, "I don't need much though. I'll manage. You're brilliant, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Dobby is happy to help his friend Harry Potter sir!" The elf squeaked.

Harry went down to the dungeons using the Map to avoid a patrolling Professor Snape and Flitch. The latter seemed to have found a few slugs and was muttering darkly about it. He considered briefly tipping off Filch that the slugs were Ron's fault, but decided revenge was better served cold.

He made it down to the lower dungeons. It was safer there, he thought, farther away from Gryffindors, and a floor below where most of the Slytherin traffic was. This lower level was colder,
and while clean, had an air of disuse and neglect. It would have made anyone else feel slightly uncomfortable, but Harry, having spent a lot of his childhood hiding in forgotten, dirty, unused corners, felt quite comforted by it.

There were no paintings or statues down here. No spys. It would be safe, and quiet enough that Harry would hear anyone coming from miles away. He ended up choosing an old and forgotten store cupboard near the heart of the lower dungeon. The corridors were more narrow, and twisted and turned more like a maze or a rabbit warren here. More so than anywhere else in a castle. It would be easy to get lost down here he thought with delight.

The door of the cupboard he chose was unlocked. It was small, just big enough for him to get in and out of. Honestly, the door was more elf height than human height, and he wondered if this area used to house-elf quarters of something.

But the thing he liked about it, as awkward as it was to get in and out of, was that too small for an adult or an older student to easily use, he thought, with a savage pleasure.

There were mops and buckets and old boxes in it. The cupboard itself had little floor space, a bit over a meter square. it was about the same size as Harry's cupboard back at the Dursley's. But this one was tall. It had shelves starting at his stomach and going up far above his reach. Like a treehouse, he thought, as he levitated the boxes and things up onto some of the top shelves on one side.

He used the old cleaning supplies to clean up the small space until it practically shone. Using the repetitive brainless actions to calm himself down, to ground him so he could think slightly clearer and plan ahead. The dust and dirt was all vanished with a flick of his wand. He filled a bucket with water from his wand, and gave the floor and walls a good scrubbing, before drying them with a charm and vanishing the filthy water. The air smelt clean now.

He lay out all the blankets and pillows he'd gotten from the Room of Requirement, in a little nest on the floor and placed his bag in a corner. The few clothes he had left, he stacked neatly on a shelf, next to his ratty shoes.

Harry put up all the wards he could think of. Then painstakingly, with help from the big book of warding he'd swiped from the Room of Requirement, added some more and even tried his hand at some blood wards from the book he swiped from the restricted section. He layered them on both sides of the door, the walls and the floor. He even climbed up the shelves like a monkey to layer them onto the ceiling of the cupboard too.

It was not enough yet, but the notice-me-not charms and subtle bounty alarm wards, to warn him someone was crossing, were layered all along the corridor and along the floor, wall and door of the cupboard. That should keep it safe enough. At least until he came up with a better ward scheme. He didn't trust it enough to unpack properly yet though. His wards had been broken before. Sure he'd added more now, and layered in a password, in parseltongue. But if the twins could lift and bend the library wards, he would have to figure out how to anchor these wards, so people couldn't bypass them. So they really would keep people out and keep him safe. He'd have to ask Bill for some more suggestions.

It almost felt like home, he thought as he got changed into his pyjamas.

He could use the bathrooms down here, they were mostly forgotten this deep down. He'd stumbled across them one night when he was wandering, unable to sleep.

Harry looked around his cupboard again, there was a stack of old towels on one of the upper
shelves, that he could clean and use. No-one else could use the snake bathroom, it had a parseltongue password, so he could easily leave his toiletries there. Yes, he thought satisfactorily, this would do quite nicely. Much better down here in the dark away from all those people.

He'd make and claim this cupboard as home. Harry layered several heating and cushioning charms in the corner, before re-layering his blankets and pillow down in a nest. He curled in a ball. It was cold still, as it always was in cupboards. But it was better here than in his room at home. At home, it was cold and hard with little in the way of a blanket at all. Not that the cupboard under the stairs at his aunt Petunia's house was home. But Harry had nothing else to consider home. Despite Hogwarts often feeling something like what Harry thought home should feel like. At least it had to start with.

Harry summoned an empty mason jar off one of the higher shelves and spelled some Bluebell flames into it. The bright blue flames flickered merrily, letting off waves of heat. He grinned, watching it for a moment before putting a lid on the magical fire. He wrapped it in the folds of one of the blankets and curled up around it.

At least here, Harry had charms on the stone floor and plenty of heated blankets. It was comfortable, cozy and dark. Just the way he liked it. Being back in a cupboard, for the first time since he'd had his letter, made him realise how much he'd missed it. How much he'd found being in a proper bedroom disconcerting.

His bedroom back at his aunt's place, his cupboard, had always been far more comfortable than Dudley second room. There, he always felt like he was intruding, creeping where he did not belong and besmearing it. At least in the cupboard was his, and he was safe. Sure he hated being manhandled and locked up, (but that happened in Dudley second room too) and he hated other people being in the cupboard with him, not that anyone at no. 4 could fit. But if he was in there on his own, on his own terms, there was nowhere he felt safer. Sure he hated being manhandled and locked up, (but that happened in Dudley second room too) and he hated other people being in the cupboard with him, not that anyone at no. 4 could fit. But if he was in there on his own, on his own terms, there was nowhere he felt safer. Most adults and upper years couldn't to fit in and wouldn't want to. Cupboards were great when they weren't being used as a prison.

He spent more time sleeping under the bed at his aunts. Too scared his uncle would come in and grab him. Even at Hogwarts, for the first few months, he had waited until everyone was asleep and had then crept under the bed with his pillow and blanket and slept there. It just felt so much safer in a small space few people could get to. Even now, he still had trouble sleeping in proper beds and open places.

Somewhere high out of reach was fine, like a tree, people rarely looked up, but he still preferred small dark spaces to let down his guard in. He wondered if he'd ever really be comfortable in such big rooms like Hogwarts had? Would he ever be able to sleep in a real bed without tossing and turning, and feeling overexposed where anyone could walk up and grab him? At least at Hogwarts, there were curtains that he could fool himself into think were like his cupboard, and wards to keeping him safe.

He yawned and curled up tighter. Yes, it was much better here. Safer, hidden and far more comfortable. They'd leave him alone here, they'd never think to look for him here. He'd always lived in a cupboard before his Hogwarts letter, he thought as he finally drifted off, it was strangely fitting that he'll live in a cupboard one here too.

Harry would not tell anyone what had happened with Gryffindor, what was the point? And it would take a long while before anyone figured it out. That is, other than those who had been witness or perpetrator. Later, the staff would wonder how it had been kept a secret for so long. And some would wonder how their colleagues had been so oblivious.
When Harry woke the following morning, he felt surprisingly well-rested, not able to clearly remember any of his nightmares. It was quiet. It took him a while to remember what had happened and why it was so quiet. He slid his glasses onto his nose and looked around.

Oh, the cupboard. His new home. It all came rushing back. But when it did, all he felt was relieved. Relieved to finally be away from people, to have peace, and quiet, and safety. His own space. He may have hated how his 'family,' locked him up in his cupboard back at their house, but he had liked the peace and the safety of it. While they could keep him in there, they couldn't get in themselves. He was safe from them in his prison. It had been a gift and a curse.

After Harry had used the bathrooms, Dobby popped in with the stack of clothes he'd liberated from the Room of Requirement, freshly laundered and re-dyed.

"Dobby and Winky be cleaning and mending your new clothes sir, and we be finding underthings for Harry Potter sir!" He said in greeting, handing Harry a tall stack of clothes. Harry took them hurriedly and was amazed to see they looked practically good as new.

"Wow, thanks Dobby. What do you mean under things though?" Harry asked

"We is finding undershirts, singlets, and tights to keep Harry Potter warm sir," Dobby said, holding them up, "Winky said you is still cold even with her warming charms. She is saying you is not insulated enough. Not enough padding sir. So you is needing more layers, sir. These is be keeping you warm if you is wearing them under pants and shirts sir" Dobby squeaked holding up a set of the black woollen tights and a singlet.

Harry peered at them dubiously, never having worn tights. But they felt warm and surprisingly soft. He was cold enough at that point, his warming charms had worn off, that he didn't really care. So he pulled a pair on, pleasantly surprised that they fitted and were indeed quite warm. He pulled on a singlet and a long sleeve top as well, followed by the black woollen slacks, a dress shirt and tie.

"They is old uniforms Harry Potter sir," Dobby squeaked handing him a grey waistcoat, "now we is just having robes, but at one point they had tights and tunics under open robes, and at another point they had dress uniforms with shirts and slacks under open robes. They is old sir, but clean now and will keep you, warm sir," Dobby finished handing Harry a worn but mended school jumper.

Harry layered up, and Dobby asked, pointing to the other stack of shirts and pants, "is you wanting different colours, sir? Dobby can be changing them, sir? You is having coloured clothes before."

"Erm," he said, thinking about it. He'd never had a choice before, "just black please, for everything but the shirts. They can be grey for now, for a bit of contrast. I was never a red fan before, and while I do like forest green, it will only rile Gryffindor up and feed the dark Slytherin rumours." he sighed, "I like black, it's neutral. Let's just keep everything black."

He watched curiously as Dobby tapped the pile of clothes and watched as black seemed to seep from his finger. After a moment the clothes were all black and looked freshly dyed and pressed.

"You're brilliant Dobby," Harry said, as Dobby did the same thing for the grey shirts.

"Dobby is happy to serve, sir," the elf squeaked, "this stack has enough clothes for each day now, sir!" The elf squeaked, pleased, "and Winky be finding more school robes for you, sir, so you have enough of them too now, sir!"
Harry nodded and cast a tempos charm. He still had time for his run before breakfast. He grimaced, just the thought of breakfast made his insides squirm. Oh well, he still had a few hours yet and was meant to be meeting Ronan in the forest anyway.

*

One of the things Harry really liked about the Centaurs was their lack of interest in the goings-on of the castle. They were also largely disinterested in Harry's life out of the forest. It was a bit of a relief really. But he did hope sometimes that he was doing enough, was useful enough to them in return. He hoped he was not getting more from them than he was able to give them in return. He'd hate to unbalance the scales.

Harry's lessons with the centaurs were going well. His archery has been improving, and he was getting better at tracking and setting snares. His arrow making was improving as well, and Ronan had started teaching Harry how to make knives, and how to use and throw them.

He wasn't good at throwing them yet; actually, he was pretty bad at it. But Ronan had said it was to be expected and to keep practising. Harry had been enjoying channelling magic through the antler and stone looks when he was knapping flint. It's surprising, he thought, how sharp one can make flint or bone. Especially with magic to help it along a bit.

It had been very challenging at first to channel magic into his hands, especially not being able to feel it. But in the end, he managed to control it by watching and focusing on its effect, not on what he was feeling, or not feeling.

Often Firenze or sometimes Ronan would lecture Harry while he practised. But not Bane, who Harry had the distinct impression, did not really approve of him or teaching him. Like Hagrid, they pointed out useful plants, and things to gather that grew in the forest, and slowly taught him it's ways. They explained how to gather some of a plant correctly, and how to make sure not to take too much so that the plant would continue to grown and thrive. They would explain different uses for different parts. Often their uses for it differed greatly from wizards uses.

The Centaurs showed Harry how to move soundlessly in the forest, though it was different for him with his feet than it was for them with their hooves. But once he worked out that he could draw heating runes onto his feet, and imperturbable charms and shielding runes on them, he could run delightfully bare foot though the cold dirt. It was much easier.

They showed him how to not leave signs of his passing. They told him about their race, of their herd, and the etiquette they used. They explained how they wanted humans to treat them. Harry sucked it all up like a sponge. They didn't talk about divination or many of the centaurs beliefs and practices. Harry got the impression that it was sacred knowledge. Maybe in time they would, when they had come to trust him, but maybe not. As curious as he was, he was happy enough to wait and absorbed whatever they were willing to share.

He took to taking his bow with him whenever he went out into the forest, and practised at every opportunity. He liked it. The heavyweight of the draw, the focus required to aim and fire the arrow. He wasn't very good at it yet, he still sometimes missed, but he enjoyed it. He enjoyed the effort of it, and how meditative it was. He did get good at fletching arrows though and gave almost all of the arrows he made to Firenze or Ronan in trade for his weekly lessons along with the herbs and plants were also diligently gathered for the centaurs.

The other thing he'd taken to carrying on him at all times now, was his knives. It had been ages since he'd carried a knife. Somehow, and he was fairly sure he knew how, he'd forgotten about them, and how important they were. How often they'd saved his skin on the streets when he
couldn't face being at the Dursley's.

They'd been no help against Dudley, the only time he'd threatened Dudley with a knife to leave him alone, his uncle had given him the hiding on his life and locked him up for months.

But they kept him safe on the streets, where he'd taken refuge from the Dursley's. It hadn't always been enough, there was always someone bigger and stronger than you were but he'd learnt to fight dirty and fight hard, and to use every advantage he had.

Somehow he'd forgotten all of that in coming to Hogwarts. But now, when so many people were out for his blood, it made him feel a bit safer having a knife in his pocket, for when his magic wasn't enough.

Chapter End Notes

NOTES:

Flint knapping - using stone, bone or antler (normally) to chip of bits of flint to shape it, in this case into arrow heads or knife blades.

Knapping can also be done on obsidian, glass and other fracturing stones

Its supper cool check out the link below.


The Cupboard.

As a kid his cupboard was his safe haven, too small for his relatives to get him. So it feels safe, he looks for something like that.

Yes he’s claustrophobic, but only with others in small spaces and/or when he’s trapped. If it's on his terms, he feels a strong draw to them as its safe. The dark is safe. Small spaces grown ups can't get into are safe.
Despite Professor Flitwick's warning, he did not go to the hall for breakfast that morning after returning from the forest. He would not sit at the table with all those turncoats and pretend everything was fine. Screw them all! As far as he was concerned, Gryffindor was not his house anymore. Even if the younger years and some of the younger years had been part of kicking him out, they'd stood by and done nothing. So fuck the lot of them he thought savagely.

He also did not want to be in such close proximity to them. That would have just been stupid and asking them to hex him black and blue. No, thank you.

Harry did not really want to go down the the kitchens to eat breakfast, not after having slugs crawling inside him the day before. But Harry did give in to Winky's pleading and agreed to a light cup of ginger tea and his daily nutrient potion. So he headed down to the kitchen and was joined by a very worried Hermione, Fred, George and Neville. They all looked exhausted and ranged from angry to miserable.

Hermione rushed up to him and pulled him into a tight hug. He flinched and stiffened, pushing her away gently, but patted her on the back.

"Oh Harry! Are you okay?" She asked. She had bags under her eyes, and her hands were shaking, "I can't believe they did that Harry! And unhousing hasn't happened in over a century! I won't let them get away with this Harry! We'll fix this!" She fumed.

"I'm okay," was all Harry said.

"Yeah mate, what happened after they kicked you out?" Fred asked,

"We tried to go after you, but we were outnumbered," finished George.

"It was horrible," added Neville, sounding as miserable as Harry felt.

Harry sighed, "I'm fine. I managed to find somewhere safe to crash, and Dobby helped me replace my things. I'm good." He assured them feeling numb again, "what happened to you after I left?"

"Well," Hermione began with a sigh, "they kept arguing and yelling for ages, going on about how you were no Gryffindor and must have been a dark wizard in disguise all along. They were brainstorming how to get you expelled." She started, "it's easier now you're un-housed apparently."

"It's a really old tradition," Neville cut in.

"Yeah," Harry said, "it's mentioned briefly in Hogwarts: a history." He said making Hermione beam at the reference, "it is when a house pushes someone out, if the person is shaming said house or acting in a way that is detrimental to the house or it values. It's a way of punishing them. It's a really extreme punishment. If that issue between the person and the house is not fixed, Hogwarts magic will permanently un-house them. If it's totally unanimous as apposed to merely majority rules, it happens quicker."

"We won't let it happen!" Said Hermione "We'll fix this Harry, we'll fix this. This is so stupid."
"I'm not sure I want to fix it."

"What?"

"I actually I know I don't! I might be a Gryffindor. Or I was a Gryffindor. But not any more. Not their brand of Gryffindor. I'm still brave, still courageous, but I'm not one of them. Not one of them who continually turn on me and have now cast me out. I want no part of that. I won't go back to those who cast me aside.

Hermione looked at him a long moment, "okay Harry," she said nodding, "but I don't want to be part of that. I want to fight them over it. I want them to take it back, because I don't want to be part of a house that does that to someone." She said, "I don't want to be like that. And I know I'm not the only one really mad about it. There's a small group of us, mainly muggle borns that think it's stupid, casting you out over a language, over being sensible! They just weren't able to say anything without the older years turning their attention on them."

Harry scowled but said, "just be careful then," he said slowly, "and do it for you, not for me. I'm done with the lot of them."

Hermione just looked at his with steely determination, then added "I'm still going to research this. It's insane that none of the teachers can do anything or over ride it. I need to make sure we're not going to be blindsided by anything else, or that it doesn't have any nasty consequences we don't know about."

"Thanks Hermione."

"I can't really believe they did that," Neville said quietly.

"Do they really hate me that much though?" Harry asked in morbid curiosity.

"I don't think it's that. I think some honestly don't like you because they don't know you. You've always been rather withdrawn and antisocial. And it didn't help that Ron hogged so much of your attention." Neville said considering, "They all believe whatever rumour is going around. None of them ever really got a chance to know you, not that that's an excuse, you're a Gryffindor and that deserved house loyalty. It's as simple as that. But I think half of it's the hype, herd mentality, one get's angry and it spurs others on."

"Just so," cut in George, "Gryffindors are brave and will follow a leader doggedly, but are not always.--"

"The most loyal or open-minded, astute people in the world," Fred finished, "they're fiery and hot headed."

"And Ron, we checked Harry," Neville said, "Hermione asked Fred and George to do it, but we checked him for magic, he's clean."

"Yeah, mum would never let anyone potion or compel her baby's," Fred said slightly condescendingly.

"It's all him," finished George, "Bill taught us how to check."

Harry slumped, a small part of him, had still been hoping it was magic on Ron. "I guess now I think about it, his jealousy has been getting worse, and he had always tried to hog my attention."

"You would not believe how many people he gives the stink eye to when they try and talk to you,"
Neville said.

Sighing, not wanting to think about it too much, Harry pushed it from his mind and said, "I'm out, but will you lot be okay?"

"We'll be fine, won't we?" George said and the others nodded.

"Ron won't actually hurt anyone. We were surprised he hexed you so bad, to be honest. He's generally just hot air." Fred said

Harry shivered at the memory of slugs crawling around inside him again, and shut his mouth tightly, feeling queasy. What if there were still some slugs left?

"Where are you staying, Harry?" Asked Neville, "did you go to Professor McGonagall?"

"No," Harry said, "she has too much on. She doesn't have enough time to worry about my issues. I'm not about to ask for her help when I know she'll tell me to stop waisting her time or to stop bothering her like she did after my name came out. She doesn't like me much anyway," Harry said, "I can look after myself. I found a bolt hole away from the tower, I'm fine."

"Not even the hospital wing?" Neville asked.

"Why bother? Pomfrey nocks me out and will keep me there all day, and theirs nothing you can do for the slug hex anyway except wait it out." Harry said irritably.

"True, Ron got himself with it in second year." Hermione said before sighing, "It was the seventh years, and McLaggan. They'd been conspiring after the task, really up in arms about the Parseltongue thing. It was as if your oath didn't matter at all!"

"It started with a few of the older years, and the wizard raised," Neville said.

"Then it just kept picking up steam, the younger years stayed out of it, but when the prefects supported it, and the seventh years were intimidating those that disagreed it got out of control." Hermione said.

"Ron pointed out your bed, when they started getting rowdier," Fred said.

"He panicked when he realised they were destroying your things. He tried to rescue the photo album, but they said either they burnt it or he had to destroy it. So he tore it up and cut the blanket," George added "so that they didn't piss on it or hex it, like the rest.

"I think he was in a small way, trying to save them, Harry," Neville said quietly, "so they could be repaired with magic."

Harry scowled, and muttered, "shit fucking job he did of it."

He took a fortifying sip of his tea, then said "it's better if they do un-house me properly? If you let them? It's better on my own, I think. As long as we can keep the teachers from finding out, I don't need more scrutiny, I'm happier on my own. Really. Now I'm out of peoples eye, and it will be harder for people to get to me without me knowing."

"But Harry," Hermione protested, "this isn't right! Unhorsing is meant to be a punishment! And you haven't done anything wrong!"

"You shouldn't let them get away with it mate," Fred said
"But you're not going to fight back are you?" George guessed.

"what? Why not?" Neville said, "get a lawyer if

can't afford a lawyer! I'm literally stuck under Dumbledore's thumb. If I draw his attention now, he'll know I'm slipping out of his shackles. He'll then make entrap me even worse and I may not even know he's done it. I can't take any risks like that before the holidays. Not when I'm so close to getting out." Harry explained, after casting a few extra privacy spells, and filling the others in on what had happened at Gringotts and what he'd found out.

"Still we won't let them do this to you Harry!" Hermione said angrily

"I'm serious, they'll pay but not until I'm safe. I can't afford to be stupid or carless about this!" he cut them off

"I don't want to be Gryffindor any more. I'm now out of the way and will be left alone. Honestly, it's better this way, no one will find me, it's brilliant!" he said, "anyway talking about it won't fix anything. I appreciate your support, and you're joining me, but I don't want your association with me to make your life hard. What if they un-housed you too?"

Fred, George and Neville paled at that thought, but Hermione said, "I don't care. My parents don't really care about houses as long as I get good marks."

"We'd be in serious trouble from mum," Fred admired reluctantly.

"Everyone's been in Gryffindor for ages. She'd be really mad if we were kicked out." George said, "but it would be just another stupid delinquent thing her idiot sons have done so..." He trailed off darkly.

"What do we care?" Finished George.

"Gran's disappointed in me anyway," Neville said with a miserable little shrug.

"Guys, no." Harry said, "let it go. I don't want them coming at you to get to me. I don't want you guys getting into trouble with your family for me."

"We'll be fine," Hermione said stubbornly, "Neville and I can stick together in class, and we're all together in the common room."

"We're always left alone," Fred said,

"We have a certain reputation for trouble you know," George said with a wicked grin.

"Fred, George" Harry said hesitantly, remembering how horrible the slug hex had been, and his father's 'pranks,' "do you ever hurt people with your pranks? Humiliate them?"

Fred looked at Harry very seriously, then said, "no. Not deliberately anyway."

"We accidentally hurt Montague once when we pushed him into the vanishing cabinet, but that was an accident," explained George "We didn't realise it was broken. We thought it just looked a bit banged up, and that he'd appear someone where else in the castle, or maybe somewhere outside,"

"but mostly that it would be pretty cool, and might teach him to actually leave us alone." Said Fred

"We didn't think he'd get hurt, just end up somewhere else," George added.
"And then there was the salamander, we tried to feed it a firework," Fred pointed out

"Oh yeah, Charlie really ripped us a new one for that, when he heard" George said with a wince, "one of the few times I've seen him genuinely mad at us."

"We all have our thing that sparks the red head temper," Fred said jokingly, "but Charlie's is animals. Nothing makes him loose it faster than animals not being treated right."

Harry remembered suddenly Charlie screaming at the Captain after the task at the sight of the Fireball.

"You'd think that as fire creatures, Salamanders wouldn't disagree with fireworks." Fred said, "if fire is their playground, why is a firework not okay? We thought they'd like it, not that it would blow them up. Lucky it was smart enough not to eat it really."

"We've may have gone a bit far a few times," said George, "with Ron, we were kids, mostly without really understanding what we were really doing."

"But we didn't intend to really hurt him or upset him, or anyone," Fred went on.

"But there were accidents," said George "turning our teddy into a spider, freaked Ron right out," Fred sniggered at that, then added "The acid pop."

"Ouch, we didn't realise it was that acidic. Who lets kids have them anyway if they're that bad? We just thought it would be like mum's stinging hex's when she doesn't want you touching something."

"There was the unbreakable vow" added Fred

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"It's like a promise, but if you break it, you'll die," explained Neville "they're not something that's generally talked about and are serious business. How'd you guys hear about them as kids?"

George shrugged at Hermione's horrified look and said "didn't realise it would kill him. Only time we ever saw Dad as mad as mum."

"We just thought it would make Ron keep his promises for a change and stop stealing our shit." Fred finished.

George considered making a joke about Fred's left buttock never being the same, but considering Harry's history, thought better of it.

"We didn't really adjust that well at first when Ron came alone and having little siblings taking up all of mum's time even more," George said, "and sometimes let our temper get the best of us, with Ron as kids. But Bill and Charlie set us straight and explained to us where that line was."

"We apologised profusely, to Ronnie," said Fred, "haven't done anything like that in ages,"

"Seriously," George said to Harry, "with pranks, we don't try and hurt people. We like making people laugh Harrykins."

"And no-one's laughing if someones hurt or truly humiliated," added Fred, "We're not above teaching people a lesson if they've been really horrible, but we don't hurt people."

"We're not like them, Harrykins," George said, "we're carful with our pranks, we're not bad
people," and there was an old hurt in his voice that made shame coil in Harry's gut.

"Whoever **them** is, we're not like that, promise" Fred added, "we're not"

"We like laughter and good memories, not the other way round." Finished George, as if the old hurt was forgotten so easily.

Harry looked away, "sorry... I'm sorry, I know your not bad people, you guys are good to me, I just- I just-" he trailed off thinking of his dad. And was surprised when they both pulled him into a hug.

"It's okay," said Fred

"You tell us if you think we're crossing the line," George whispered.

"Thanks," Harry said shakily before for pulling away, "come on, we better go, or we'll be late to morning classes. Seriously though guy, just drop the house thing. Let it go."

*They had transfiguration all morning. Professor McGonagall didn't seem to notice all the frosty glares the Gryffindors were sending Harry or all the hex's he had to constantly deflect. She didn't notice Hermione helping him deflect them, now that she was on the receiving end of them as well because she'd sided with Harry. And McGonagall also didn't notice the looks of fury Hermione shot Ron and the other Gryffindors between spell deflections or the looks disappointment Hermione shot her.*

McGonagall didn't seem to notice anything had changed at all. But Harry didn't really expect her too. It didn't stop him from being mad about it though. Honestly, when half the class was hexing each other and the tension was high enough to cut with a knife, how did she *not* notice? Was she really that over worked that she wasn't noticing anything that she didn't want to see?

Defence against the dark arts was... odd. He'd been increasingly wary and uncomfortable since his little realisation about Moody, but the class ended without any trouble, as did his Arithmancy meeting after dinner, and he hurried back to his cupboard to do his homework in peace.

Dobby had found him a wall sconce from somewhere, so he lit it with a small fire spell. It lit up the cupboard brilliantly with a warm flickering glow. His warming charms had held up, so it was quite cozy inside. A transfigured mop acted as a wonderful lap desk so he could curl up on his blanket nest to do his work, in peace, quiet and comfort.

It took much less time than in the crowded library where he was often jumpy, or the noisy common room where he was always hyper-alert and constantly being distracted.

He looked up as Hedwig flew in. Winky had found some kind of wooden ring, that after she'd worked some elf magic on, allowed Hedwig to fly in and out of his cupboard. They were both rather pleased with the arrangement, and Harry transfigured one of the shelves into a stand for her. It was nice being able to stay together again.

She had a thick letter tied to her leg. He cast several detection charms on it before he freed her of it. When he took it from her, it grew a little, and he found far more sheets of parchment inside, than it should have been able to fit. He frowned back and had a look at the letter.

To Harry's delight, it was from the WEA, the Wizarding Examination Authority. They had happily replied to his letter with a full curriculum study guide for OWLS and NEWTs. He'd not had a
chance to look at it earlier. But now the task was over, he dove into what they sent him with relish.

They'd included all the Hogwarts subjects, not just History of Magic and Defence like he had asked. They had even gone a step further, so pleased to have someone interested in history and schoolwork, that they'd also sent guides for the other subjects not offered in Hogwarts like; Politics, Etiquette, Estate Management, Ancient Studies, Religion, Language, Enchanting, Spell Creation, Alchemy. They even included enrolment forms for their correspondence courses, which was interestingly enough covered under his tuition fees for whatever institution he was part of. There were then enrolment forms for the OWL and NEWT exams sat at ministry, with were held every easter and summer holidays.

Harry was delighted with their over-enthusiasm. He was surprised to find out that anyone could book in at the Ministry to sit an OWL or NEWT in any of the term breaks. As long as they were over 14, that is. Apparently, many Pureblood students did that during their easter and summer breaks, to test in the subjects not offered at Hogwarts like Etiquette and Culture as well as Estate Management and Politics for the Heirs.

Now that was food for thought, Harry pondered, staring at the parchment in front of him. It would be a real thumb in the nose to Dumbledore and everyone who thought him stupid, who wanted him stupid, for Harry to actually get all his NEWTs. If he managed to sneak out at Christmas, there was no reason he couldn't sneak out again in the summer breaks to sit more OWLs in the Ministry.

He would have to carefully make a study schedule. He would have to do the bulk of the work over the summer in all probability. He couldn't get much of it done here while the tournament was on...

But wouldn't it be great to see the expression of shock on all those moron's faces when Harry got NEWTs in every subject offered. He grinned. It would be hard, but if he managed his time correctly, he might just manage it. It would be worth it too, to stick it in all of their stupid faces. He'd prove himself better than all of them!

It was a pity he didn't have a time turner, really. That would have made things much easier. He wondered if the Room of Requirement did something similar, or maybe there was one in the Room of Hidden Things...

He sighed. There was so much he wanted to learn. He put away his finished homework and pulled out his planner. He was already working 9 subjects into his time table, as well as scheduling in time in the forest and being tutored and tutoring the Slytherins. He'd have to be careful to add in these new subjects too. Hopefully, his Slytherin lessons would tie in with Politics and Etiquette.

He supposed he'd have a lot to do over break. Which ones would he prioritise? He would probably stretch himself too thin doing all of them at once. Better to focus intently on one or two and do them early. But he was particularly interested in… damn it, all of it, and he was several years behind!

He understood Hermione's frustration at having to drop a few subjects back in third year all too well now. Damn it! He needed a time turner to take them all. But how to get one?

Could he really afford to juggle everything?

He'd manage. He always managed.

* 

Harry had stiltedly continued to write to Bill and Charlie, as promised. He hadn't told them about
the un-housing, or the school's reaction to his task, nor did he say anything about Ron.

Instead, he sent Bill his ward plans, with a request for advice on how to strengthen and anchor them. He told Bill all about the first task, sending a copy of the Quibbler along, and told him all about the projects he was working on. He had added glasses to his project now, wanting to enchant them to see magic and invisible things like Moody's eye. If he could recreate it he could protect against it.

He told Bill how well the shirt worked and how he was working on finding another power source for it instead of blood so he could work something out for the dragon keepers. He wrote about the WEA's response and trying to work all the subjects into his schedule.

Bill wrote back enthusiastically, clearly passionate about complex magic and warding. Between the two of them, Harry was confident they would be able to ward his new home to keep him safe and to keep others out. He recommended a bunch of new warding books that Harry 'borrowed' from the Restricted Section.

Bill's letters were full of laughter and encouragement, and he sent along notes, with a fang earring. He promised it would keep Harry safe from the sun and from sand fly's if he ever encountered them. Harry couldn't wear it yet, but he would. He had some ideas on how to get his ears pierced, and would try it out over the holidays. Bill sent back some of the notes on wards for his cupboard and between the two of them Harry knew they would end up impenetrable. Nearly.

Harry sent Charlie a copy of the Quibbler too and told him about his studies, his projects, and the time in the forest with the centaurs. He thought Charlie knew there were things he wasn't saying, but like Bill, Charlie just replied with letters of work, fun stories and talked to Harry about projects and studies. He helped Harry excitedly with fireproof shirts as well, and like Bill's letters, Charlie's were frequent.

They helped. A little patch of brightness in Harry's otherwise bleak world.

Charlie laughed when Harry told him about the little dragon models he'd liberated from the task and how they now sat on his shelf and prowled at night. They were adorable, and he was falling in love with them a little bit. He sent Charlie some photos he took with a forgotten camera he'd scavenged. And often he stared at them late at night when he couldn't sleep, watching their tiny puffs of flames glowing in the darkness.

He did not send another letter to Sirius though; what was the point?

Chapter End Notes

I'm in the middle of editing chapters 45-50 at the moment! And I'm part way through writing chapters 50-55 😊 All sorts of good things coming up!
Chapter 32 Sev & Professor Snape

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS!
This one has some trigger warnings! The details are at the bottom of the page for anyone who wants to check them.
If I put them here they'll contain spoilers for everyone.

The other thing Harry had been tackling that week was his mother's books. Harry had pulled out her book on the flower language in a desperate attempt to distract himself from the images he had seen in the maunder's prank book. They were still bothering him. He didn't want to see them when he closed his eyes in his nightmares, didn't want to remember, didn't want to face the fact his father had been Sev's Dursley's.

The flower book hadn't been notated like so many of her other books. And it was more like an encyclopaedia or dictionary than a textbook. Each plant or flower had a drawing of it, the name and a detailed explanation of the meaning.

He flipped through the pages randomly, reading different flowers here and there but stopped when Wormwood caught his eye.

Wormwood. Suddenly he remembered Professor Snape's words from his first-ever potions class, 'What would I get if I added powdered root of Asphodel to an infusion of Wormwood? What is the difference, Potter, between Monkshood and Wolfsbane?'

Harry started frantically flicking through the pages, Asphodel and Wolfsbane were in the flower language too.

Of course, Sev... Severus Snape. How had he missed it?

It hit him like a punch to the gut, all at once that Professor Snape, his potions master, who hated his guts, who hated his father's guts, was the same Sev that played with his mother in the park, that his father picked on, that was abused growing up.

Something inside twisted painfully, and he frantically pulled out the Maunder's Grimoire, flicking through the pages. Yes, the dark-haired boy, so often the target of his father and his friends, looked a lot like a very young Severus Snape.

How had he missed it? Of course, Sev! Sev was short for Severus, Severus Snape, Potions Master. How the hell had he not put it together!? He clenched his jaw and started flicking through the book again. He'd read about a lot of the things the Maunder's had done in Lily's diary, but he was hit now, but a feverish need to know. To know every sin his father had committed against Professor Snape. He needed to know what he'd done. Needed to know everything his father had done to the poor boy that grew to hate him and hated Harry too, despite loving his mother.

After that, Harry couldn't not reach out one more time to his mother's friend. Harry, as hurt as he was, as mad as he was, as much as he hated the way Professor Snape snapped and snarled at him
(to a small justifiable extent), as much as he was loath to, for fear of his potion master's sure-to-come ire, Harry knew that once Sev had been his mother's friend. He couldn't help but reach out to that boy. He couldn't help but reach out to the unspoken message in those questions all the way back then.

*I deeply and bitterly regret Lily's death.*

He looked up and the ceiling turning the idea over in his head. Clenching and unclenching his jaw. Sev and Snape were the same person. Did he want to do anything with that? He didn't forgive, as a general rule but what Snape was apologising wasn't his fault. Was it? Either way Harry wouldn't mind melting his mother's Sev, as apposed to Snape. He scribbled a note on the back of his potions homework.

'If you asked me about Asphodel and Wormwood, about Monkshood and Wolfsbane, I would say that I would add a White Tulip and an Eglantine Rose. It would give you a daffodil yellow potion if you were to add a sprig of purple Hysinthea and a Star of Bethlehem.'

He was not going to say anything to anyone, Harry thought determinedly, as he put his potions homework back in his bag. If Professor Snape didn't want anyone to know that he was Lily's friend, Harry wouldn't tell. He'd done enough to the man already. His father had done enough to the man already.

But Harry had to know. He had to know what happened. Yes. He felt horribly torn about it. He wanted to know what happened, but if it had been him, he would not have wanted anyone to know. It would be a considerable breach of Professor Snape's privacy. But he had to know what his parents had done. He struggled with it, agonised over it before he slowly opened his mother's journals again.

He buried himself in her diaries, not pausing or looking up from his reading. He read through dinner, desperate to find some clue in a young Sev's world, desperate to find some good in the form of his mother to somehow make up for how bad his father was. He was desperate to have some sort of reassurance that it got better, that there was a happy ending, that at least his mother had been a good person and had been there for Sev.

But what he got from his mum's perspective seemed even worse as she talked about how Sev felt and how she hated it, and Harry's father. She and her friend Sev had clearly been very close growing up and continued to be through their Hogwarts years.

Harry wondered what had happened to them, feeling his heart clench at the continual reminders that her journal gave him, of just how awful his father and his friends were.

His mother's diaries had stopped at the end of OWL year. Shortly after Sev was assaulted in front of the school and Lily had stalked off after he called her a Mudblood. Sev'd waited for hours outside the common room for her all night. And when she finally came out, eyes red from crying, they had a screaming match.

She yelled at him for calling her a Mudblood. She'd been so hurt that he'd turned on her. That he'd used that word on her. He'd been quiet in regards to his friends using it. She didn't like it but she'd understood. She'd understood how hard it was for him in Slytherin surrounded by would-be Death Eaters when he wasn't one himself, when he was only a poor half-blood.

She understood needing to stay quiet and to fit-in to be safe. But then he turned on her, in a moment of embarrassment when she had been trying to help. That had been unforgivable. He'd yelled right back at her for calling him Snivillus and poking fun at his worn clothes, at abandoning
him to be assaulted by the Marauders when they'd had him at their mercy.

They had screamed at each other, for hours, both furious and hurt. She hadn't spoken to him after that, despite how much she missed him. She could hold a grudge. Her parting words to him on the Hogwarts Express had cut Harry to the bone, on Sev's behalf.

"I never expected you to stand alone and stand out against them," she had written recalling their parting words, "I never expected you to stand up for me when it would draw their ire and the pain of their wands. We both know that's way too dangerous. They outnumber you too much and know where you sleep. I understand what you have to do, to stay in with the right people in that house; to survive there, such as it is in these dark times. As much as I hate it, I get it. Because there are no happy endings in the real world, we both know this.

There is no-one to save you in the real world. You have to do it yourself. Life sucks, and you have to do things you don't like to survive sometimes. Especially when you grow up as poor latch-key kids in Cokesworth like we did. But I expected you not to turn that bigotry on me. What happened Sev? It was us against the world. We swore houses would not change anything. Where's that Sev? I miss my friend, but he's nowhere to be seen."

Harry couldn't believe she'd left him like that, or that Sev'd said that to her, had called her a Mudblood. Harry ached as he read her entries. The more he read, the more he saw himself in both of them.

She had stewed and worried about whether to forgive Sev straight away or not. She had talked and fretted at length how hard it was, being a poor boy from a muggle neighbourhood, with no Pureblood standing in the Slytherin snake pit. But that world turned on her, and she was angry at him for not being at her side, the way she tried to be for him.

Harry wished he knew what had happened. On the one hand, he was furious at his mother for abandoning her friend. But he ached for her too; for the one true friend that knew her, that understood her, that was her brother, her other half, had turned and hurt her.

He knew that pain.

He ached for that loss. He knew what that felt like, that world-shattering realisation that things would never be the same. The Sev in his mother's diary's seemed so different from what Harry knew. He was guarded and cynical and sarcastic. Sev was cold and detached but gentle and kind to his mother. Slow to open up and feel, but was passionate and had fun with Lily. Sev was nothing like the potions professor Harry knew. And Harry thought, maybe he was a bit like that too. It hurt.

Harry wondered if he'd ever meet that person. The Sev his mother knew. He wanted to. He wanted desperately to connect with something of hers.

Harry jumped a mile when his wand started buzzing. He cursed, that would be his alarm to remind him to go to Astronomy Class. Cursing, he bundled his things back into his bag and sprinted up to the tower. Astronomy had improved greatly now he could see. Harry was finding it much better now. He loved looking at the stars now he could see them clearly and was still amazed by how much easier seeing was with these glasses.
Tonight, he could not stay focused though. His mind constantly drifted back to what he’d learnt. And when he rushed back down to his cupboard after class, he wouldn't have been able to tell anyone what they had learnt.

He pulled out the Marauder's Grimoire again, when he got back to his cupboard. He read it cover to cover like his mum's Diaries. Prank after painful prank he slogged through it and realised the full extent of it. There was a lot his mother had never known about. His father and his friends had written all of them down. Preserved in all their excruciatingly humiliating detail. His father was just like Dudley and his gang.

By the time Harry had finished reading the books, he had to summon a mop bucket down to be sick into. Professor Snape had been hexed and nearly choked using soap on multiple occasions, he had been assaulted, striped naked in front of the school, and had been set-up with a werewolf to die. Black had set him up to meet Lupin under the full moon, Harry had to stop for a moment. That wasn't in his mother's diary, either it happened after fifth year, or she didn't know. He stared at the words on the page. His godfather had tried to murder Snape.

And! If Harry's father hadn't intervened on that full moon, to save his friends neck, Professor Snape would have died or worse, been turned. Sirius had known that and did it anyway. All for what? Because Sev was a Snake? Because he existed and was poor and unkempt and not well-liked? Because he was so smart, he made everyone else sound like morons?

He, Harry had been on the receiving end of so many similar incidents from his cousin. He had been through such similar hexing here at Hogwarts. All Harry could feel for the man now was sympathy.

His heart broke a little inside. Both for young Sev, for the pain he went through, and for the friend of his mother that he had hoped to meet, to make potions with, to talk about his mother with. The friend of his mother he would never get to know now. Professor Snape hated his guts because Harry was his father's son.

And his heart broke little for himself too. For having that dream broken, that hope, that belief that somewhere inside, his father has been a good person. But he wasn't. His father was not a good person.

People had lied.

In that moment, Harry hated his father more than he had ever hated the Dursley's. Despite all they had done, the Dursley's had always been horrible. That's just who they were. They never let Harry down as he had always known to expect that. But his father. His father had let him down. Harry had expected better of his father. His father was supposed to be a good man.

He felt angry to be so disappointed in the man, a man he never knew, never remembered. He felt ashamed that he felt that he deserved better from the man who was meant to be his father and a good person. But he wasn't a good person and that hurt.

Professor Snape made more sense now, Harry thought. No wonder he hated Gryffindors. No wonder he hated Harry. Harry would have too. He felt guilt well up inside him. All he could do was make amends for his mistakes and not make the same errors his father had.

Harry was floored though, as he finally drifted off into a tormented sleep. Despite Professor Snape hating his guts, and rightly so, he still gave Professor Flitwick the photos for Harry of his mother. He still protected Harry over and over again.
Harry was very quiet the next day; not really talking to anyone, not even Winky and Dobby. He found himself using formal language and behaviour to keep the world at a distance. He'd been doing that more and more lately, he realised. He'd been doing it to everyone, to the teachers, his peers, Hermione, the Twins, Neville, even with Bill and Charlie in his letters. Did he care though? That he was holding the world at arm's length?

He deflected Hermione's questions on their morning run when she saw the bags under his eyes. Didn't tell her why he had stayed up all night, didn't say why he was so quiet.

He didn't talk to Hagrid as they did the morning rounds in the forest, patching up one of the salamanders and tending to a Hippogriff's talon rot. Hagrid seemed to understand though. He'd always had been good with broken things, Harry thought self-deprecatingly.

He skipped breakfast again and felt so queasy that he could hardly get down anything more than Winkey's nutrient potion. Again.

Hermione, despite knowing, as she always did, that something was up, didn't push him, to his great relief. She just quietly kept him company as he buried himself in his studies and his books during class, then in the library. She followed him under the cloak between classes, as they avoided the school's population and stuck to his side as she helped him deflect the Gryffindor hex's that were now directed at her too.

He was grateful for her patience with him. She just gently took his hand every so often when he got too quiet and too lost in his own head, not able to differentiate between his own memories and images of his father bullying Sev.

Potions class was painful that afternoon. He'd managed to slog his way though History of Magic and through Charms. He had studied his way through lunch. But as always the class he'd been dreading came around much too soon. He'd meant to apologise to Professor Snape now the task was over. But now that he knew...

Now Harry knew about Sev, and his father... he wasn't sure he'd ever been able to look the man in the eye without feeling that burning shame and humiliation.

Harry kept his head down through class. They'd missed their theory and demonstration class on Tuesday, due to the task. He and Neville had a slightly harder time brewing their potion, but they planned it out diligently and managed to get it mostly right, to Harry's relief. He didn't need to give Professor Snape more ammunition against him. The man had enough.

He reluctantly loitered behind as the bell went, waving a concerned looking Hermione off. He needed to say something. He didn't want to, but he needed to. He owed it to the man to apologise for his own arrogance, and wrongdoing at the very least. He had no intention of ever mentioning his father.

Clenching his jaw with dread, hoping he was not just about to expose another weakness to be used against him, Harry carefully approached Professor Snape's desk as some of the class filed out. Greengrass just give him a discrete nod of approval on her way out. Malfoy sniggered and some of the Gryffindors elbowing Harry sharply on their way past him.

He gulped when he caught sight of Professor Snape's face. Harry could feel the loathing coming off the man in waves, making Harry feel a little dizzy with it. He didn't blame the man, though.
"Well, what do you want Mr Potter," Professor Snape sneered.

"Well," Harry stuttered his mouth suddenly very dry.

He swallowed and started again in a clearer, stronger voice, "Well Met, Potions Master Snape."

Harry bowed. Deeper than required, a show of respect, but once again, with his palms up, empty, a sign of peace, "I'm sorry for disturbing you sir, but might I have a moment of your time?"

Professor Snape looked momentarily surprised but said nothing, leaning against the side of his desk, his arms crossed. Harry looked up and felt cowed and awkward with Professor Snape towering above him. But then, most people towered above him.

"What do you want, Mr Potter" Professor Snape repeated after a moment, "I haven't got all day."

"Potions Master Snape," he said, but was cut off.

"Just Professor is fine, Mr Potter," Professor Snape said echoing Professor Flitwick, "it's about time you learnt some manners."

Harry glanced up. Professor Snape's face was blank, but he was peering at Harry like he was a particularly strange potions specimen. In the background, Malfoy had stalled to watch Harry get humiliated. Just like Dudley, it seemed to be one of his favourite pastimes. He snickered. Harry thought he may have imagined it, but a minute frown flicked across Professor Snape's face at that sound.

"Er, yes, sir. It is. I'm very sorry, sir," he started, then began properly, "I offer you my formal apologies, sir. I have recently become aware that I have been rude though my ignorance and may have appeared arrogant because of it. I had no idea about anything until now. I had no idea how important manners were or that they even had a different here from in the muggle world. I didn't know, but now I do, I realise that my behaviour and treatment of you was appalling."

"I'm very sorry sir," Harry continued, forcing his voice to stay steady, "I don't think you're horrible at your field, or that you don't deserve respect. Nor do I think you're an idiotic fool who I can learn nothing from. I did not intend to snub you so badly. I am fixing my ignorance and will endeavour to not repeat my mortifying behaviour. I am very sorry, Professor."

Professor Snape looked at him for a long time, his black eyes glinting. Harry couldn't read his face but hoped, though he knew he shouldn't, that Professor Snape would believe him, would forgive him.

"Detention Mr Potter, after dinner, for lying. Get out of my sight." He said after a long pause. While the words were angry, his tone wasn't.

Frowning, Harry left; Malfoy's snickering followed him out.

* 

Harry went to the Potions Dungeons after eating dinner alone in his cupboard. While he actually liked the dungeons, lots of good places to hide and explore, or work undisturbed, Professor Snape's office was still terrifying due to its occupant.

The door was open when he arrived, and despite his great trepidation, he knocked on it anyway to alert the Professor to his presence.
"Professor Snape, Sir?" he asked tentatively when the Professor ignored him, "I'm here for my detention, sir."

Wordlessly, Professor Snape waved him in and pointed a potion stained finger to the chair in front of the desk before jabbing his wand at the door. It slammed shut, and Harry forced back a flinch. Professor Snape kept writing for a long moment, and Harry had to force himself to keep looking at Professor Snape's desk, instead of glancing anxiously at the door.

When he had finished, Professor Snape set his quill down and stood up. He crossed his arms and leaned against the side of the desk again. He peered at Harry with those cold black eyes of his.

"I do not accept your apology, Mr Potter, for I do not find it to be sincere or even truthful," the Professor drawled, in a dangerous voice after a long moment. "I do not know what little game you are trying to play this time, but you will cease and desist this instant."

Harry slumped in his chair. He had come here trying to mend broken fences. It had galled him, but he had swallowed his pride to try and right his wrongs and still Professor Snape only saw his father. Still, Professor Snape didn't really see him, Harry, but only what he wanted to see.

This is why we can't do nice things, he thought to himself bitterly, because no one ever believes us anyway!

"How can you possibly be such an unbelievably spoilt brat, to not know basic manners, you arrogant little snot." Professor Snape asked, disbelief colouring his seemly permanently, irritated tone, "or did you just not bother to read the books your guardians gave you. I know they were muggles and may not have known the details, but there were books." Professor Snape scorned.

Harry clenched his jaw to stop himself gaping. They were given books for him? He was about to protest when Professor Snape said, "never mind! I don't care. You will need lessons then, if you're telling the truth about that at least," he said, sounding resigned and furious.

Harry controlled the urge to cringe away from his tone. He would not show the man any weakness.

"Yes sir, but some of my Slytherin peers have offered, sir," Harry bit out holding back slowly growing fury, "Ms Greengrass gave me this list, but warned that I would need permission to get them from the restricted section, sir," he said holding out the list, trying to be helpful.

He had planned on just breaking in, but he probably shouldn't make a habit of it, in case it was noticed. If Professor Snape was actually going to give him a pass like Greengrass had said... Well, Harry wasn't about to look a gift-horse in the mouth.

Professor Snape moved suddenly, making Harry jump. He sat down behind his desk again, pulling out a quill and scribbling on the bit of parchment Harry had given him, before for thrusting it back at him.

"Give the list to Madame Pince. She'll get them for you. And just those ones!" He said sternly as if expecting Harry to disobey, "and I suppose this is what prompted this out of character apology?" Professor Snape sneered suddenly, his eyes full of loathing again.

"No, sir!" Harry tried to protest taking the paper from him reluctantly and putting it safely in his bag, in case Professor Snape were to change his mind suddenly.

"Liar. I do not like being used! Get out," Professor Snape said furiously.

Harry wanted to run from the room, but held his ground. If he didn't fix this now, it would never
change. He owed it to the man his mother had been friends with, to sort it out.

"No, sir! I really didn't know. I didn't get the introduction list! I only just found out about it, sir. My relatives didn't tell me anything," he said, reluctant to say anything about his relatives, for fear of it being used against him later. And Gods, he hoped Professor Snape didn't say anything to Dumbledore.

"I really was apologising, am apologising, sir," he pressed on, "it wasn't to manipulate you sir, but when you brought up lessons, I figured I'd tell you I'd already sorted it out so that you didn't feel you had to sir. I know you hate me. I didn't want you to feel you had to spend more time with me. You've been good to me. It's the least I can do, staying out of your way, sir." Harry said, scuffing the tip of his dangling foot. He hated it. He felt like a child on Professor Snape's chairs, his feet barely reaching the floor.

"Are you even listening to me, Potter!" Professor Snape snarled.

Harry flinched, and automatically said, "sorry!"

But couldn't quite hold back his next words, "don't call me that" then hastily added, "sir."

Professor Snape ignored him, "not only are you arrogant enough to try to manipulate me, and then lie about it, but you blame your ignorance and laziness on your relatives. They must be too in awe of your fame to be properly ashamed of you, to let you get away with acting so. Like father, like son," he sneered, voice full of loathing. "How proud he must be of you Potter, his son's behaviour and lack of manners, in his perfect image. You're just like your father, Potter" Professor Snape started in a snarl.

"I'm not my father! Don't call me that! I'm not!" Harry snapped, nearly shouting, as it all boiled forth suddenly.

"What?" Professor Snape spat out, surprised out of his anger, "it's your name! I will certainly not be calling you Gryffindor golden boy or the boy who lived." He sounded disgusted at the very idea.

"Potter! Don't call me Potter," Harry said, suddenly very tired and feeling very old, "it reminds me, and you, of my father. Neither of us need that!"

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed.

"It's your name, you spoilt twat!" He yelled back.

Harry was too angry to flinch, to be scared, to even think of anything other than desperately trying to hold his temper, "anything but Potter is fine! Hell, you could even call me Boy or Freak like my relatives do! Even that would be better!" he shot back, all attempts at holding his temper, suddenly shot to hell.

Snape just stared at him.

"Fine! You don't accept my apology? Fine! You don't believe me at all, about anything? Fine! But don't call me Potter. I. Am. Not. Him! You were right, you know." He spat venomously. "It galls me to say it, but you were gods be dammed right. My father was an arrogant snot. A bullying toe rag. I know he was horrible. He was no better than my cousin and my relatives i-"

Professor Snape cut him off, "don't. Lie. Potter!" so furious he was spitting, "we all know perfectly well you're a pampered, spoilt prince!"
"Sure! Really pampered! Really spoilt!" Harry spat, all his previously suppressed furry that had been slowly building since his name had come out of the goblet, spewing out of him at full force, "spending all day, every day working my ass off, blistering in the sun whether I want to or not! Whether I have eaten or not. Really pampered that is! Really spoilt! I'm treated like the Malfoy's house-elf, only to be locked up every bloody night when they can't stand the sight of me any more or want to forget I exist when they don't want me anymore! When they no longer have a use for me!" He could feel his nails digging into his palms. The pain felt good.

"Not that they wanted me to start with! They made that perfectly clear, every single bloody day!" he continued "I lived in a bloody cupboard for peat's sake! I'm not even allowed to own my own underwear! How fucking spoiled is that! So spoilt that before this place, an actual bed, hot water and access to a toilet whenever I like, was an unknown luxury!"

Harry didn't think he'd ever been so furious before. He felt like his insides were boiling. His legs shook, and his fists were so tightly clenched he didn't think he'd ever be able to unclench them or dig his fingers out of his surely bloody palms.

"I get starved and told to shut up and pretend I don't exist. I used to spend days locked up in the dark, wondering if I'd ever get anything to eat again. Now of course, they know the wizards are watching them so they just lock me in Dudley's second bedroom instead. Can't have the wizards watching the house catching on. Yeah, that's real fucking spoilt." Harry spat out almost screaming, shaking now.

"I am nothing like my father. My father is, from what I have read of his journal, and my mother's, a despicable human being, that was little more than a cruel and abusive bully. I'm ashamed to even be related to him" Harry continued viciously.

"I want nothing to do with him! I have no idea why my mother married him. He was a shit head. My Father was a swine! I want nothing to do with anyone who treats their peers like that. It's bad enough being treated like he treated you, at home by my relatives. I never want to be anything like him.

So screw you! I'm not my father! I'm not Dudley! What he did, I know what that's like! I never want to be like that! I'm nothing like Dudley! I didn't do it, I didn't- I'd never, I'm Not, I'm Not I-" but he clapped a hand over his mouth. Images of his father and Dudley blurred together again, as they had been all day. Dudley's horrible laughter echoing in his head coming out of his father mouth. He wasn't too sure where he was anymore.

"What did you say?" Professor Snape whispered, his face white.

Harry felt the colour drain from his face. He felt light-headed, He blinked, trying to focus on Snape and it came swinging into frightening clarity all at once. He hadn't meant to lose his temper like that. He hadn't meant to let that much slip.

He was always so out of control around Professor Snape. He always felt so alien, so angry, around Professor Snape. Harry stood there, frozen in terror. He had never meant to admit to another living being that he knew what his father was really like. He had never meant to almost admit to knowing what it was like to be in that position either, or that he knew what had happened. He'd never meant to so obviously confuse his father and Dudley. He'd never meant to admit he'd been in Professor Snape's position.

Fuck!

Professor Snape must have realised that he knew. He looked murderous. His harsh black eyes
"you know nothing boy," he spat out, so furious the words didn't quite come out right. It sounded more like a strangled hiss.

"Get out!" Professor Snape roared suddenly, spittle flying from his mouth, "get out and don't come back!"

Harry bolted, not even taking the time to hook his bag strap up around his shoulder before he made a break for it. All he could think about was Uncle Vernon yelling at him. He heard a jar smash against the wall on his way out, and the door slammed shut at his heels.

He tripped over his bag, hanging around his waist, jerked it up and ran as he felt something brittle and painful inside him break.

Why did he even bother trying to fix things? Adults were never worth it. First Dumbledore, then McGonagall, then Sirius and his father. Professor Snape was just another in a long list of adults to let Harry down. He should have known better. He pressed a bloody hand to his mouth.

Harry's last hope in adults shattered to pieces as he ran from the room deeper into the darkness of the dungeons, desperate to get away. Desperate to turn his heart off, close it down and never be hurt again.

Chapter End Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Bullying, trauma, assault, kids gaming up on other kids

Being stipped naked in front of others

Humiliation

Adults being assholes

OTHER END NOTE

Yes, this is actually important for plot development. You'll get the flower translation in the next chapter.
Severus Snape jerked a hand furiously towards the door, making it slam shut on the green-eyed menace fleeing his dungeons. He could barely contain the fury boiling in him, making his hands shake; mixing toxically with a familiar burning mortification. The brat knew! Potter's dunderheaded spawn knew! He knew and would use it against him and humiliate him, just like his misbegotten father!

And now it would be all over the school by morning! His shame! His humiliation. He grabbed the nearest jar and hurled it at the closed door. The jar was of cockroaches, (he kept especially for these moments.) They shattered, and the tiny brown bodies slid slimily down the door. He watched them go feeling slightly better, but still mortified, furious.

How dare he! He wanted to haul the brat back in there and make him scrub cauldrons until his fingers bled, until the day he died. How dare he play him! How dare he lie and manipulate him! How dare he treat him that way! How dare he know!

The brat was such an arrogant blighter, such a terror like his idiotic father. And how dare he know Severus's shame. How did the little blighter find out! Potter was dead and still he lived on in his son to torment Severus Snape!

He wanted to smash and break every jar in that room! He rained it in slightly and crossed to the door hidden behind the shelves in the wall behind his desk. He hurried down the tight spiral stairs behind the door and into his rooms housed below in the lower dungeons. It was blissfully quiet and deserted down there. He stalked across his rooms and out the door, exiting his rooms into the rest of the lower dungeons. It was even colder down there; silent. He stalked down a corridor, around a corner and into one of the old potions classrooms.

He didn't notice it was cleaner than it should have been for a long abandoned room, didn't notice the tables were freshly scrubbed, didn't see the fresh scorch marks. He would later. It would make him think later when he reviewed and sorted his memories of the day. Then it would make him think, make him go back and have a closer look. But now he dismissed it and let himself indulge in his fury.

Instead, he stormed across the room to grabbed the hearest chair, raising it over his head and bring it down with a crash. Upending the old desks, picking up chairs and throwing them, hexing every bit in sight. He let himself fume in a way he rarely allowed himself to. There are no potion ingredients down here, it was safe. Safe to smash things without wasting hard won ingredients and risking blowing up the castle.

He was humiliated and furious and mortified. He threw things and broke things only to mend them and wreck them all over again. It was hard exhausting work, trashing the place.

He was numbly aware of the wards around his office going off, but he dismissed it. They were
warded to the high heavens. No-one would get in without his say-so.

He didn't want to be wrong! He didn't want Potter to be abused. He didn't want to have failed Lily. Potter was a menace, out to get him, use and humiliate him just like his rotten father! He didn't want Potter to be like him. Potter was an arrogant snot, and that made him justified in taking his resentment out on a child. It justified his harshness as Severus Snape never wanted to be the bully his masters wanted to make him.

He always resented Potter's carefree childhood and arrogance. And like Dumbledore said, he was the one who needed to teach the brat about the unfairness of life. But if the boy was like him... then that just made Severus Snape another one of a long line of abusers.

And he'd never wanted that.

Potter could not be abused.

He exploded the teacher's desk with uncontrolled magic, the likes of which had not escaped him in years. It rained shrapnel everywhere.

He wasn't a bully! He wasn't, he thought with furious desperation. He wasn't an abuser! He wasn't just like James Potter, Tobias Snape and Avery and Mulciber. He wasn't!

Was he?

He was a Slytherin after all. He knew where the line was and crossed it pointedly at times, but he never took it too far. Never.

Had he taken it too far? He'd been practically an adult at that age! He'd had a thick skin and had taken it any time an adult or child dolled it out on him. Why couldn't they do it too? If he had, they should have been able to! The little shits!

Had he miscalculated? Had he taken being a strict and harsh teacher, necessary for such a dangerous subject, too far? Had he become what he hated?

No, of course not.

He'd sworn to follow Dumbledore, to atone for not being able to keep Lily safe. He'd been fighting from the shadows for so long.

He'd wanted to do the right thing, to fight for the light, to be free. To do something right for a change. Had he got it wrong again? He'd just wanted acknowledgment. To be congratulated for once, but nothing he did for Albus was enough, and it always had to be the hard, harsh road.

Always in the shadows; forgotten and sneered at, loathed and condemned at with suspicion...

Was following really the answer when there was nobody trustworthy to follow? When no-one could be trusted with the safety of his soul?

He was so tired of fighting so hard all the time. He just wanted someone to sort it all out for a change. For it not to be him for a change.

He just wanted to get something right for a change.

He snared at himself for admitting the weakness, the need for approval he hated and had tried to squash out of himself since he had been a young child. It never got you anything but heartache.
Had he really been that bad? He looked back at his classes. What he thought was on the edge of reasonable, seemed less reasonable now. Longbottom, making that first year cry, the Weasley twins - they had talent, maybe it should be nurtured, even if they never brewed what they were meant to in class...

Goddess, what had he done?

And Potter, the little liar!

But her eyes, her eyes, her green eyes. They almost looked terrified on his face, almost looked hurt, lost as he'd ran from the room. But that story... so wild. It couldn't possibly be anything but a made-up lie.

But the boy never could lie.

So then...

There was a knock at the door.

He took a swift breath, drawing everything in behind Occlumency shields, boxing the raging emotions up tightly with a mere thought. He flicked his wand, before sweeping it across the room in a wide arch repairing everything and removing all traces of his meltdown.

"People don't often come down this far Severus," Filius Flitwick said, looking at him closely when he opened the door, "are you alright?"

"Fine" he lied shortly, "how did you find me?"

Filius raised an eyebrow, but said, "I know you better than you think, my friend."

Severus frowned but said nothing, so his colleague continued, "have you got a minute Severus?"

"Indeed," he drawled, taking a calming breath, "let us return to my office."

He led them back through the labyrinth that was the lower dungeons and back up to his office, avoiding crossing through his quarters.

With a quick flick of his wand, the jar repaired itself, and the cockroaches were back in their jar and returned to its place on the shelf. Hopefully, his colleague wouldn't notice.

"I gave those photos to her son, Severus," the small man said, as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

Severus winced, and pushed everything behind his Occlumency barriers even further, so not to take his pain, fury and mortification out on his colleague. He actually liked Filius. He was one of the few exceptions to his general hatred of people, as Filius was one of the few who were not complete morons.

"I didn't tell him who you were, though I wouldn't be surprised if he worked it out, Severus. He's very bright, like his mother, truly." Filius continued.

Severus scowled. The brat knew alright. But he kept his lips pressed together in a thin line, to stop the vitriol he wanted to voice, from escaping his mouth. Potter knew! Potter knew who he was and what had happened. He didn't know how, but he knew Severus's worst memory. One of them anyway, unfortunately, the bad ones were far more numerous than the good.
Fuck!

After a pause, he merely said, "he has shown me nothing but arrogance and is as much a dunderhead as his father was," he spat.

"Really, Severus? Or is that what you want to see?" Filius asked, not in judgment but in a thought-provoking tone, and despite himself, Severus found himself thinking about it.

"He asked me to pass on a message," Filius started again, "he was so shocked when he pulled out the stack of photos from the envelope I put them in. He stared at them for a full 10 minutes, his mouth gaping." Fillips glanced up at Severus now his eyes bright.

"He was acting very queer today, very formal almost with cold detachment," Filius continued, a frown marring his face.

Severus looked up sharply at that but said nothing as Filius continued, "actually, like you were as a child occasionally. But he looked at those photos as if they were something sacred, something to be revered. He looked so much like her then, Severus. He was so grateful to have a few pictures I thought he would cry. Honestly, I get the impression his parents are never talked about at home, and he did say no-one talks about his mother. He asked me about her. He's coming for tea regularly, picking up her old tradition. To hear about her." Filius paused for a moment, surveying Severus.

Severus frowned but did not sneer in disdain at his colleague. Filius was smart. He may disagree with him about the Potter brat, but Filius always saw things a little differently. Severus often attributed it to his half-goblin nature, but his insights were usually spot on. He scowled.

"He asked me to pass on a message," Filius continued.

Severus held back a wince again, "he said and I quote, 'please sir, please convey my deepest, most sincere thanks to her friend. I am very grateful.' He meant it, Severus. It seemed odd, even from what I know of him. I get the impression he is not nearly as spoilt as the Prophet implies. He handed them back to me, Severus. He honestly expected me to take them back! He almost fell off his chair when I said they were for him to keep. It was as if he is not used to getting anything. It was very odd. Minerva was no help when I asked her about his home life either."

"What do you mean his home life," Severus snapped, "the little blighters treated like a prince. He cannot lie to save his life, and no-one grows up abused without learning the ability to lie," Severus finished bitterly.

"I'm starting to doubt that Severus," Filius said, "and it is hard to lie to a gifted legillimens, but anyway. I will leave you to your potions. I just wanted to pass on his thanks. He truly was very grateful."

Severus did not really notice him go. Too caught up again in that look of terror in her green eyes as the boy had fled the room. Could he have been telling the truth?

He pulled out his pensive. It was a dirty bribe of a gift from a dirty colleague. If not for the sheer usefulness of the item... he didn't want blood money. But, needs must. He pulled memory after memory out of his head, watching them swirl in the pensive, with slight trepidation, his lips curled into a familiar sneer of derision.

The boy couldn't be abused. He would have noticed from the start. And as if anyone in the Wizarding world, least of all Dumbledore would have let their precious golden boy be anything but
a spoilt pampered brat!

Occluding his mind of all things Potter, he took a moment to look at it with an unbiased eye, as if the boy was one of his snakes, just to prove himself correct. Surely he would see just a spoilt arrogant brat...

Abuse would explain much though, especially if he really was kept ignorant as he claimed, but surely not... Not Lily's child. He never missed an abuse case. Even Longbottom, he had noticed within the first week. The boy was so cowed. He'd gone straight to the boy's Head of House, after demanding the boy had a health check. He was clean, just emotional abuse, and there was nothing Snape could do about it when he wasn't the boy's Head of House.

Snape could keep the boys history in mind, but he would not pander to anyone, would not relax his high standards for anyone. The boy had to learn to chop ingredients right and stop blowing things up!

But... No, the Potter boy was not abused! He would have seen it. His head started to throb, and he plunged his face into the pensive.

But... as he watched memory after memory of his interactions with the Potter brat, his sorting, his first Potions class, Potter failing his test to see if he were more like Lily or his father, the shrieking shack, the opening and leaving feasts, glimpses of Potter in the halls, in classes... it was not painting a good picture now that he examined them carefully.

He had been so tiny back at his sorting. The hat had dwarfed him, completely covering his head. The boy had a cold look of terror on his face now that Severus really looked at it. His face had been completely blank at first. He had brushed it off as arrogance, over-confidence, boredom even. But now Severus looked, it was a cool neutral mask that automatically covered the boy's true feelings of sheer terror and desperation. Severus knew that mask. He saw it himself in the mirror. And what did it say that an 11-year-old had managed to perfect that which had taken him years? Why was the child so scared? Sure, everyone was nervous before the sorting, but terror? What had been going on in that boy's head.

The boy had been far too small and thin to be a first year! He looked about 7 or 8. And really, even now it wasn't much better, Severus thought. He was still scrawny, underfed and undernourished... and his parents had been tall. Potter, the elder, had been irritatingly well built with little effort and Lily had always been naturally curvy. Their son should not have been so tiny and boney. Severus really thought he needed a few good meals, not that the boy ate much. Severus had dismissed it as being used to being pampered and being a picky eater.

But that couldn't be right... the boy should not be so small, but he was, as if starved and stunted. Which meant he may have had trouble eating... He'd need a good nutrient potion to build him up again. But come to think of it... nutrient potions had consistently been missing from his stores this term... He narrowed his eyes. That little thief!

Severus kept looking. Their first potion class showed next. He, Severus, had looked so furious, and he had been. He had been furious that he would have to deal with Potter's son. But looking back now, the boy had done nothing but take notes. And wasn't that embarrassing? He, Severus Snape, a teacher, had yelled at him for that! Sure the boy said nothing when Severus baited him to see if he'd react like his father. Sure, he had failed Severus's simple questions, proving he was not like his mother either, not bothering to read in preparation for class and had been unable to see Severus's hidden message. But now, he caught the familiar flinch and look of terror from the boy as Severus watched himself yell.
It was hidden well, hidden by carefully shown anger, behind a well-practised careful mask. But it was there. And Severus had not seen it for what it was. He should have, but instead had taken it for childish defiance and arrogance. Why had he not seen it. And why did a child so young have such a well-honed mask?

Why had he not seen it? He was the head of Slytherin; the house with the most abused children. He was the one other heads came to for guidance when they found an abused child in their house and didn't know what to do. How had he not noticed? Why had he not noticed? He always noticed.

Then, the troll incident. Potter falling to the floor from the trolls back just as they all came rushing in, as the troll fell. Now he looked, Potter had been hurt. There had been a wince as he hit the floor feet first, his ankle rolling. But as soon as the teachers had entered, Potter had stood up straight, his face blank and walked without even a limp.

Surly, the child, was not that good an actor. No-one was that good at hiding pain unless they had years of experience. And why would he? Unless he really was abused? Unless he really had spent years hiding his hurts, for fear of making them worse. He, Severus, knew that trait too well. No, it couldn't be... not Potter.

He looked at another potion class, his potion had exploded, and Potter didn't even flinched as he got burned, just tugged his too big sleeve down to hide the burn and kept on going, as if it had never happened. As if he was used to that kind of thing. But how could he be..?

Every time Potter's potion exploded due to a Slytherin, mostly Malfoy, tossing an ingredient in, every time Severus was forced to blame Potter not the real culprit for fear of jeopardising his position, Potter's eyes hardened, deadened, and he seemed to get smaller. But he did not look at all surprised. Severus squeezed his eyes shut as the memories kept playing. Potter had expected the treatment. And didn't that speak for itself?

Potter jerked every time he was touched, every time something startled him, or moved too quickly. His extraordinary reflexes seemed less an annoying gift that made him too much like his father, and now, now Severus saw them for what they were. The survival skills honed painstakingly over the years of abuse. Fuck. They were the skills honed from years of necessary practice, simply to stay alive and 'safe.'

Severus got a cold sick feeling in his gut as he saw himself in the boy's eyes. He knew that walk, knew that fear. The fear of discovery that would only get you beaten more. He saw that familiar distrustful look hidden behind the carefully faked childlike mask on Potter's face whenever he was around an adult.

That inherent distrust of adults, Severus knew it so well! But he had mistaken it for stubborn arrogance, for malice! How had he been so blind? How had he been such a moron! He was a man that prided himself on his intelligence!

Potter noticed everything, he was coming to see now, another thing Severus was familiar with. That exhausting hyper-vigilance that was necessary to keep one safe when the whole world was out to get you.

He looked too, for the boys supposed ignorance; slight confusion at some of his instructions, confusion at certain words, phrases or actions. It was glaringly obvious now, the boy had known nothing. He was meant to have been tutored! To be ahead of his classmates!

How could he have been wrong! He had been so confident in his belief that the boy was a lazy bully like his father! Had treated him as such, done his job to take the boy down a peg or two.
But he had been wrong! It was inconceivable!

He pulled out of the pensive and was nearly sick. All this time. All this time he had seen the boy as his father, as the reincarnate of Severus's own abuser, or one of them. When in reality, the boy was too much like himself as a young boy. Too ignorant to be anything but unknowingly arrogant and rude.

He had always assumed the boy was a moron. Too lazy to bother, but if he'd been kept in the dark, deliberately... He would have only had half the cards, no wonder he got bad marks. It would certainly explain his sudden sharp improvement.

Though, while Potter often messed up his potions, they very rarely, if ever, exploded dangerously. That actually took some talent. He knew the Malfoy brat often tossed things in his cauldron, to try and make it explode. Oh, how Severus would love to be able to give that brat the string of detentions he deserved for his dunderheaded murderous pranks. The dunderheaded-brainless-spineless-fool!

Could the Potter boy have been deliberately getting them wrong? Was the boy actually in possession of even a spec of his mother's intelligence? Even his ingredient prep had improved. The boy now used the same method as Lily had used for brewing potions, the method he, Severus, had taught her.

He sighed.

So the boy was telling the truth. He had been ignorant. He had realised the errors in his behaviour. And now Severus could see it all, he had no idea how he had missed it. Was he really so blinded by his loathing for James Potter that he missed the signs of an abused child? An innocent child? Lily's child? Lily's child who he had sworn to protect?

Severus' stomach heaved suddenly, and he was sick all over the stone floor, only just missing his desk. He was shaking, badly. He hadn't lost control that badly in years.

The fact that Lily's son had been abused and he, Severus Snape, Lily's best friend! The boy's protector, and an abuse survivor himself, had not seen it, had done nothing, and had been no better than that abusive bullying git, James Potter! Severus heaved again. He had become no better than his own tormentors, his own father who he had sworn never to be like.

He stumbled backward under the force of the realisation, landing on his ass in a totally undignified manner. He clamped a hand over his mouth to try and stop himself from being sick for the third time as bile filled his mouth again. His head spun as his world cracked open on its side.

He had let her down. He had let Lily down. He had let Lily's son down. There was a sickening twisted feeling, aching in his gut. How could he ever atone for that? There was already so much blood on his hands! His best friends death on top of it. Goddess forgive him! What had he done!?

And if the boy was abused... and looking at it now, the schoolyard scuffles the boy had gotten into, what Severus has assumed was Potter bullying others, seemed a lot more like Potter being bullied. The incidents in the corridor with Malfoy; yes the boy was rude, but did he actually start the fights? If he was abused, and shied away from people like he did in the memories, now that he really thought about it, why would he start a fight?

He put his head back into the pensive. No, the Potter boy never started it. Malfoy did. Weasley did. The other Gryffindors did, but Potter never started it. Sure, he often gave as good as he got, but he never started it, and recently tried to stay out of it. Bugger!
He pulled his head out of the pensive again. In which case, he had, most recently unfairly taken out his anger at not only Potter but also on Granger that day with the teeth. He had been out of line, both to be angry at Potter for something he could now see Potter hadn't started, and wrong to take it out on Granger, by insulting her when she needed medical attention.

What had he become? He never would have done that before? Not when the irritating child reminded him a little of Lily, even if Granger was a bit more of an in-your-face know-it-all. And Longbottom too. The child was a walking hazard and a dunderhead but... The boy was more cowed than he should have been...

But did he really care if he was a bastard to the little snots? No! Of course not? Why should he care? They were not his problem. It was not his fault they were idiotic imbeciles and dunderheads that never bothered to do anything right or open a book for once in their sorry lives. He could not abide by idiots.

They deserved everything they got...

Didn't they?

Did he care?

Lily's son...

What if it had been Lily? He'd never do that to Lily? So why anyone else?

Why did he care? He didn't want to care. Caring meant hurt, and hurt meant he'd done something wrong, and was again in the wrong. He just wanted to get it right!

He didn't want to care, he thought bitterly, caring never brought anything good.

He didn't want to bloody care!

... But he did.

He swore viciously. At great length.

Of course, he did. He didn't want to be a bad person. He was a bad person, tainted by years of stain, but he didn't want to be, he never used to be a bad person, had always considered himself, not a nice person, but a good one. What had happened? When had he stopped caring?

What had gotten into him? This was not like him. Yes, he had always been a strict and harsh taskmaster, often grumpy and irritable and on the whole, had an unsuited temperament for teaching. He had little patience. And they were all dunderheaded brats and deserved everything they got, but he had never been cruel, never stepped over the line of abuse. Not like this. This wasn't him...

Was it? Was he really as much of a bastard as his father?

He didn't want it to be. He'd been fighting all his life, to exist and to survive, and had made so many mistakes he was left continually trying to atone for. What had gone so wrong? What had he done this time?

He thought back to the nonsense the boy had written on his homework.
'If you asked me about Asphodel and Wormwood, about Monkshood and Wolfsbane; I would say I would add, White Tulip and Eglantine Rose. It would give you a Daffodil Yellow potion if you were to add a sprig of Purple Hysinthea and a Star of Bethlehem.'

He'd thought it more of the nonsense that often spewed from the boy's mouth, none of those things made any useable potion! But now... Now it made sense, now he remembered why he chose those particular questions to use on him specifically that first day. A silent secret apology... 'I deeply and bitterly regret Lily's death.' A test, to see if Potter was enough like his mother to recognise it for what it was.

He'd never expected anyone to figure it out, not really. It had been their secret language, Lily and Severus, as a child. Looking at it now... especially with what Filius said about Lily's book...

'I forgive you, and absolve you of your guilt. Let that pain be healed. I offer you deep regret over my own actions, and I offer you reconciliation if you would accept it, though I am uncertain whether you will at all.'

The boy had been prepared to forgive him so that the guilty wounds of Severus's soul may heal, to tentatively reconcile. He swallowed. The boy didn't know the half of it. He did not deserve that. It was his fault that she was dead at all.

Filius was right. He was like his mother. Lily had had an enormous capacity for kindness, except when she was furiously angry, then she could hold a grudge. How had the boy gone through so much and still been left with a kind heart? Severus certainly hadn't managed it. His own childhood had left him cynical, bitter and hateful. Lily would have been so disappointed.

But the brat had been willing to forgive and start again. And now he'd blown it.

Lily's child. The last of his best, and only friend.

It was over.

Severus put his head in his hands and wept with the shame of it. He wept over his lost friend, wept for letting her son down so badly, for contributing to all the things that had broken her son. She'd be so ashamed of him.

"By the Goddess, Lily, I'm so sorry!" He moaned.

He recognised the look on the boy's face as he had left. That look had said everything he needed to know about the boy's faith in adults or complete lack thereof. That was the 'I don't know why I ever bothered thinking I'd ever get any help from an adult' look, the 'there is no hope for humanity' look, the 'I'm on my own, I'm never trusting or relying on anyone again,' look.

"Fuck!" He yelled, hurling his fists against the stone wall.

He needed to fix his wrongs, but how could he? He was again, stuck between another rock and a hard place. Doomed either way.

Fuck! He thought again.

But how could Severus help the boy, mend fences, without giving himself away?

Did he even want to? He maybe Lily's, but he was still a Potter too, he thought viciously, trying to keep hating the boy, trying to not care. But then he saw the look on the boy's face again, her green eyes, wide in terror and pain. A look he, Severus had put there.
Lily’s son, how could he not?

And that was the problem, wasn't it?

He did care. He had been blind before, but now he realised he did care. He cared too much, and it would probably be the end of him. Lucius Malfoy, the upstart French bastard, had Severus by the balls. One toe out of line and the asshole would whisper in the Minister's ear, and he'd be back in Azkaban. And Dumbledore would not come and rescue him this time if he wasn't useful to him any more as a spy. Dumbledore would not rescue him this time without a cost, and Severus had nothing left to give, nothing left to pay with but his own blood and the price of his soul.

He sighed, rubbing his left arm hauntedly. It was getting darker. Soon he'd have to go back and grovel at the Dark Lord's feet to get his role as a spy back. If he pissed Lucius off, the ass would spin tails and make every tiny move Severus made look like a betrayal to the Dark Lord. One word from Lucius, and Severus would be dead or under crucio until his brain turned to mush. And Dumbledore would not try to save him, not when he was just another expendable pawn.

If Lucius wiped his hands of Severus and whispered either to the Minister or the Dark Lord when he returned (and there was no doubt now that he would), then Severus couldn't spy on Voldemort anymore.

Dumbledore would let him rot either in Azkaban or forgotten in a ditch somewhere tortured into insanity by the Dark Lord. Dumbledore was happy for him to keep being an asshole. Dumbledore was happy for him, wanted him to act like an evil Death Eater to maintain his spot as the faithful spy. The fool!

Why though? It couldn't be just that? Surly a supposedly ex-Death Eater would be more successful playing the part of recovering defector? Trying to play the part of a good light soldier? What was Dumbledore's game? What was he really using Severus for? Dumbledore was making him act like an evil Death Eater.

He wasn't, and if he was a Death Eater spy, surely a good spy would play the part to fool the opposition. So why did Dumbledore want him playing the part of a cruel Death Eater? It served him no purpose other than damning Severus in both side's eyes. Doomed to always be distrusted and condemned. Such a stupid play. What did Dumbeldore want? Why did he want Severus damned and isolated?

What was his play?

If Severus got too close to Potter, the students that were loyal to their Death Eater parents would tell, and the Dark Lord would no doubt find out, and expect Severus to bring the boy in, to his death.

But if Severus got cozy with Potter, Dumbledore would find out, (it was enormously difficult to keep anything from the nosy old fool). He would dislike it and while Dumbledore didn't curse his slaves like the Dark Lord did, he could make their lives subtly difficult and he still held the threat of Azkaban over Severus' head. He'd made it only too clear it was only his word keeping Severus from being shipped back to that hell hole.

A rock and a hard place.

Both masters had a vicelike grip on his balls. The Bastards.

Either way, he was doomed. Doomed to a life of misery and sin. He was going to hell. His soul
damaged and damned to all eternity. There was no way out. He would doom himself if he continued, now that he knew, if he didn't try and right his wrongs, but if he did, he would be doomed by his chess masters.

*Oh, Hekate forgive me,* he thought bitterly.

He crossed the office and down the tightly spiralling stairs behind the hidden door to his chambers, and crossed to an alcove cut into the stone wall above the Fireplace.

Hidden safely behind wards was a floating incense burner above a tall green candle. In front of the candle stood a black statue of his goddess. Hekate. He used a knife to prick his finger and smeared the blood on the base of the statue in offering. The magic crackled. He lit the candle and placed a little honey along with sage and mugwort onto of the charcoal disk in the innocence burner. It crackled and popped as it ignited and started to smoke softly. He watched the tendrils swirl and coil. It was hypnotic. Is familiar smell soothing.

His pressed his hands either side of the statue, closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to the smooth stone before her feet.

"Hail Hekate Queen of the Witches, Queen of the Night," he murmured, squeezing his eyes shut, "may your torch and keys guide me, as I choose my path at these crossroads. May my weaknesses become my strengths, and my failures, my teachers. Lend me the strength and wisdom to choose the right path. Hail Hekate, the Crossroads, the Magi Queen, lend me your guiding light, for I am desperately in need."

How would he help the boy without no-one knowing? Was Potter a good enough actor for Severus to tell him the truth? And all of it? He scoffed, of course, the brat wasn't. He was a hopeless lier.

But he paused, no, the boy wasn't hopeless. He'd hidden much for a long time... Could Severus trust the boy, a mere child with information that could be his damnation? Could he trust it would not get out, that the boy could keep that secret?

Dare he?

Dare he not...?

He stood there for a long time, staring at his goddess, watching the candle flame flicker, and the incense smoke coil.

**Chapter End Notes**

On the use of the term *Witch.*

In this case witch is a gender neutral term. While the modern Wizarding world uses witches for females and wizards for males. But in Darke Culture and the Old ways, witch is gender neutral. It's an old term for magical that follow the old religion and practice the old magics. Before the modern ministry it was a gender neutral term. It is only in these more modern times that the world wizard was started to be used to specifically refer to males of the craft.

Many pagan practices today use Witch to refer to both males and females of the craft.
Flower translation:
Snape: I deeply bitterly regret Lilly’s death
Harry: I forgive you, let it be healed. I would offer you deep regret and an unserten reconciliation if you would accept it.

Also Snape's rooms are actually down a set of spiral stairs leading from his office, to the lower dungeon bellow.
The Darke

Chapter Summary

Extra Summer Solstice Celebration Bonus Chapter!

Charlie worries, Bill explains the darke, Harry meets some Slytherins, Gryffindor keeps shunning him and Harry is a hermit because they suck

Chapter Notes

It's summer solstice down under, so I'm giving you all an extra chapter this week in celebration!

Happy Summer Solstice to all by Southern Hemisphere brothers and sisters! And Happy Winter Solstice to all of our Northern brethren.

Harry didn't remember of going back to the cupboard. He didn't remember disarming his wards or re-arming them. He didn't remember getting changed and crawling into bed around his warm jar of bluebell flames or pulling his mum's blanket tightly around him, over his head.

In fact, in the morning, when he woke up surrounded by books and completed homework and study notes with little no recollection of studying at all. He felt cold and exhausted, and empty.

He must have studied, he wouldn't have been able to sleep after that. So he must have studied. Because school work was safe. Safe and predictable and cold. School work he could manage. Schoolwork stopped his mind thinking. Anywhere was better than being in his head. So he must have done it. And while he didn't remember it, the names and dates in his notes felt familiar now.

He must have worked late into the night, falling asleep on his books, but he didn't feel rested at all.

Now that the first task was over, Harry had given himself a week off before he tackled the egg. He'd buried himself in his reading, studying and other projects like working on his trunk, working on the protection wristbands he's been toying with, writing to Bill and Charlie, studying traditions and etiquette as well as the Goblin books. This proved a good distraction from everything over the weekend. And the books Greengrass had recommended, when he'd retrieved them, were fascinating. Much better than the intro books. It was a bit of a relief to just burry himself in normal things for a change.

Harry spent most of the morning huddled in his cupboard, with a hot jar of Bluebell flames in his lap, and plenty of blankets around his shoulders, studying. It was almost December, and the lower dungeons were getting colder and colder. He could constantly see his breath in the air now and had taken to casting many warming charms over himself all the time, so he stayed toasty and warm. He'd decided to keeping a jar of Bluebell flames with him at all times now and had taken to wearing layers and layers of clothing, along with a scarf and gloves everywhere he went. It also
had the added bonus of hiding bruises and marks leftover or still healing from the bullying, and hexing.

Thought it was Saturday Bill wouldn't be at the shack until after lunch, some curse having escaped the night before, keeping him up late. When Bill did meet Harry in the shrieking shack, however he immediately said, "Send Charlie a proper letter, will you? He's worried about you, he sent me this."

He pulled a note out of his pocket and handed it over. Harry winced, cursing his transparency. He didn't want anyone to worry. He didn't want anyone to notice, to see, to see him.

"Bill,

You see Harry on Saturday, yeah? Give the kid a hug for me, will you? He needs it. No matter what he says, he needs it. There's something he's not telling us, and he's shut down. I'm worried. Talk to him please? Or bring your mirror so I can, or just get him to write about something more than books, will you?

Love ya bro,

Charlie"

Harry frowned, his eyes prickling, betrayingly. He scowled.

"I'm fine," he said, "really! It's just hard sometimes. I'm okay."

"Really?" Bill said, "because I agree, your letters were off this week."

"I'm okay," Harry replied in what he hoped was a voice more confident than he felt.

Bill opened his arms, but Harry shook his head, his jaw clenched, "if you hug me, I will cry. I don't want to cry. I have too much to do," He mumbled, pulling out his notes, "I may never stop." He muttered to himself more quietly.

Bill sighed, but said, "he was worried about you on Wednesday too, he told me about both of your meltdowns."

Harry nodded, "I fell asleep on him too," he admitted to Bill, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly, and deflecting.

Bill chuckled, "yeah, he's a bit like that."

Harry smiled weakly, "best sleep I had all month. I'll be fine though."

Bill snorted, but Harry changed the subject, "oh, I have your birthday present here too! I won't see you tomorrow so I thought I'd give it to you now!" Harry exclaimed, pulling out a thin package from his bag.

"Thanks, Harry!" Said Bill with a grin, "you didn't have to though."

"No, but I wanted to," Harry said, letting Bill hug him very briefly.

"Can I open it?" Bill asked eagerly, poking at the paper, childishly.

Harry laughed and nodded.
Inside Harry had wrapped one of the sharp flint daggers he had made. He had made a smooth handle out of horn and wrapped leather from a squirrel he had caught in one of his snares and had used runes to instil the blade with strength to never break and an ever-sharp edge.

"Brilliant Harry!" Bill said, carefully testing the blade's edge, "where'd you get it?"

Harry smiled proudly, "Firenze is teaching me the ways of the forest. He taught me how to make them."

"You made this?" Bill asked incredulously, "they are teaching you? Willingly?"

"Yes on both counts. I'm very lucky. We have a mutually beneficial system in place." Harry explained.

"Well done. This is a really brilliant knife, thank you," Bill said hugging Harry tightly for a moment.

"So," Harry said, pulling out his books, "before we start on everything else, can you look over my warding notes? The ones on my trunk were broken into. This is what I've done to make them better."

They spent the afternoon picking away at his new warding project after Harry had reluctantly admitted the wards on his bed had been broken too. They went over various detection spells, some for checking objects like Bill used for Cursebreaking, and some for testing things for poison and spell work in food and drink.

"Now how's your Occlumency travelling?" Bill asked when they'd put away Harry's notes, "having any luck finding the heart chamber through meditation?"

"Not much luck overall. I still can't feel my magic, but I'm starting to get a sickly squirmy sensation inside when I try to feel it now. I think it's stopping me getting to the heart chamber." Harry explained.

Bill hummed for a moment, "okay, keep practising. I didn't expect you to get it straight away. I think you'll get there. The blocks are just making it harder. But not impossible. Keep practising feeling you're magic and sinking into your mind. The more mental and magical self-awareness you have, the better."

Harry nodded, "what will I do if I get cornered by Dumbledore though? I won't know if he's using it on me? His magic is so powerful I won't really realise he's doing it. It's overwhelming, and I can't feel spells interacting with me anyway."

"The best we can do at the moment, other than not being alone with him, and not meeting his eye, is working on other techniques of mental discipline to keep him out," Bill said pulling a book out of his pocket, resizing it and flipping through it.

"If possible, it may be best to try and restrict your thoughts around him. Try to push things aside and not think about them too hard," Bill started, "I know it's hard but if you're not actively thinking about it, the thoughts will sit deeper in your mind and be harder to get to without you noticing."

Harry nodded, thinking of how he often pushed aside emotions, "that sounds do-able. Can we practice that focusing thing we tried last week?" He asked, "where you focus hard on one thing?"

"Yes, how'd you go with it?" Bill asked.
"Okay," Harry said, "it's a bit like meditating. It's hard to do other things at the same time, though." He said

"It is. Ot helps when you can access the heart chamber, you can withdraw your mind inwards and keep the outer mind focused on one thing as an outer protection." Bill explained, "keep practising it. it will help you with finding the heart chamber, and your mental discipline, which is what Occlumany is all about."

"So I guess it's a bit like muggle mindfulness?" Harry asked, "you want to be present only in the moment, not in the past, or in the future, but fully focused on the moment at hand and what you're doing. That way that is the only thing taking up your outer mind and that's what anyone will see if they go nosing about." Harry hypothesised.

"Exactly." Bill said, "once you have that, it's easier to find and retreat to the heart chamber and Occlumency gets much easier from there."

Harry nodded, and they practised that for a while, Harry focusing hard on different things, a crack in the floorboard, focusing intently on writing out the alphabet, imagining he was flying, staring at a point on the ceiling, on his own breathing, all while Bill used Legilimency on him.

Some worked better than others, and the more they practiced, the better he got. Not that he could tell how successful he was, but he was finding it easier to focus intently on one thing, or just focus only on what he was doing, and not thinking of anything else at the same time.

It was also rather stilling, rather grounding. He liked it. It wouldn't stop people getting in, but it would keep them from seeing anything too incriminating if he was careful.

It still left him with a headache from the strain, but when Bill told him he had improved afterwards, and to keep up the good work, he felt oddly pleased. Since when had he cared for others approval? He'd never gotten it before, but it was... nice?

"Right," Bill said, moving on to the next thing they had to go over that afternoon, "so the Slytherins will be teaching you etiquette and how to act like a lord?"

Harry nodded, "we start next week, but they wouldn't talk about what the old ways are and I can't find any books on them yet. No-one talks about it."

"Right. Let's look at that then," Bill said, after a moment, an odd quality in his voice, "we'll leave etiquette to them for the moment and look at culture and traditions."

"You've heard of Paganism in the muggle world?" Bill asked wondering where to start on the huge topic that was wizarding religions and the old ways.

"yes," Harry said, "read about it in the library in primary school. My relatives hated the word magic, so I tried to read all I could on it. Paganism is an umbrella term for many nature-based religions that often worships several gods and goddesses. Muggle Witchcraft is a big part of that, but it's different. It's a lot more about intent only and less about magic like we have. Their Witchcraft is gender-neutral as well, they're all witches. I wanted to be a witch when I was a kid. I wanted to work magic and make my world a better place, like they talked about in the pagan books."

"Well, modern muggle paganism came from the ancient times before the statute of secrecy, and came from the old magical religions." Bill explained, "everyone here used to be called witches too until politics came into it hundreds of years ago, and they decided it was too feminine for a male to
be called a witch." Bill shook his head in mild disgust.

"Here in magical Britain, many people have turned away from being actively religious despite it once being a big part of magical practice and everyday life. It became less popular during the rise if Gridalwald and people started seeing the old ways as dark or evil as Gridalwald was."

"The old ways are not only referring to the old basic traditions and etiquette of the Wizarding world. They also refer to the old religions and practices of worshipping of the land and magic that we have followed for hundreds of years." Bill went on, "it's changed a bit over the years, and while it's not as popular as it once was, and it is still important. But it's also complicated." He paused.

"Complicated like quidditch is?" Harry asked, "As in, it's actually relatively straight forward but people think it's complex, or complex as in its actually quite convoluted and there are many different factors."

Bill laughed and said, "the latter one. Now there are a few sides of it. There are the old ways and the Darke. Then, there is the Lyght. But it's not that simple. The old ways are not always referring to the Darke, though you cannot have Darke, without the old ways. But you can have the Lyght without the old ways however."

And you can't explain the Darke without also explaining the Lyght." Bill went on, "and while politics enters into it, it's a belief system, with traditions. It's a way of life. It is not politics. Though it does influence politics and there are political factions named after them.

Now, today most people are neutral in terms of Darke and Lyght. But Neutral is very similar to Lyght. The Lyght believe that in the beginning there were duel deities, magic personified. They made the world and watched over it. Then they gave their magic to wizards. Magic is a gift from the god and the goddess.

"Huh?" Harry asked frowning, "so are those gods still around?" he was not sure he liked the idea of gods, especially not if they were like the ones in the mainstream muggle religions that he'd read about in primary school. Those gods seemed to have conditions to their love and seemed so controlling and manipulative. At least the god's churches and books did.

"It depends on how you look at it. They are still worshipped by some, not all, but they're not active beings that control or do anything today according to Lyght beliefs. It is more that they became the magic in people. Magic today, the tool we use, is a bit of the creative force that made the universe and holds it together. That's what makes us wizards, special." Bill said. "That is how the Lyght differs from the Neutrals. Neutrals do not believe in a god or goddess. Of any kind."

"And do they follow nature worship like the pagans?" Harry asked curiously pulling out a notebook and pen.

"Not so much as the Darke. In the old days, the 8 seasonal festivals worshipping the natural cycles were a big thing across the board. Not so much now, at least not by the Lyght. Now it has been rather muggle-ised or 'modernised,' by the Ministry, to the point of outlawing the old celebrations. They've done what the early Christians did to the pagan festivals. They replaced them with more 'modern,' festivals on the same date, to force everyone else to 'toe the line.'

Mostly it's now just celebrating Christmas, which was once Yule, Halloween, which was once Samhain, and Easter which was once Ostara. Some of the others fell away and were forgotten by many. Some were replaced with other smaller celebration that have little of the old magic left in them." Bill explained sounding sad.
'There are still links to the older traditions, but most are very subtle and have fallen away; like the use of mistletoe at yule, having a fire which is remnants of the yule log tradition and easter eggs are remnants of the celebration of life that is what Ostara is all about." Bill said.

"But there's more to it than that isn't there?" Harry asked after a moment, pausing in his note taking.

"Well spotted," Bill said, and Harry hid a pleased smile, as Bill continued, "now the difference is Magic and the way people view magic."

"Really?" Harry asked, "how? And how does that affect the holidays?"

"Well," said Bill, "the Neutrals and the Lyght practice and believe that magic is drawn from within. Say the words and an incantation, and magic is drawn from within, shaped by the words and the incantation to make things happen. It's a set pattern, an algorithm, an equation that is the same every time. It just uses will and internal magic to make the set patterns work.

The Lyght and the Neutrals use set patterns to cast spells. They do not create. One may use arithmancy in spell creation, to find undiscovered patterns but you're discovering what is already there, not creating from scratch." Bill specified.

"They do not use emotions to do their spell work, occasionally joy when necessary for the pattern, like the Patronus. They don't admit it's Darke. They shun any magic too chaotic or too powerful. So no blood magic, rituals are few to none and no sacrificial magic. Magic is calm, controlled, and a tool. It does not feel, it is not sentient. It only exists in the capacity to obey wizards."

Bill then looked at Harry to gauge his reaction. But Harry was frantically taking scribbling.

"Getting back to the holidays," Bill began again, "they used to have important magical rituals worshipping the natural cycle of the world that revered magic. Now the Lyght don't believe in any of them or their importance and the ministry outlawed them in one of their bids to get rid of the Darke.

So the old festivals and ways fell out of practice. While the Lyght observe much of the magical etiquette, they see many of the old traditions and practices as unimportant. So the Lyght, in some sense, follow some of the old ways, when it suits them but not the full extent, and they will nearly always deny it. The Lyght see etiquette as old and outdated, but not the old ways. The old ways is not a term the Lyght really uses or acknowledges. They will often shun any mention of the old ways."

Harry, still taking hurried notes, looked fascinated. He paused and thought about it all for a moment, then said, "that sounds sad. But if the Lyght believe magic is a pattern or a formula, not a living thing, what about magical creatures and plants?" He asked, "they're living, and magical. How can they think magic is so cold and wooden?" He asked with a puzzled frown.

"Yes, there are some things that are magical, plants and the like, but it's a different magic from wizard magic, and is still a cold tool, not sentient." Bill explained

Harry frowned, "really? That doesn't make any sense! Magic is magic, of course, it's not cold and unfeeling!"

"And that is what the Darke believes." Bill said, "but, a warning, Lyght is the most prevalent practice and political faction today. The Darke is highly frowned on and is very taboo. It's not talked about, and even the suspicion of being Darke can cause trouble for people, as can the old
ways as the two are very closely linked." Bill warned

"Really? Why?" Harry asked, thinking of the reactions of the Slytherins when he had asked about the old ways.

"Well, to understand that, we need to look at the Darke," Bill said, "The Darke, the old ways, are less popular now. Even in Pureblood circles they are fading, with less true believers. The old ways are followed, but there are few truly Darke followers. The Darke draw on internal magic and external magic. The Darke believes that magic is in everything, and it is the universal energy that is in and connects every living thing. (The Lyght merely believe magic is a special type of energy, not that it is in everything.) We believe that it's one and the same."

Bill seemed to wince at the slip, but Harry ignored it (temporarily) and said, "that makes more sense."

Bill gave him an appraising look and continued, "sometimes emotions, will and desire, powers a spell. It's not necessarily just words and intent, though power comes into it too." Bill said, "Intent is super important. Sometimes you don't always need incantations and wand movements. The Darke create. To the Darke magic is more. It is alive and passionate and is a living thing that connects everything. It's the very fabric of the universe that holds everything together." Bill explained, getting more passionate. His voice held reverence, Harry noticed.

"To the Darke, Magic is sacred and sentient, to be respected at all times," Bill went on. "There is only one type of magic, the energy in every living thing. Muggles cannot feel it, Squibs can but cannot wield it and Wizards feel it and wield it. As do other things. wizard magic, centaur magic and house elf magic are the same. It is all just magic just used and felt differently, same with plants."

"The Darke doesn't necessarily think Muggleborns are trash, but they are naturally weary as they often do not respect the old ways and muggles have historically treated magical's appallingly. That is where their distrust comes from." Bill went on solemnly "another reason the Lyght disagrees with them."

"unlike the Lyght, the Darke sees that magic is sacrifice; be it in energy, or in blood sometimes, or in life, the way your mum gave hers to save yours."

Harry sobered instantly, "she said in her letter, she was Darke, that it was wonderful, but to be careful."

Bill nodded understandingly.

"You're Darke aren't you," Harry said curiously, cautiously.

Bill looked at him for a long minute, "that is not something you ask someone. It's not something you talk about either, except with great digression with those you trust impeccably. It's too risky. But yes. It's not something my parents approve of. And it's something I keep very quiet. I could lose my job, have my home searched for the slightest suspicion, be arrested as a suspect on trumped-up charges. It's pretty serious, Harry. I mean it."

"Oh," Harry breathed, starting to realise the enormity of the trust Bill was placing in him, the risk he was taking even teaching Harry, "sorry. I don't really understand yet why it's so dangerous."

"Well it's like being in Slytherin," Bill said, using the unpopular house as an example, "a few horrible wizards gave that house a bad name, so they're now all seen with more suspicion. They are
often punished more harshly, and their actions are judged more harshly and seen automatically in a less positive light. They're always the first to be accused and even when or if, proven innocent, they are still viewed with distrust."

Harry thought about it a moment, "so if people know someone is Darke, they'll automatically think Darke is evil. That it's dark, immoral or that you're doing horrible things, especially is the Darke have beliefs in regards to sacrifice. I bet people will jump to conclusions about that too."

Bill nodded, "just so. Blood magic and sacrifice may not always be harmful, but it has, like anything, the potential for misuse."

"So people frown on it and distrust it." Harry surmised.

"Yes," Bill said, "especially since Gridalwald misused it, and fucked things up for all of us."

"So he gave the Darke a bad name and Voldemort probably didn't help. Was he Darke too?"

"No, but he was dark, and extremest. I'll get to that later. It's different," Bill said.

"So because of them the ministry shuns it and tries to do away with the old ways, making the lives of any Darke practitioners very difficult," Harry guessed, "they could use it as an excuse to lawfully harass you, find reasons to fire you, fine you, arrest you on bogus charges..." Harry said his mind going wild, "be more likely to take bribes and find you guilty even if you're not. They could extend your sentence just because you see magic as the wonders thing it truly is. They could really be horrible to you and get away with it."

"Gasically," Bill surmised glumly.

"Bugger," said Harry, "I won't tell anyone, I promise. No wonder the Slytherins were so dismissive."

"Right," Bill said, "the Darke is actually a tiny community now. Most people know each other, so it's hard to 'get in,' now if you're not born to a family."

"Professor Flitwick lent me a book on it," Harry said slowly, "I meant to read it, and my mum had a book on it too. I'll have to look into them. It sounds really interesting." Harry said and really interesting felt too mundane a word for it.

"Glad you're looking at it with an open mind," Bill said, "let me know if you have any questions."

"What if I'm Darke? Will people know? Will they hate me for it? Because if what you said is true about beleifs, then I am Darke." Harry said, worry bleeding into his voice.

"Don't say that lightly Harry. It's a big deal," Bill said sternly but not unkindly, "don't be too hasty to make that choice. It's a big decision and not one to make on a whim. Once you make that choice, it's like an oath. It's hard to change your mind later. It's very serious. Don't set yourself up to be an oathbreaker."

"Oh, okay, sorry," Harry said feeling uncomfortable.

"Hey, it's fine. You're learning, no-one expects you to know everything strait away. You have every right to question, explore and make mistakes," Bill said slinging an arm around Harry and pulling him into a brief half hug. Harry had to suppress the urge to snuggle into his warmth, "if you do decide to join us, you'll be welcome, but don't take it lightly, and make sure you're doing it for the right reasons." Bill advice.
"Ah, okay, thanks," Harry said thinking a long moment before saying, "but back with the Lyght and their odd view of magic; magic just feels the same," Harry said, "has no one that is Lyght ever felt it? Even I realised that my magic feels the same as a mandrake's magic or a house elf's. Sure it's slightly different, it's clearly elf magic or plant magic, but it's still energy, still magic" Harry said curiously.

"It's not a common gift, being able to feel magic," Bill said, "it's also possible they didn't want to believe that either."

"Now politic wise, there are factions in the Wizengamot supporting different sides and different agendas. There is a faction for the Lyght that follows most of the politeness but does not see the importance of the old traditions and practiced. That's mostly the ministry at the moment. They shun anything Darke and the old ways and err on the side of Lyght and modernising.

There is the Neutrals or the Grey which is neither Lyght nor Darke technically, but err on the side of Darke as it's too dangerous to be openly Darke since Voldemort and Grindelwald. They are traditional followers of the old ways, worship magic, often practice the old religions and customs and believe in magic being sentient. They do not always shun Muggleborns and half bloods. They are all for integration, but the old ways are important and need to be taught first and foremost, as magic is sacred." Bill explained

Harry nodded and guessed, "then there are Dark and Light? The extremists?"

"Exactly," Bill said, "Voldemort, if you can guess, is a Dark extremist. He is all for magical supremacy. The Dark are big believers in etiquette and customs, when it suits them. Which essentially also weakens our culture. They hate muggles and Muggleborns. Darks are not actually that big on the Darke, more just power and supremacy. The ass holes." He added, making Harry giggle.

"Light is basically Dumbledore. Shunning the old ways, the Darke, and the Dark. They believe the old ways, the traditions, the festivals, should be done away with, and the muggle ones should be integrated instead. The muggle ones are better and more modern. They don't have a problem with Purebloods but shun the old ways, Pureblood culture and the Darke and any magical traditions."

Which prompted a further long discussion on Wizarding religion, how gods played into it, and the various beliefs and festivals practised. It was fascinating and enrapturing, and Harry felt like he could sink his teeth into it and belong. Especially when Bill lent him a book on the different gods and goddesses and why people chose to dedicate themselves to one or more.

Many of the old religions that had died out in the modern muggle world were still practised in the Wizarding world and had never really died out. Many wizards believed in a deity, though it was becoming less common, now that the ways of magic and the culture and traditions were not taught in school. Sadly it was becoming more and more common for whole family to forget about the gods and the old traditions.

In no time at all, it seemed, it was time for dinner and Harry was dreading going back up to the school to face everyone. But Bill was pulling him into a hug and he didn't resist this time, just hugged Bill back tightly for a brief moment, hanging on as if Bill was an anchor in a stormy sea, enjoying the warm tingly feeling it sent along his skin.

Harry pulled away shortly, reluctantly, but feeling a bit better than he had before. Not much, but a bit. He fought the urge to sniffle and resolved to write another letter to Charlie that night.

"Keep in touch. Keep working on your Occlumency. Hang in there okay, Harry?" Bill said giving
him a second one-armed hug before he disillusioned himself, flew out of the shack's attic window and disapparated.

After Bill left, Harry went back to the Dungeons. He slipped through his wards and spent a good while updating them with the improvements that he and Bill had hashed out, and used a good bit of blood around the door. Hopefully, that would be enough to keep almost anyone out, he thought, as he pulled out his blankets and bedding from his bag. He wouldn't say it was warded tighter and safer than Gringotts, but Harry was pretty confident that it was now close.

He cast a strong cushioning charm on the floor over where he slept, then laid out his blankets and pillow in a little nest. He kept all his school books in his bag still, and his bow and weapons, but put the rest of his clothes on the shelf. His photo album and the little dragons from the task were placed on the shelves above the little door. The little dragons seemed rather pleased to be out of the bag.

He lined his other books upon another shelf, put a stronger alert ward on the door, and then for good measure, on each end of the corridor. If anyone else came near, he would know. He was safe here. His things were safe, he thought with a satisfied sigh, drawing back into this cupboard. It really brightened up the place.

He smiled, stroking a hand over the blanket. Winky had cleansed it of the magic used to break it, had repaired the subtle soothing and warming charms his mother had put on it, then carefully had sown it back together leaving it looking just as it had before. Harry had been so grateful when she'd returned it that she'd burst into tears when he hugged her.

He glanced around the cupboard again and looked at the shelves on the right of the door. With a flick of his wand, they had been reinforced and looked more like a wooden ladder in the wall. The cupboard really was very tall, enough that you could probably stand three of him end to end and still have headspace.

He climbed up to near the top and transfigured some shelves into planks to make a 'floor' and a 'table' so he could use it as a brewing area or a desk. He cast a ventilation spell on the ceiling, for good measure and smiled. Yes, this was the perfect place, really.

He pulled out his notes and Moste Potent Potions, instead of going down to dinner. The purging potions were both in there, as Rodgrip had implied. They were, Harry thought, two of the most complicated potions Harry had ever seen, including the Polyjuice potion.

Luckily both the spell purging potion and the potions purging potion had the same base, and each potion had three parts.

The base was made in two parts that were brewed separately then combined.

There was a healing component and a poison component. The healing part was distilled moon water and powdered unicorn hair and one scraping of a unicorn horn. The poisonous component wasaconite root and burning bitterroot syrup. Both were made at the same time and brought to the boil, and after boiling for an hour, it was left to simmer overnight.

Next, they had to be combined. They had to be poured into a new caldron, in a careful steady flow over 3 minutes while stirring twice in a widdershins direction, and once in deosil direction in a continuous pattern.

It then needed to simmer for a week, continuing stir two widdershins and a deosil every 12 hours.
It could then be put under a status spell, to freeze it if need be.

The middle part was likewise the same for both potions.

Boil; Moon dew petals, unicorn tail hair, Dittany, Holly ash, Basilisk skin shredded, Billywig stings, doxy eggs, for 2 hours in a fresh cauldron. Leave simmering for 4 days until black and gelatinous.

Then add to the combined base. Do not stir. Put immediately under status, until ready to combine with the final component. Of course, if you were making both potions, the ingredients had to be doubled.

The last component was where they differed.

For the spell purging potion, you then boiled in a separate cauldron, elderflowers, distilled hazel syrup and 3 adder fangs all in adder blood. It then needed to simmer for 63 minutes. It could then be added to the combined base and boiled for a further 2 days before it was finished. It had to then be bottled while scaldingly hot, or it would lose its potency. It could only be placed in glass viles, not crystal.

The potions purge was made of peeled and chopped arnica root, yew needles chopped boiled in honey water boiled for exactly 36 minutes, before being added to the base and boiled for a further 2 days. Again it had to then be bottled while scaldingly hot. It too could only be placed in glass vials.

They both then needed to placed outside overnight, in view of the moon, for different lengths depending on the phase of the moon. 3 drops of his blood would need to be added after removing it from the moonlight to each vial.

Harry sighed. It would be a lot of work, and by the sounds of it, taking them would not be at all pleasant. But thankfully nearly all the ingredients were available in the student store cupboard or easy enough to gather in the forest, (or from the Chamber of Secrets.)

Harry had taken to keeping his eye out for the useful plants and potions ingredients now whenever he was in the forest. Sometimes with Hermione on a run, though not always as he now moved his runs around in the forest with Hagrid and Firenze.

Firenze was always pleased with his offerings and Harry was happily surprised about how many potions ingredients he could source in the forest alone. He had found enough unicorn hair last week by accident alone, to make both the purging potions.

The problem was, finding the unicorn horn it needed to be used as a stirring rod. Harry didn't have one of those and could not afford one.

Harry scowled but set about noting down the brewing schedule and set off, before curfew, to collect the ingredients he needed from the student store cupboard and the Chamber.

A he headed back to his cupboard much later that night, he wondered if curfew really applied when he was no longer welcome in the common room? When he was an outcast on his own? Did it matter when he was alone and safe on his now in the abandoned lower dungeons. Probably not. As long as no-one noticed. Which they never did.

After that Harry ate a very late dinner alone in his cupboard and buried himself in his mum's and Flitwick's books on the Darke. They were fascinating and by the time he looked up it was three in the morning, and he'd finished them both. Feeling more than ever, that the Darke might just be home.
I have not read (or watched) Fantastic beasts (either of them) or cursed child (and I'm not going to.) So I am not going to go into Grindalwald, or what actually happened, just what we know of it from the HP books. So if I deside he used Darke rituals to harm other to gain power, then he did.
Harry spent the following morning in the forest with Firenze and Hagrid. It was a blessed relief to be out of the oppression of the castle, and a much-needed distraction from all Harry's worries about Gryffindor, Snape and his father. He was so incredibly tempted to just walk deep in to the forest and never go back. But he didn't. He wasn't quite sure why, but he didn't.

Firenze and Harry had spent a productive morning training vines over a creek deep in the forest. The Centaurs had long been training branches and trees to form living bridges over rivers and streams deep in the forest. It was brilliant and somewhat ethereal, and Harry was enjoying immensely all the forestry he was learning.

He'd had asked Hagrid about Unicorns, mainly how wizards got their horns to use in potions without actually harming them. He was relieved to know that they were usually shed every five years and that one could obtain horns without harming the beautiful creature. Hagrid wasn't sure any were due for a shedding, but he was scheduled to check to the unicorns later in the week, so they'd be able to see then.

Back in his cupboard for lunch, Harry set about beginning to solve the egg. He dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around the golden egg and curiously prised it open.

It was hollow, completely empty, and the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible, loud, screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

Whipping out his wand, he shot a silencing charm on it and the noise stopped but did leave his ears ringing. Despite having silencing wards, he stayed frozen for a long time, listening for footsteps in case someone had heard.

When no-one came, he peered closely at the egg. It felt magical. But it looked like just a hollow bit of brass. He peered at it carefully, and cast a bunch of detection spells on it, cursing himself for not doing that first.

What came back was confusing. It did not have any runes on it, but the arithmancy showed it had sophisticated magic on it. It was so complex he didn't really understand all of it. And if Bill hadn't shown him the more advanced curse-breaking spells, Harry would never have managed to extract the arithmancy on the eggs at all! If he was interpreting all the numbers and equations right, it looked like someone had tried to capture a verbal message in the egg... But that couldn't be right. It didn't even sound like any sort of message, and he couldn't make sense of the equations enough to figure out how to translate it or figure out what sort of noise it was.

If anything it sounded like a banshee... unless it was a language? But what language sounded like screaming? Maybe he had to decode the noises? Or maybe it was music that had been distorted in some way? He set about testing every kind of revealing and detection charm on it he could think of and even tried a Reparo incase it was broken, but it made no difference to the horrible screeching sound.

He'd have to hope it was a language, and did have Flitwick's book on languages, he'd have to read it. He showed it to the twins after they finished their duelling practice, later that evening. For some
reason Hermione hadn't shown up, Harry was getting worried. The Gryffindors had taken to hexing her as well, because of how vocal she'd been siding with Harry and disagreeing with them.

"That's horrid," said Fred, his hands over his ears still, "sounded like a Banshee."

"I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing... maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower, Harry" George added

Harry snorted and said, "no, thanks. I thought it may be a code or a language message we might have to decipher?"

"Could be," George said, grabbing a book.

"Looks like we'll have to do some research mate," said Fred.

"Research what?" Hermione said, stepping into the room.

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed, seeing her face. She had what looked to be the beginnings of a spectacular black eye, and her hair seemed somewhat frazzled.

"What happened to you?" He asked.

"Have you been fighting them again?" asked George, looking closely at her back eye.

"Over the un-horsing," Fred said for Harry's benefit, while wordlessly tossing a jar of salve to his brother.

Hermione winced as George put the salve on her eye and sighed.

"It's not right what they're doing." She said fiercely, "and anyway, I punched Angelina first, so I guess it's only fair."

"Good on you!" Said Fred

"She deserved it, turning on our star seeker like that," muttered George darkly.

"Just wait till she puts on her quidditch gear next," Fred said with a grin at his twin. Harry wondered what they'd done to it, but decided he didn't care, he just hoped she was sorry.

"Hermione you don't need to do that," Harry said pleadingly. He hated seeing her hurt because of him.

"Yes I do," she snapped glaring at him stubbornly.

He sighed, but saw the conviction and burning belief in her eyes and said, "then I'm teaching you to fight. So next time, you'll be able to keep yourself safe from their fists when Magic is not enough. I'll teach all of you."

Hermione beamed at him, and said "now what are we researching?"

"The egg. It screams," started Fred,

"We think it's a language or code," said George.

"I looked through this one this afternoon, it's not a Banshee. They scream, but their spoken language is different. I haven't gotten very far, but the book doesn't demonstrate what the
languages sound like, which is really annoying," Harry said, wondering if the room had a book that did demonstrate the sounds.

And so, they spent a rather frustrating few hours trying to crack the egg, before Harry started to teach them to fight and protect themselves the muggle way. Harry was a bit rusty, but it was more fun than talking about the un-housing.

*

Harry kept avoiding the great hall that week. Especially after Monday when he had, for an idiotic moment, forgotten and tried to sit at the Gryffindor table, only for them to bunch up leaving no space. He glared at them all, and went down to the kitchens instead to have a quiet word to the Dobby and Winky, who then talked to Tippy for him. If Harry had talked to Tippy she would have had to tell Dumbledore. But if Dobby and Winky did it, she could keep it a secret.

The Gryffindors would be having a lot of Brussel spouts and all of the least popular foods served to them for a while. Their pumpkin juice would be a little too sour for a while, their tea always a little too cool. It wasn't much but it was a small act of rebellion that he knew would be kept from Dumbledore's ears.

That and the hot water in Gryffindor tower would be on the fritz for a while. Never anything reliable, or anything that would be caught, but enough to be really annoying.

Harry's subtle plan of revenge had the twins, and the elves in stitches. And he left the Kitchen feeling a bit vindicated. Which was just as well, as it was the only thing that kept him going though Monday.

The situation with Gryffindor had reached a hexing point by Monday night when he had, after his friends coaxing tried to return to the common room. He was hexed so severely he turned tail and ran as Hermione and Neville were bullied into staying put.

Fuming, he went back to his cupboard to patch himself up. Screw the point loss, he decided. He wasn't eating in the hall, and he wasn't a Gryffindor any more. What should he care about their house points if he didn't turn up to their meals? He spent the week avoiding people and used his newfound understanding of etiquette and manners to keep people at a polite distance. He avoided his classmates and his teachers, being unfailingly respectful, with perfect manners. It worked.

He was the last into class, sitting at the back (now that he could actually see well enough to not need to be in the front) and was the first to leave, practically bolting from the room. He travelled the halls in the invisibility cloak and used as many secret passages, and snake passages as he could.

Harry also avoided Professor Snape like the plague, giving the man no reason to call on him, or notice him at all, even went so far as to use a notice-me-not charm a few times.

McGonagall didn't notice anything had changed and Harry wasn't sure he was relieved, disappointed or unsurprised. So he avoided her too. Along with all of the teachers except Hagrid, and he even avoided Professor Flitwick, whom he had been almost getting on with.

Hermione, Neville and the Twins were all furious but he pleading with them to stay away and stay safe and went out of his way to avoid all of them. Hermione, in particular, was furious at their house, and at Harry for trying to protect her by staying away. Hermione was still arguing with Gryffindor, trying to get them to apologise. She was researching into the unhousing and was in a state of irritation and despair over the library's lack of recourses on the matter. Which did nothing
to improve her temper and made her vicious in her return hex's, and she'd even started helping the twins help prank their disloyal house in retaliation.

Harry was careful to make sure no-one saw them with him. They were having a hard enough time in Gryffindor at the moment without him there to make it worse. At their insistence he still studied with Hermione and Neville when doing homework, the duelled with the twins on weekends. But he was extra careful to make sure no-one saw him, not wanting Gryffindor to give them more trouble. He kept running with Hermione in the morning, around the times he was in the forest with Hagrid or Firenze, and Neville had taken to joining them a few mornings a week as well.

But, as a whole, Harry spent most of his time when out of class, either in the forest or alone in his cupboard studying. It was almost less lonely like that. At least when he was by himself, it was by his own choice, not because most of the castle was shunning him and hated him. He was used to his own company. It was the only company he got back at his relatives, expect for Hedwig once he'd gotten her.

His isolation, coupled with his insomnia did give him plenary of time to explore when he needed a break from studying like a mad man. Having the lower dungeons to himself, he'd started there, before working his way through the upper dungeon too. Armed with his cloaks, his map, his wand, and the spells Bill taught him, along with Parseltongue, Harry found all sorts of good hidden things. In fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that the castle liked him. Sometimes he wondered if it was trying to tell him something.

He'd found and met all sorts of unusual ghosts, who not used to have someone to talk, to had all sorts of interesting stories and tidbits to tell him. Some of which led to other castle secrets. There was a whole host of odd and unused rooms for all manner of things. He found a set of abandoned offices, classrooms, bedrooms and bathrooms. Bathrooms with enormous clawfoot tubs that Harry was desperate to try out. He'd never been allowed a bath at the Dursley's, and the Gryffindor tower didn't have any. Only showers.

The bedrooms were dusty and unused but looked comfortable enough, but Harry thought after a lifetime of using a cupboard, he didn't want to sleep in a bedroom. It was too open, too exposed. Better to stick with a cupboard where he belonged.

The other room he found in the lower dungeon was an Oubliette. A terrifying and heavily warded against magic, Oubliette. An Oubliette that set off Harry's claustrophobia strait away. The floor was slippery and slanted narrowing down to a was very narrow, shaft, not enough room to sit down in. By the looks of it, from where he was above it, If he fell in, he'd be trapped It would be impossible to get out of without a rope or help. Just looking at it set off racing breathing and panicked sweating, at the mere thought of being trapped in there. He shut the door of it and layered as many wards on top of it as he could, in an effort to make sure he never accidentally ended up stuck in it. It was truly horrible and for a moment, it made him question ever feeling safe at Hogwarts.

But then there was the Castle, warm and dozy like a cat napping in the sun, nudging him gently, and a snake carved into the wall hissing at him in a friendly sort of manor. For a snake anyway.

And that was another thing he'd noticed. All the snakes he was finding carved into the dungeon walls. Once he'd found one, he started noticing them everywhere. Some looked like they were decorations, most were small and relatively hidden, and somewhere so tiny they looked like mere cracks in the stone. Though, it being a magical building, Hogwarts didn't have any cracked or damaged brickwork. Now he was aware of them he started seeing them all over the castle.

Once he started finding all the little snake's, he wondered what they were there for. A range of
revealing and detention spells showed that what he'd first assumed were just decoration, were instead a whole host of entrances to many secret passages as well as doors, rooms, odd closets and cupboards. He found an old forgotten kitchen, old duelling chambers that still had wards, old potion classrooms and cupboards with rusted old caldrons and mouldy forgotten ingredients Harry didn't even want to touch, several old store cupboards with moth-eaten forgotten supplies, and a few broom cupboards.

Most of the passageways were, like the Slytherin common room, just a patch of wall with a small snake on it. Some were behind portraits or tapestries with snakes in them, some were even hidden inside normal secret passageways. Some snakes were even carved onto torch brackets that you had to pull alone with a Parseltongue phrase.

Most of the snakes opened to just the world "open," in Parseltongue. But many of them, even the tiny ones, seemed capable of conversation and pretty much all but the tiniest could move, though they left an impression where they originally were, like a shadow.

And didn't that open up a realm of possibilities?

After much experimentation, Harry discovered a whole network of snake passageways weaving all through the dungeons. But it wasn't just within the dungeons.

He found passages leading out to the grounds or to different parts of the school, including the Room of Requirement and the Chamber of Secrets and all over the school. There did not seem to be a bit of the castle they did not touch, and Harry longed to find a way to put these on the map too. The passages seemed to reach every corner of the school from the lowest and most forgotten corner of the dungeons to the tallest tower, and, to Harry's great pleasure, into the common rooms. It was neat seeing what the other houses common rooms looked like.

He also stumbled upon some very small passageways and small rooms that he thought may belong to the house elves. They were all small enough he couldn't stand up in them and had to crawl instead so not to hit his head. The small rooms were equally short and were no bigger than his cupboard back at the Dursley's. He learnt to avoid those ones after almost being caught by Tippy a few times.

These new discoveries were a great help to Harry, however, and it consequently made him almost impossible to catch when not in class as he now very rarely used the typical secret passageways, shortcuts or corridors. Why would he when he had his own set of passages, that no-one else could access, where he was totally safe from being hexed or seen?

* He'd also managed to make, with the help of some arithmancy, a rune circle to brew on that acted as a passive shield for his potions. Malfoy was still trying to blow up his cauldron, and while he was getting better at potions now he was working alone, it was harder to watch everything at once. He'd had a number of near misses where his potion had almost blown up, and it was only his quick use of Bicarb soda that saved him from being at the centre of an exploded cauldron.

The ward was powered by blood and was drawn on the underside of a piece of leather. He placed his cauldron and flame on top of it and was pleased to see it not only shielded it from anyone other than him adding ingredients but also contained any explosions. It was brilliant, and as it was not active magic, which Snape had banned in his classroom, he could still use it.

It was a pity that wanded magic could sometimes interfere with potions, or more so that Snape didn't trust any go them to not screw it up. But then with Malfoy, Crab, Goyle and Neville, in the
class, one malicious and the others just terrible at potions, Harry didn't blame him.

So he used his wards to protect his cauldron. The brilliant bit was that any ingredients Malfoy did try to throw into his potion just bounced right back. And wasn't that satisfying to watch. The first time it had worked, it ended up right back in Malfoy cauldron instead, blowing it up in the blonde's face. Luckily for Malfoy, it was harmless as he was a few steps behind Harry. If it had landed in Harry's cauldron, it would have scalded him rather severely. Harry was pleased to see that it resulted in Malfoy getting a detention for a change.

While Hermione didn't quite approve of Harry skirting the 'no magic in the potions classroom,' rule, she didn't say much. It was following the letter of the law, not the intent so Hermione, just asked how he'd done it instead of telling him off.

"That's really advanced magic Harry! How did you do it?" She'd asked in an excited whisper.

"Nah it's not, my runes and arithmancy are self studied. I'm loads behind you guys," he'd replied doubting his skills.

She'd shaken her head but didn't argue with her self-deprecating friend who had no sense of self-worth what so ever.

Harry also managed to come up with a timer. He'd been researching time turners and time magic and had came up with a rune scheme that he could draw on his hand to time his potions with. It was again, as runes, passive magic, so it didn't interfere with the potions, but let him get his stirring and other precisely timed things done correctly to the second.

Harry used a brew he'd found in his mum's book for invisible ink, that only the brewer could see. Again, Hermione thought that using a book with notes in it, that edited the original instructions was cheating. But at least she knew his mother was trustworthy. She frowned at him when he'd shown her and explained how it was cheating. But again, she did not press it when he disagreed, knowing how much it must mean to her friend.

He had taken to using the invisible ink on all his potions related rune work on his brewing mat, and hands so that Professor Snape wouldn't notice.

* 

Snape did notice but wasn't sure what Potter had done. He just saw that it wasn't active magic like he had forbidden, so he dismissed it as one less exploding caldron to watch out for. He was reluctantly impressed.

* 

The other plus side to the isolation and insomnia was that it gave him extra time to work on his runic projects, to his great delight, including the fireproof shirt. He was still having trouble powering it without blood magic.

The shirt was a conundrum. When he took away the blood powering it, the rune scheme worked to protect from fire, but after the initial charge up, it needed to be able to use the fire to recharge itself and be self-sustaining. Otherwise, the user would be continuously exhausted from powering up such a heavy runic array.

Harry had the rune's and sigils working already. He just needed to add or adapt it to be self-sustaining. The fire rune was the charge, balanced with the ice rune to keep it from burning the wearer. He wanted to use the fire rune as the charge, but if he wasn't careful, the shirt would heat
up too much. What he needed was some sort of rune circle for climate control. Or maybe he could use the heat that shirt still absorbed as power?

He'd not yet managed to perfect the sort of self-sustaining rune scheme he'd need in the shield bracelets, but he had a base for it. So it took him several goes in an unused classroom to find a few that would work and not blow up in his face. He ended up with 4 potential possibilities that he thought would work. But he still had to combine all the elements, and make sure they also didn't blow up.

In the end, he ended up with several runic circles he had to combine together. There was the original fireproof scheme, along with its power scheme. There was then the rune circle that controlled the temperature of the shirt, and then there was the circle that, hopefully, would draw power from the heat of the fire it was shielding against and funnel it into the runes to keep the shirt charged. In the end, he linked the three rune circles around the original power circle.

He ended up with four prototypes that he managed to test out with normal magical fire. It worked well enough. One blew up in his face after it overcharged. So he set to work again, trying to work out what to do with the excess power. If the runes became too overcharged, what would happen to the excess? Could he make them glow? And use that to bleed off the excess power. But maybe on the inside of the shirt? So not to attract attention?

Despite his exhaustion and general misery, he was rather pleased.

*

Harry started his lessons with the Slytherins on Wednesday night and was relieved when, unlike Hermione, they did not question his polite and cool manor. They seemed pleased by it, and the hours after dinner before curfew passed painlessly in a sea of manners, deportment and practice and explanations of how to be a lord. It seemed that the girls were happy to have a pet project and were very pleased to have someone to mould into the perfect Slytherin gentleman.

The boys it seemed were interested in seeing how it panned out and how they could use that to their advantage. This was something Harry was aware of and didn't mind, The Slytherin boys were happy to chip in as it got them Harry's tutoring in Defence.

There were a lot of rules. The Slytherin's explanations were to the point and easy to follow, but also reasoned out why things were the way they were and how it all worked. Hierarchy was subtle and convoluted, but important and affected most interactions within certain circles, as did the people involved, the occasion and sometimes even the location.

There were several different ways to bow and curtsey, along with full bows, half bows, head dips and a series of nods, and complicated hand gestures. Some of which accompanied certain bows to say different things.

The use of each bow and gesture and the message it conveyed was equally complex and convoluted. It was complicated as hierarchy affected it, as well as, who you were with and how many people you were around, if you were in public, or in private. There were many ways to deliberately snub people in varying degrees, and just as many ways to do it accidentally such as bowing too deeply to one person and not to another, or not using their full and complete titles as the situations and occasions dictated.

This also meant he had to learn all the important people in the Wizarding world, at least in Britain, in Hogwarts and in the Ministry, so he knew how to properly bow and greet them and what their titles were.
It was complex. They answered all his questions and didn't seem to judge him on his ignorance, they clearly thought it a crime.

As promised, in return, he started showing them the Patronus charm. They were diligent students and it was not an unpleasant way to spend a few hours. He was mildly surprised by how much he actually liked them, and how much they didn't pry. It was rather painless, all in all.

And that wasn't the only friendly experience Harry had with the Slytherins that week. He was studying in the upper dungeons one afternoon. He'd wanted more floor space to spread out his notes and things, but if he were honest, he was just using it as an excuse to be near people. He was feeling a little lonely, and wanted to hear other people about. He'd set up camp in one of the dusty old potions classrooms and had all his WEA study notes spread out on one of the large brewing tables. There was a one-way silencing charm on the door, to stop any noise he made getting out, but still allowed him to hear the occasional noise coming in.

He'd spent all afternoon flitting between different subjects on the WEA curriculum. He was working on ancient studies and alchemy at the moment. It was rather intriguing. He was surprised by the correlation between alchemy and potions and also the correlation he could see between his etiquette class and his ancient studies and the Darke. It was captivating, so much so that he didn't notice the door open until he was startled by a sudden, "oh, sorry!"

There were three first-year Slytherins standing awkwardly in the door way.

"Well met," Harry said mildly.

"Well met," one of them replied, "you're not a Slytherin second year." She said almost accusingly

"Course he's not Astoria!" Another said, elbowing her friend.

"We were looking for one of the second or third years," the boy added, "we need help with our homework."

"Well I'm not a second or third year, but I was nearly a Slytherin," Harry said conversationally, not wanting to spook them, and no longer feeling ashamed of it. Now that it was out. After the disaster in the common room, he was no longer a Gryffindor, and the whole world knew he was nearly Slytherin. He and Luna had needed up putting together an article about the history of the houses, and the animosity between Slytherin and Gryffindor and how Harry was almost a Slytherin. Hopefully it would help diffuse things when it came out in the Yule edition of the Quibbler.

"Really?" Astoria asked, only to be elbowed by her friend again.

"Yes," Harry said calmly, "I can help you with your homework if you don't mind it being me, though."

Astoria's eye's narrowed, and her friend asked, "what's in it for you?"

Harry looked at the boy a moment and asked, "are you related to Nott? In fourth year?"

"He's my older brother," the boy said, "I'm Thaddeus."

"Well met Mr Nott, Ms Greengrass if I'm not mistaken and..." He looked at the last girl.

"Goyle," she said, "Alice Goyle, Greg's my brother."

"Well met Ms Goyle, I'm Hadrian Evens."
"Wait," cut in Astoria, "aren't you Harry Potter?"

"Yes, but Harry is actually short for Hadrian, which I prefer, and my family name is Evans-Potter," Harry explained.

"Why introduce yourself by a mudblood name, when you have a Pureblood one?" Thaddeus asked, not in a malicious way, but more with the innocent confusion of one who repeated what their parents said without really understanding it.

Harry bit back a sigh and said mildly, "I'd prefer it if you did not use that word in my presence, Mr Nott, have a seat," he gestured to the chairs on the other side of his table.

They looked at each other than sat down.

"Why?" Alice asked.

"Think about it," he said simply, "how would you feel if someone called you that?"

"But I'm not!" She said

"That," he replied, "is not the point."

She frowned and Astoria said, "I guess I wouldn't like it very much, I'd be angry, but probably just because it hurt."

"Exactly, very perceptive of you. It's not nice to call others names, especially to say someone has dirty blood." He explained, "My mum was a Muggleborn, my grandparents are muggles. They did not have magic, but they were good people. Mum was a good person and died to save my life. My father, however, was a Pureblood and was a nasty bully in school. With is why I don't like using his name."

They thought about it for a minute, "but don't muggles have different blood? Isn't it dirty?" Alice asked.

"What colour do you bleed?" Harry asked, "when you trip and skin your knee or if you slip when preparing potion ingredients, what colour do you bleed?"

"Red," said Nott as if it were obvious.

"If muggles had dirty blood, you'd be able to see it, right? It would be a different colour? Brown, for example, like mud?" Harry questioned and they nodded, wondering where he was going.

"Well my cousin Dudley, is a muggle," Harry explained, "like my mum's parents. I have 2 muggle grandparents and a Muggleborn mother, yet I bleed red," he said, taking a knife and making a small nick on his thumb and watched a bead of blood well and dribble down the pad of his thumb.

"If muggles have dirty blood, you should be able to see it." He held up his thumb to show them, "Which means my blood, with has muggle blood in it, would look different too, right?" Harry reasoned. They frowned but nodded in agreement with that logic.

"But my blood looks the same as yours, doesn't it?" He said, "and my muggle cousin, he bleeds red too, same as us."

They frowned, but Astoria said eventually, "that makes sense I guess. But people say muggles are dumb and that we're better. So what does it matter if we call them names?"
Harry considered a moment, "For one, it's hurtfull. They're people with feelings just like us. They're just different. They live differently to us. They don't have the gift of magic that we do, so they need to do things differently to make up for that. Some of us may not understand all of what non-magical do. It's easier to assume they're stupid to cover our own ignorance. They're not stupid. Well, my cousin is, but not all of them."

Alice giggled, and he went on, "We're all not so different, them and us."

"I'm not like a muggle!" Astoria shrieked.

Harry just said, "we live. We breathe. We hurt. We laugh. We feel. We are all made of energy, which holds the universe together..." He paused, wondering what to say.

"What do you mean?" Thaddeus said his eyes narrowing, rather like his older brothers had.

"Magic is in everything, and it is the universal energy that is in, and connects every living thing. That's magic. Sure, muggles cannot feel it, see it or use it and they have no magical core, but they are still made of energy. They cannot harness it like we can. They use it in different ways, electricity, with machines, but we're all made of the same universal energy. That's what magic is made of. So are we really that different?"

There was a weighty silence then Astoria glared at him accusingly, "you didn't answer our question!" She said.

"Yeah," accused Thaddeus drawing his wand.

Harry placed his hands upon the desk, in a sign of peace, "I don't really want anything from you. I am not offering to help you to get something, but if it makes you feel better, I'll help you in exchange for your silence on my presence in your dungeon."

The three of them exchanged looks, before nodding and pulling their book out of their bags. They spent a peaceful few hours, Harry working on his own projects between helping the first years with their charms and transfigurations homework when they needed it.

He liked helping them, he found. He liked teaching them and they seemed to not mind that it was him. They were the first people in the castle (other than their older counterparts) to openly talk to him in what felt like ages. It felt refreshing. They even agree to do a study group there a few times a week to get his help. From then it would slowly grow to include most of the green clad first years.

*

Harry had had a little luck finding all the ingredients for the potions, except the unicorn horn. On Friday morning, the same day he needed to start brewing the potion if he was to finish it in time, he was beginning to panic.

Harry had had no luck in finding a unicorn horn at all that week. He had even sent Dobby to ask for a quote from an apothecary (too expensive) and Winky to look in the Room of Requirement (no luck).

By Friday morning when he'd still had no luck, he had accepted the fact that he would not be able to free himself in time for the new year. He'd just have to put up with it a bit longer and hope he could stretch his supplies next year to afford a unicorn horn then. There was little hope, but it was all he had. Still, he hated it and spent a long while blowing things up in the Room of Requirement before first class.
Harry had nearly slipped out of charms, later that morning, and under the cloak when Professor Flitwick's voice seemed to follow him around the corridor. Pushing everything to the back of his mind, Harry went back into the room, somewhat reluctantly. He waited for the professor to speak, holding his gaze, but thinking hard on the feel of his shoes in case Professor Flitwick was a Legilimens.

"I've been trying to catch you, Mr Potter," the professor said cheerily.

"Sorry sir," Harry said, glancing at the door.

"Is everything alright, Mr Potter?" The professor said, and Harry had to hide a flinch at the name, images of his father coming to mind, and Snape being upended and hexed over and over and over again.

"Fine sir. What can I do for you, sir?" Harry asked in a cool but flawlessly polite voice.

The Professor looked at him for a moment, and if Harry didn't know adults better, he'd say the man looked worried, "I found you mother's trunk at last," the half-goblin said with a broad smile.

Harry stared.

"It was shrunk on the end of her bed up in her old apprenticeship rooms. The castle had closed them, I hadn't thought to check there until now," Flitwick explained, as he pulled something out from his pocket and re-sized it.

Harry knew he should feel something, anything, at all, but he felt nothing. He'd felt nothing much all week actually. He blinked and forced a smile and what he hoped was a grateful look onto his face.

"Thank you, Professor. It means a lot to me," he said, but it seemed to fall a little flat. He touched the lid softly but didn't really register much other than a tingle.

"Are you sure you're okay Mr Potter? You've been quiet this week?" The professor said again, shrinking the trunk and handing it to Harry.

"Yes, sir, I'm fine." Harry said emptily putting the tiny trunk in his bag, "can I go to lunch please, sir?" He asked, "I don't want to get into trouble."

Flitwick frowned but nodded. Harry left, donning the cloak as soon as he was out of sight and heading back to the comfort and solitude of the dungeons to finish some homework as he ate before Potions.

Harry avoided Professor Snape again that afternoon in double Potions. He was the last to enter, sitting alone at the back, and was the first to leave, focusing on nothing but his potion. He did not notice the man watching him, or open his mouth to call Harry's name as he dashed out of the class at the end of the lesson. And he certainly did not notice Professor Snape's thoughtful frown follow him out.

Chapter End Notes
So we’ve taken some artistic licence with unicorn’s and how they work. I have bent some of the cannon lore about unicorns. They shed their horn every few years (like deer shed their antlers every season, because how else would you harvest the horns for potions without killing them?)
Filius Flitwick was in his office marking, but not really concentrating. He was thinking on the Potter conundrum, when a knock at his door interrupted him. He glanced up and a flick of a long finger towards the door, revealed it to be Severus.

"Come in," he called and gestured his colleague and friend to have a seat

"Merry meet, Severus, I don't often see you leaving your dungeons," he said.

"Indeed," the dour man drawled, looking worried. Filius's brows furrowed and he wondered what the man was concerned about. Could it be that he had noticed as well?

"What seems to be on your mind," he asked summoning tea and pouring his colleague a cup.

"Her son." He said simply, his dark eyes burning.

"Yes," Filius said after a moment, "me too. But you're not often openly concerned. Normally you come here to rant about his stupidity," the half-goblin teased.

Severus winced, and said, "it seems I was wrong about the boy. I am worried."

Filius frowned, "I agree. But that is out of character for you. You hate the boy."

"Indeed, on both counts." He said slowly, "it is a change of character..."

Filius peered at him slowly, "you think there is something else at play?" He flicked his wand in a complicated pattern, bringing up privacy wards around his office.

"Mayhap. I shall be going to Gringotts over the break. I know I have not been potioned. As a master I would have noticed a compulsion brew. But there are other methods someone could use to bend a person's will. I should have-" he cut himself off furiously.

"Severus?"

"The boy is abused. I should have noticed it. There is something wrong, and I didn't notice. I always notice, and I failed him. I failed Lily's son." Severus burst out, sounding uncharacteristically openly pained.

"Would you like me to scan you?" Filius asked.

Severus nodded sharply, "I was so angry I wanted to make him scrub cauldrons until the day he died; until his fingers bled, Filius," he said looking at his colleague with an unusually raw expression.

Filius frowned, "that is a bit extreme. I can understand thinking it occasionally, but really wanting too, that's not like you."
Filius waved his wand over Severus in a long, complicated pattern before pinching the end of it and withdrawing a silver wispy substance that he then pressed into the end of a quill he'd pulled from somewhere. The Half-goblin always seemed to have a few spear quills and parchments on him. A click of his long fingers and it started writing.

"hmmm, you have a complex hatred hex on you, and a torment hex," Filius said with a frown, "both old. The target is Gryffindor, Weasley, Granger, and Potter and Longbottom. Both seem to be based on your true dislike of Gryffindor and Potter. It has built increased its intensity, and compromising moral values." Flitwick said, frowning deeply at his colleague.

"Can you break them?" Severus asked.

"Yes. It's ingeniously done, really." Filius said as he handed Severus a short knife, "horrible but genius, so you wouldn't notice, so it would slowly build upon your known dislike and make it extreme. Extreme enough that you had trouble thinking clearly and judging your own actions it took your own mild dislike and made it into someone else's seething loathing."

With a scowl that would have sent students running, Severus pricked his finger and touched it to the top of Filius's wand. Filius made a complicated pattern around Severus, touched the bloody wand tip to his forehead and drew it away. It made a bang like a gun, making Severus flinch. He felt a horrible squelching sensation in his chest, pulling to the point it almost hurt, and then...

He blinked, and took stock of his body. Everything felt the same. He scanned his mental shields and his mind. Some holes as normal. Wait... He frowned. How had he missed that? He thought a moment.

"I still hate them." He said

"Well, yes, I expected as much. You hated Gryffindor before, disliked the younger Weasleys already and dislike people in general, especially students and Gryffindors at that. Add in Potters and no wonder you didn't notice it. It carefully amped up your general dislike of people." Flitwick explained, "you wouldn't have noticed. It just tweaked, took away your control, heightened the desired attributes to unreasonable extremes."

"I should have thought," he said, taking a long sip of tea. "I have treated all of the little blighters appallingly, not that they don't deserve it, the little terrors. Not that I have much choice even without the spells. But it was extreme even for me. I never should have made that comment about Granger's teeth, and Longbottom is hopeless but needs tutoring, and possibly investigation into his home life, not constant berating. Potter was ignorant, not arrogant and is clearly abused. That much is clear now. I never should have yelled at him when he apologised either..."

Filius smiled sadly at his colleague and patted his hand, "We'll manage. I'll take you to see my half brother over Christmas, for a full work up. We'll see what else we can figure out." Filius said.

Severus nodded and said, "the boy is abused."

"Yes."

"He's acting oddly this week." He continued

"Yes, I noticed, it worried you too?"

"Yes. I haven't been able to corner the brat to ask him. He's been avoiding me since our disagreement last Friday. It's remarkable how hard to catch he is in the corridors."
"Oh?" Filius enquired curiously.  

"He came to apologise for his lack of manners," Severus said slowly, reluctantly, "I threw it in his face."

Filius winced, then frowned but asked, "why?"

"I thought him lying; mocking me. He somehow found out about his father's treatment of me. I lost my temper, thought him rubbing my face in it. Now he is avoiding me like the plague."

"Ahhh," Filius said, "we'll give him the holidays to calm down. If you can't get hold of him, maybe send him an owl. I haven't been able to catch him properly either."

"Mmm..."

"Though," Filius mused, "if he has a troubled home life, why is he going home for the holidays now? He never has before..."

"Why indeed," Severus mused.
Later that evening, after their rounds in the forest, Harry and Hagrid were heading back when they come across a unicorn. Harry hadn't seen a unicorn in person since that night with Quirrellmort back in first year, and just the sight of it threw him right back to that night.

He remembered walking down the path, and Fang suddenly let out a yelp and bolded. Startled Harry had hurried forward, stupidly, only to catch sight of the blood. He followed it, only to stop when he caught sight of the unicorn. Her pearly white coat was glowing almost in the darkness. It was the most beautiful and heartbreaking thing he had ever seen.

After being sick, Malfoy freaked out and ran, taking the lantern with him, running screaming after Fang, leaving Harry alone in the dark. (Really Fang had sensed something, Harry should have paid more attention to him.)

But Harry was so overcome with compassion for the unicorn, who was grunting in pain, it's golden foal nearby. Unable to help himself, Harry ran up to the mother, spooking the foal. It snorted in alarm and gangled off into the trees out of reach.

Harry had desperately tried to stem the flow of blood, ripping off bits of his pants trying to patch her up. But it didn't stop, and he didn't know any spells. Just a warming charm that he used to keep the mother warm, and one on the foal too, which had crept fearfully closer. Harry had tried to reassure it that things would be okay, that its mum would be fine, but Harry hadn't believed it himself.

But Quirrellmort came out, not that he'd known it was Quirell then. Harry stood wand out, trying to defend it, but he didn't know anything, and his head hurt. Quirrell had used Expelliarmus to blast Harry back and he hit a tree. Quirrellmort drank the blood. Then Firenze had come galloping in, and chased him off.

Harry had crawled over to the unicorn. He'd been crying then, as he had pressed his hands to the wound, trying desperately to stop the still sluggish blood flowing from the now dead Unicorn, too overcome by the sight. The foal was nowhere to be found and despite Harry's pleading, fighting, Firenze wouldn't let him go back for the foal. He'd told Hagrid though.
It took ages afterwards to get the blood off, Harry recalled now. He never wore those robes again. They had been folded up, in the bottom of his trunk, he meant to burn them but hadn't gotten around to it. The Gryffindors had taken care of that Harry thought bitterly. He'd had nightmares for ages after that.

He blinked when the unicorn in front of him let out a nicker, a soft, low, throaty sound. The unicorn was not quite white yet, a pale silver, with hints of gold in its main still. Its horn was still gold.

Hagrid put a hand on Harry's shoulder, making him jump and said, "slowly, they don't like boys usually. Just girls and virgins, the innocent mostly. But he remembers you 'arry. He's the one who's mum died, back in ye' first year. You're warming charm was still on 'im when I found 'im" Hagrid said.

Harry stared at the unicorn. It didn't seem to mind Harry, thought it was hesitant. It let Harry take a step closer however. It was so beautiful. Harry carful reached out to pat its warm, velvety nose.

It smelt sweet, like fresh rain, and a summer breeze. It nudged Harry, its head butting against Harry's shoulder as if itchy. Harry reached up to scratch its head, and it leaned into the touch, letting out a long sigh of content, making Harry scratch a bit harder. Harry panicked a moment when the horn wobbled, however. It was gold still, though the coat was silver, the base of the horn had started to silver now too.

Harry try to stay away from it, but the unicorn has a mind of its own and seemed to want him to scratch at the loose horn. It looked slightly Darker around the horn, as if slightly inflamed. It wobbled, Harry was really worried and turned to ask Hagrid but the unicorn just head-butted him again when he stopped scratching and started using Harry's chest as a scratching post.

The horn wobbled again, got caught in his cloak and fell off. Horrified Harry catches it without thinking and pulled his wand casting 'episky,' over and over again trying to heal it, to fix it, worried he'd broken the unicorn. He seemed to break everything he touched at the moment.

But Hagrid was laughing, and the unicorn was still scratching quite vigorously against him. Slowly Harry calmed. He can see a small white stub of the new horn underneath now. He tentatively ran a finger over it. It was cool and smooth. The unicorn made a content sound, and he obligingly scratched its head some more, a but much harder this time, know he knew it wouldn't hurt it.

Hagrid was still laughing, and Harry turned curious.

"They're meant to shed their horns, 'arry. They take 4 years too mature, they grow horns from 6 months. When their fully grown, they shed their childhood horn, and they then shed their horns every few years (like deer shed their antlers every season." Hagrid explained still chuckling.

In hindsight, Harry figured it was pretty funny.

"its an honour and a gift. He remembers you, 'arry," Hagrid went on, handing Harry a sugar cube, from one of his endless pockets, to feed the unicorn, "what you did to try and save his mum, how you tried to go back for it. I went back after I dropped you lot off, Firenze showed me where you lot had been. I found him, still warm by your charm by his dead mum. I burried her good, and took him home with me, raised him myself."

Harry felt his walls crumbling. He'd all but given up on being able to make the potion to free himself. And now this unicorn, this bright, vibrant, innocent creature had come to help him. The compassion of it hit Harry like punch to the gut, and he seemed to tilt forward until his head was
resting on the unicorn's strong neck, and he had wrapped an arm around the animal.

Its warm spring scent. Its fur was soft and warm, and Harry could feel it breathing, and he absently stroked his hands along his flank. The unicorn seemed to nibble at his hair a bit but seemed content to let Harry cling to it for a moment longer.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and stepped back, reaching out a gentle hand to stroke its nose.

"Thank you, I don't know how you knew, but thank you. You have no idea what this means to me. Or maybe you do," he murmured into its ear.

The unicorn butted its nose against Harry's chest before turning and cantering off into the tress with a swish of it's bright silver tail.

Feeling honoured and with a renewed sense of determination to free himself, Harry started the potion that night. Up in his new little potions lab. He timed it carefully so he could stir it in the mornings and evenings, around his classes.

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Harry's weekend passed in a blur of studying. Studying in the forest with Firenze and Hagrid, practicing his knives, and archery, studying with Bill, studying languages trying to work out the egg, duelling with Fred and George, and catching up on both his school work and WEA work as well as tackling the books on the old ways. It kept him busy and distracted him from the fresh set of nightmares the unicorn had reawaken.

The following week passed in much the same manner as the previous, spending most of his time when not in class, tutoring the first years, having Slytherin lessons or in the forest, in his cupboard studying or working on the potion. He'd not made any headway with the egg, but he'd read enough of the language book to know it wasn't a banshee or any other human language, nor was it a goblin dialect. Though Goblin was a very interesting language but seemed harder to teach himself that Latin and French were.

Rita Skeeter showed up to Care of Magical Creatures on Tuesday and interviewed Hagrid, after a particularly trying session with the skrewts. He had another Slytherin lesson on Wednesday night and started brewing the middle stage of the potion. So far, despite the fact that it was complex and time-consuming in nature, it was going well. Harry was finding he was really enjoying it.

It was on Thursday in the transfiguration double that Harry was jolted out of his dead numbness.

"I have something I need to say to you all," Professor McGonagall said, making Harry look up from where he was in the back corner of the room copying down their homework essay on Cross-Species Switching.

"The Yule Ball is approaching. It is a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialise with our foreign guests," she went on, and Harry felt a spark of dread light up in his stomach. This could not be good.

"The ball will be open to fourth years, and above only. However, you may invite a younger student if you wish."

Brown and Patil let out a shrill giggle, Professor McGonagall ignored them, and continued, "Dress robes will be worn," Harry's heart sank, he didn't have any anymore, they'd been burnt. Even then, there was no way in hell he was going to a ball. Too many people, too much attention, too many people touching him. And no ball was more important than getting free of the magic and spell on
him. He needed to be at Gringotts.

"The ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then-" Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is, of course, a chance for us all to," she pursed her lips disapprovingly for a moment, "let our hair down."

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on when the giggles had subsided, "that we will be relaxing the standards of behaviour we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and he had almost made it out of the room when she called above the noise, "Potter a word, please."

Biting back a groan, Harry proceeded reluctantly back in into the classroom. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, after shooing Hermione and Neville out. This did not help the sinking feeling in his gut. Only then did she say, "Potter, the champions and their partners -"

"What?" said Harry, there was no way he was going.

Professor McGonagall looked at him suspiciously, as though he was trying to be funny. He was not being at all funny. There was nothing remotely funny about this situation in any way shape or form.

"Your partner for the Yule Ball, Potter," she said coldly. "Your dance partner."

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel, his hands started to go numb. Dancing meant touching and being stared at. Dread pooled in his gut, and it was all he could do to get out the words, "dance partners? I don't dance. I have holiday plans," he said quickly.

"Oh yes you do dance," said Professor McGonagall irritably, "and no, you do not have plans any more. You will be staying here for the break. Now pay attention. That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions with their partners open the ball."

His skin crawled, and itched, felt much too tight, his stomach rolled.

"I'm not dancing," he said again, trying to remember how to breathe.

"It is traditional. You don't have a choice," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion. You will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

"But- I don't-" he stuttered, his hands shaking now, his legs starting to feel like jelly, "please ma'am."

"You heard me, Potter," she said in a very final way, "you will be at that ball. You will have a partner, and you will dance. If you cannot do so competently get one of your housemates to teach you. I do not see why, after 3 years of not leaving the castle once, you have the need to now."

"But ma'am, I can't-"

"You and the other champions are opening the dance! You will have to ask someone." She said clearly getting exasperated with him.
"I'm not a champion!" He spat out, "I'm an unwilling participant! I don't want to be your bloody show, pony!"

"20 points for your language and disrespect, Potter," she snapped. "There are plenty of girls in your house, ask one of them!"

Then suddenly he had a thought, and it really irritated him, "so are you telling me I have to ask someone to the ball or that it has to be a female?" He asked suddenly, her comment distracting him momentarily from his panicked irritation and he latched onto it.

"I didn't know you were gay Potter?" She said, clearly surprised.

'You don't know a lot,' he wanted to spit out, but he didn't, instead, "that, is beside the point professor. Are you saying that not only do I have to go to a ball against my will, but I also have to dance and be in a semi-intimate embrace in front of other people, against my will and it has to be with a girl?" He asked, trying not to snap.

"Ms Granger's a girl, you know her well enough, ask her." Professor McGonagall snapped.

"I am starting to see that if not you, then someone else will force me to go to this ball whether I agree or not. But I have no intention of fooling myself that I will like it. I won't. This whole tournament has been hell. Hermione deserves to go with someone who actually wants to go with her and wants to be there. Hermione is my dearest friend. I love spending time with her. She is not a last resort. She deserves better. I won't do it. I won't go."

"another 20 points for your cheek. You have to Potter. You will take a girl or if you insist on a male, and you can get him to agree, take Mr Weasley for all I care. You will dance. You will do so graciously, or you will be in detention for the rest of the year, champion or not and more points lost! I will not have you disrespecting me like this, and you will not make a fool out of Gryffindor or of Hogwarts. I had enough of this attitude of yours!"

"I wouldn't take Ron if it was between him and the giant squid!" Harry spat.

"So you're not gay then!" She cried out with satisfaction.

"That's not the point! I won't do it!"

"You'll do as your told!" she snapped back in an uncharacteristically harsh snarl.

Panic rising again, Harry stormed out.

He made it to a nearby bathroom before his knees gave out. He pressed his face into the floor and tried to breathe, gasping, and his lungs seemed to tighten and not cooperate at all. She was going to make him stay. She was trapping him here, and making him dance in front of everyone. Making him touch people.

Petunia had tried to teach Dudley to dance once. She'd made Harry be the girl. Dudley had teased him mercilessly about it for weeks and had taken the opportunity to pinch Harry and stomp on his feet. Gods it had hurt, and it had been so humiliating. He shuddered as his skin crawled, and he heard Dudley's laugh in his head.

He was trapped here. He'd never be free. He'd never get out. The walls were closing in on him, and he gasped for air. All he could see was nameless faces staring at him, peering at him like a bug under a microscope, staring at him, pawing at it, clawing at his clothes like they had that first time in Diagon alley, like they had when they grabbed him and threw him out of the tower.
Gods what was he going to do, he didn't mind Bill and Charlie touching him when they didn't startle him, but they weren't students, and they weren't here. And even then, he didn't think it would go down at all well. The last thing he needed was more attention and more scandal. Hermione was okay, and Hagrid was manageable but a teacher. He clenched his fists in his hair, trying not to shake as his skin crawled at the thought of such scrutiny and attention; of having to be touched for so long.

"Hermione," he gasped out. He'd have to pray she would agree to do him the favour. She deserved better, but if he had to go, she was probably the only person he'd manage to dance with and was his only hope of surviving the whole hellish idea. Gods he'd have to find a way out, he'd have to write to Rodgrip.

There was a pop. He startled, shot out a stunner without even thinking about it. There was a squeal, and Dobby popped away again.

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Hermione looked up startled when she heard a popping noise and something tapped her knee. Frowning, she glanced around before peering carefully under the table. Dobby was there, tapping her knee. He raised a finger to his lips in silence and pointed to the entrance hall before popping away again. Frowning, she hoped Harry hadn't gotten himself into trouble without her. She gathered a couple of sandwiches before turning to Neville who had been sitting next to her.

"I have to go. I'll catch up with you later?" She said hurriedly.

"Sure, everything okay?" He asked, worriedly.

"Don't know, I'll find out. Don't let them bully you while I'm gone," she said before hurrying from the hall.

Dobby joined her and lead her to one of the boys' bathrooms by the Transfiguration classroom. Her heart sank, and she hoped Harry was okay.

Harry was on the floor in the corner, next to a puddle of sick, clearly panicking.

"Harry?" She asked, cautiously stepping into the bathroom.

He glanced up at her, eye's wide, "don't want to dance, to be stained at, to be touched," he shuddered, his skin crawling, "hate it. She's going to make me. Can't leave for Christmas, have to go to the ball." He stuttered out, "don't know what to do."

"Take a deep breath Harry," she said, sitting next to him, after vanishing the sick. She was carful not to touch him.

Harry took a shallow shuddering breath.

"And another one," she said, talking him through it, putting one of his hands on her upper chest so he could feel her breathing and mimic it.

"Feel my breath, copy it. In slowly... Hold it... and out," she said slowly and calmly, "you're doing well, keep copying my breath."

Slowly he calmed down, and when he realised, he pulled his hand back as if burned. She rolled her eyes at him, snorted "boys."
He smiled, weakly, "Thanks, Hermione."

"Don't worry about it," she said handing him a sandwich, "I had panic attacks in primary school, the teacher would have to talk me down, I'd forget how to breath" she explained that unasked question, "now, what's up? What did Professor McGonagall want?"

Harry's eyes filled with dread again, and he said, "I have to dance at the yule ball. The 'champions," he sneered, "have to open it. Everyone staring at me, too much touching. I'm so sorry Hermione, I'm so sorry to ask this. You deserve so much better."

Hermione looked puzzled but let him continue, "She says I don't have a choice." He took another calming breath. "I would be very relieved if you would consent to go with me, please Hermione, as my friend."

He all but begged, hating himself for it, "I don't want to go, if I'm brutally honest, and I don't want to dance. Being stared at and touched so closely; it honestly sounds like a nightmare, but you're my best friend, and it might make it bearable if it's with you."

He grimaced slightly, not the most flattering way to asked, "sorry," he said, "I know girls seem to like balls and find them exciting or romantic or something Brown and Patil said, so I understand if you'd rather not... its not that I don't think you're pretty, and attractive and wonderful. I just don't like you like that. Oh gosh, I hope I haven't made this all really weird! I don't know if I like anyone like that. I think that bit's broken.

"Oh Harry," she said, "I'll go with you, of course I will. Yes I'd like to be asked out by someone who fancies me, it would be really nice, and maybe romantic, but there's time. There will be other times for that, and I'm more than happy to go with you as your friend and support you. Don't worry, I don't like you like that either.

But you're not broken Harry, some things take time, and you're not there yet. You have plenty going on, and that's okay. It will happen. And if it doesn't, that's fine. Charlies single, and happy with just his dragons, and Bill's not into girls at all. It's fine. Don't worry about it yet."

"Oh, thank the gods."

"You want a hug?" She asked carefully.

"Erm yes? Maybe? Just a little one?"

She laughed softly, opened her arms and slowly and gently wrapped them around him loosely, so not to startle him. He was stiff as a broad.

"What am I meant to do again?" He asked nervously, his mind going blank

She let out a soft huff of amusement again and said, "just relax into it and enjoy the warmth and companionship of a good friend that cares for you. It doesn't need to be complicated. It's just meant to feel nice."

"Oh," he forced himself to relax. It was weird still, being so close, even if it was Hermione, but the warmth was kind of nice. He wasn't sure, he put his arms around her tentatively.

She leaned back after a moment, "Its okay Harry."

"You deserve better," he said, "you deserve that romance dating thing that girls, and people seem to want."
She laughed lightly, "I do, but there will be other balls, and I'm happy to help out a friend. It's not as if I don't like spending time with you. If you're opening the ball, maybe you can slip away after that. There will be other dances, I can dance with other people after you're free to go. It's okay Harry." She said, and he sighed in relief.

"Thanks, Hermione, don't know what I'd do without you."

She nodded, "and if you have to stay, we'll just have to make sure you can get out for easter."

He nodded glumly, "gods I don't want to go. I don't want to dance and be stared at like a freak show!"

"I know and you're not. I can teach you to dance, that way it will at least be a bit more bearable," she said.

"You deserve better than this," he said, "I'm really sorry."

"I do, but that's not your fault, I could have said no. You're my friend and asked for my help. I chose to give it to you." She said firmly, "there is not much I wouldn't do for you, Harry, just as you would for me."

Harry nodded, she was right, she often was. He would have done the same for her.

"I'll check the charter and see if I have to stay, if there is anything keeping me here of the holidays," he said making a decision, "I'll talk to Rodgrip and see if its in the contract too. Maybe I can get us both out of this then you'll be free to find a proper date."

She blushed and elbowed him but instead said, "I've missed you these last few weeks. You've been avoiding me."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, "but it's better if they don't see you around me, they know we're close."

"No, actually," she said matter of factly.

"What?" He asked frowning

"It's not better," she said bluntly, "they hex me as much as they hex you now, but I live with them. They hate me just as much. It's no safer for me alone than it is with you. They hex me we're together or not. At least when we're together, I have someone to watch my back." She said matter of factly, "and I'm not letting it go, because even if you don't, I think you deserve better than this."

Harry swallowed thickly and nodded, resting his head on her shoulder.

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He wrote to Rodgrip, Bill and Charlie that night. He had finished up studying in the library with his friends, and Harry had returned exhausted to his cupboard. He'd started reading the Hogwarts charter. It was much too long for him to read cover to cover in one sitting. It was not only long but also a complex document, that seemed to have little order to it at all, as if it were really a bunch of different rules and sections just strung together.

He'd had to resort to using searching spells to find all of the sections pertaining to staying or leaving school over the break. Thankfully, nowhere did it say that he had to stay at school over the break. Not if he didn't want to, not if his guardians didn't object.
He wrote to the Dursley's too. He hated it, but he wrote to his aunt, begging her to give him permission to be away from the castle over the break. He bribed her with the potential for him to stay somewhere else during the summer if he could find somewhere else now. He also added a note that none of the neighbours would notice him there, thinking that if she didn't have to worry about his freakishness, maybe she would be more inclined to help him out.

He did not have high hopes.

Friday passed achingly slowly, but desperate for a break from study and worrying, Harry took Hermione and Neville down to Hagrid's at lunch. Hermione had, as usual, been right. It was much better when they all stuck together, and Harry led Hermione and Neville through the lesser-known secret passageways, and the snake passages, to get through the school without being hexed. It was nice hanging out with Hermione again. He hadn't realised how much he'd drawn away, and how much he'd missed her.

The five of them originally went to ask him about Skeeter's interview and to interrogate him about the lake. They were still planning on exploring it with Gillyweed in the summer but were worried about the Giant Squid.

"Surprised you didn't end up in the paper," Harry said as Hagrid poured them all tea.

"'She jus' wanted me ter talk about you, Harry," Hagrid said. "Well, I told her we'd been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. 'Never had to tell him off in four years?' she said me. 'Never played you up in lessons, has he?' I told her no, an she didn' seem happy at all. Yeh'd think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry."

"'Course she did," Harry muttered, "anyway less about her and what about the lake Hagrid?"

"We want to go exploring in it with Gillyweed when the lake has thawed, when it's warm again," explained Hermione, casting a look out Hagrid's window at the snow-covered grounds. It had started snowing early this year, and it looked like the lake was going to freeze over.

"But we're worried the squid will eat us." Neville said succinctly, "we were hoping to find all sorts of aquatic plants and animals down there. Harry said you might be able to tell us."

"Ah well. He won't harm no one he won't," Hagrid said, "e's harmless."

"Aragog harmless?" Harry asked, "or Unicorn harmless?"

Hagrid laughed, "unicorn," he said. "You want to watch out more for the Grindylows in the kelp forests, but you know all about them from Defence, don't you?"

"Yes, Professor Lupin went over them with us," Hermione said

"What else is in there?" Harry asked curiously.

"We'll there are merpeople down their, their defensive of what's theirs, don't like wizards much. So don't go causing them trouble." Hagrid warned.

"Merpeople? In the lake? What are they like?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Well, their friendly enough if you can talk to them, and leave them alone. But they don't like having to go up to the air, to speak to people. Of course, it's harder to understand Mermish on land, sounds like screeching, don' it?" Hagrid continued, and Harry froze.
"what?" He asked.

"Mermish," Hagrid said, "it sounds like screaming. It's only in the water you can understand it. There it sounds like the singing it truly is then." Hagrid said frowning at Harry.

"You okay Harry?" He asked.

"That's it!" Harry said, standing up, dropping his teacup in his hurry, "the egg! It's in Mermish! You're a genius Hagrid!" Harry said, tearing out of Hagrid's hut leaving a bemused Hagrid, Neville and Hermione behind him, talking more about the lake.

* 

As much as Harry wanted to, he didn't skip potions to work on the egg. He contented himself with flicking through to the Mermish section of his language book and reassuring himself that it did indeed sound like Mermish should.

Potions seemed to pass excruciatingly slowly, and he worked alone at the back of the room diligently, despite his agitation. It seemed that Snape had plenty to distract himself with instead of Harry. Ever since the announcement of the ball, everyone seemed to have an inability to focus, girls giggling mainly at every turn, and it seemed that Harry wasn't the only one irritated by it. At least it provided them with a good distraction from hexing him.

He went straight back to his cupboard after potions and took the egg down to one of the long-forgotten bathrooms in the lower dungeon. It was dusty and abandoned like everything else, but with the help of Dobby, Winky and a good few cleaning spells, he managed to get the large stone bathtub working.

Once the bath was full, he hesitantly got in. He didn't like baths. He'd almost drowned too many times as a child either due to Dudley pushing him into a pool or holding him under in the bath. Even alone like this, it made him weary. Not weary enough that the idea of going into the lake to explore with his friends didn't sound exciting. But enough to make him realise he really did need to learn to swim.

Maybe the Room of Requirement could come up with a pool? Maybe there was one here in the dungeons somewhere. He noted that this level wasn't on the map. He kept meaning to read up on how they made it and see if he could add to it.

He got into the bath and nearly jumped a mile when the Bloody Barron appeared out of a tap.

"No-one has been down on this level for an age, young snake." He said

Harry shivered as the Ghost's presence started to chill that water, and he sank deeper into the bath, "sorry sir," he said.

The Ghost chuckled, and while it made his chains klink, it made him seem much more human and less intimidating.

"I did not expect you of all people to make themselves at home here in my domain."

Harry forgot how to breathe, "it's nice down here, safe and quiet. Please don't tell anyone! They'll kick me out."

I have nowhere else to go, he thought, hopelessly. He did not want to get unhomed again.
"You're Harry potter," the Ghost said, then peering at him closely

"Unfortunately," Harry said bleakly.

The Ghost laughed again but said, "they are trying to un-house you young snake."

"Yes," he said bleakly, "I won't stop them. Better off without them."

"Spoken like a true snake. It is said that you should have been one of ours, snake speaker."

"Yes sir," Harry said

"There are snakes in this dungeon. It holds many secrets," the Ghost said before drifting off through a wall. Harry wondered if he was talking about the Parseltongue passages or if maybe someone else was secretly hiding down here too.

"Sir!" Harry called out, making the ghost pause and stick his head back out of the wall, "sir, thank you for the advice, but you won't tell anyone I'm here will you?" He asked

"Snakes stick together," was all the Barron said before drifting off, leaving Harry confused but somewhat reassured.

Puzzled, Harry frowned and reached for his wand and cast a lot more spells on the door and reheated the bathwater. When the water was once again, almost too hot, he reached for the egg and dropped it into the bathwater before opening it.

He took a great breath and slid under the surface. The egg was producing an eerie chorus of voices singing:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour-long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour- the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes. Dread filled his stomach. He took a great breath and slid under the surface to hear it again, memorising it.

It was indeed Mermish. meaning that they lived in the lake like Hagrid said. And were going to steal something of his... Or someone else would and give it to them to hold hostage. He wouldn't put that past Dumbledore. He'd have to find a way to tighten his wards. Again.

They would take something he had to get back. But what were they going to take?

He frowned. He can easily put everything he owned of importance in his warded bag again. It
would be easy enough, and he could get his bow and his broom in there now too. He could have Dobby pop it over to his vault overnight so no-one could take it in his sleep. It will be safe in Gringotts. He could keep his possessions safe.

But would they do that, or take someone, he thought frantically.

Two things he had noticed about the tasks in the past. They used the elements. With dragons being the fire element and air, it made sense that the second task would be water, and therefore, the third had to be earth. The other thing he had noticed was that the first was often a creature task, the second was a hostage or rescue of some kind and the third was often some kind of challenge or quest.

Hermione. They would take Hermione. They wouldn't take an object, that was too easy, too little risk.

Hermione was his best friend. That or maybe Bill or Charlie, or Fred or George or Neville or Hagrid. Somehow he didn't think it would be an adult. Noone knew he was close to Dobby and Winky, and wizards so often dismissed them, so he didn't think it would be the elves. They were safe.

It would most likely be Hermione. He shuddered. He'd have to find a way to protect them all. He'd have to work doubly hard on that shielding wrist band. Maybe put some kind of tracker in it.

He had to get Gillyweed, enough for both he and Hermione, to have some regularly as a backup. They'd need to learn to fight and fight dirty if someone was going to try and get either of them. He'd need to research other methods of breathing underwater. And, he'd need to learn to swim. He shuddered. He'd nearly drowned last time.

Fuck.

He called Dobby and Winky.

They popped in with a bow and a curtsey, "you know you don't need to stand on formality with me," he told them.

But the elves just shook their heads, horrified at the prospect, so he continued, "the second task is a hostage rescue. Either something or someone important to me. I can keep all my things in my warded bag, would you be able to take it to Rodgrip or into my vault if I needed?" He asked.

"We is not able to take it into the vault, Mr Harry Potter sir," squeaked Dobby, "I is not bonded, and Winky only partly, but we is able to take it to Miss Goblin sir, she be putting it in the Vaults.

"Right, that would be brilliant." Harry said relieved, "the other thing they may take is someone. I want you both to be very careful, no-one knows you work for me, so that should keep you safe. But if anyone asks, please say no. I do not want you at risk. Of course, I don't think they will ask, they will probably just take. Please be careful!" He begged.

Both elves burst into noisy tears, overcome by his caring but agreed. They also agreed to keep an eye on these things and on his friend.

He headed back to his cupboard after that. He had a potion to finish and breathing underwater to research. He paused a moment. It was in February. It had already started snowing, and the lake was showing signs of freezing over this year. He shuddered, there was a foot of snow outside! He'd have to look up heating charms and maybe ways of using runes on his skin to keep him warm. He
had three shirts on, two jumpers and a cloak on and he was still cold.

Chapter End Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS!
Panic Attacks
Thoughtless teachers

The unicorn bit that was originally meant to go in before the first Gringotts trip but the centaurs ran off with my plot!

Yes I changed the date of the ball. It was more convineit that way

(Note no homophobia intended, mcgonagall is just being oblivious and thoughtless. She's not a homophobe, she just doesn't know Harry.)

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