Gringott's Lesser-known Branch

by Brennah_K

Summary

Few in the Wizarding world have a true understanding of the inner structure of the Goblin Nation or its corporate representative to the wizarding community, Gringott's Bank, much less any clue about how far they will go to protect their investments.

Notes

Just a small update: the sequel Severus Snape-Prince and the Philosopher's Stone has been completed and posted. Harrison Peverell-Potter and the House of Lords is now posting.
Harry had barely even a moment to blink as the door to his cupboard was flung open; a hand that wasn't his aunt's, uncle's, or cousin's reached in and dragged him out; and a shiny metal stick with odd writing was waved in front of his face.

Soft odd whispers in a different language than any he had ever heard on the telly captured his attention lulling him into a strange passivity when he really did know that he should be frightened – particularly, when his aunt was shrieking in a strangely high-pitched scream unlike any of the screams that she made for mice or spiders or roaches or even the really scary scream that she made when he sometimes caused ... odd things to happen.

He knew he should have been frightened by the oddly flat voice that instructed his aunt, "We are dissatisfied with the current level of neglect that you demonstrate in the maintenance and upkeep of your nephew. After investigation, it was discovered that this situation has continued unchecked since he was initially placed in your custody by Albus Dumbledore six years ago. As neither the wizarding nor muggle communities have seen fit to intervene in your nephew's behalf, despite his strategic importance, the board of directors has seen fit to invalidate your assignment of custody without penalty. If you choose to dispute this action, you have thirty days to employ a barrister from the ministry of magic to issue an application for appeal to the nearest Gringott Branch in Little Hampstead. If no appeal is filed, the matter will be marked closed at the end of the appeal period.

If, however, you do wish to file an appeal, instruct your barrister to include copies of all receipts paid for the care and upkeep of your nephew as well external, third-party testimony to the fact that the materials purchased were used solely for the upkeep and care of Harry Potter. If these receipts fall within the currently accepted standards for the care and maintenance of wizarding children, the matter will be forwarded to the Board of Appeals, who will initiate a secondary, year-long investigation into the past and present circumstances of your household to determine whether you are capable of caring for the child appropriately. If it is deemed necessary, in the process of this investigation, to alert authorities regarding the results of the board's inquiry, Gringott's does not have a preference of jurisdiction and you may petition the board to submit the results to a governing body of your choice, be it muggle or wizarding. Are these instructions clear to you?"

"Y-y-ye-s," Harry's aunt stuttered, apparently understanding more of the gravely voiced instructions than Harry did.

"Very well," the voice commented as Harry felt himself being lifted and propped against what he suspected was a shoulder. "Good Afternoon, then, you may expect a bill for our services to be delivered by owl within twenty four hours."

"Wh-wha-t are you going to do with him until ..." Aunt Petunia finally recovered a bit of her familiar tone and sense to ask a question that Harry was only just then beginning to ask himself.

"Until the matter is settled satisfactorily, Mr. Potter will be placed in the supervision of a caretaker employed by Gringott's in one of its lesser known branches. If you should wish to contact myself or the representative to arrange visitation with your nephew, the instructions will be included with my bill. Good Afternoon."

"But, but- -" Harry thought his aunt had said something else after that, but the door closing in her face had cut her words off.
Thirty-One Days Later

Harry was tightening the strap at his collar for the second time when the door opened behind him.

"Second Assistant, Hibby, Sir. Could you show me how to do my lead again? I don't think I will ever get this right."

"I will be certain to inform Hibby of that necessity, Harry."

"Mgr. Griphook, Sir!" Harry spun on his heels and dropped into a deep respectful bow. "I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't realize that I should expect you this morning. I would have been ready earlier."

"Yes, yes. Harry. I realize that this meeting would come as a surprise, but merely for the fact that management wished to be certain that the Dursleys did not intend to pursue an appeal before we arranged for your ongoing training."

Lowering himself from his polite bow, to kneel on one knee, Harry silently indicated that he had a question and waited hopefully to be acknowledged.

"Harry, this is not the first time that I have had to tell you that you are neither a domesticated elf nor a goblin, proper. You may ask your question without a customary display of obeisance – in accordance with your wizarding background."

"Yes, Mgr. Griphook, Sir, but is it not like scowling at goat's blood soup? Muggle's and Wizards might be discourteous enough to sneer or scowl at the traditional offering made to guests, but it would not reflect well on the training and attention paid me by Gringotts if I was so discourteous."

"True, child. You do hold to your notions don't you. Very well, I have no objection to proper displays of courtesy – so long as they are not made in wizarding public, where they would diminish the image of our propriety or place our investments into speculation."

"Yes, Mgr."

"Now, that we have spent more time on an already spent subject, I believe you may have a question."

"Yes, Mgr. I am not surprised that my former relatives were willing to abandon their claim on me so readily, but ..." Harry stumbled on his question and blushed with abject embarrassment.

The first lesson that he had learned under Manager Griphook's supervision was that time was money. A question should not be asked before it was fully ready to be answered succinctly and definitively. Hesitation and ambiguity were intolerable.

This time, however, his manager seemed to understand, though not without a raised eyeridge.

"But... why has no one else made a claim on you? Did we not publish it publicly enough for interested parties to respond within the allotted time period?" he suggested.

Harry nodded, still embarrassed, but less so when it was clear that he understood what he wanted to ask.

"Child, I cannot answer to that. You saw yourself the announcement placed in the Daily Prophet, and other wizarding papers. The Minister, himself, did inquire – but for the reasons that we
explained to you on your arrival, we did not feel that either he or the Headmaster— who both allowed you to be placed at your relatives without further follow up, were sufficiently concerned with your well-being and potential to adequately protect our investments. He was, however, persuaded to accept that you would be better placed in our care than in the Headmaster's. As far as the Headmaster is to be considered, while he was named as the executor of your parent's wills, when he placed you with your aunt, he expressly and explicitly broke the terms of these documents and no longer has a vested claim in your custody."

"Yes, Mgr. Thank you for answering my question."

"Information is power, Harry. We profit nothing by allowing you to make ill informed decisions."

Nodding quietly, Harry returned to the quarter bow that was permitted once a junior member had been engaged in a discussion.

"Now, on to other matters. You will need a change of wardrobe for this morning. President Ragn'rok wishes to make an appraisal of you this morning to determine the proper direction of our time and galleons."

"I'll change immediately, Mgr." Harry answered obediently, already subconsciously reaching to remove his training collar and halter.

"Ah, yes, but into what? How should you best display yourself?" Mgr. Griphook asked quietly.

Recognizing it as a test, Harry thought hurriedly over everything that Mgr. Griphook, First Assistant Ebby and Second Assistant Hibby had told him over the past month, and pulled open his drawers to examine the eight sets of attire that the elves had cut, sewn, and charmed specifically to his size and needs. Finally, acting on instinct, he pulled out his physical training outfit. Unlike the tunnel training outfit, his physical training uniform did not need a collar and halter that could be linked to a magical guideline, which would keep him from falling or being injured in any of the numerous tunnels and carts tracks that littered Gringott's underground facilities.

Instead, it was quite like the gym uniform he had worn at his muggle school, but with tight black tank and shorts were matched by closely tailored gym shoes, like a gymnast might wear. Instead of hiding his lack of physical development under overlong shirts and baggy shorts, his current physical training uniform did not need a collar and halter that could be linked to a magical guideline, which would keep him from falling or being injured in any of the numerous tunnels and carts tracks that littered Gringott's underground facilities.

"That is an interesting choice," Griphook commented in a stern tone. "Would you care to explain your decision? This hardly accentuates the strength of your assets."

"A property's impenetrable wards, impregnable walls, and marble columns are for not, if the property beneath can not support its weight." Harry quoted the mgr.'s own instruction on the importance of understanding the weakness of every investment.

"Very well." Griphook agreed with a smirk, "Let us see if the President and Senior Partners concur. Five paces should be sufficient."

Falling in five paces behind his manager, Harry quietly whispered the mantra of 'inescapable' rules that he had been instructed in – one a day – since his manager had deposited him in the care of his personal assistants, Ebby and Hibby.
"The first inescapable rule of existence is that time is money."
"The second - principle hoarded is profit lost." 
"The third – knowledge is principle waiting to be spent."
"The fourth – an unasked question is profit lost."
"The fifth – image is the shepherd of success, intelligence is its coin."
"The sixth – a weakness is an profit in disguise."
"The seventh – there is no greater folly than action without knowledge."
"The eighth – a competitor's spy is your best servant."
"The ninth – your spy is your competitor's until given a stake in your profit."
"The tenth – a tarnished sickle still weighs the same."
"The eleventh – if the scales don't balance, weigh again."
"The twelfth – the first duty on waking and last duty before sleeping is to balance accounts."
"The thirteenth – a knut miscounted is a galleon lost"
"The fourteenth – the galleon's seed is a knut."
"The fifteenth – savor the fruit but plant the seed."
"The sixteenth – a hen killed is an opportunity lost."
"The seventeenth – one can see the dropped knut when he bows deeply enough."
"The eighteenth – diplomacy serves two roles: to ease a knife into your back and to ease it out."
"The nineteenth – trust is a commodity when given by others- a folly when given to others."
"The twentieth – blood and friendship bought cheaply are soon spent."
"The twenty-first – wards and walls are for nought if the ground can not support their weight."
"The twenty-second – a foundation of stone will crack if built upon water."
"The twenty-third – before laying the foundations, dig deep."
"The twenty-fourth – an estate is lost through a hole in the pocket."
"The twenty-fifth – never trust an elf you don't own, never mistreat an elf you do."
"The twenty-sixth – elves and children hear everything, consult them if in doubt."
"The twenty-seventh – if the road splits into two paths – you can only take one."
"The twenty-eighth – you'll find no gold on a well-walked path."
"The twenty-ninth – invest only what you are willing to risk; risk only what you are willing to gain."
"The thirtieth – if you will not invest in yourself, neither will Gringotts."

When he was about to begin the mantra a second time, Mgr. Griphook flicked his claws appreciatively and complimented, "Down to the knut, Harry. I imagine you'll be wearing a coin belt even sooner than Hollow-eyes suspected."

Harry flushed at the implied double compliment. He had guessed that the tunnel manager had been pleased with the number of reports that his team had delivered to their respective offices, but if the staunch tunnel manager had spoken with his manager, Hollow-eyes must have been pleased.

"Thank you, Mgr. Griphook." Harry answered eagerly.

Once he earned one of the knotted coin belts, Harry could start earning knuts and sickles to invest in additional tutoring sessions with the various trainers and purchase some of the materials and supplies that had been holding him back from his preparatory lessons in potions, herbology, transfiguration, and runes. Arithmancy and accounting were the only subjects that he was not being held back in due to a lack of materials, but as they were more complicated subjects, he was certain that he would soon need to schedule additional sessions with those instructors as well.

Almost before Harry realized it, Mgr. Griphook had stopped and was opening a door to the larger conference room. Harry had never been in it before, so he was a little bit stunned at its spartan
interior. He had expected the meeting room to be decorated befitting the rank of their visitor.

Mgr. Griphook had mentioned previously that although President Ragn’rok had initiated the Little Hampstead Branch offices, some forty years earlier, to address matters of the wizarding community's general unwillingness to protect some of their more strategically placed offspring, he did not generally dabble in their day to day activities. He preferred instead to leave the offspring in the hands of tested and generally trusted managers – visiting only when new 'investments' were found to appraise their suitability for the program that he had initiated.

Some, regrettably, lacked the mental and emotional wherewithal to benefit from the program and had to be turned over to the ministry of magic for obliviation and often had been returned to their original guardians – but those who did possess the requisite facilities were taken in and trained to the height of their abilities. By all reports, their latest investment seemed to be the latter, but protocol had to be adhered to even in regards to the famed boy who lived, and the President had been waiting most curiously to observe with the boy.

Watching the child's interaction with his investment manager, from earlier, in the charmed viewing screen, Ragn’rok was pleased by the respectful manner that child showed his manager and amused by the boy's astute observation on the fallacy of wizarding etiquette. Griphook had apparently done a thorough job of teaching the boy the Thirty rules... Well enough, that the child could integrate them into casual conversation and explain his choice of Garb. The child's quick deference and abeyance were satisfying as well. Perhaps this child would indeed become an advocate between the Goblin Nation and the Wizarding community that Ragn’rok had been hoping for when he initiated the branch. The final coin in the bag was the child's disconcerted expression when he entered the meeting room. Clearly, he had been expecting something different something that bespoke of a President's presence.

"Yes, this child is going to be a profitable investment." Ragn’rok commented in gobbledygook to Griphook; he could feel it in his eye teeth, and his teeth had never been wrong.
"Hibby," eight year old, Harry Potter called for his personal assistant as he entered his quarters.

"Yes, Harry?" the elf asked as it bounded into the room. Despite its initial reservations, the boy's constant request to 'just be called Harry' had eventually worn away the title 'Master'. They observed formalities in public, of course, just as Harry never knelt down to Mgr. Griphook when the Minister of Magic showed for his monthly visit.

"Could you contact Potions Master Gavrok, please, and inquire when he may have an open period to review my latest potions assignment?"

"Oh, Sir. Did the Knott-Torquay merger fall through as you predicted?" Hibby asked eagerly. Harry's insistence hadn't been able to wear away the Sir, yet, but at the moment, the boy didn't mind.

"Yep, and I won thirty sickles off of Jessup because of it." Hary pumped his heel to make the coin belt shake.

"Oh, that's excellent, Sir. Will you be wanting me to purchase that block of marble for transfiguration, then?"

"No, Hibby, I've been thinking about that. Could you discreetly ask Tunnel Manager's Second Assistant, Eckr, how much the tunnel manager is requesting to review applications for the cart training?"

"Harry..." Hibby murmured with an anxious note. "You is too young to be in those bad, dangerous, fast-flying carts." Hibby protested, falling back into his less formal grammatical house-elf dialect as the elf always did when he was upset.

"Not this again. Hibby, I know that you're worried about me, but I've always done things earlier than I probably should have; it's just one of my talents. Besides that, you know that I know my way around the tracks better than any of the others, and being able to use the cart would let me finish delivering the reports much earlier so that I can have more time for tutoring sessions and get paid better for timely deliveries."

"Yes. Yes. You's be telling Hibby this and telling Hibby this," the elf fussed, "But, you's not be mentioning how you's was needing the healer called to yous after the last time yous was in a cart. You's not be mentioning that you's had to be spending galleons... GALLEONS! On the potions to be making you betters and then working and working days again to make it back by the knut. Hibby wonders why you is not saying anything about that? HMMM?"

"Hhhrggh. Why I didn't say anything about that is because I wasn't responsible for that cart wreck, if you'll remember. Jessup was. He wasn't listening to Tunnel Manager Hollow-eyes when the manager explained about the new brake system on the carts for that level."

"Yes, yes. But you's was hurt."
"Of course. I know that, but really, I need to earn just a bit more just a bit faster so that I can book more time with Potions Master Gavrok. Because of all of the potions ingredients and materials you have to buy for that course, it's the one I'm most behind in."

"There is much time for you to take the classes left."

"No, there's not. Hibby, I've already been here a year, did you realize that? I'm eight. There's only three years left until I go to Hogwarts. Mgr. Griphook believes that I can earn a summer internship in the Hogsmeade Branch, but only if I can complete the minimum training levels required of a goblin at eleven."

"Hmmph. Of course. I won't say anything more then. It is much more important for you to make the summer internship than it is for you to come back to Hibby and Ebby. Even if it means that you will be landing in a bloody heap when the next cart flips you out and then you may not even have the money to pay your healer because you've spent it all on your potions project."

"Oh, so that's what's bothering you."

"Hibby is not bothered."

"Enough. I've already spoken with Mgr. Griphook. The funds my parents left me does include a domestic servant stipend: a rather sizable one. I will be able to hire you, possibly both of you, if you wish to come with me when I leave for Hogwarts. Mgr. Griphook has already spoken with the Deputy Headmistress, who informed him that because I am are the sole heir of my house as well as an orphan, they will be able to make a small allowance for me- permitting me the assistance of least one domestic elf to help maintain my family's estate so that I may focus my homework and other responsibilities."

"Hibby would be very pleased to be join you at Hogwarts, but Ebby is not comfortable with losing secure employment that she has at Gringotts."

"Well, there may be something that can be arranged. I will have to speak with Mgr. Griphook about our possibilities."

"Thank you, Sir." The elf squeaked as he lightly settled Harry's financial journals on the desk beside the boy.

"Thank you, Hibby."

"Will you be wishing for special meals tonight, Sir?" The elf questioned, apparently equally prone to pigeon grammar when he was excited as well.

"No, thank you, Hibby. Whatever you and Ebby will be having will suffice."

"Yes, Harry." Hibby sighed shaking his head. Both he and Ebby found it somewhat disturbing how complacently their Harry had accepted the Goblin's standards of behavior as well as their knut and sickle philosophy. They didn't object to either really, but it just didn't seem normal that a human child – a wizard child, at that – would accept another culture's strictures without a second thought. A prime example of it was his preference for elf fare whenever he wasn't dining with guests. To their knowledge, none of the other wizarding heirs at the Hampstead Branch had chosen the meager, if nutritionally balanced, largely vegetarian rations that Gringott's Elves were customarily given, but Harry had been frankly thrilled with the simple salads and stews, sometimes even requesting smaller portions when Ebby – in her occasional fits of distress at his menu would add some enticement she was certain he could not resist.
Turning back to his journals, Harry considered the matter of Hibby's wife for several seconds, even though he knew that he should be concentrating on clearing his thoughts to focus on balancing his accounts. The thought of leaving Ebby behind troubled him, but he had recognized some time ago that she was very happily placed as a Gringott's elf and had no desire to leave. It had become quite apparent whenever he discussed Hogwarts that the subject disturbed her. Hibby, on the other hand, seemed more sensitive to the thought of being left behind and had actually looked forward to the thought of Hogwarts until a snappish Ebby, one evening asked Hibby what made him think that he would be welcomed at Hogwarts where they already had a staff of elves. From that time on, Hibby had become difficult on the subject while Ebby relaxed.

After speaking with Mgr. Griphook, Harry thought he had solved Hibby's desire to go, but now wondered if there was an answer that wouldn't cause stress between the elves. The two were still young, by elven standards, and had not petitioned either Harry or his manager for permission to procreate, but Harry suspected that it was only due to the fact that Hibby was still rising in the elven ranks. Ebby often bragged of his status as when they welcomed other elves and of the fact that Hibby had much more in him and would have been a first assistant if Mgr. Griphook had not assigned her, as his third assistant to oversee Harry's care. Although they never said why, Griphook's assignment of one of his personal assistant's was an unusual occurrence, and Harry wondered if it wasn't somehow the key to their problem.

Tapping his quill on the edge of its inkwell, Harry paused considering the matter several seconds more before he decided to ask Griphook about it in the morning and tapped the quill a final time until there was only a thin glaze of ink coating it's razor sharp nib. Harry quickly worked through the day's receipts, neatly copying the day's debits and credits into their respective journals and columns in the general ledger. The self-totaling fields at the end of each column were charmed to cross-check for miscalculations as soon as Harry rested the quill in the raised pen rest of it's stand instead of the inkwell and to fine his discretionary account a full galleon if mistakes were found.

It was a stiff penalty when the error might be as small as a quarter of a knut, but Harry and the other heirs all knew that it was only put in place to ensure that the Goblin's children and human wards rapidly gained an appreciation for the precision required for employment in any of the Gringott's branches – even Little Hampstead, which was manned primarily by humans and had a large muggle clientele, who were completely unaware that the inner offices were staffed with creatures they had only heard of as the villains of their fairy tales. As such, though stiff, it was successful on several levels both training their youth in the necessary precision to later fulfill their job requirements, and in weeding out candidates who were unsuitable for positions in their upper levels. Goblins and their human charges, who could not achieve the necessary precision were, as a result of the fines – which could be applied as often as the balances were done (on a twice daily schedule – morning and night) often unable to afford to pay the fees to have their applications reviewed for apprenticeships, which in turn were necessary steps to achieving employment in the banks upper levels.

Subsequently, Harry carefully scanned each column in the general ledger, quickly doing the math over in his head – three full times before finally holding his breath, wiping the nib on the edge of the inkwell, and setting his quill back in its rest. Waiting breathlessly, Harry barely kept from reaching for the quill again, but even if he found an error now, it wouldn't matter; the incantation would start immediately. In any event, he had gone ninety-three days without a single miscalculation, so he probably didn't have any reason to worry – but, he was so close to having the lab fees and tuitions for Potion Master Gavrok as well as enough to put in his first application for cart training (despite what he said to Hibby, he knew the Tunnel Master might very well think him too young to train on the carts yet – and he might be required to apply several times if he was to be accepted at all, but if he wasn't willing to invest in himself...) that a galleon's loss would be devastating.

As if the very thought of it had tempted fate too far, the ebony ink shining in the debit column's
subtotal field lost tone and contrast in a painfully slow color change – from shining black to muddy crimson to transparent. The color change triggered a sweeping transformation on the page: erasing thirty-two lines – back to the balance from his journal detailing the Inherited Investments from the Potter Family Estate. Digging the journal out of its stack, Harry threw open its cover, scanned its credits and groaned softly as he dropped his forehead on the journal. He hadn't checked the journal because out of all of the known family investments, the earliest expected returns for the month weren't due for another two days. But, there it was.

50 knuts.

50 knuts that he hadn't thought to look for - even knowing that his father had been a betting-man before his death.

His father had made a wizard's bet on the prospects of a Knott-Torquay merger falling through, when the merger negotiations had first initiated fifteen years earlier. As most merger negotiations were often concluded within a two to three year period, he had not even thought to look back to see if his father had cast a bet that the merger would fail – in his father's favor – crediting their accounts with fifty knuts. An unexpected fifty knuts that had just lost him almost all of the thirty sickles he had just won from Jessup.
"Cart assistant thirteen o'three." Cartmanager Holloweyes barked loudly and nodded as one of the assistants broke from the string of cart assistants standing at stiff attention in the hall.

Running forward, Harry quickly bowed in the normally low bow - common to courteous young goblins - before he realized that the cart manage Holloweyes had been joined by a tall wizard with a dark aspect and glare. Wincing in expectation of the Cartmaster's barked chastisement, Harry was startled when the Cartmanager Holloweyes, instead, switched to gobbledygook with a rueful growl.

"The Headmaster has sent another of his staff to 'appraise' your circumstances – under the guise of opening a secondary vault for Hogwarts – in this branch, though it has no proximity to any of Hogwarts's properties."

"Except me?" Harry sighed, bitterly, in fluent gobbledygook, discounting the wizard's startled expression to the fact that few adult wizards learned more than a spattering of gobbledygook.

Holloweyes gave a quick jerky nod in confirmation as he gestured the other cart assistants to certain tasks. In recent meetings, of branch managers, there had been numerous discussions regarding the Headmaster's inappropriately proprietary attitude toward the boy.

One after another of the elderly wizard's emissaries had toured the branch, each inquiring in some manner or other after the child's condition - until there could be no doubt as to the Headmaster's true motivation. Potter had been informed almost immediately after the most recent emissary had attempted (unsuccessfully) to pull disparaging comments from the boy about his living conditions and the goblins in general, with the clear intention of maligning the Goblins ability to care for the boy-who-lived properly and stealing his custody.

"As you say," Holloweyes agreed before offering a warning to the human. "Guard your neck and your knutsack with this one around, Wormroot, his scent is sharp enough to think he's just come from training with Four Claws, and he doesn't waste his teeth on smiles. "

After giving the stranger an appraising glance, Harry quickly thanked the Cartmaster for his warning before returning to English.

"Show this gentleman each of the vault sub-levels as well as any of the customary functions, afterward you may take lunch in the commisary if you are up-to-date in your studies; however, under no circumstances are you to miss the afternoon staff meeting." Holloweyes finished grudgingly with a just-this-side-of-hostile scowl (that served as goblins most polite expression) at the visitor.

"Yes, Sir. Cartmanager Holloweyes."

"This way, Sir." Harry intoned formally as he dipped into the shallow, barely polite – by goblin standard- bow customary to wizards, and directed the wizard to the nearest guest carts with a slight gesture that urged the man to move ahead of him.
When the wizard passed him with a dark, unfathomable glare, Harry felt a shiver run from the back of his neck down to his spine. The cartmaster was right; from his training with the Weapons Master, Four Claws, Harry had learned to recognize the stance and mannerisms of wizards and goblins alike, who were familiar with dueling.

The wizard stalking ahead of him had the stride and carriage of a wizard who was not only skillful in dueling, but lethally so. His grim expression was almost more fitting to a goblin; neither projecting the cloying superficial courteous smiles that wizards generally wore nor wasting his teeth by bearing them needlessly in a condescending sneer, though the tightness of his lips, the glint in his eyes, and the arching of his thick brows all expressed an air of condescension. The thick black robes the wizard wore were well crafted too, almost appearing bespoke, without the garish trim and decking that many wizards seem to prefer. As Harry studied the wizard's robes, noticing the close fitting sleeves and numerous buttons that secured the loose edges of his garments, it suddenly occurred to him that they were well disguised dueling robes that could easily be overlooked as plain daily wear, garb which could almost be counted on to interfere with a wizard's ability to draw their wand swiftly and aim accurately.

"If you have finished gaping at my cloak, like a brainless oaf, we can be on our way. You may have nothing better to do today, but I assure you, the same is not true for me. A full yard of parchment could barely contain the list of activities that I would prefer to do before entrusting my physical well-being to your no-doubt immeasurable cart driving skills." The wizard snarled impatiently.

"Yes, Sir." Harry rushed ahead to claim his preferred cart, ignoring the wizard's continuing dark glare on his back.

Despite Manager Hollow-eyes's warning, however, Harry found himself unable to repress the flippant response that came to mind almost immediately on the tails of the dark wizard's chastising remark, "As a representative of Gringotts, I would like to personally thank you for the trust you have shown in our bank and assure you that I have tested above requirements on all cart training and would not have been selected to escort any visitor, were this not true. Additionally, however, I would like to inform you that, for a small fee, should anything untoward and life-ending occur during our cart tour, your sacrifice could be memorialized on a brass plaque placed on a wall in our training hall to remind all future drivers of their duty to keep even potential customers safe."

Standing behind the impertinent boy, Potion Master Severus Snape barely repressed a snort at the amusing comment so much like one the child's mother might have produced.

"How comforting." Snape responded.

"Service is our first product." Harry chirped back so politely that Snape had no doubt he was being mocked, if lightly.

Snape studied the boy silently as Potter bowed almost inappropriately deep and gestured for him to enter ahead of him. The child's comments, manner, and wit were all unexpected, but none as much as the boy's possession of Lily Evans Potter's brilliant emerald eyes.

Fifty-four minutes later, Severus finally acknowledged, if only to himself, that the boy's report of his skills had been accurate. True to his word, however, Potter had delivered both the fastest and smoothest tour of the vaults that Severus had ever experienced, drawing from the Potion Master a flicker of grudging respect... as had his astute aside in gobbledegook to the manager regarding the Headmaster's seemingly proprietary attitude towards Potter. The headmaster's attitude had been one of the primary reasons that he had been so startled the previous year to learn that the Gringotts' bank had taken custody of Potter on the basis of unaddressed neglect.
As much as the headmaster might have wished to diminish the charges of neglect, Potter's delicate frame denied the Headmaster's former assurances that the boy had been pampered and cossetted. For having been two years in the goblin's scrupulous care, which none could question for goblins were infamous for their close attendance to their investments, the boy was still quite scrawny and must have been practically emaciated when first introduced into their care. Further, while his spirit had not been completely crushed, as his earlier wry comment showed, he did seem far more humble than Severus would have expected... calling a goblin Sir and bowing so deeply. Severus had met other goblin wards in the past, and had never seen the like. No, for better or worse, Potter was not the same child he would have been had Lily raised him.

Still, it left him to wonder whether he retained any of his parent's traits, but most particularly Lily's skills in transfiguration, charms, and Potions. Although he believed that he had enough information to provide a thorough report to the Headmaster, Severus nevertheless, posited a question of his own.

"The goblin you called Cartmanager called you thirteen o'three and then Wormroot; those are quite unusual names for wizards?" He asked with a subdued sneer, wondering if the boy had inherited enough of his father's ego that the Goblins were having put the boy in his place, even with the background of neglect.

"Oh, the first... that's the lowest vault level I'm permitted to drive to."

"Interesting, thirteen, could you perhaps explain why you only took us to nine levels?" Snape jumped on the boy's explanation, expecting... almost hoping for some sign of laziness to have warranted his mistreatment by the Dursley's.

"The little Hampstead branch has only nine levels, Sir. I have simply passed the training levels to work in any of the branches having thirteen levels, including the London British Branch Headquarters. They have 65 levels, but you can only get the training to go beyond the fifteenth level from that branch."

"Hmmmph." Snape responded dryly, not certain how to cover any seeming disappointment on his part. "and Wormroot?"

"Oh, that." Potter sighed with a blush. "That's... well... Like humans, Goblins hand out nicknames, if they think you've earned them."

"How. May. I. Ask. Did you earn the nickname Wormroot?" Severus asked with a smirk, finding it difficult to conceive of anyone who could possibly do something sufficiently dramatic with a completely inert ingredient like wormroot to earn a nickname."

"Hhhhhhhfh." Potter responded with a dry, irritated grimace. "I opened my big mouth last year just before my birthday."

Clearly recognizing that Snape was not about to let the subject drop, Potter sighed again and rattled off a rather long and unnecessary tale that ended with him possessing over three crates of accumulated wormroot, given him by various goblins, heirs, and other associated Gringotts employees, solely because he had huffingly reported to one co-worker that if anyone were to get him something for his birthday (not a common tradition honored at Gringotts), then he wished it was wormroot so that he could finish the blasted potion that was holding him back from additional studies with the Potions Master on staff. Despite himself, Severus snorted, shook his head and waved the boy on his way to catch up with his studies... promising -for some odd reason- that he wouldn't divulge the story to anyone at Hogwarts.

He had no intention of it, in fact... at least, not until the boy's first potion's class.
Satisfied that he had enough to report (not including the nickname and associated tale), Severus smiled again at the boy's rapidly retreating back and turned to leave, nodding to the two Gringott's guards that had been surreptitiously trailing them the entire time.
Accounts in Review

Chapter Summary

"The third – knowledge is principle waiting to be spent."

Harry sighed as he removed his outer cloak and hung it in his wardrobe, smiling as Hibby handed him a damp hand-cloth.

As much as he truly enjoyed being a Gringotts' cart driver, it was simply impossible to do his job without coming away coated in layers of tunnel grit, a substance, which somehow managed to defy all cleansing, impervious, and banishing charms and which could only truly be removed with a thorough - and costly- shower. Hibby knew, though, that he had taken a shower just two days earlier, and would make himself content with heated damp towels to conserve funds and thankfully had them ready for him when he came in.

Wiping his hands and face, Harry handed the towels back to the elf and turned to his accounting desk.

After dropping into a deep-most polite bow, Harry knelt and waited to be acknowledged the stately-dressed goblin, who was sitting at his desk reviewing his ledgers and making copious notes in a leather binder. After a moment, the goblin gave a curt nod, but continued scanning his ledgers.

"My apologies, Sir! I was not aware of your presence."

"You were not to be informed of my presence, Mr. Potter until the audit was complete."

Although he had been answered succinctly, Harry remained kneeling, patiently waiting for the goblin to give him permission to speak again.

"You have a question?"

"Sir, May I offer my humble hospitality in gratitude for your presence in my home?"

A flick of the goblin's feathered quill sent Harry and Hibby hurrying to the kitchen and out into the paddock where Harry kept the two goats he had purchased when he was eight.

As Hibby went to Mildred, the nanny, Harry went to Edgar, the smaller of the two, and greeted the goat with a friendly, "hey fellow."

He had purchased Edgar from Jessup, after the other cart driver made a foolish and thoughtless attempt to impress the tunnel manager, Holloweyes. Hoping to get an edge in the application process, Jessup had ordered his elves to take Edgar's scrotum and use the meat for hors d'ouerves that he wanted served with the custom offering of blood soup.
While goblins considered scrota delicacies - courteous to serve to seniors and superiors whom one wished to impress- the delicacies were customarily taken only from elderly goats that had proven their value by sireing no less than seven offspring in hale and vigorous health.

As a result, had Jessup attempted to properly purchase the delicacy, he would have found a single small serving priced well beyond his ability to purchase it. Instead, Harry's friend had rashly ordered his elves to take Edgar's without even the supervision of a beast healer, which he also could not have afforded - forgetting that while they were assigned to his care, Tabby and Nort were actually in Gringott's employ.

Because of the good relationship that he had with Hibby and the other elves, Harry was one of the first to hear that Jessup had been ordered to sell the little goat, that he had kept just barely fed, to the first bidder. Harry, feeling sympathetic for the scrawny little creature that he'd had to carry home - it had been so weak, had quickly offered a bid that was well beyond reasonable given the little goat's state, then immediately after, took Edgar to the healer and bought the recommended potion recipes and ingredients. In the year since, Edgar had thrived - under Harry's care and sired a kid with both Mildred, who was due in less than two weeks and Bunka, a nanny belonging to another cart drive who paid Harry a seventy two sickle stud fee and promised Harry half the profit when its kid is sold to the animal broker.

"Good Fellow," Harry murmured, casting a gentle cleaning spell over the nick he'd made under the billie's right ear before casting a second light numbing spell and the healing charm.

Edgar bleated happily, barely noticing the blood collection, as he playfully butted Harry in the chest-clearly hoping that Harry was ready to play now that he was home from his duties.

"Sorry fellow, I can't just yet." Harry laughed and summoned a fresh bundle of spring greens that he split between Edgar and Mildered before handing off the container of blood to Hibby.

"Your domesticates appear content, healthy, well-groomed, and productive," the auditor commented from the doorway, gesturing Hibby on to the kitchen as he cast an appraising eye over Mildred. When his eyes returned to Harry, Harry had dropped into a polite, attentive kneel. The auditor nodded at the gesture, without comment then moved from the doorway to the paddock where he gave the goats a cursory inspection, pausing only to note the slight swell of scar tissue at the burl of their ears - where the veins were closest to the surface.

"Your ledgers are in good order, your accounts appear adequately maintained, and your investments show a positive rate of return. You are either current or in advance of your required studies, and your managers' report strongly on your performance of your duties. Tell me, Mr. Potter, what are your ambitions?"

Harry paused, considering the question carefully. He had hoped that he could earn a summer internship at the London branch while going to Hogwarts, but Harry suspected that the auditor's question referred to Harry's long term plans, and he wasn't certain how to explain why he hadn't made plans for his future beyond Hogwarts- having no true idea what the wizarding world would be like outside of Gringotts.

And then there was Gringotts… In the two years that he'd been in Gringotts' care, Harry's life had improved so far beyond even the fantastical dreams of what life could be when he had lived at Privet Drive. He was never hungry. He had an entire suite of his own - with a bedroom, a dining room, the tiny kitchen he shared with Hibby and Ebby, and a study- not just a dark little broom cupboard under the stairs that dropped dust and cobwebs on him whenever his cousin decided to jump on the steps
above his bed. He had friends, teachers who didn't ignore him, and managers who took him aside to
offer their advice even though he wasn't having problems.

When Jessup had caused the cart accident, Tunnel Manager Holloweyes had visited him every day
to check on him; and Manager Griphook had dined with him at least once a month and after every
visit from one of the Headmaster's people.

Harry didn't know for certain what he wanted for himself in the future, but he was absolutely certain
of one thing: "I wish to return a thousand galleons for every knut Gringotts has invested in me."

The auditor clicked his teeth with amusement, as he continued to rub Edgar's ear to the billie's
delight.

"Very well, then, I shall see that you do," the auditor remarked cryptically, before dropping Edgar's
ear and ordering, "Come."
Chapter Summary

"The fourth inescapable rule of existence is that an unasked question is profit lost."

By the time they reached the dining room, Harry had given up on trying to figure out what the auditor had meant. The younger goblins that he had trained with had spoken of auditors in hushed tones and nervous rumors of anonymous bank agents who struck without warning, reviewed all ledgers and investments down to the knut, then ordered you to sell off any investments that did not meet their unspoken requirements. From what he'd heard, auditors had very little to do with the actual management of loans, acting instead as an over-sight to ensure that no individual ran up an undue amount negative returns. While the auditor's review seemed favorable toward him, Harry was not convinced that the goblin's opinion could not change at a moment's notice and kept the thirty inescapable rules of existence running in the background of his thoughts as constant mantra, in hopes that the running monologue would help him from speaking or acting rashly.

After the auditor glanced over the table with a blank almost expressionless glance and took a seat, Harry waited until he received permission to join the bank official and thanked Hibby when the elf set a bowl of blood soup, a walnut and lilywort salad, and a side of feta cheese in front of him. He'd almost worried that Ebby might overload his plate in a bid to get him to eat more, when the auditor's presence would prevent him from discarding food, but thankfully the little elf had restrained herself. After the auditor finally started, Harry crumbled the feta into his soup, and carefully sipped from the bowl as was customary to goblins.

After a moment, he felt the auditor's keen gaze on him, but politely ignored it, knowing that most of the heirs in Gringott's care avoided blood soup. While he doubted that it would ever be his favorite dish, Harry had asked Hibby and Ebby to serve it as often as they could, without affecting Mildred and Edgar's health, so that he could become accustomed to the bitter dish that was considered one of the most polite starters to serve goblin guests. Blotting his lips before turning to the salad, Harry looked up with startled surprise when the auditor clicked his teeth furiously, in a display of what goblins would consider hilarity.

"Centuries of experience should have taught me ago not to place wagers with Ragn’rok ," the auditor finally explained when he stopped clicking his teeth.

While Harry was intrigued by the unexpectedly personal statement, he was still uncertain whether it would be impolite to inquire deeper so he sufficed himself to clenching his fist in polite agreement before continuing to eat. Whatever the nature of their wager had been, Harry began to suspect that he was the root of it, when his gesture set the auditor off in another spree of furious teeth clicking.

"Recite for me, Mr. Potter, the twenty-third inescapable rule and it's compliments." The auditor hissed in gobbledygook.

"Yes, Auditor." Harry responded in kind, "Sir, the Twenty-Third Inescapable Rule of Existence states that before laying foundations – dig deeply. It has three compliments: the twenty first – wards and walls are for not if the ground cannot support their weight; the twenty-second – a foundation of stone will crack if built upon water; and the seventh – there is no greater folly than action without knowledge."
"If I had not seen your lineage charts with my own eyes, I would have you tested for goblin blood, Mr. Potter." The auditor uttered with transparent amusement.

"Thank you, Auditor." Harry ducked his head with pleasure. To him, it was one of the most unlikely, but sought-after compliments a goblin could offer.

Goblins, by nature, culture, and experience were necessarily exclusionary individuals, seeing themselves set off from all of the other magical races by both their history of successful rebellion against the human wizarding world and their exclusion of the other non-human races, who had refused to support them in the bid against human domination. Goblins were literally a nation and a people unto themselves, who had only seen fit to monitor and intervene in the affairs of wizards when it became obvious that the wizards were neglecting investments (in the nature of untended offspring) in a manner that would have been deleterious to both peoples, and then only by the treaties and the financial powers they held under those treaties had they been able to take possession of children like Harry, whose legal guardians were negligent in their duties. While Goblins were generous and attentive in their supervision of these dispossessed children, they, nevertheless, seemed view most heirs as outsiders: individuals to be trained and tolerated but rarely socialized with or accepted in their numbers.

After flicking his fingers permissively, the auditor commented, "your gobbledygook is nearly flawless with little accent barring the lack of vibrato in consonants, but I suspect that human throats are not constructed to handle such nuances. Your recital is accurate and prompt. You were instructed by Griphook?"

"Yes, Auditor."

Returning his bowl to his plate, the auditor wiped his lips on his napkin and smacked his lips to indicate his pleasure with the dish, then tossed the remaining cubes of feta into his mouth and chewed them thoughtfully. By custom, they had reached the point when Harry could present any questions he might have, and he promptly slipped out of his seat, to one knee to do so.

"You have questions?" the auditor inquired curiously.

"I wish to employ the fourth rule." Harry agreed.

"An unasked question is profit lost." The auditor confirmed, before flicking his fingers in permission.

"Given that you have seen fit to allow me knowledge of your presence, I presume that my audit is complete. May I inquire into the results?"

"Ask."

"Aside from the comments that you have made thus far, what is your determination on my status?"

The auditor's lips curled slightly, clearly pleased by the neutral tone Harry had used so far.

"The return on investments that Gringotts has made on your behalf, to date, have exceeded expectations. While I have yet to make my report, it will state that, based on the current rate of return, the principal invested should be increased – significantly with a corresponding increase in the rate of review."

Harry clenched both fists to express his gratitude, but remained kneeling.
"Will your recommendation be accepted?" Harry asked hesitantly when the auditor did not signal an end to the questions. It was a presumptuous question, almost to the point of being rude, but his instincts were yelling at him to ask it, and Harry was slowly learning to trust his instincts.

"Your investment has been closely monitored; you are correct in suspecting that this is a mere, if necessary formality. On receipt of my report, you will be transferred to the London branch where you will begin a new training regime designed to augment your current productivity."

The auditor's declaration startled Harry. He hadn't considered the possibility of being relocated, or heard of any other trainees (heirs or goblin alike) who had been transferred. The prospect sounded both exciting and a little daunting, but at first blush, Harry suspected that it would be a really great opportunity... until something occurred to him.

"Sir. Hibby and Ebby..."

"Your current assignment of personal assistants have been proven successful, I see no reason to elect new assistants. Similarly, Special Accounts Manager Griphook will be assigned a lateral transfer to the London branch."

"Thank you, Sir." Harry dipped into a lower bow before returning to his seat.

Barely three seconds had lapsed before Hibby and Ebby began to serve the second course, and Harry was grateful for their quick distraction. His mind was awhirl with thoughts of London, and he was almost certain he would have reversed the auditor's opinion of him if he'd been required to hold a conversation at that moment.

"Your hospitality and company do you honor, Mr. Potter." The auditor pronounced after they finished the final course and he slid out of his seat. "I look forward to seeing you in London."

"Thank you, for accepting my hospitality, Auditor. I look forward to such future opportunities." Harry responded carefully, assuming that the auditor was referring seeing Harry due to the increased rate of review he was going to recommend.

The auditor paused at the door to comment, "Given the frequency of our interactions, Mr. Potter, it would be advisable to give you a name that you may refer to me by, other than auditor. I am Coronae Magister Magia of the Clan Ragnrok, Brother to Ragn'rok of Ragnrok, President of Gringotts. Profit be ours," then swept out the door.

In his wake, Harry shifted nervously when Hibby and Ebby stared at him with wide – startled expressions.

"What is it?" He questioned them urgently, afraid that they were going to tell him that he had done something to offend the auditor, given the goblin's swift departure. Neither Manager Griphook, nor Tunnel Manager Hollow-eyes had ever left immediately after the meal, before the customary provision of drink and fire. He must have been too careful or shallow in his response, given insult. Hibby and Ebby were positively pale.

"Master Harry is not be knowing of the Crown-Maker?" Ebby asked glancing uncertainly at Hibby, who pushed her forward, trusting her to explain it better to Harry... or simply not trusting his own voice to hold out.

"Crown-Maker? No... He makes the crowns for the Kings and Queens?" Harry asked in confusion, that seemed like an odd corollary for an auditor.
"No, Master Harry, you's not be understanding perfectly," Ebby squeaked, falling into Hibby's habit of elfish grammar from her excitement. "Coronae Magister Magia... he is Crown – Maker... He is making the Crown of Magic... Master Harry - He bes making The King! Yous is ... maybe ... being the King."
Assets - Retrieval and Retention

Chapter Summary

"The fifth – image is the shepherd of success, intelligence is its coin."

Nodding a firm dismissal to 'courier three-forty seven', Harry smiled warmly at the child's back as the girl scampered over to her station, money belt jingling. Truth be told, of his recent charges, the starry-eyed blond was probably his favorite, and he suspected she was the goblins' favorite as well, as her supervisor forced an abnormally encouraging smile to his lips for her benefit.

As much as he had expected and looked forward to joining the London Branch and taking the lower-levels cart operator training, Harry could not deny that his new position on the "Assets Retrieval and Retention Team" was far more satisfying.

It was a task he didn't think that even Coronae Magister Magia had anticipated the possibility of, but instead - one that, by fortune's favor, had fallen into his lap, when his path crossed the Retrieval Team's path the day they veritably dragged the Zabini heir, kicking and screaming, into the London Branch, the very same day that Harry had reported for cart-operator training.

Unlike the Asset team's retrieval of Harry, Gringott's asset retrieval team had not claimed Zabini because his guardian had been neglectful, negligent, or abusive. Unlike Harry, Blaise had never been ignored, starved, abused, reviled, or otherwise mistreated in any form. He had been pampered and coddled and fed his mother's prejudices and beliefs as if pap from a nursery's elf's spoon.

Instead, the team had asserted the Bank's rights over Zabini in the certainty that, without intervention, he was destined to follow in his father's fate, mysteriously passing within days of Madam Zabini inexplicably increasing the rate of their death benefits, with herself named as the sole beneficiary.

Being taken away from a mother, whom he had, once, believed loved and cared for him, by individuals that he had been taught to see as abnormal, base, vicious, untrustworthy 'creatures' had been a terrifying experience for Blaise. Subsequently, he had been fighting viciously with every ounce of strength, physical and magical, that he possessed to escape the goblins as they virtually dragged him into the London Branch.

It had only been happenstance, that Blaise had caught sight of Harry as he crossed the hallway, and mere happenstance, that Blaise - even in his frantic state- had recognized Harry as the Boy Who Lived and had immediately frozen in surprise.

Most of the surviving Death Eaters had been Slytherin, and cunning enough to know that their values could be served as well by child of the light, as by a dark lord - who lost to said child, if the proper political associations were secured. In that light, they raised their children with a certain reverence for Harry, who presumably possessed the magical power and ability, as an infant, to defeat the former dark lord.

If it turned out, later, that the Boy-Who-Lived was too entrenched in the light, well, their children could be suitably indoctrinated into a more productive path of their parents' choosing.

So, at that young age, barely ten, Blaise still revered Harry Potter.
When Harry Potter told him that the goblins meant Blaise no ill-will - and that they had taken him in and raised him better than his own guardians had - Blaise had trusted and believed him.

As a result, in time, Blaise had accepted the goblins as his new guardians on the basis of that trust. Oh, there was no denying that there had been a few miss-starts as the child came to accept that his mother may have had other motivations, but before too much time had passed, Blaise had been convinced to accept the guidance and philosophies of his new guardians.

For his assistance in retaining the Zabini child as a ward of Gringotts, Harry had received seventy-two galleons and had been called in four other times to relieve the fears of mistrustful and frightened heirs as they became wards of Gringotts... before Coronae Magister Magia and Manager Griphook finally decided to redirect Harry's duties away from their original plan.

As a deep level cart operator, Harry would have frequently come into contact with the bank's more prosperous clients (or their representatives) building the bridges for future contact in political and financial realms - while he was still a child - and gaining a measure of their character, while they still believed he was naive and irrelevant to their current concerns.

The position had proven profitable in the past, as many of the wizards Harry escorted had shown a tendency to simply ignore his presence, trusting - in a manner that they wouldn't have had a goblin been present - that Harry's youth and position translated into his ignorance of their conversation.

While Harry had always maintained the bank's standards of client confidentiality, as a cart operator he had also gained several significant investment advantages, which had, in turn, garnered approval from Manager Griphook, Coronae Magister Magia, and higher notables (although those names had never been clarified). Subsequently, the decision to change his planned course had been somewhat difficult, but in the end, it was decided that greater strategic advantage lay in placing Harry in a position that would allow him to mold the relationship between the Goblins and other significant heirs.

In addition to being satisfying job, giving Harry the opportunity to encourage, support, tutor other of the Goblins wards, the profitability of his new position continued to win approval from Manager Griphook and gave Harry the additional time needed to improve his studies.

Having dropped off the last of his charges to their assigned station, Harry returned to the records podium that had been added to retrieval team's offices for him, so that he could regularly review his accounts and his charges performance reports - without having to return to his apartments, in the among the lowest levels of the Gringott's dormitories.

While the ward's and children's quarters were luxurious, by comparison to what he had enjoyed in Little Hampstead, Goblins traditionally ensured their children's safety by placing them in the lowest levels of their tunnels at the furthest reaches from any invading force, which in London - having eight times the clients and staff as the Little Hampstead Branch - meant inconveniently long rides between his quarters and his assigned offices. Still, there were some small indulgences from home that Harry had become comfortable enough with his position to allow himself.
"Hibby." Harry summoned his house elf in a quiet voice when he saw that he was the first of his teammates to have returned to the offices after delivering their charges.

"Harry has called Hibby?" Hibby popped in, his voice eager and excited.

"Yes, thank you, Hibby. Could you please arrange a ward's dinner this evening at 6:30?"

Hibby's expression positively beamed at the prospect as he nodded frantically, his enthusiasm so noticeable that it caused Harry to wince, guiltily.

While the move to London had been a profitable one for Harry and Hibby's mate Ebby, now assigned full time to Manager Griphook's staff, Hibby had found his duties and activities more than cut in half.

With the change of positions, Harry rarely visited his rooms during lunch; he never returned, as he once had- with his clothes covered in soot and tunnel grit; and the goats Hibby and Ebby had looked after had been sold to two of Harry's charges after they were relocated to smaller branches, where there was space and resources available for the care of livestock.

As a result, Harry often found the little elf's constant attention frustratingly inescapable when he did return to his quarters.

Harry was just settling down to revise his charges reports for the day, having completed all of his own assignments, when courier three-fourty seven ran through up to the open door and began knocking on the wall, frantically, forgetting to bow in her distress.

"Courier?" He acknowledged her, jumping to his feet and rushing over.

"Manager, Manager, Manager, Manager..." She gasped out in a rush. "Hurry, you have to hurry. Cart Assistant Four Nineteen has gotten in trouble again, and he's gotten hurt this time, too."

"How badly?"

"He's in the healer's wing, but Healer DimsFlush said that he won't even have enough for the minimal treatment, and he's refusing to let them pull directly from his personal account. He said he'd rather die that be broke."

Rolling his eyes, Harry caught her hand and followed her out as she dragged him after her.

Cart Assistant Four Nineteen had been Harry's most troublesome charge so far. Retrieved from the Malfoy estate, the cart assistant had stubbornly refused to acknowledge that his circumstances under the goblin's care were far improved over his previous treatment.
Like many of the other children of former Death Eaters, the cart assistant, Draco, had suffered horribly when one or both parents addiction to the Dark Arts had been turned inward by the Ministry's constant supervision. Draco had never acknowledged the injuries he had received or identified the source, despite both Harry's and the Healer's numerous attempts to get him to come to terms with the abuse.

More frustrating, though, were Draco's high temper and his tendency to take it out on others - especially their hosts, whom he irrationally blamed for the nightmares and mood swings that had begun to affect him more frequently the longer he was in their care. While the cart assistant had been both quick to learn his duties and both canny and careful minding his books, he frequently lost most if not all of the profits he'd gained in a week due to penalties for getting into arguments or outright insubordination to his supervisors.

Although he had been brought in two years, earlier, he had been so problematic that he would have been turned over to the ministry of magic for obliviation and return to his guardians, if the Malfoys had not been so heavily invested in Ministry's affairs, and the Malfoy's influence far stronger than it should have been despite the clear evidence of abusing their own heir. So long as their child refused to name his abuser, there was nothing the bank could do to stem the Malfoy's influence outside of working toward a more moderated stance in the future Lord Malfoy.

Draco had only been assigned to Harry in a last ditch effort to turn the boy's attitude around, after he had thrown a knife at his previous manager.

Admittedly, Defense Master Thornbrow had not been injured, but neither had there been any reason for him to expect the attack - in the dining hall, when he had only commented to another of their instructors on Draco's recent improvement.

He had improved, marginally, with Harry's attention: his fights had, at least reduced in frequency from daily to weekly, but it was still ridiculously frustrating how easily he was set off by innocuous and often unpredictable topics.

After dropping off the courier back to her station, Harry hurried down to the healer's wing and quickly located Healer Dimsflush, who was clicking his teeth sharply as he stared at a figure writhing on the the stone healing bench. Dropping into a polite bow, Harry knelt and waited to be acknowledged. Thankfully, the healer had been expecting him and turned quickly gesturing him to follow.

Before Harry could kneel, again, to await the Healer's announcement, the Healer flashed his fingers in a quick order to remain standing.

"He is unconscious." The healer growled. "He has refused to pay for treatment, even though the remaining debt would be recoverable. If he is not treated, Gringott's investments will quickly go to waste."

Harry caught a startled breath at the Healer's pronouncement of Draco's impending death, and he couldn't help glancing away from the Healer to Draco, even though it amounted to rank disrespect. He quickly returned his eyes; however, the healer had either not noticed (unlikely) or had chosen to ignore the slight, and nodded his head giving Harry permission to speak.

"How much would the cost of his treatment be?" Harry ventured. He had other questions, of course, but none that were worthy of wasting the healer's time.
"Seven thousand galleons."

The expense forced a chuff of air from Harry. It was steep, but the Healer was right; Harry had seen Draco's books. While Draco could not personally spend the personal accounts that were set aside for wards to learn to invest wisely, it was permitted to direct those funds toward medical treatment. Draco would have enough, but it would take months or perhaps even years for him to return his accounts to his previous levels.

"Healer, I will cover his treatment if I may have a moment, please."

Healer Dimsflush nodded sharply and called his assistant accepting Harry's agreement even before Harry could give him the account number.

"Hibby." Harry summoned the elf, requested three of his family's discretionary account books, and signed them over to the healer.

"He will not thank you for this." The healer commented, in an oddly personal note, after the payment was finished.

"No," Harry agreed, in gobbledygook. "But he will owe me, and perhaps that will be enough for me to work with."

To Harry's utter surprise, Healer Dimsflush bowed to him, in response. It wasn't deep, but the mere fact that he had at all was an unprecedented honor.
"The seventh – there is no greater folly than action without knowledge."

Stepping to the front of his charges, Harry glanced over Blaise, Draco, Taylor, Neville, and Millicent to verify that they were appropriately prepared for their venture. Blaise and Draco were standing the closest together, having become familiar with each other as Harry's charges, while Neville and Millicent - having been sent from outer branches to attend the shopping expedition - stood slightly off to the side speaking to courier three forty-seven.

"Courier," Harry called her over from her gushing explanation of how Harry had arranged for her assignment to department three-forty, which handled the inspection and purchasing of non-consumable animals for Gringotts (like the ebon-toed nifflers that were used in the lower and more ancient vaults to prevent the loss of galleons through vault wear and degradation) so that she could get to see, play with, and tame the new purchases before they were delivered to various departments.

"Yes, Manager," Three forty-seven, sing-songed as she danced around him, much to Draco and Blaise's amusement.

"Is there truly nothing that you would like me to pick up for you while we are picking up our supplies?" Harry asked suppressing, for her sake, the slight grimace he felt at being put on show.

"Nooooo. I could order any sweets I want, even if Hibby weren't making me honey and jumblebee jam sandwiches for lunch. Really, I could. I haven't made a single mistake on my accounts in ninety-two days."

"I know," Harry agreed smiling at the reminder of her accomplishments, despite her accompanying reminder that they all could have simply placed orders for their school supplies - were it not for the Ministry's and Dumbledore's continued 'concerned' interest in the "status and well-being" of the 'Gringott Heirs'.

Harry had been quick to point out to the Coronae Magister, when briefed about the Ministry's resurging interest, that - if the Minister (aka Dumbledore and Lord Malfoy's seemingly unwitting puppet) had given a deuce about the 'heirs', surely they would have sought to arrange a visitation with more than just Harry and Draco - in a more "neutral location". The Coronae Magister had agreed, of course, all too familiar with Dumbledore's meddling and inappropriate interest in Harry; but from the start, Harry had realized that his managers would have to agree to the ministry's request in some form or other - or risk impacting Gringott's investments.

Ultimately, after Gringotts proposed several artlessly manipulative resolutions, an agreement was finally negotiated for Harry, Draco, and 'other representative heirs' - who would be attending Hogwarts in the coming year to visit Diagon Alley for the annual 'Hogwarts Shopping Day' under the supervision of a non-ministry worker 0 who was finally selected as satisfactory to all interested parties and who was to meet them momentarily.
"Everyone has their voucher books then?" Harry asked gently, remembering that both Millicent and Neville had left their account books back at their home branches, not realizing that they would be needed for the trips.

Neville shuffled through his pocket for several seconds, seeming quite unused to the loose black wizarding robes that he had been given for the excursion, but with a sigh of relief pulled the thin voucher pad out of his pocket. Millicent's searching hand wasn't so lucky, and she grimaced retreating in her tracks to retrieve her vouchers from the meeting room they had just lunched in.

"If we're ready, then, we might as well move up to the front lobby and wait for our escort there." Harry suggested.

"That won't be necessary, Wormroot." A familiar voice answered, cutting across Harry's suggestion with a tone of amusement.

"Sir," Harry turned quickly in surprise. "Will you be accompanying us, today?"

"Obviously, Wormroot." The potion master replied, drawing his name out again with relish. "Or is there another title that you prefer to go by? I understand that you're no longer a cart assistant?"

Harry grimaced, shaking his head ruefully. The man had promised not to share his nickname with anyone at Hogwarts, but they weren't at Hogwarts, were they? And he had said nothing about whether he would mention it to anyone not currently at Hogwarts. "No, Sir, my current designation is Retention Specialist London Seven, but Wormroot is fine, or Mr. Potter, if you prefer."

"Very well, Mr. Potter," the potionmaster grumbled, seeming disappointed by Harry's equanimity, and Harry almost felt bad for not putting on a little huff and spoiling the man's humor, until the man continued, "You may have nothing better to do today, but I assure you, the same is not true for me. A full yard of parchment could barely contain the list of activities that I would prefer to do before escorting a cluster of ill-mannered, dunderheads..."

"Sir," Harry interrupted, bristling but trying his best to maintain a polite tone, "I would thank you not to disparage our manners or behavior before you have spent even thirty seconds time with us; while you may not be aware of the fact, our guardians have invested time and expense into assuring that ALL heirs display appropriate comportment."

Taken aback slightly by the familiar flash of temper in her child's eyes, Severus studied Lily's son for several seconds, noting the changes that two years had made.

Wormroot, for in truth he preferred the nickname to any reminder of the child's sire, while no longer scrawny was still willowy slim, and most likely would never attain his sire's brainless but brawny build. Unlike the detested parent, he appeared well-groomed if modestly dressed. Most notable of all, however, was the boy's maturity and maintained politeness - despite his apparent ire, traits so similar to his mother's that her stamp on the child out-shown the superficial imprint of the unfortunate half of his parentage - and Severus unconsciously moderated his stance toward the child.

He would still give lip service to the Potter name for appearance sake, but the child might as well have been named Evans for all that it mattered to him.

"I will take that into consideration." He offered, not quite willing to apologize, though it was probably warranted, "but reserve the prerogative to decide for myself … in thirty seconds."
"Of course." The child agreed - a flash of humor visibly cooling the temper still simmering in his gaze, before he asked with returned equanimity, "Shall we lead or follow?"

Severus gestured ahead of him, smirking when he heard Draco and another child, the Zabini heir by complexion, ask under their breaths: "Wormroot?"

"It's a long story," Potter huffed.

Surprisingly, the purchase of supplies was accomplished in a bare modicum of time, as organized by Potter, who allocated a portion of their supply list to each child, including himself, with firm instructions to request each clerk cast shrinking and lightening charms on their purchases so no one would be unduly burdened, before sending the Longbottom and Bullstrode heirs in search of their text books, while he and Draco remained with the Potion Master.

Sensing a shift in the boys' attitudes, Severus gazed at them impassively, curious to see who would speak first and what would be said.

For several moments, they simply stared back at him, then glanced at each other and seemed communicate with glances... not legillimency... he was certain, but more the sort of communication that arises from familiarity. A firm nod from Potter, signalled an agreement of some sort, followed by his raised clearly questioning eyebrows, then a less certain nod from Draco. Potter studied Draco briefly, before nodding to them both.

"I'll just get started on our potion supplies, shall I?" He offered then turned and hurried toward the apothecaries.

Severus stared expectantly at Draco, noting his idle shifting moving toward actual agitation.

"You have something to say, Draco?"

"Why are you here? Draco blurted out without a moment's hesitation, very much in the manner Severus remembered for early childhood. Even back then, Severus had dreaded Lucius's mistreatment of his godson, or he might have teased his schoolmate about Draco's gryffindorish tendencies.

"Are you asking for yourself, or Mr. Potter?" Severus evaded the question for a moment, curious to get a better idea of Draco's mindset with regard to Potter.

"Both really; You're not answering the question." Draco attempted his own clumsy evasion, but Severus was not going to be deflected. After observing their notable, if unexpected familiarity, he was curious to get a better idea of Draco's mindset with regard to Potter.

Draco straightened, clearly attempting to project an air of haughty disdain; a façade, which Severus cut through with a raised eyebrow and an expectant expression that Draco wilted under, after several seconds passed.

"Both really; I told Harry that you're my godfather, but he thinks you're here because you're under orders from both the Headmaster or … my father." Draco's carefully couched accusation and voice weakened as he referred to his father, but Severus pretended not to notice.

"And Mr. Potter's opinion of my motivation is relevant?"
"You're still not answering the question." Draco retorted in rather Gryffindorish deflection that Severus was inclined to ignore.

"That seems to be a trait that we share. You must realize, however, that there may be multiple reasons that I am here. Without a frame of reference, I can hardly offer you an adequate response? If you will answer my question, I may be inclined to offer you a meaningful response."

Draco cocked his head, and quite rightfully studied Severus suspiciously, but Severus was confident in his gimlet gaze, and knew that the child would be able to read nothing of significance.

His godson maintained his silence and suspicion for almost forty-eight seconds, a impressive display of self-control compared to Draco's behavior that Severus had last witnessed at the Annual Malfoy Solstice Ball, five years earlier. His godson shifted back and forth for several seconds, glanced between him and the apothecary's window several times, then visibly struggled to answer subtly: "Harry's already told you that he's a Retention Manager. Blaise, I, Taylor, and Allison Chamberlain are..."

"Interesting," Severus interrupted in an impatient drawl, before continuing, "I am surprised though that you would be so willing to do Mr. Potter's bidding. Especially when in relation to family... of a sort."

"I'm no- It's not... I owe... there are... oblig-... " Draco trailed off uncomfortably.

"Were you about to say that are obligations between the two of you?"

The answer was obvious, but the clarification and observing Draco's attitude regarding the matter were critical to Severus. There were more obligations surrounding the children than either child could possibly realize, but Severus had no intention of allowing either his godson or Lily's child to be sacrificed in the name of his duties. To that end, Severus would settle for nothing less than full confession, even if it meant dragging the full details out of his unfortunate godson.

His irritation must have shown in his tone or expression because Draco took a step away before nodding.

"Yes," Draco answered, flinching slightly, almost cringing in his skin.

"In which direction?"

Draco paled, backing further away as his reaction provoked a soft growl from Severus. He could never remember Draco acting so skittish, but then Lucius had always been gifted with memory suppression spells, in the short term ... and Severus was unpleasantly reminded of the elder Potter and his tendency to prey on schoolmate's weaknesses.

"Draco's debt is a private matter that has nothing to do with today's outing." Potter unexpectedly answered, from behind him, catching them both off guard.

"I happen to disagree." Severus retorted, "Untoward debts to untrustworthy lenders is well within the purpose of this outing, Mr. Potter... as is elicit eavesdropping. If this is how you intend to persuade the ministry of your guardian's good faith, you are falling rather short of the mark."

Severus suppressed a smile at the bristling anger that Potter wore like an extra cloak as he stepped around, moving between him and Draco. Instead of speaking to him, however, Potter kept his back to Severus and addressed Draco with a strange remark.

"A galleon a question, two galleons permission, three galleons discretion."
Draco studied Potter with quiet but clear anxiety then nodded and grabbed the list from Potter before he practically ran to the apothecary shop.

"You have him quite intimidated, it seems."

"And it seems that you are quick to jump to conclusions before investing the time to gain sufficient information... or is that what you were sent to do, build a case of false information and defamation for your masters to slander our guardians' reputations?" Potter's tone was surprisingly cutting for one so young, and despite himself, Severus was impressed.

"Why look for false information, when what I have heard is damaging enough?" He retorted in a cloying drawl.

"What information do you have?" Potter asked with a light scowl, "That Draco owes me a debt? When debts are a customary means of establishing leverage between families where ties by marriage are not possible? That I didn't trust you alone with one of my charges? They are my responsibility, and you're Dumbledore's or Malfoy's or the Minister's 'man', or perhaps all three?"

Potter's retort was so surprising to him that, for a moment, Severus was certain that it had been crafted for the boy by one of the goblins, until Potter opened his mouth again.

"How dense do you think we are? Just because we're kids, you don't think that we know what's going on? ... That we don't hear and understand what adults are saying just because they prefer to ignore our presence? That's the one thing I miss about being a cart operator - the money I could make off of adults' idle conversations..."

"So you've decided to prey off of your 'charges' to make up the difference?" Severus taunted, smiling openly when he struck a nerve and the boy's fists clenched in response.

"I paid off the medical treatment, he was too proud and too shamed to pay for; if I hadn't ... he wouldn't be here. Would that have been in his best interest?" Potter snapped back, "Is everyone in the wizarding world so prejudiced that they'd believe he was better off dead than in Gringott's care? If so, then why didn't they just leave him with his 'Father' in the first place? He would have seen to it quick enough!"

Potter's voice was so thick with derision and righteous anger that Severus was rather impressed he could keep his voice so low. As it was, Potter was clearly struggling with his temper, clenching and unclenching his fists, breathing heavily in sharp 'chuffs', but under Severus's gaze he slowly regained his composure and looked away. The child's passionate defense of his actions, if true, spoke well on the child's behalf - likening him more than ever to his late mother, but Severus wasn't quite willing to take his words at face value... yet.

"And you have no intentions of collecting?" Your motivations were purely beneficent?" He asked skeptically.

Potter shifted slightly under his gaze, and Severus smiled thinly. "Your behavior does not match your noble words, Mr. Potter. Are you, perhaps, being less than sincere?"

"No," Potter denied, but shifted uncomfortably again.

"No?" Severus drawled, enjoying Potter's discomfort, as he let his disbelief carry in his voice.
"No." Harry denied again, almost cursing under his breath. He hadn't meant to give so much away, but especially after he'd essentially promised Draco that he'd be discrete in his answers.

Even worse was that he'd also essentially trapped himself into answering. If he didn't, it would cast aspersions on Gringott's care and ethical standards, but if he did, it would be giving away information that he wasn't certain he wanted the Potion's Master to have. Especially since it wasn't about just him; wavering in his response for several seconds, Harry finally met the man's gaze, hoping that Draco was right about the man.

"No. I wouldn't care if he ever paid me back for it, except..."

"Except?" The older man pressed when Harry paused to get his wording exactly right.

"EXCEPT," he returned irritably, "I've needed the debt, to manage Draco. I don't want him sent back to his father, but he's been close to it a handful of times. His father doesn't respect Gringott's representatives any more than the rest of the wizarding world seems to, and he passed that disrespect on to Draco. I'm not using it to get him to do anything for me or to sabotage him, just to get him to behave properly with our guardians, so he doesn't get sent down."

It wasn't entirely the truth, or at least not the full truth, but he meant it sincerely and the small parts that weren't completely honest weren't in conflict with anything else he said, so Harry trailed off without further explanation, hoping it would be enough.

"I see." The potion master answered, staring at him with a dark-goblin like gaze before clicking his teeth and glancing away - just enough that Harry could only see the outer edge of his lip turn before the man mastered his expression and nodded toward the apothecary.

"Come, I have some suggestions to add to your supply lists, being in the know, as I am to what materials will be covered this year. Too, in my presence, you might find the apothecary more willing to offer a better grade of materials than usually sold off to first years."
"The eighth – a competitor's spy is your best servant."

"What?" Harry asked in surprise. "Is that it? Aren't you going to ask..."

"Was there something else you felt the need to so unwillingly reveal?" The older wizard questioned with a thin-lipped expression that might have been a smile on a goblin, but that - on a human- Harry had no idea how to interpret.

He wasn't certain, but he thought that the potion master was playing with him like a niffler would a trapped coin, and tried to extricate himself from the question as graciously and succinctly as he could, answering: "I - I think that - that question has too many layers to answer immediately, Sir."

"Smart Boy." The potion master responded, and turned back toward the shop. "Come, Wormroot, I am quite certain I have already mentioned that the list of activities I would prefer to do before escorting schoolchildren shopping would fill..." The man paused in his response, staring down at Harry with an expectant eye that Harry hoped meant what he thought it meant.

"...a full yard of parchment, Sir." Harry filled in the remainder of his sentence, then continued in an amicably teasing manner, "Yes, I believe you've said," and hold his breath until the potion master responded.

"Then it would behoove you not to dally."

"Yes, Sir." Harry agreed and followed the man, bemused by his change in manner, and trying to work through what he'd said and figure out why it would have made such a difference.

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Having collected the remainder of the supplies from their list, the Gringott's Wards met back at the spot they had parted and turned toward their last destination: Madam Malkins; though not without some balking.

This was the least necessary requirement of their unwanted shopping trip – as Gringott's customarily supplied their wardrobe at much lower prices and higher quality than they could expect to pay from the merchant. Only one irksome detail prevented this - the final line of their shopping list:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes must carry the Hogwarts Academy Coat of Arms, licensed solely to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions.

… And judging from the way that the potion master's eyebrows rose at that requirement, Harry immediately realized that it was yet one more item the Headmaster intended to manipulate. For what reason, Harry couldn't yet guess, but knowing how great a gossip Madam Malkin tended to be on her frequent visits to Gringotts, it was more than enough to be irritating.

The last thing that Harry wanted was to be put on display as a feather in the Headmaster's cap, but at the moment, he couldn't see any way to extricate himself and his charges from the unnecessary trip.

So with a glance to his charges, Harry steeled himself to enter Madam Malkin's shop thankful that he wasn't alone, and trying to hide the feeling of nervous watchfulness that had come over him on the realization that the Headmaster's agenda controlled their trip.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

"Hogwarts, dear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here – another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, freckled face and knut-copper hair was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Dad's next door with my brother's buying my books, and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. "She was gonna stay here, but Madam Malkin told 'er there wasn't much trouble I could get into with her pinning me up as she is."

His tone was petulant and a bored, seeming to resent the fact that he couldn't cause trouble, and Harry took an instant dislike to his attitude, remembering – unpleasantly- how much his cousin had liked to cause trouble.

"Then we're going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. Fred and George already have theirs, being on the Quidditch Team and all; Percy too. Doesn't seem right that I can't. I wish I could bully my dad into getting me one, and we could smuggle it in somehow. My brother's are great at smuggling things."

The boy's blatant disrespect for the rules and his father set Harry's nerves on edge: he was strongly reminded of Dudley.

"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry answered shortly. He had taken the mandatory flying lessons in addition to his cart training, but the frivolous pass time – while enjoyable - offered little towards his accounts.
"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth the appeal of Quidditch could be. The goblins did have competitive sports (cart races, fencing, beast dodging and riding), but they all had the added value of developing skills that would benefit their occupations.

"I do – Dad says it'll be a crime if I and Gin aren't picked to play for my house, our whole family have played, even Perce – second year- before he got caught up in the books. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"No," said Harry, feeling more irritated by the minute.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Gryffindor, all our family have been – imagine being in Hufflepuff, or worse, Slytherin, I think I'd leave if I got sorted into Slytherin, wouldn't you?"

"Mmm," said Harry, wishing the boy would move on to another tract or at least say something a bit more interesting. Coronae Magister Magia, Manager Griphook, and he had already thoroughly discussed his house choices as had his charges and their particular managers. While it was a little known fact, and even less advertised, the Goblins had been pleased to inform them that the sorting hat could be overridden by student request, especially if and when the student could offer a reasoned argument for the house of his choosing. So far, everyone but Neville had decided on their house choice.

"Hey, look at that man, the one staring in at us!" said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. "Looks like a right nasty piece of work."

"That's Professor Snape," said Harry, pleased to finally be able to comment on something without reservation, "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, derisively. "I've heard of him. He was one of death eater that got away, wasn't he? So sneaky they couldn't prove he did it, but the Headmaster's seeing to him, isn't he? He's a sort of servant, I've heard."

"He's the Potion Master," said Harry, liking the boy less and less every second.

"Well, yeah, I heard that, but that's just cause the Headmaster wants to keep a close eye on him, isn't it? Has him making the schools potions, too, an for free. Part of his parole, I expect, not that they ever put him up on trial that I know of. My father works at the ministry, and he would have said something if one of our 'fessors was a convict. Mind you, I'm glad the Headmaster's keeping an eye on him. Him being a Slytherin, you know? Can't trust the lot of them. Hope, I never have to take one a his potions; it'd probably rot me from the inside out."

Harry turned his gaze to the potion master- who was standing outside the window, his arms crossed over his chest and his face schooled in a forbidding visage- more easily understanding the man's animosity, if the boy was right; first being required to offer his services without reimbursement, and without a trial, and then being asked to lower himself to the task of an hourly child-minder. If that were his given field, there would be no shame in the task, but where his mastery was in potions, it was a demeaning task to be forced to- without recompense.

"I think I've heard that he's quite brilliant, in his field," said Harry coldly.

"Did you? Like it even matters how bright someone is when they've mucked about in the filth he has," said the boy, with a grimace.
"A tarnished sickle still weighs the same," Harry replied, trying to hold his temper and his tongue.

The redhead stared at him blankly for several seconds before challenging, "That's an odd thing to say. Pretty sure the git doesn't have any kids; why is he with you, anyway? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other, not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"It's okay if they're not, you know." the boy hurriedly answered, though hardly sounding sincere, "It's just it's got to be harder being one of the other sort, don't you think? They're just not the same; they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter. Imagine! What's your surname, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," the boy commented.

Professor Snape sent Neville in next, then Blaise, then Taylor, and Millicent, before finally sending Draco in, after the red-haired boy's mother had finally returned to collect the boy. Harry thoroughly agreed, and – even though Draco groused at being last - Harry thought it had been a wise move, given how blunt and biased the boy had been just in Harry's presence. There was no telling how outspoken and insulting he would have been to Draco, whose father had made their surname notorious and whose own appearance was easily recognized due to the Daily Prophet's coverage of the abuse that landed Draco in Gringott's care.

With Draco's measurements finally taken, Harry and the others turned back toward Gringotts, all quite glad to be headed back, when Professor Snape cleared his throat, stopping them in their tracks.

"Mr. Potter, I do believe that you have neglected to make your most essential purchase."

"Sir?"

"Your wands, Mr. Potter."

"Oh, I apologize. I'm afraid that there may have been a miss-communication. Gringott's wards are required to purchase the materials to construct personalized wands almost immediately on being taken into Gringott's care. Our first lessons in transfiguration and runes focus on creating student wands to be used until our majority."

"I see, an unorthodox practice that our Headmaster may not strictly approve of." The potion master commented mildly.

"Perhaps not;" Harry agreed, perhaps a little too pleased to be at the possibility of thwarting at least one of the Headmaster's manipulations, "however, the ministry has long sanctioned early tutoring for heirs to offset the later impact of estate management studies and tasks not required of the general student body."

"As you say, not unorthodox, at all; however, I am certain that the Headmaster would not wish you to miss the traditional visit to Olivanders." Whether it was Professor Snape's mild response, so counter to his usual acerbic manner; the fact that he didn't simply order them to the shop; or the fact
that he too turned back toward Gringotts; Harry couldn't say, but by the time they reached the inner silver doors, he had the distinct feeling that the professor was pleased with his choice.

Despite everything, the 'outing' had been more tolerable than Harry had expected it to be. In reflection of that fact, when he turned, in parting, to the Professor, Harry bowed respectfully low, as he might have to one of his managers and thanked the startled man … and several nearby bank clients.

"Professor Snape, I thank you for your accompaniment. Your advice on the quality of materials at the apothecary was highly valuable. Thank you, again."

After a quick, but surreptitious glance, the potion master replied with superficial equanimity, "Mr. Potter, as my services have been preformed, I will bid you a pleasant day... You may call upon me, in the future, if you require further consultation."

Harry thought he was the only one close enough to see the slight tinge of embarrassment color the man's sallow complexion, until he heard Draco's soft murmur of exaltation.

"I am honored by the offer, Professor, and look forward to September 1st."

Professor Snape nodded, before turning with a swirl of his cloak and exiting without a further word.

The other charges, except Draco, had dispersed by the time the doors closed behind the potion master. Draco paused to search Harry's face before he finally nodded and turned to go his own way, having seemed to come to some decision. Whether it was about Harry, the potion master, or some other matter, Harry couldn't say, but Harry didn't have time to consider it, at that moment.

Manager Griphook and the Coronae Magister Magia were waiting for him to report on the outing and to compare his impressions of the outing with those of the human Gringott's employee who had been assigned to follow and protect the heirs.
The Events of July Thirty-First

Chapter Summary

"The ninth – your spy is your competitor's until given a stake in your profit."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I must tell you, Severus; I am most distressed. For the goblins to have as much influence over young Harry as they clearly do, it is most troubling... most troubling... and that he has been forced into the position of using a substandard wand instead of the wand he was meant to receive. Quite troubling… Yes. It is quite troubling, indeed. “

Severus was almost boggled at the Headmaster’s comments. From his observations, both of Lily’s son and the Dursley’s son – at the Headmaster’s request, no doubt to find some evidence that the child could be returned to their dubious care, Severus had easily concluded that the establishment of the Gringott’s guardianship was a beneficial circumstance for the boy. The Dursley child was an absolute cretin even in muggle terms and had been routinely picked up by the muggle authorities for his brutish harassment of younger defenseless children, vandalism, and outright theft. Returning Lily’s child to their care would have been disastrous.

Compounded with the claim that the goblin’s wands were substandard, the Headmaster’s entire claim rang as suspect. Few but the most elite and affluent could afford wands crafted by goblin-trained wizards, and a goblin-crafted wand could easily run in the thousands of galleons. For Harry and the other heirs to have been trained in the crafting of their own wands and their family’s wands, was an unexpected advantage that almost none but the most ancient and noble families could hope to afford. Olivander, himself, had been goblin-trained.

“If…” Severus paused, doubting the sanity of his impulse to challenge the Headmaster, “If it is truly of concern, might I suggest that you reconsider establishing magical guardianship over Mr. Potter” Severus nearly winced at uttering the name ‘Potter’, still preferring to think of Lily’s child as “Wormroot” over his surname.

“No… No, unfortunately, that is not an option open at the moment; there are too many … arrangements that would come to light, necessary… strategic decisions, and sacrifices that were necessary to make, but that would not be well-received, if viewed from the wrong perspective.”

Electing silence in response to the Headmaster’s even more dubious answer, Severus waited for the Headmaster’s dismissal to his completed report. Regrettably, the Headmaster’s tendency to conspire behind the scenes was not entirely finished.

“Were there any indications of issues that might be useful in creating distance between young Harry and his … so-called guardians?”

“No, Severus answered with certainty. In truth, he hadn’t had the opportunity to observe the child’s interactions with his guardians for more than a few moments, but the child’s staunch defense and quick anger at even the slightest hint of a slur toward the goblins implied a deep respect for and likely
a close relationship between the child and one or more of his guardians; however, he wanted to give as little encouragement as possible to the Headmaster if his intention was – as it clearly was- to disrupt the young man’s living arrangements.

“Very well, Severus, please continue to observe young Harry’s circumstances as closely as possible for any trace of circumstances that we can turn to young Harry’s advantage.” With that, the Headmaster turned his attention to the stack of parchments on his desk, without thanking Severus for his spent time or diversion form his required, yet un-reimbursed, brewing.

“Retention Specialist Seven,” Defense Master ThornBrow snarled, slashing his claws across the span of the doorway to abort Harry quick brow, “Locate and collect your charges to the heirs’ chambers, immediately. Security protocols for levels eighty and below will be engaged on notification that all minors are secured.”

Gripping his fist above his shoulder level, to indicate his agreement and understanding of the urgency, Harry ran from the room, calling for Hibby.

“Yes, Harry, Sir.” The elf appeared immediately following quickly in his wake.

“How many charges can you safely shift with you through Gringotts’ levels?”

“Three Sir, of your size. Four if smaller.”

“And the lowest level you can shift to with them in tow?”

“Seventy-Three, Sir. Belowses seventy-three only elveses may travel in twos and threes.”

Unaware that the Defense Master had followed behind him, Harry was startled by the goblin’s approving click of teeth.

“Continue.” The goblin ordered before Harry could bow.

“Hibby, collect couriers three forty-seven and three-twelve, shift them to level seventy-three, eating hall six. Then, collect cart-assistants four-nineteen and four-oh-four and take them to the eating hall. I’ll collect scribe’s assistant sixty and call for you when we’re ready to shift.”

“Yes, Harry Sir. Hibbys is shifting the heirses as Harry Sirs is saying.”

With that, Hibby shifted, and Harry continued running toward the scribe’s offices.

Blaise, scribe’s assistant sixty was carefully blotting the edge of his quill against the keen-edge pad when Harry slid into the office.

“Scribes’ assistants, to me.” Harry called out after scanning the room and noting close to twenty assistants his age and younger blinking in surprise at his sharp command. Barely taking time to catch his breath, he explained to the Scribes who were looking up in shock and offense at his actions, “Defense Master Thornbrow has commanded me to collect my charges and take them to the lower levels so that security protocols can be engaged. I can save other managers time if I escort them as well.”

Their expressions cleared, especially as they noted Thornbrow coming behind, his hands flying rapidly in silent commands to every staff member and office he passed.
‘Comply’ an elder scribe commanded with a slash of his hand that sent assistants scurrying after Harry.

Arriving at the entrance to the cart tunnels, with a trail of scribes’ assistants, couriers, and refreshment runners whom he and other ‘junior’ managers collected on their way, Harry joined them in loading the youngest into the carts until only a small collection of the oldest were left, waiting for the carts to return.

“Hibby!” Harry shouted as he heard an eruption of the un-mistakable sizzling that accompanied curses and hexes.

The elf shifted into existence beside him, and Harry grabbed Blaise’s hand shoving it into Hibby’s, with the order, “Take him down, and come back for me.”

As Hibby shifted out, his wrinkled expression a mix of wretched concern for Harry and stark determination to return before the security protocols were set, Harry turned to the other young managers, and shouted, “Call your elves, they can shift you to level seventy-three, at least, and we can make our way lower from there.”

Thirty-four elves shifted in and back out carrying their assigned charge with them, leaving only Harry and two others behind, the other two watching for the carts with a grim expression and twitching claws. Each of their elves were within days birthing, if Harry was correctly remembering which ones they were and would not have been permitted, much less able to shift, so close to term. When Hibby returned, Harry pushed the two at his assistant, ignoring their startled grunts, and shouted, “Take them,” turning as he drew his wand. Hibby hesitated though, at Thornbrow’s snarled interruption, “Go with the elf, Whelp.”

The slash of his hand ordered immediate compliance, and Harry rushed to comply, but as he reached out to grab Hibby’s arm, agony shot through him swiping Harry’s legs out from under him and dropping him to the ground with a cut off cry. Almost on instinct, Harry threw his hand out toward the entrance to the cart tunnels and what felt like the direction of the source of his pain, gripping his wand tightly as he watched the corridor beyond.

His snarl falling to silence, as rage at the approaching intruder rose higher, Thornbrow sent the elf and junior managers with silent command and sliced his wand across the corridor’s entrance to seal it before he turned to levitate the young heir before him, jumping into the cart’s tunnel and running to meal cart, still stocked and waiting for its runners to return and make their deliveries. Slicing his wand at it, Thornbrow banished its contents, dropped the Heir into it, and jumped on its edge.

Despite his agonized writhing and the awkwardness of his position, as the cart pulled away, Harry was able to watch the entrance’s seal warp and bow before bursting inward and revealing a tall thin man who was wearing a strange head wrap and seemed to glide above the rubble as he entered behind them.

The glimpse was fleeting, however, for a breath later, the cart made a swift plunge as it spun away from the incursion.

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Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow of the Clan Ragnrok, Youngest son of Coronae Magister Magia of the Clan Ragnrok, Brother to Ragn’rok of Ragnrok, President of Gringotts studied the small wizard who was carefully righting himself as their cart trundled toward the lowest levels. When
the whelp had been transferred at his father’s orders to the London Branch, Thornbrow had been dubious at the wisdom of integrating the somewhat notorious heir further into Gringotts’ levels, regardless of this father’s claims that Heir Potter was unlike the seven previous potential regents that Gringotts had fostered in the centuries since Merridwyn the meddler had tricked their last regent into drawing the plunged sword from the home-stone, nearly-ending the magical treaty that had stood between the humans, wizards, and goblins throughout the untold centuries since the last ‘human-goblin’ war.

He still questioned whether the small creature could bear up under the weight of the armor they would wrap him in, but no longer debated his father’s perception of the wizard.

The heir’s performance had been circumspect: diligent in the securing of his assigned charges, notable in the protection of charges not his own, and -most notably, in Thornbrow’s eyes, unbiased in his attention to their welfare. The young wizard not only had immediately hit on a well-considered means to quickly secure his charges’ welfare, but had in the heat of action had been certain to inquire as to the safety thresholds of his elf’s shifting and planned accordingly without risking the elf by over-exertion, nor his charges with hasty shifts; moreover, instead of immediately departing once his collection of charges had been delivered to the cart tunnels, as he might have as easily interpreted his orders to allow, the Potter Heir had taken on the same duties of other junior managers and seen to the evacuation of striplings to the lowest levels, without consideration of their race or lineage, human alongside weres alongside goblins alongside elves according to size, age, and strength, but no other discernable criteria.

Had it been any other young heir, Thornbrow had no doubt that he would have seen carts filled with humans rushed ahead of goblins, weres, and fellow ‘creatures’. Nor had he any doubt that any other heir might have as easily left one or both of remaining elf-deprived goblins in Thornbrow’s care to shift away with his elf and escape the clearly noticeable sounds of battle. No, Thornbrow’s father had been correct. This wizard was one whom Thornbrow could break tradition for and train in the arts of galleonclaws. Whether the stripling would have the strength to bear out those lessons, he could not say, but the decision had been clear to him the moment that the Potter heir had ordered his means to escape away with two whom he owed no debt to and raised his weapon in defense against the invader.

There was no question in Thornbrow’s mind either, that this was the exact outcome his father had expected when he had ordered Thornbrow to stand guard over the strange heir when the wisps first detected malice and artifice toward Gringotts and its holdings.

As he righted himself, the heir’s expression was pallid and his eyes narrowed with pain, the scar above his barely present brow, inflamed and drizzling blood, but despite the youngling’s obvious discomfort, the heir worked his knees back under himself until he was kneeling steadily even as the flimsy meal cart threw itself around the tunnels’ curves, charmed to its highest speed, leaving Thornbrow’s wand and claws free to defend them. When the heir seemed certain that he could kneel up, he quickly and visibly clenched his fists with gratitude before following the training given to all younglings and flattening himself as low as the cart would allow to reduce his interference with Thornbrow’s aim.

Sparing the stripling a brief glance, the defense master clicked his acceptance of the gesture and approval of the heir’s positioning before turning back to watch the tunnels behind them as the air around them – scenting heavily like the fumes thrown off by melting knuts began to sizzle with hex charge. Behind them, guard carts cut across their tracks, chasing and intercepting the wizard who followed them – surprisingly levitating in flight without the aid of a broom, carpet, or other. Eventually, as they neared the forty-first level, the intercepting guard successfully, slowed and finally routed their pursuer, who ricocheted blasting curses as close to the escaping cart as he could while
shouting that 'the chosen' and stone would both be his.

Chapter End Notes

Just a small note about this chapter's inescapable rule, it does apply to the events of this chapter, but the connection won't really be clear until chapter 29.
The shard of soul embedded in Harry vibrated in agony, clinging as tightly as its unexpected bonding to its vessel, Harry Potter, permitted against the agonizing pull of its proximity to the diseased remaining portion of soul possessing one of his lesser servants, Quirinus Quirrell, a body equally poisoned by Quirrell's fascination with black magic. The tearing agony of the pull nearly overwhelmed the shard at several points until the cart driven by Defense Master Galleonclaw Thornbrow continued to descend, and the shard was reluctantly (and somewhat ironically) grateful for the spell that Dumbledore had cast on his solitary return to Privet Drive the night that he had dropped Harry off. If it had not been for the binding spell the old wizard had placed on the shard and the child, to 'lock that little bit of 'Tom' down', the shard was certain that it would have been ripped away from Harry and absorbed into the repulsive Voldemort/Quirrell combination.

It was galling to be even marginally grateful to the decrepit old man for that binding, much less for the fact that it wasn't the only matter he was reluctantly grateful for. Prior to the binding spell, without the necessary preparation spells having been cast of Harry to make a living vessel, which Voldemort hadn't even considered a possibility of doing, the shard had simply existed inside Harry's body similar to shrapnel in an injured muggle shoulder prior to healing. Eventually, relying only on its ambient magic, the soul shard would have weakened and most likely been absorbed or cast adrift in who-ever-knows-what form. The binding spell the old man had cast in addition to connecting him to Harry's magical had - through that core- had been infused with the cleansing properties of a child's abundantly innocent soul. The effect of the connection was that ultimately, though slowly, the injury that Tom Riddle and others had inflicted on his own soul finally began to heal in his shard.

Personally, the shard preferred to believe (mostly convincing itself by desire alone) that it was the result of being embedded in a living sentient being, being forced to occupying itself in reflection during Harry's early formative years (before the child could even hold his cup stably, much less the non-existent wand that Harry had crafted for himself), and observing through Harry's eyes both the muggle world and the Goblin's society - opening the shard's 'eyes' so to speak to several inconvenient facts.

The first of which was that while Dumbledore had effectively poisoned Harry's relatives to the child through compulsion spells and wards, and similarly blinded the other muggles in the neighborhood and Harry's preschool to Harry's plight through compulsion-rich, strategically-planted ward stones, he had not prevented the shard from observing the better natures of many of the muggles surrounding Harry - even though, through no fault of their own, their compassion had never been spared to Harry.

The second inconvenient fact was that -despite his own expectations - the shard harbored no ill will or intent toward its host. Instead, the shard, having experienced similar mistreatment and neglect in his early life, had almost immediately developed a feeling of kinship with the child it had been bonded to; though, whether this was the result of shared experiences, inherently intimate exposure to the child's magic and soul, or an unintended side effect of Dumbledore's binding spell, the shard could only speculate on despite knowing which theory it preferred to believe. Much more surprising,
even to the shard, was that it had no desire to usurp the child's achievements or recognitions regardless of whether the child was groomed to be the King of Magic or not, whether the shard was ever released or not. The lust for power that had once consumed him in his ever-present desire to divorce himself from his past and to protect himself from ever being abused or ultimately death had dissipated as he had been exposed to the thoughts and emotions Harry had as the child grew and developed his own sense of self, justice, and conscience under the goblin's influence. True, power was an effective tool, but for all the political, financial, and sheer magical power that Voldemort had possessed before his death, the shard now realized that he had not been successful in implementing even one of the reforms he had desired. In short, Voldemort had wasted more than four decades accumulating meaningless power that had done nothing in the end to either achieve his goals or protect himself.

The third inconvenient fact was that the shard had been forced by their exposure to Goblin society, to rethink it's entire belief system regarding goblins and other magical creatures (as well as muggles). Contrary to everything he'd learned during his years at Hogwarts, Goblins were a race to be respected, not only for their ferocity in work or financial acuity, but for the equality of their social structures, which enforced the rise through merit and skill alone- regardless of age, gender, or other ambiguous designations. While they certainly kept the secrets of their skills and arts within their own society, for self-protection, those skills and secrets where openly shared to any member who had the desire, strength, and will to learn them. In fact, the shard was rather fond of the terse little creatures, finding that he preferred their curt, straight-to-the-point manners, ironic humor, and close-knit families, and -truth be told - their penchant for gambling that was encouraged from the earliest ages.

In short, if it had any means at that moment to do so, the shard would have willingly rejected, renounced, and repudiated it's connection to the soul it had been torn from and the wraith that now inhabit his once-servant, Quirrel.

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Galleonclaw Thornbrow watched the trembling stripling as the cart pulled to a stop at the eightieth level. While he would have preferred to participate in the defense of the upper levels to ensure that the possessed wizard did not have the opportunity to rally and turn the tide again, Thornbrow could easily tell the difference between frightened trembling and that caused by pain. The stripling's movements were definitely of the latter category, and given the stripling's previous performance, Thornbrow was inclined to believe the pain was quite significant despite the lack of the child making any verbal complaint.

In the split second that it took Thornbrow to make that decision and for him to reach the cart's control handle, his father vaulted over the edge of the cart and into the narrow space beside the stripling, slashing his hand at Thornbrow to continue even as his feet touched the floor.

"Rig'anok, can you hear me?" his father asked the stripling, startling Thornbrow.

"Rig'anok?" Thornbrow questioned. He had been certain that his father would not select another 'Little King' for at least ten or more generations, especially considering how the general wizarding community had declined in the last two.

His father's sharp nod silenced him, though as the youngling's shaking hand pressed outward in a trembling gripped fist.

"Good. We will be with the healer's momentarily... all fees waived for your services to other managers in collecting their charges."

As wrecked as the youngling appeared to be, he nevertheless honored Thornbrow's father by forcing
himself up into a formal position of acceptance and thanks.

"Down now, Rig'anok, rest. We will need to speak when we arrive, and there is a decision you must make."

"Rig'anok,' Coronae Magister Magia's voice drifted to Harry as he felt the cart coming to a stop. "Do not try to move, we will levitate you to the healing bed."

As promised, before he could even try to gesture his thanks, Harry felt himself being magically lifted and directed through the hallway to the healer's ward. The magic felt surprisingly delicate for the healer's as it settled him carefully on the bed. While the healer was never particularly rough, it had always previously felt direct and clinical. To his surprise though as the magic turned and settled him in the bed, Harry saw it was not just the healer who was moving him, but the Coronae Magister Magia as well.

Bowing forward in thanks, when they released him, Harry sat back in relief, the pain easing at the healer's first cast after settling him. By the third cast, having noticed the significant glances being passed between the healer and Coronae Magister Magia, Harry began to worry especially when he noticed that President Ragn'rok and Manager Griphook joined them.

Finally, the healer stepped aside, and President Ragn'rok stepped forward.

"First, Retention Specialist Seven," Ragn'rok began, only to be interrupted by the Coronae Magister Magia who corrected, "Rig'anok".

"Rig'anok," Ragn'rok began again, with a click of approval. His eye teeth had never been wrong. Even if the child did not live up to his brother's expectations, Potter had exceeded Ragn'rok's expectations in ways that were already bring profit to Gringotts and the Ragnrok clan. "You may remember that when we first retrieved you from your former placement that you were thoroughly scanned as a course of restoring your health and magic."

After the child acknowledged having with a clasped hand, Ragn'rok continued, "During that scan, an unexpected discovery was made, which due to the possible distress and delicacy that might be required to deal with the discovery, Healer Magia Mensaetcorpor and I made the decision to delay informing you of this until such a time as we were certain that you possess the maturity needed to discuss this or an urgent need existed to prevent negative consequences for your health and well-being. With today's events, both of these qualifications have been met."

Harry considered the president's words, feeling a flush of pride at the president's implication that he'd demonstrated the maturity to change their earlier decision even as a feeling of dread rose at the thought of a medical discovery that they had put off telling him for five years when they had been so blunt and open about all other aspects of his life from the first moment he had arrived. To many thoughts were turbulently running through his mind for him to decide on the most important to ask, particularly before he had a clue what they were going to announce, so Harry gave a silent gesture to show he was ready and attentive to what they were going to say and blushed at the approving teeth clicks from the Defense Master and Coronae Magister Magia.

"Healer..." Ragn'rok ceded the floor to the healer that Harry now remembered as being the one who handled his medical intake when he first came to Gringotts.

"Rig'anok Potter," the healer greeted him. "I am told by your managers and the Coronae Magister Magia that you have been a diligent student. May I ask if you have, in any of your studies, come
across the term horcrux?"
"No, Healer Magia Mensaecorpor." Harry answered quickly.

"Healer will be fine," the healer answered, showing his eyeteeth as his mate, Thornbrow snorted at the allowance. Despite their many years together, the defense master still disapproved of his tendency to dispense with titles.

Ignoring his mate's displeasure, he healer explained, "Very well, horcruxes are a means of prolonging an individual's life beyond its natural measure."

"There are three primary ways to create a horcrux:
~ by splintering a soul through a violent act and encasing it into a prepared object;
~ by removing the soul from the individual's body, binding it to another living form, and allowing the original body to naturally pass on; and
~ by Lady Magic's creation of a soul imbued into an object that did not previously possess a soul, which though rare in the wizarding world, has occurred more frequently in the muggle world than wizards realize."

"Other magical races who use horcruxes include the djinn, niads, driads, crenaeae, and goblins according to their races' laws and purposes."

"In the Goblin kingdom, horcruxes are used as a means to prolong the lives of individuals with special skills and arts that our race wishes to preserve. President Ragn'rok, Coronae Magister Magia, and Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow represent but a few of the individuals whom the Ragnrok Clan have honored with extended life... through the second method mentioned."

Pausing as he noted a sharpening in the child's eyes, the healer considered what he might have said to prompt a change circumspect child's manner, but long-trained out of the desire to waste time speculating, the healer gestured for the child to ask his question.

"Am I ..." the child's voice thickened to a choked whisper as he spoke. "Am I the product of the second ... or third method, like a Pinnochio?"

"No, Young One. You are not the product of any of these methods; your soul is both complete and original; however, you do carry a soul piece as the by-product of an intersection between the first two of the methods.

That by-product is a soul-shard, which was unintentionally produced when an unstable corrupted essence splintered his soul in an act of great violence that caused the destruction of his own warped vessel. The shard cast off in the process clung to existence by entering you. It would have eventually dissipated once its ambient magic ran out had not Headmaster Dumbledore interfered by casting a binding spell attaching the horcrux shard to your magical core."

"It's from Voldemort..." the child interrupted, continuing in a whisper, "and Dumbledore what... tried
to protect it... using my core? That's why he's interested in me; not for me, but to get the shard?" - for the first time in their memory abandoning his customary courtesy out of shock.

"Yes, we believe so," the healer agreed somewhat surprised that the child had come to that conclusion so quickly.

After taking in a deep shuddering breath, the child stated, as if confirming to himself in the useless way that wizards often repeated the obvious, "So, I have... I'm carrying Voldemort's soul inside of me, and feeding it from my magical core."

Not a completely useless repetition, after all the healer decided, as it pointed out an error in the child's thinking that would need to be addressed.

After considering the child's surprisingly calm expression given what the child had just been told, the healer looked to the Gringott's president, then the Coronae Magister, but neither stepped forward or otherwise indicated that he should not himself continue, so the healer offered, "While essentially true, your summary is not entirely accurate."

With the little Rig'anok's slightly disconcertingly intense attention fixed on him, Healer Mensaetcorpor explained, "First, the shard is not the entire embodiment of that creature's soul but an aspect of it, and while the binding spell has connected it to your core and sustained it, it is not precisely feeding from your core. True, it would have dissipated without the spell to bind it to you (like tunnel grit in the mines ever-present but through and over everything in its proximity without cohesion); however, the level of energy magical energy required to sustain a soul is infinitesimally small and should not be equated to consuming your power as even with the miniscule amount that has been absorbed, there is some evidence of a power exchange or redistribution."

"What does that mean... the first part about it not being an embodiment?" the child's confusion quaked in his voice.

"Imagine that the soul is an enchanted vault cart, filled with galleons, sickles, and knuts. The wealth in the cart only belongs to a particular vault, but there are coins of many types. What happens as the cart travels through the tunnel and when it reaches the vault?"

"The cart is enchanted to sort the coins to their types so that they can be stacked appropriately and easily retrieved," the Rig'anok answered promptly, the odd context of the questions working to ease the child's anxiety.

"Exactly, the soul has similar ... processes... to access different aspects ranging from elements used in contemplation, magic focus, emotion, conscience, stability, and communication to those engaged in physical activities and other proclivities. The processes or enchantments of the soul allow like-elements to be drawn to like-elements for more effective use in any given activity. Because of this, when a splinter of a soul is created, this can result in the shards having a particular composition rather than reflecting the complete composition of the soul."

"Can you tell what it is?"

"I have studied your first scans from the first taken through every treatment and scan since, and believe that I can safely rule out the possibility that it is composed of the creature's malice, proclivities, or dark magic focus. Based on the lack of change in the connection from the first scan to the scan I took only moments ago, I believe, but cannot guarantee that the composition may be of elements from the creature’s intellect, conscience, sentience, or empathy (or combinations there of) - if any still existed at the time the shard was created. The only assertion I am completely certain of - or we would have removed the shard immediately on its discovery - is that the corrupting influence that
destabilized the original soul was not and is not present in the current form."

Grimacing slightly, the child asked, "What are the methods and subsequent expenses to having it removed?"

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Griphook watched the sleeping child with amusement and relief.

It had taken the young Rig'anok fourteen minutes before the child had truly recovered from both the exertion and pain caused by his coming into the proximity of Voldemort's possessed puppet and the subsequent shock of discovering that he contained a portion of the dark wizard's soul. Fourteen minutes, before Potter had realized that he was speaking freely with the Coronae Magister, President, and Defense Master, and the child's composure and strict adherence to customs reasserted itself - startling even the Coronae Magister, himself, by the speed of the change.

Given the depth of the news imparted, none of the goblins present had thought anything of the child's brief lapse, yet the depth of his resilience had been admittedly impressive - a credit to the President's choice and in the President's own words - well-reflected on Griphook's career as he had been the child's primary manager - even after the Coronae began to mentor the child.

"Quite unusual for a human." Healer Mensaetcorpor commented, surprising Griphook as he passed, his footsteps silent.

Hurriedly greeting the healer with a deferential bow, Griphook clenched his hand until the healer acknowledged his request to speak with a nod.

"If you would provide a list of the materials required, special instructions for handling, and preferred outside vendors if necessary, I can begin the requisition process." Griphook offered politely. As Harry's primary manager, it was within Griphook's authority and would moreover increase his standing with several vendors from whom the higher grade materials needed to construct a golem would be ordered.

Healer Mensaetcorpor's brow furrowed in surprise as he disagreed, "Such an investment of time and funding is certainly unnecessary. Admittedly the little Rig'anok is unusual for his kind, but you cannot believe that the youngling would make such a heavy investment to give life to the soul of the creature that murdered his progenitors, regardless of the advantages that could be gained doing so. A stripling of our race might do so, but we are 'made of stronger materials' as the wizards say."

Griphook ignored for the moment the healer's miss-phrased quote of the human and wizarding phrase; it was not really the point and would be impolitic - given that the healer's accounts were older and more prosperous than his own. Disagreeing even would be impolitic, unless managed carefully.

Drawing a wager-chit out of his pocket to indicate he held a different opinion than the healer, and would wager on it if the healer accepted, Griphook waited in silence as Healer Mensaetcorpor studied him - teeth likely clicking in amusement.

"You think otherwise, young one." The healer answered, acknowledging the gesture, if not as formally as was commonly done.

"Yes," Griphook agreed. "Provide the materials, special instructions, and preferred vendors lists, and I shall purchase the materials and have them collected at my expense. If the Rig'anok decides as you say, I will reimburse your time and equally split any profit I make on reselling the materials. If, however, the Rig'anok decides as I believe, you would reimburse my time, expense, and the
"Interesting." Healer Mensaetcorpor commented before cautioning, "You are aware, of course, that the steep cost of these purchases - much less the wager itself - will automatically record to this cycle's council account books, with little time for recovery if you are in error."

The healer's warning, though unnecessary, was well taken by Griphook. Most Goblins, who were not in direct supervision of one offering a wager, would not make such a warning.

The rise and fall of their nation depended on the wisdom and cunning of their numbers. A goblin who could not risk wisely should not and would not be permitted to keep the coins to do so; what wagering did not take care of naturally, the auditors would, and by making this large of a wager so close to the end of an accounting cycle, Griphook would definitely catch the attention of auditors - for better or worse.

If he were any less certain of his charge, Griphook wouldn't have considered it. The fines of such a failed risk would set him back almost as much as the stain on his reputation of having lost such a costly bet, but for better or worse, having spent four years in charge of the little wizard, Griphook firmly believed that he could predict the child's choice. For a wizard, the young future-king had a singularly unique talent for winning the favor of goblin and elf alike - through the simple act of accepting them as equals or betters, a trait that no other wizard of Griphook's knowledge had ever demonstrated.

If perhaps Healer Mensaetcorpor had elected not to draw a distinction between the dark wizard's unstable soul and the composite of the soul-shard or had not offered options for removing the shard that amounted to giving it life by embuing its soul into a golem or death either by essentially obliterating its nature and absorbing its power into his core or by breaking the bonding spell and forcing its dispersion - then, yes, Griphook could see a chance that the child would choose a different option that reflected or enacted measure of vengeance for his parents' deaths.

Or, if the child had been given some certainty that the shard was composed of the dark wizard's malice and corruption, then certainly, Griphook would not predict any other outcome.

Anyone who had watched the child training with London branch's Fourth Defense Master, Dagger-eye, would know that while the child did not joy in battle for battle's sake as many young striplings both human and goblin did, the child possessed the will and acuity to strike out against an opponent and did so efficiently and remorselessly. Knowing the child as he did, Griphook had no doubt that remorse would eventually come to Harry when the stakes were higher than sickles and galleons lost on the sparring mats, but believed that training and duty would win the wager over remorse and doubt if the child continued as he believed the child would now... putting even the shard's life equal to his own if there was a possibility of its redemption.

"One must risk to gain." Griphook answered, holding out the chit.

"Risk only what you are willing to gain," the healer warned softly, but after a moment of silence between them, took the extended chit and slipped it into his pouch before dismissing Griphook with a casual flick of his forefinger.

Griphook had barely reached the entrance to the healer's hall before his ears picked up a positive omen for his wager as the child's voice carried to him, asking the healer whether it was possible to speak with the shard in some manner, before he made his decision.

Not wishing for Healer Mensaetcorpor to hear the amusement clicking from his teeth, Griphook
hurried through the entrance and toward his office.

He was not looking forward to informing Defense Master Dagger-eye that the child’s defense training might no longer be scheduled with Dagger-eye, who -unknown to the child- had already been pushing Griphook to release him from retrieval duties to pursue extra defense training. Given Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow’s presence, though, Griphook suspected the Coronae Magister had other plans in mind.
"What in Merlin's name did you think you were doing?" Draco positively shrieked at Harry as he entered the common corridor to the heirs' quarters.

Luna was clinging to Draco's hand, briefly hesitating to step forward as they scanned him looking for any visible indicators clues to the injury that put him into the healer's hall overnight. At the sound of Draco's fussing, Blaise hurried out of his quarters, still rubbing the pomegranate moonpearl oil over his nails to remove the last of the ink from under his fingernails. Just behind him came Millicent doing the same, and buffing them into her palms with frustration. Neville, when he came out, looked like he had hurriedly pulled on an over-shirt, and was still running a half-dry towel through his hair.

"Hey Harry, you alright?" Blaise was the first to break the silence that fell over the other heirs as they stared slightly surprised at Draco, who himself looked startled at his outburst and was starting to flush at their attention.

"Fine, Blaise, thank you. Where's Taylor?" He turned his question to Luna to distract the others and give Draco a chance to calm down.

"Tutoring with courier seven twenty four. He improved on his last review, but he's still ten minutes slower than the rest of the level threes." Luna answered before pulling her hand out of Draco's and running forward to hug him.

"And guess what, Daddy came for a visit today," she continued, skipping around him.

"He did? That's great. Did he get to stay long?" Harry asked hoping for her sake that the man had.

Unlike most of the other parents of 'retrieved' heirs, Mr. Lovegood seemed to be a genuinely kind man who loved Luna and doted on her - when he could remember her, that is. He really wasn't all there, and Luna had been removed from his custody after Mr. Lovegood had left her alone in their home at three years old without anyone to care for her - claiming that the nargles had promised to feed her and the whilliewazzles to play with her while he was away the following month.

"No. Only about an hour before he had to go back to work, I did get to show him two mating pairs of the golden toed nifflers before he left; though, and he got to meet Beast Master Shortclaw and hear that Master Shortclaw has accepted my training application."

"Congratulations, Luna." Harry answered with relief. "Hibby, please check how much longer Taylor's tutoring session will be. Sala, Cala, Airo, Tanky, Prust, Please set up the dining table." Harry called to their assigned elves before turning back to them. "I know everyone is curious about what happened yesterday, and I'll be happy to tell you, but honestly, it's been a very long day, and I am famished. Why don't you get your account books, and bring them to the table. By the time I'm finished, Taylor, should probably be back, and we can eat."
Most of the other heirs took the suggestion at face value, but Draco remained stubbornly in the hall. Harry hadn't expected any different. Draco had been raised to believe that he was entitled to receiving what he wanted when he wanted and while it was getting better, it was slow going. Harry tipped his head gesturing for Draco to follow.

"Okay, Draco, let's see, how about a galleon a question, two for dropping a question if I say I don't want to answer, and three galleons for ending the conversation when I ask."

"I don't care about stupid coins right, now." Draco snapped peevishly, and demanded "You stayed topside when you were supposed to come back with your elves after they dropped us off, and you didn't, and you ended up hurt, and I want to know why."

Draco was almost panting by the end of his demand, and Harry wasn't certain at first how to answer him. Sometimes Draco would get incredibly prickly if you even suggested that he was having an emotion, other times his masks would come down faster than a cart going off the rails if he thought that someone believed he didn't or couldn't care, and this felt like a mix of both.

He went with the only thing he could think of that wouldn't fall to either side: logic and duty, "Draco, as a retention specialist, I am a ranked equal to a junior manager. Included in the responsibilities that I have been paid for since coming to this branch is the duty to protect, guide, and oversee lower ranks. I was doing the job that I swore to do and have been paid to do. I realize that I have a duties to you as well as the other heirs, and would not have willingly foregone them if those duties were put into conflict."

Watching as the blunt facts took some of the wind out of Draco's sails, Harry took a chance and pushed his shoulder lightly, challenging in a wry tone, "But, thanks for showing you care," before turning serious again, "It means a great deal."

And it did to Harry. Things were slowly improving with Draco, but Harry knew if he weren't there to run interference, Draco would probably be sent down before the year was out.

"Who said I cared," Draco huffed half-heartedly.

"You did, just now, twice." Harry teased before turning to grab his account books from inside the desk just inside the door. He rarely reviewed his accounts in his room any more, finding that his charges were more prone to get their accounts checked and finished promptly if he joined them in the dining room.

"Manager," Taylor interrupted the start of the casual conversation was trying to deflect to as he and Draco walked back toward the dining room. Based on the solemn expression the courier wore, Draco easily picked up on the need for privacy and said he needed to pick his account books up.

"What's wrong, Taylor?" Harry asked, pulling the courier into his room to sit down.

"I shouldn't have waited this long to say it, but I don't want to go to Hogwarts. Before my Mum's accident, Mum home-schooled me, and that worked fine for me. The manager I was assigned to before I was transferred here said that it was still an option and that I could study for my owls and newts, just like I have up to this now, as long as I was under a manager's supervision. When I was placed with you and found out that you're going to Hogwarts, and so were Draco, Blaise, Neville, and Millicent, well, I thought that meant I had to go too, but Courier seven twenty four just told me that just because a manager transfers doesn't mean that the workers under him or her have to transfer too, so... I wanna know, do I have to go to Hogwarts?"

Not used to hearing the shy courier say more than five to seven word sentences, it took Harry a
couple of seconds to figure out what Taylor was trying to ask, but as soon as he did, Harry flashed the courier a wide smile.

"Taylor, if you want to stay here and continue lessons that should be just fine." (If Harry's managers had offered it as a choice, he would have made the same choice, but knew better than to even ask - given his particular circumstances.)

Pushing that thought aside, somewhat sourly, Harry continued, "Your accounts are in good order, and you are in advance of most lessons, but If I can make one suggestion?" Harry smiled as his charge nodded enthusiastically for him to continue.

"If you'd like to stay at this branch, it would be a good idea if you look at taking up a different job. You really don't have the speed or memory of offices and tunnels to make a strong courier. I know you don't like the carts, but..."

"I wanna work in the shipping offices. I've looked at all the requirements, and have them, but didn't apply because, well Hogwarts..."

"Okay, then why don't you apply for a trainee position? You'll probably be run off your feet for a few weeks, but it will be cheaper than applying for an entry position and give you a chance to see if you'd like it." Harry advised.

"Oh, I already know I like it. After Runes, I sometimes hang out with Chipclaw, he's already a clerk and let me help a couple of times." Taylor answered happily.

Of course, Chipclaw would have, Harry thought with a smile. Very few goblin were adverse to having free help getting their work done. They wouldn't trust the work completely, but if it got done faster and well, it was more coins in their belt. He truly hoped that Taylor would find a position in the department he liked, as it had been quite difficult for Harry to guide the boy into a position he was suited for.

He had finally suggested courier to the child (and paid Taylor's application fee out of his own pocket) in hopes that a position, which could fit even Luna, might provide a good fit for Taylor as well. While paying a charge's application wasn't often done, it was not unheard of either; although, it did cause the Coronae Magister to furl his brow and tap the line in Harry's expense journal, before muttering, "risk to gain" and closing the book with a nod.

While the Gringotts' application process could sometimes seem cruel to applicants who couldn't see or accept their limitations and hoped to rise above their skill levels, in the end, most eventually settled into positions they were well-suited for and fell under the protection of higher skilled managers who learned early on the benefits of encouraging their charges' well-being and productivity.

"Okay then, it sounds like you have a plan. Why don't we catch up with..."

"Actually, Manager, I do need one more thing... your endorsement? I can only stay if I have a manager's supervision, but since you'll be at Hogwarts, I'll need to transfer managers, with your endorsement, of course."

"Of course, bring that book to the dining room as well, and I'll sign it tonight." Harry laughed quietly.

By the time they reached the dining room, the others had apparently finished reviewing their account books and stacked them by Harry's place setting before starting on their own meals.

Draco had a wager chit out, flipping it back and forth around between his middle and index finger,
and grinning at Neville.

"Come on, Neville, you know you want to take the wager." Draco taunted.

"What's the wager?" Harry questioned.

He rarely intervened in their wagers, unless one would have too much of an edge over another - particularly with Draco, who was their undisputed source and uncontested winner in matters of wagers on investments and financial matters. Blaise seemed to have an edge on betting pools about whose applications would be accepted by different department managers. Though she rarely made wagers, Luna had an strangely undefinable edge in wagers that didn't seem to have any particular connection. She'd wagered on a cart once because the rail had a chip that reminded her of a smile, and had won heavily even though the driver rarely won and the cart hadn't been serviced in the past year.

"I keep telling him that scrimping on cauldrons for potions because he's blown up a couple up and doesn't want to pay a lot for one that he might only blow up just results in him buying cauldrons that are more likely to blow up. He's fine at prepping the ingredients and has most of the basic recipes down; he just needs to stop flinching when ever something bubbles and buy a decent cauldron that doesn't blow up with the drop of a stirrer."

"And that doesn't sound like a wager to me." Harry cut him off, wondering if his charge was trying to slip something by them.

"The wager is," Draco sighed dramatically, "Neville uses my spare cauldron instead of that pig-iron pot he just bought from the smitties in training - for Potions tomorrow, and if he blows it up, I lose and have to buy a new cauldron for myself, and he'll have the pig iron one for the next day... OORRRRR, he uses it, doesn't blow it up, and tomorrow he lets me pick an actual cauldron for him to buy - you know ... one with three legs instead of four mismatched ones and a clip to hold the stirrer when it's not in use."

"Exclude gold, monogrammed, any rune-engraving beyond student standard protections, crystal or gemstone cauldrons, and that would seem like a fair wager to me, Neville. It might help improve your brewing outcomes, and Draco's right, you know, about your competence with potion ingredients and standard recipes. It seems to me like a good way to eliminate another possible factor messing with your progress in practical brewing."

Neville glanced between the two of them, then asked Draco in an uncertain tone, "Will you accept those exclusions?"

It went without saying that one of the reasons Neville was hesitating to accept the wager was that despite Neville being quite skilled at ingredient sourcing, moderately successful cart driving (fourth level and above - as going below the fourth level or to above-ground levels higher than the second story muggle and muggleborn vaults made Neville incredibly dizzy), sketching botanical diagrams, and increasingly competent in estate accounting; the Longbottom heir was absolutely pants at making wagers. Harry thought it was due to a mild lack of confidence. Unfortunately lacking the confidence to make a timely wager -when it could be successful - directly interfered with the ability to gain confidence making wagers.

Draco paused for several seconds to consider the limitations before nodding and flicking the chit over to Neville. "Done. My spare cauldron is the one in the blue carrying case. I'd prefer you to take it to class in the carry case, or re-wash it before putting back into the case. I don't think there's anywhere that tunnel grit doesn't get."
"Tunnel grit..." Neville murmured, his eyes widening as he thought of something, probably the exact point that Draco was trying to get across, but Harry didn't stop to ask or point it out.

Instead, he reached for Draco's account book, resting on the top of the stack. Scanning 'fines' column of the adjustment ledger, Harry rechecked the dates then ran his gaze down the empty credit column again, before flashing his gaze to Draco who was watching him -smugly- clearly waiting for Harry to notice and react.

A whole week.

Draco had avoided earning a single fine through the whole week, and this was the first time that Harry had noticed with more than a passing glance. Admittedly, it had been a busy few weeks between negotiations for their unnecessary 'shopping trip', welcoming and settling Neville and Millicent in, in addition to his 'regular' responsibilities, which it now seemed he had been slightly shirking, and it was logical why Harry might not have noticed yet, but now that he did...

Harry raised his gaze again and smiled broadly at Draco before nodding to him, and recording an adjustment in his manager's journal, reducing the debt Draco owed him by seventy-five galleons. Once recorded in the manager's adjustment journal, changes would cascade through the charge's account records - without triggering the penalties assessed to adjustments needed when the heirs first complete and review their ledgers in the evening.

Closing Draco's ledger he handed it back before picking up Millicent's. As he reviewed the adjustment, he chuckled when he heard Draco gasp at the amount of the adjustment.

"If you need an itemization of the adjustment, I would be happy to provide one for a fee, but I suggest that before you request one, you attempt to calculate the adjustment on your own. If you are not able to reach the same conclusion, we can make an appointment to discuss it." Harry offered, even as he signed off on Millicent's ledgers.

Despite having a fairly good week, in most of the areas, Millicent had run up a small fine by missing two entries in the previous night's accounting, and another one that evening.

Closing her journal, Harry suggested, "The entries you missed were each related to the same investments. Perhaps, it would be wise to record them in a separate investment account for that particular investment making it easier to discern fluctuations in the account."

"Yes, Manager," Millicent agreed with a rueful smile.

The remaining reviews went without much comment; although, Harry did lift an eyebrow at Neville on reading a fine for damage caused to a potions counter by an exploding cauldron. Neville blushed at the gentle chiding and dropped his hand to cover the pocket holding the wager chit.

The reviews finished, the heirs settled into a comfortable meal and light dessert, until Harry shooed them off to bed. After calling a bored Hibby to clean up after the meal, and earning an impromptu hug from the eager elf, Harry took himself off to his own bed.

It felt like he had just closed his eyes when he heard an unfamiliar voice that woke him from his half-drowsing state as it whispered: "Harry, you wished to speak to me?"

As the voice trailed off, Harry realized that the whisper had come from his own mouth.
"Voldemort?" Harry questioned, almost surprised to have control over his own voice.

"Yes, in a sense," his lips answered, a thin smile curling his lips.

"Are you or aren't you?!?" Harry demanded, wanting to reach for his wand, but having no idea what he could possibly do to a threat from inside of him.

"In truth, I prefer to imagine myself separate from the polluted and diseased... creature he has become," The shard controlling Harry's voice answered - distaste evident in his tone as he continued. "But, there is no denying that a connection of some form exists between he and I. We both felt it as if..." The shard trailed off, but Harry could hear and interpret the pain in his own voice when he heard it.

"It was ripping us apart." Harry finished for him, remembering the agonizing feeling that had struck him as he'd reached for Hibby.

"Yes, precisely." The shard agreed, then added, "Thank you, by the way."

"What?!?" Harry blurted out before wincing.

From his first moments in the Goblins' care, Griphook had taught him and cautioned him about the Dark Lord, warning him that the dark wizard still existed in some form; that there were many ways available for him to return to physical existence; that he was incredibly skilled - even by Goblin standards, and incredibly dangerous; and that he was not 'well-disposed to being questioned'.

His mind spinning as he tried to figure out how this was happening and how he could protect himself from a possible enemy inside him, Harry was startled to hear a hoarse version of his own chuckle.

"Your panic is not only a bit premature, but also unnecessary: first, ownership and priority of the body are yours." The shard's voice was surprisingly pleasant as he explained this (not at all what Harry had expected). "Second, contrary to what my former body would attest to, I have no particular desire to cause myself any further harm, which I would be doing - in more than one way - if I attempted to inflict further harm to you.

"Why?" Harry questioned, leaving it open ended. In truth, he had too many questions to waste time asking and no way of knowing, as yet, what the shard would be willing to answer, what could be trusted, and what his should use in making his decision.

"I presume you are not referring to the two previous points I made as they should be rather self-evident, so I will instead speak to some of the explanations you are particularly interested in and ask that we defer others until a more appropriate time as I am certain there will be others:
Why are we able to speak?

I believe you exhibited accidental or unintentionally used wish magic to enable me to speak as you were, just moments ago, dwelling on the decision you plan to give the Coronae Magister and Manager Griphook.

Why now?

Before this morning, you had no awareness of my existence and therefore, could not have wished for a means that we could communicate.

Why am I thanking you?

Simply put, it would have been entirely reasonable for you to decide on my dispersal or absorption based on the way that I was 'created', the event that caused it, and the fact that I have been surviving on your magic even in the smallest way. I was thanking you for not making that decision outright and for desiring the ability to converse with me deeply enough that magic responded.

The greater question of why Voldemort chose to go after you that night is not one that I can answer in a single sitting, but regardless of your choice, believe your guardians can extract copies of my memories for you to review and understand the events leading to your parent's deaths."

"You say that as if you don't care if you live or die," Harry asked distrustfully.

"Make no mistake: I. do. not. want. to. die!" the shard answered firmly, continuing, "But, I also have no illusion that I will be allowed to live if your guardians do not permit it."

"A very astute prediction, Entity." The Coronae Magister Magia agreed as he stepped from the shadows, instantly aborting Harry's instant intent to jump from his bed with a swift slash of his hand. "Gringotts protects its investments, and as you must be aware, to whatever measure you possess, that Gringotts possesses a vested interest in Mr. Potter's well-being."

"Yes," the shard agreed, over-riding the question Harry would have asked. "As do I."

"For the present." The Coronae Magister acknowledged before he argued. "However, the past actions of your original form offer little reason to believe that your interest would remain constant to Mr. Potters."

"What substantiation would you wish me to offer?" The shard began in a tone that struck Harry as both amused and serious, before the negotiations began in earnest.

"A vow of fealty." Coronae Magister promptly insisted.

"To a child?" The shard requested dubiously, "At present, Harry shows the beginnings of possessing leadership skills, a reasonable understanding of responsibilities and heritage, as well as a sound judgment, but he is a child, and children can be lead astray. I would swear to a truce, instead, until he reaches majority and selects his side."

"No," The Coronae retorted, "Your past actions belay that; moreover, a truce does not balance the life debt incurred by invading the Potter as an infant. Nor the one you incur even now, as it is only his decision that stays our hand. As both legal and magical guardians, it is our sworn and vested duty to ensure that your continued existence benefits our ward. Be assured, your existence will not continue otherwise."

"A vow of allegiance, in all interests that do not conflict," the shard began, but from his tone, Harry
recognized that the Shard hadn't realized or considered the possibility of a life debt being incurred, much less twice over. The Coronae Magister's smirk told Harry that the Goblin had recognized the same.

"You have yet to suggest benefit or value you would offer in exchange for such an agreement." The Coronae Magister retorted.

"He will be attending Hogwarts in the coming year; I can direct him to lost artifacts of Lord Slytherin, and as Slytherin's heir transfer ownership of select artifacts of your choosing." The shard almost bragged.

"As a soul shard, without possession of a body, you do not have an uncontested right to them, as of yet. It would only be through Mr. Potter's willing allowance and further disposition of magic that you will receive a body if an agreement can be reached. Do not offer goods you do not have an uncontested right to; they will not be accepted."

Harry squirmed slightly, feeling the shards agitation. While he deeply respected the Coronae Magister, he was beginning to feel the Coronae Magister was pushing too hard and that trying to trap even a shard of the soul of the temperamental dark wizard would only result in either the Shard's resentment, which couldn't end well or the shard attempting something rash to undermine and free himself. Because of this, he finally interrupted, hoping he wouldn't be insulting the Coronae Magister, or the shard by doing so.

"Coronae Magister, may I ask ... how should I call you?" Harry asked the shard nervously as the Coronae Magister raised his brow in a manner that wasn't quite disapproval nor permission, but at least wasn't a direct refusal.

"I, frankly, had not believed we would get this far," the shard admitted, "and had not thought as far as a selecting a name. Given my own preference, I would distance myself from both of my previous names. As you have been speaking and thinking of me as Shard, that should be sufficient."

"That's not a name," Harry protested. "It's close to one of the human public relation clerk's names though. Would Rishard work?"

The play on the word Shard and the slurred French pronunciation of Richard drew several chuckles from the shard as well as a small sputtering of amused teeth clicks on the Coronae Magister's part.

"Rishard is fine," the shard agreed as the Coronae Magister added his permission with a slightly glared nod.

"Thank's," Harry offered, before returning to his question. "Coronae Magister Magia, may I ask Rishard some questions?"

Another nod answered him.

"Rishard, what aspect of the fealty vow do you find most objectionable?"

"Aside from potentially losing my magic or my life at Magic's whim if I act or disagree in any substantial degree counter to your stated or implied goals? Or perhaps, you mean the potential to be forced provide you any the use of any gift or talent I may have regardless of your ability or preparation to use it properly, or the consequences to me if it's miss-used? Why, I can't think of a thing. Oh, yes, maybe there's one more thing that disturbs me: like the fact that if you are strong enough, the vow will actually require me to publicly endorse any stand or activity you take - without being consulted for my opinion on the matter. That might be the one."
"Well, I can understand why those options might be... distasteful," Harry answered back dryly. "Although, personally, I'm not sure that I would find them so bad that not surviving is preferable, but it's not really my choice is it."

"According to the Magister, it is," the shard growled.

"I guess it is, a little bit, but, really, in the end, it will be up to you, or at least up to how you answer." Harry denied.

"So, ask your questions," the shard snapped.

"Thank you," Harry offered politely. "If we can come to an agreement, what are your plans? Do you intend to continue where you left off?"

The shard was silent for several minutes uninterrupted by Harry, who had received some small guidance in negotiation from the Coronae Magister Magia, and willing to let the weight of expectant silence rest in his court as they waited for his reply.
"I do not know." Rishard finally admitted, seeing no other option.

Fully aware that his previous methods had not furthered his agenda in any manner, essentially isolated from the wizarding world's political developments - aside from the few tidbits that he had overheard through Harry when he had driven carts, and uncertain whether he even wished to attempt to regain the loyalties of his previous supporters - many of whom had been as polluted and maddened as he had been -- Rishard found himself suddenly confronted with an uncomfortable truth:

For the first time in his memory, Rishard had no clear direction or purpose to guide him - having discovered not only that his methods were ineffective and misdirected, but that his ideals had been misinformed almost since his earliest introduction to the wizarding world.

"That is an insufficient ans..." The ruthless magister challenged (not that Rishard particularly blamed the goblin who was only being true to his race as well as his role in Harry's life) even as magister trailed off - deferring to the request that Rishard felt Harry making with a clench of his fist.

It was rather surprising, at least to Rishard, that Harry's abrasive guardian and mentor had even permitted the conversation to go on as long as it had, much less allowed the child to interrupt and redirect the flow of the conversation. From his observation of the inner workings of their race, while no one could reasonably dispute the goblins care and protection of their youth, it was equally undeniable that the heirarchy of their strictly structured society left little room for distraction or disrespect.

"Rishard, is it fair to say your goals have changed because of what happened to us?" Harry asked flawlessly polite, despite it being an interruption of his mentor's rebuttal.

"Completely fair," Rishard agreed his edginess settling slightly at Harry's effective summary of the issue, before he set his pride aside to meet the child's question more than half-way: "During our previous ten years, I have observed - through your eyes and other senses- many incidents that illuminated foundational errors underlying my previous goals. I continue to believe that muggle-influence on the Wizarding World should be constrained and that muggles and beings entering the magical world - should be indoctrinated into our customs and beliefs, rather than allowed to expect that we will give up our practices, rituals, and customs for theirs. I recognize however that the methods attempting to enforce this through magical might and violence as well promoting prejudice to recruit others who would enforce these principles did nothing to further these goals."

"What about killing muggles and subjuja..." Harry stumbled slightly over the word before selecting another to continue his question, "enslaving other magical beings?"

"Subjugating..." Rishard corrected before answering, "Muggles were killed, true, but that was not the
intent of the raids, and early on, not the results. Initially, we set our sites on three objectives: interfering with muggle land developments where they were to close to encroaching on reserved wizarding areas; obliviating muggleborns' friends and family members outside of the muggleborn's immediate family if were privy to the muggleborn's status, and monitoring muggleborns to enforce the statute of secrecy. We... I was also pushing for stronger methods of ensuring the separation of the communities."

"Land developments?" His answer was clearly not what Harry had expected.

"Yes, the ability to expand wizard space is a beneficial tool; however, it can only be pushed so far. Whenever muggle developments were in threat of breaching wards around wizarding properties and communities, liaisons, whom were assigned the duty of interacting with the muggle world, would warn the muggle media days in advance - usually under the guise of muggle eco-terrorists - that the developments would be destroyed for their misuse of the land. The properties would be monitored, and when the construction crews were ordered away, my followers would cast notice me not spells, stupify and relocate any muggles remaining in the area with a memory of bizzarly dressed activists setting bombs around the developer's equipment, which would be destroyed and the building disrupted in such ways as would make the developments unprofitable to continue."

"Yet, despite your intent and early methods," Coronae Magister Magia countered, "Muggles were killed."

"Yes, I can't argue that fact; however, I would point out that we did not strike the first blow, nor were we always the side responsible for their deaths. First blood was drawn by a muggle security guard at one of the last land developments that we destroyed. The guard must have been from one of the squib lines or somehow immune to the notice me not spells, as well as muggle military trained by the way he evaded the stupify's cast at him. He was armed and using the weapon he carried, the muggle fatally attacked a favorite among my ranks: Elias Fischer-Watson. Our ranks, on site, included seven skilled healers (masters and above), and yet, Watson could not be saved."

"The effect that Watson's death had on my followers was transformative, in the worst of ways. Many turned as I had to even darker magics, which only served to fuel our darkest desires for revenge, and Dumbledore's sudden decision to interfere and intervene with our other campaigns only gave us targets... enemies against whom we could freely vent our rage. Even then, I doubt few but the most maddened of death eaters wished for the genocide that Dumbledore was only too happy to claim we desired. That was when the muggle deaths truly occurred - in the chaos that Dumbledore brought with his order to every battle - tearing down notice-me-not spells and muggle deflection wards that should have kept away all but the muggleborn families we intended to oblivate, and the muggleborns whom by the end of the war, we were seeking to remove and send to schools elsewhere to be raised without Dumbledore's influence. His actions allowed muggles to be drawn into the sounds, sights, and chaos of battle, and make no mistake, death eaters were not the only witches and wizards present who - in the heat of battle- miss-cast spells that injured and killed the hapless muggles." As he finished his impromptu speech, Rishard noticed that because of his ire and angry delivery, Harry was left almost panting with angry sounding chuffs of breath until Rishard calmed himself.

"And... subjugating other magical races?" Harry's question came several minutes after, as if the child had been waiting until he was certain Rishard had calmed down.

"That claim is primarily propaganda; although, I will admit that I had not been particularly concerned with my follower's interaction with other races to notice if they were exerting undue influence in their dealings. I will not say I had a proper or clear minded respect for many other cre... magical races (a fact which has begun to change), but I readily negotiated alliances with numerous races without the
goal of using them as mere wand fodder. I asked that they fought alongside, but never in place of or to clear the paths for death eaters. In any battles they chose to take place in, magical creatures stood side by side, equal to my death eaters."

"Okay, I think I can understand at least some of your points, so far, but you said you wanted stronger methods of separating communities. What do you mean by stronger methods?"

"The squib lines. Where children of magical families were born without magic, it was custom in some families to kill the children outright - well custom, but not customarily followed- as it is not unknown for pureblood magical witches to command their nursery-elves to take the non-magical child to muggle hospitals and orphanages in distant cities and countries where they can be found and raised among muggles. It is my belief that those we call muggleborn are in actuality the descendants of squibs who have lost connections with their magical line. I intended to require that children of magical families be registered when they are born - so that 'squibs' could not be so easily disposed of, and that their lines be tracked so that potential magical descendants could be brought into the wizarding world to be raised by their magical relatives and integrated into the wizarding world before being misled by muggle ideologies - or worse - abused for having powers their guardians could not use or understand. Why Dumbledore, a Headmaster... much less the other titles he holds, would want to stand against the earliest possible access to wizarding culture and education, I still can not fathom."

Rishard half-sighed, half-growled.

"Can you not?" Coronae Magister Magia asked, his tone surprisingly amused and curious as he watched Harry and Rishard's shared face and expression. "Harry can you?"

Although Rishard couldn't precisely read Harry's thoughts, even though he was directly connected to his host, he could feel the almost spin of Harry's thoughts as he considered the question put to him.

A minute passed, possibly two, before Harry did something very unusual of late - at least when not discussing Dumbledore, which considering the topic of the conversation, was perhaps not so unusual at all: he sighed in disgust, muttering, "the manipulative old..." cutting himself off before the goblin had a chance to warn him.

"You have a theory?" Rishard prompted.

"Yeah." Harry agreed.

"Care to illuminate me?" Rishard prompted intensely curious what the boy could have possibly discerned that he had overlooked.

"After we come to an agreement, I think." Harry refused in a polite but firm tone that sent the magister into a veritable gale of teeth clicking amusement. (And, yes, Rishard despised being laughed at as much as his previous incarnation had... even though, he could appreciate Harry's strategy - providing just one more lure to push him into agreeing to their terms... as if they really needed more.)

Rishard didn't even spare a glance at the goblin, certain that he would not be the one to explain Dumbledore's murky motives - not when the magister had the upper hand and knew it.

"Have I answered your questions - to your satisfaction?" Rishard bit out to Harry, trying to hold what existed of his temper. Surprisingly, it was easier to restrain than he remembered.

"Almost, I just have one more. Have you considered that -- unless you want to take up your old identity and begin trying to remold your previous organization in whatever extent it still exists to
align with your current beliefs while fighting against public opinion, Dumbledore's resistance, the expectations of your remaining death eaters sound or not, and the competition of whatever/whoever it was that came after us, yesterday -- you'll need a new magically verifiable identity and background that will allow you to legally access any resources you may have, without giving your previous identity away?"

As the question sank in, Rishard practically groaned. The entirety of his circumstances were beginning to sound like more trouble than extending his existance was worth - if he weren't so inherently adamant in his desire to survive.

"Okay, I'll take that as a no. Would it help if I told you I think I have a solution that wouldn't require a vow of allegiance, should still give both me and the goblins the surety to risk giving you a body, AND would give you the identity and background you'd need."

"Rig'anok, what are you proposing?" Rishard couldn't say why, but somehow seeing the magister as surprised as he was - was reassuring.

"Well, if I understood Healer Mensaetcorpor fully, the body that would be created for Rishard will be more stable if I provide blood and magic to the mix and stronger if I actually participate in making it. Essentially making us the same bloodline."

"Yes," The Coronae Magister Magia, his eyes sharpening and brows raising, suggesting to Rishard that he was beginning to understand whatever Harry was suggesting - and thinking it through.

After several moments thought, the magister flicked his fingers out giving Harry the permission he'd apparently been waiting for to continue explaining.

"So, your golem will have my blood and magic, you would already be taking blood and magic replenishing potions to support your organs as they are transfigured into human organs. We will literally be sharing blood lines." Harry explained somewhat repetitively.

"And you think that Dumbledore and the ministry won't remember that your parents didn't have any other children?" Rishard gently rejected the idea.

It wasn't the worst idea he could have come up with, naming Rishard as a part of his line, and certainly not what he would have expected from the boy, but it was short sighted.

"Actually, I think that you're overlooking something, or maybe never really had need to study it as part of managing your estates, but there is an adoption ritual that I can use as the heir and last living member of the line. The ritual allows for the complete blood adoption of a half-blood or muggleborn, by an infertile lord, or a primary heir (when there is a perceivable threat to the line) to ensure a secondary blood heir, so that the bloodline doesn't die out. Performing the ritual will create a familial bond, which will prevent you from actively trying to harm me or act counter to any of the family's alliances as defined by the myself in place of a current lord as primary heir identified at the time of adoption. As my adoptee, while you cannot directly or indirectly do anything that supports my injury or removal as heir or lord, in the same token-

You cannot be compelled to use any skill or power you possess in furtherance of any agenda I may hold - even if you agree with it

You can't be forced to support or promote my beliefs, publicly or privately

If we find ourselves on differing sides of an issue, familial detente will require that we negotiate and compromise so that the house is not divided, and...
The alliances made by me as the primary heir extend to you, so long as they don't conflict with any codicils of the alliance.

Plus any inheritances, properties, and possessions that you owned or were inline for from say squib lines will be absorbed into the estate, under your sole access and authority until you assign them to your heir.

Shocked to silence, Rishard mentally confessed himself dumbfounded. How had he not known about this? Not that he would have been concerned with it; his primary focus had been on ensuring that he never need an heir. Nevertheless, as solutions went, it was near flawless, at least superficially.

"And an inheritance test would not still show the fact that I would be a golem or that my parents were Riddle and Merope Gaunt?" He questioned, wondering if it was truly possible.

"That's one of the beauties of the ritual, it's like magic... well, not erases the connections to any previous parents and inheritances, really - but more like marks the information for her eyes only, so that if anything were to happen to the both of us, your previous relations could not make a claim against the estate, only those whom we designate as heirs potentia." Harry assured him, sounding slightly smug. Rishard couldn't begrudge him the bit of pridefulness, though; he'd earned it.

Trying to maintain a modicum of decorum, Rishard paused a second to rethink the explanation before agreeing that it was probably the best option he could get - on many levels: "Yes, I am willing to agree to such an option."

"It would meet Gringotts' requirements, as well." The Coronae Magister Magia replied formally, before performing a complicated swish of his wand that caused a contract summarizing their negotiations to compile and recording Rishard's and Harry's vocal agreement in place of physical signatures.

"Great!" Harry answered, cheerfully. "I have just one question left."

"And that is?" Rishard and Coronae Magister Magia asked almost simultaneously.

"How would you like to go back to Hogwarts?"
Initially, Harry found process of creating a golem fascinating.

It didn't start as Harry had expected it to with mixing and kneading the clay. Instead, Harry found himself touring the vault of wand materials with the Coronae Magister and another ancient looking goblin he had been introduced to as the Gavra Magister.

After collecting the composite materials of Harry's wand in soup-sized bowls, they wandered through the vault with Rishard and the Gavra Magister discussing Rishard's earliest memories - detouring whenever Rishard noticed a pull toward any particular ingredients, until the basket Harry carried held fourteen bowls.

Signing for Harry to listen, as he brought them back to a table in the center of the vault, the Gavra Magister spoke to him for the first time.

Lifting seven bowls out, containing the more inert materials, the magister set them in a circle with gaps between each bowl and announced: "There are seven characteristics in the uncultivated person."

"There are seven characteristics in a learned person," he continued, lifting the remaining bowls out placing each into one of the gaps, until the circle was relatively solid despite being composed of individual containers.

Into the center of the circle, he placed seven empty bowls before ordering in hand gestures for Harry raise his wand and cast an untargeted 'Accio'. Stealing himself for a sudden tidal wave of material containers crashing on him from the ailes and ailes of containers surrounding them, Harry was startled when seven thin cloud-like trails of volatile materials rapidly floated toward them and filled the bowls.

"The substance choose whom they will serve." the Gavra Magister explained with an almost human chuckle instead of the click of teeth that Harry would have expected... then intoned, "And, seven qualities of a magic being."

Circling a thick spiral of claw at the end of a gnarled and swollen-knuckled finger over the circle of bowls in the pattern of an ouroboros biting its tail, with the flick of his nail ending the tail as it hovered over the volatile ingredients in the center, the magister ordered, "Grind these together... carefully," he impressed, tapping one of the outer edges of a volatile bowl before indicating a section of the table that was slightly hollowed and pierced to act as a sieve with a stone roller hanging down at the end of the table like a bread roller. "... until all materials have been strained to the shelf below. Then we will begin the second step."

Studying the length and shape of the table, Harry started from the closest outside inert ingredient, pouring the contents out in a long thin line zigzagging the length of the sieve, then moved to the adjacent less inert material and poured it beside and overlapping the zigzag line of the previous one,
before moving to the volatile ingredient - until he had poured all twenty-one bowls, filling the hollow, an inert layer between each volatile layer of ingredients.

The Gavra Magister had watched for several minutes without comment, until Harry picked up the rolling stone and laid it into the hollow with only a barely visible lip between the ingredients and the flat surface of the table creating a channel to roll the grinding stone down the length of the hollow. Nodding his approval, the magister informed the Coronae Magister that he would return when Harry had finished the task.

Lunch had passed unnoticed, before the Gavra returned and watched Harry push the last of the fine particles through the sieve. Gesturing for Harry to step aside, the magister bent to pull a long marble sheet from the shelf below and rest it on the table's now cleared surface. Laying on the surface of the crimson and steel mottled stone sheet was a sheet of metal that glowed like fire-lit gold despite the layer of materials that coated its surface from Harry's work.

"You are familiar with rolling and bonding the outer surface of a wand to its core." the magister stated knowing it had been part of his training.

"Yes, Gavra Magister." Harry replied quickly.

"Then do so. The end product should have roughly the same circumference as a galleon." The magister ordered before moving away to collect a seemingly random variety of materials and departing.

Working slowly and gently with the parchment thin sheet of metal, Harry began to roll the sheet only noticing as he did the runes drawn into the sheet with almost unseeable pin pricks that pierced the metal sheet but were not wide enough to let any of the materials through. Finally, when the ... well, he could only call it a staff, really, ... was finished, Harry stepped back - his magic depleted by heating the ends and seams of the staff enough to blend them together without overheating it and sealing the runes.

"Rig'anok, Gavra Magister will require your blood and magic soon; it would be wise to refresh and take in a more substantial meal than you are accustomed to so that the ritual may be sustained."

As light-headed as he was feeling, Harry couldn't argue the point, so followed the Coronae Magister to a small room nearby where the supply managers took their lunches. The table was already laid out for him, with several broths that would be easier to stomach after the long day, small fingerling cuts of beef and goat as well as crackers with a fish paste, the taste of which was almost strong enough to cover the acridity of nutrient potions.

Just as Harry finished the last cracker, the Grava Magister's assistant knelt in the door, requesting their attention. The Coronae Magister waved the assistant away before questioning Harry's readiness with a curl of his lip and gesturing for him to follow.

When they arrived, the Coronae Magister gestured Harry to a table where he was instructed to gather stems of sage, vervain, long pine needles, rosemary, asphodel, dittany, lavender, hyssop, wormwood, acacia stems soaked in wiggenweld and rue into sprays then tie them off with seven strands of hair each. When he finished, the Grava Magister brought over a surprisingly large clay bowl filled with a draught that smelled strongly of phoenix tears and belladonna then held his hand out for Harry's. Drawing it to him, the Grava Magister dragged a claw across it, causing Harry to wince as the claw cut deeper than he'd anticipated drawing blood as he turned Harry's hand and squeezed it until the droplets of blood turned the light lemon shine of the draught to a deep crimson, then pushed the hand away. When Harry stepped back, he stirred the draught with a claw before ordering Harry with a gesture to pick up the herb sprays, then dragging him over to a pile of damp red brown clay. The
Grava Magister dipped the first spray into the blood mixed draught, and showed Harry how to flick it properly over the clay, then pushing the bowl into Harry's unhealed free hand, ordered, "Until it's empty", and left.

When the bowl's contents had been completely flecked over the clay, the Coronae Magister sent him to bed.

Harry spent the next day needing the clay that had taken on a blotchy brown and crimson tone - late into the evening until clay's color was an even shade of light crimson. The next day, the Gavra Magister had him pulling off chunks of the clay, of varying sizes, setting them in a bowl and covering them with clothes soaked in the draught and his blood. The next day, he returned to the bowls, kneaded the contents of each before rolling them into balls and recovering them to rest. The next day, he finally saw why he had started by creating the magical staff, which he was instructed to use like a large rolling pin to roll each of the clay balls out into sheets of a specified thickness that the Gavra Magister only informed him he met the various unstated measurements, when then the sheet was rolled to the Magister's satisfaction... staying silent between Harry starting a sheet and finishing one - except for the flick of nails to say that particular sheet was the thickness the Magister desired. And, none of the sheets were the same thickness. The final sheet seemed to take hours until it was barely paper thin, before the Gavra Magister grunted,"Go".

When Harry returned the next morning, the last sheet he had rolled the evening before was being carefully hand wrapped by the Magister and the magister's assistant around what looked to be a clay mannequin as if it were a layer of skin. The Magister almost seemed surprised to see him, but didn't stop what he was doing until they had smoothed the edges and ends of clay -seemless - levitating it to smooth even the bottoms of the mannequin's feet. No, not a mannequin, the golem's feet. Returning it to the table when they'd finished - muttering a spell that Harry couldn't interpret even though he had been complimented by both Griphook and the Coronae Magister on his fluency in gobbledegook. Then the Gavra Magister leaned over the golem and used his palm to press the skin down over the face and chin before drawing a claw across where the eyelids would separate and the eyes blinked open. The assistant returned with the sprays Harry had used earlier and untying them handing the Magister each of the locks of hair which he used to create lashes and brows for the face before he began layering each of the herbs into the back of the golem's head pushing the tips in like roots, with the last layer being the few remaining strands of hair that had tied the herb bundles. When they were finished, the Gavra Magister finally turned back to him and ordered, "Come back tomorrow."

"But, I thought we needed to remove and implant the horcrux before his body was completed?"
Harry questioned, again forgetting his manners.

The Magister hardly seemed to notice; however, growling almost more than he'd said to Harry in days, "It was taken while you slept. The seed has been planted. Now, go and come back tomorrow. Bring your blood, and the ritual you intend to use."

As Harry trudged back to his quarters, it struck him that he was no longer fascinated with the process- he was exhausted. Literally, fully and completely exhausted. So much so that when he finally reached the desk beside his door and sat down for a brief moment before planning to start his abolutions, Harry immediately dropped into sleep, unaware as he did so that the Gavra Magister's assistant had followed him into the room and watched him curiously as he nearly missed the chair in stumbling to it. As soon as Harry's slack expression and shuttered eyes signaled he was sleeping, the Assistant cast the levitating charm to move him from his desk to his bedroom and a warming charm as he settled him onto the simple-stuffed bedding that covered his cot. There was just something about this human, the assistant decided... something that compelled deeper consideration. His task done, the assistant extinguished the room's candles and turned to return to the Gavra Magister, who had many hours to go before he too could rest.
Mark it with a T

Chapter Notes

My muse went a little off course with this, at the end, but despite being a bit crack'y, I like it so decided to keep the chapter as is.

Run, run, run as fast as you can.
You'll never catch me, I'm the gingerbread man.
I ran from the baker and his wife too.
You'll never catch me, not any of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry woke to the very familiar feeling of Hibby's eyes glaring at him.

"Master Harry has been wasting his moneys not eating the breakfasts and lunches that Hibby is being making. Before Hibby is wasting his time and Master Harry's moneys, again, he is being asking if he should be making food for Master Harry's breakfast or just for Master Harry's charges." The elf's disdain only barely hid the underlying hurt in his tone that often came up when Harry showed glimpses of independence.

Slightly nauseated at even the mention of food, Harry threw his arm over his eyes, groaning softly. He could almost feel Hibby's irritation washed away in a flood of concern as a small cool hand tentatively touched his forehead."

"You's are not being hot, hot, but not as cool as Hibby's thinking you's should be," the elf decided resting his hands on his hips. "But you's not being eating for all day yesterday and Hibby's thinking the day before that too. So Hibby's making food. What is Harry be wanting?"

Relieved that Hibby had dropped the uncomfortably formal use of 'Master', Harry decided to cater to the elf, regardless of how he felt.

"Something light, please. Broth, maybe." He answered, trying not to sound as pathetic as he was beginning to feel.

"Stomach soothers, broth, knut biscuits, and ginger creams." Hibby insisted, falling back on the menu that Harry often deferred to when he was recovering from the cart accident Jessup had caused back at the Little Hampstead branch. His little master had never been one to treat himself, but the ten for a knut cookies and thumb-sized whipped ginger custard creams were small enough and cheap enough that Hibby could slip them past Harry's notice and encourage the boy to eat.

"Okay." Harry agreed, pushing himself up to sit on the edge.

Harry was only just dressed when he noticed Griphook standing in the entry. Before he could kneel in greeting, Griphook slashed his nails to the side aborting the movement, with an explanation "Until the link between yourself and the shard is severed and sealed, Rig'anok, your responsibilities will be split between myself and your charges as fits."

Harry's fist trembled as he clenched it, waiting for permission to speak.
"Sit," Griphook ordered, word and gesture, watching Harry with an assessing gaze. "You question why the link exists while the shard has been removed?"

At Harry's agreement, Griphook explained, "the shard has been removed and installed in the golem but cannot be bound to its vessel permanently without the ritual been completed to imbue it with life. Any residual weakness is the result of your magic stretching to support the shard."

Hearing Hibby setting Harry's food in place behind them, Griphook - in an unusual expression of familiarity - came over to Harry, helped him up and half-supported Harry as they moved to the table.

While he wouldn't have been prone to wasting food on any given day, with Griphook watching, Harry made a consolidated effort to eat everything that Hibby had made, even though he would have stopped after drinking the cup of broth if it had been left up to the whims of his own appetite. Judging by Hibby's inordinately pleased expression, Harry felt the elf was almost gloating at his successful timing.

Eating swiftly but as carefully as he could with his hand almost shaking for the pitifully small effort, Harry almost let out a thankful groan at the last bite ... thankful that Hibby hadn't already added more and that he had mustered enough strength to lift the seemingly lead-weighted spoon the interminable number of times that it had taken to consume the supposedly light meal. If it weren't for the thought that they Magister Gavra and Magister Coronae were likely waiting for him to complete the ritual, Harry would have been sorely tempted to request the rates of available retention specialists to cover his duties. The rates... but, no, Griphook had explained that he would be taking over Harry's responsibilities. Harry barely finished the second fold, laying his napkin across the plate, before Griphook aborted Hibby's move to retrieve the plate and ordered Hibby to shift Harry down to the four hundred and twelth level, seventh furnace room, the sealed seventh furnace room where the Magisters were indeed waiting for Harry.

The four hundred and twelth level? Harry's mind boggled at the thought. He was well aware that Gringott's nation had dug deep under the bank's foundations, but more than four hundred levels. How was that even possible? Before this, he had known that the public 'wizarding vaults' only went down fifteen levels, the salary and expense vaults of Gringotts human/non-goblin employees and wards (including himself) went down another five or so levels. From there various department offices, training centers, medical facilities, supply distribution offices, conference areas, production departments, and business services dealing with the magical public, took up fifty or so more layers to the 80th layer where the family dwellings were located. Beyond that, he had heard, the Gringott's great council held court on the one hundred and eleventh level. While he had never asked, which he now regretted, Harry had assumed that the hundred and eleventh level had been the final level. What could possibly fill the three hundred levels between?

Somehow, Harry wasn't surprised when the Magister Coronae - on seeing his awed-dumbfounded expression - broke out into a gale of teeth clicking amusement so fierce Harry expected to see a chip of tooth fly from the Magister's mouth at any second.

"I do seem to provide you endless amusement," Harry -unthinkingly- sighed in gobbledygook before catching himself and dropping into a polite bow of apology for his brash comment. If he weren't so tired, Harry didn't think he'd be slipping so badly with his manners... even though a treacherous little mental voice that sounded disgustingly like his Aunt Petunia countered that he'd been letting his manners slip quite a bit lately and it wouldn't be long before they were fed up with his disrespect. Harry pushed that thought aside, though. He had long ago come to terms with and talked through his Aunt's mistreatment with Griphook, (even if the mental voice did seem to come...
out a bit when he was tired or sick.

"Yes," Magister Coronae readily agreed, drawing Harry from his distracted state, "You often do. I fear my reputation may change for the fact." The Magister continued, in turn drawing a reluctant-almost-forced click of amusement from the Magister Gavra, who almost immediately huffed in embarrassment before ordering, "Enough, Niffler, your reputation can hardly get more ridiculous - and if it does, it will be on our shoulder's for ill-thought investments. Speaking of which, if you wish your ward to have the energy to participate it should be done now."

At Magister Gavra's comment, Harry could feel the weight of the Magister Coronae's gaze studying him before nodding and guiding Harry to a small table and single chair that he hadn't noticed until just that moment.

When Harry was seated, Magister Gavra strode over to stand across the table from him and started speaking in a tone that sounded somehow ceremonial or as part of a ritual - even though the Magister was not speaking Gobbledygook as most Goblin rituals used. Instead, in accented english, Magister Gavra explained, "Throughout the history of the non-magical world, muggle religious scholars have created crude near-shapeless golems from clay - without the imbued essences of blood, magic, and spirit - and given the crude golem life by engraving the letters aleph, mem, and tav, which spells "emet," a shem or one of the word of magic used for the muggle 'God's' name. Emet, which meaning truth, is engraved on the golem's forehead. Once this is done, the one who had given golem life had complete control over him, and the golem - having no essence of it's own was but a slave to its creator and could be killed by the simple method of erasing of the aleph - leaving the word "met," which means death. Alternately the shem was written on a parchment and placed in the golem's mouth - preventing the golem from speaking as the loss or accidental expulsion of the parchment would result in the golem's death."

After studying Harry's face for a moment to be certain that he understood, Magister Gavra continued. "While the life you will create today, Novice Gavra, shall not be so crude, given shape, essence, blood, and magic - certain principles remain. A shem is required and should be chosen with great care. This muggles were late to discover this, believing that only 'emet' could be used, and suffered for their folly, when the golem, which they normally rested on Fridays was permitted to observe their religious observances on their sabbath, but having been imbued with the shem meaning truth had been enraged by the hypocrisy of several community leaders of the time and rampaged. The scholar, though understanding his creature's raged was forced to put him down as a result. Choose the shem you are to imbue - wisely."

Saying this, the Magister handed him a list of the shems and their meanings, then a piece of parchment, and a blood quill.

Elohim (God)
Emet (Truth)
Yahweh (Lord, Jehovah)
El Elyon (The Most High God)
Adonai (Lord, Master)
El Shaddai (Lord God Almighty)
El Olam (The Everlasting God)
Jehovah Jireh (The Lord Will Provide)
Jehovah Rapha (The Lord Who Heals You)
Jehovah Nissi (The Lord Is My Banner)
El Qanna (Jealous God)
Jehovah Mekoddishkem (The Lord Who Sanctifies You)
Jehovah Shalom (The Lord Is Peace)
After considering what he knew of the different meanings, Harry immediately rejected Emet. He had seen too much of the wizarding world to believe hypocrisy wasn't common enough to cause problems. El Quanna, Elohim, Adonai, Jehovah Sabaoth, El Elyon, Jehovah Mekoddishkem, Jehovah Tsidkenu, and Jehovah Nissi, were quickly discarded after leaving Jehovah Jireh, Jehovah Raah, Jehovah Rapha, and Jehovah Shammah. Noticing that that Harry seemed to be having trouble distinguishing between the remaining four, Magister Gavra gave a brief explanation of each:

- Raah means to shepherd or feed, to supply with food, and to be a good friend. Jehovah Raah means The Lord Is My Shepherd. God is a friend who provides extravagant nourishment, protection, as well as rest for our weary bodies and souls.

- Jireh is more subtle and means one who is quietly arranging things behind the scenes so that they will be in just the right place exactly when we need them.

- Rapha is the shem implying the Great Physician who heals his people. This truth in the shem applies equally to emotional, psychological, and physical healing as well as to nations and individuals alike.

- Shammah is the presence in times of turbulence letting others know that he had not forsaken them and that he was still there, both in their present as well as in their future. Regardless of what you are going through, or what you are heading into, you can take comfort knowing that it is not alone.

(from "How to See Many Amazing Names of God", Newcreations.org/names-of-god)

After this, Harry's decision came easily. While Shammah, the comfort of never having to go through turbulence alone, appealed to Harry, it also felt selfish. As did Raah. Rapha seemed too much responsibility to push on the golem - leaving Jireh. Quietly arranging things behind the scenes seemed like it would be in keeping with the shard's slytherin traits, without asking him to take over the responsibility of the wizarding world. His decision made, Harry carefully copied the goblin symbols for the shem onto the parchment and stared at it. Without being told, he knew the next step was placement but hesitated at this.

In his mouth would keep the shard from speaking. In his forehead, anyone who knew of the ritual could threaten the golem or force him into slavery under the threat, and somehow, Harry had no doubt that Dumbledore would have learned the ritual. If the muggles knew it and had used it as late as World War II, Dumbledore would have found it, and perhaps even made some of his own. Given the wizard's keen interest in getting Harry under his thumb, Harry wouldn't be surprised at all. Not entirely aware that he had begun to wish for a better solution, while he had actively been trying to think of one, Harry felt a laugh startled out of him as his magic took over surrounding the thin slip of parchment and transfiguring it into a small earring post with a tiny dial where the ball or gem might be. The dial was engraved in the letters of the shem overlapping each other again and again in a way that would have prevented him reading the symbols if he hadn't already known what they said.

Beside him the Magister Gavra caught his breath in surprise, while Magister Coronae let out another round of clicking teeth.

Suddenly drawn to the golem laying on a pallet before a large oven like opening in the room's wall,
Harry walked over, pushed the pin into the lobe of the left ear, and felt the back of the pin flattening into an equally wide dial at the back of the lobe as it passed through. Magic and instinct must have been guiding his hands because, without questioning why, Harry pushed the pallet into the opening, and stepped back.

As he studied the sight of the clay body in the oven, Harry was suddenly reminded of an old children's rhyme that about a gingerbread boy that he had slightly changed when he sang it while cooking for his relatives- a lonely child wishing for a friend:

Patty Cake, Patty Cake,  
Baker's Man;  
Bake me a mate,  
As fast as you can;  
Pat and prick him,  
And mark him with a T,  
And put him in the oven - a friend to be.

Humming the tune, as he lifted his wand and almost unconsciously cast a firestorm charm that filled the oven with flame, Harry stepped back to the Magister and slumped as he felt the connection between himself and the shard finally dissolve. Thankfully, Magister Coronae caught him before his feet went completely out from under him and helped him back to the seat.

As they watched, the firestorm consumed the clay - turning it to ash that crumbled and fell away from a glowing form beneath. When the charm finally dissipated and the glowing form cooled, Harry realized that the crackling flames had been drowning out the sound of a softly singing voice that he could now hear in the sudden near silence:

"They ran, ran, ran -  
as fast as they could,  
but couldn't catch me,  
I'm just that good.

I'm the gingerbread man.

I ran from the baker and his wife too.  
They'll couldn't catch me, and they'll never catch you.  
Cast, cast, cast as fast as they can,  
They can't kill me, I'm your gingerbread man!"

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed the 16th rule ("The sixteenth – a hen killed is an opportunity lost.") that would have fit for this chapter has been put on hold for a later chapter, but will show up at a later date.
The golem woke suddenly- startled by the incongruity of breathing... the overwhelming feeling of being embodied... of having a complete connection to a living, breathing form, attendant senses, limbs and organs. The feeling... the reality of being connected to a body in a way that he had not been in more than ten years and much, much longer since he had felt such a connection to a body that was whole and uncorrupted - was surreal, a feeling he had never thought to feel again even before his separation. His mind buzzed with it for many minutes... Only to be overtaken by the growing awareness of sensation from every pore and centimeter of skin between: waves of warmth, defining sensations communicating the presence of a smooth, hard, ceramic pallet cooling beneath him. Then the press of air brings the scents of ash and herbs, of the oils that goblins use to remove tunnel grit, and ... arabica.

Taste came next... along with the surprisingly empty feeling of his mouth. Harry had not put the shem in his forehead; the previous report of his touch-related senses had verified that, but neither was there the press of a parchment roll - holding his tongue in place for fear of losing it and his life with it. But, then where was it?

There was a shem Harry had used a shem.. He was certain of it: he wouldn't have had this measure of awareness otherwise, but where... Where was it?

He could feel the burn of the magic powering his life-force: Harry's magic. He could feel it. The magic was there, contained, and severed from Harry's. Harry's but not - contained by a shem. So, there must be a shem. There must. Running a hand slowly over his chest, the golem knew before his hand slid across bare, unblemished skin that he would find nothing. There was nothing there. Nor around his throat, his wrist, the bottom of his foot... Nowhere he would have expected.

Finally, the smallest turn of his head pressed his ear to the pallet and answered his unasked question. Harry had been quite, quite clever. No one who had any knowledge of golems would expect an earring; that fact provided a protection in and of itself. Added to that the length of his hair could easily hide the earring and - with a notice-me-not additional level of protection - it was likely only Harry and the Goblins would know of the vulnerability.

The thought was almost unfathomable - especially considering just how many reasons that his former host had to not only hate him and wish for his destruction, instead of showing mercy. With that thought in the forethought of his mind as he took another breath in and another, the simple act of breathing - suddenly felt like a privilege, and an unearned privilege at that. So much so, that it took him several emotional moments to simply to cope with the experience of breathing. It was only when his breathing began to calm and slow that he finally heard a soft almost-distant sounding voice speaking to him with a note of gentle humor: "Hi there, ready to rise and shine?"
Harry tried not to stare at the Golem, who had dropped into the chair beside him shortly after being helped off of the pallet. It was somewhat disconcerting to notice how much they looked alike, and Harry couldn't help but wonder whether it was the result of using his blood and magic in the golem's creation or whether he had looked like this in his former life.

The golem was only marginally taller than himself but shared the same dark brown almost black hair, and green eyes. Their faces were quite similar too, but where Harry's lips were thin and his skin paler, the shard's lips were fuller and his skin had a warmer almost tan complexion that reminded Harry of the dry terracotta clay powder before the first addition of his blood. Their physical builds were so closely matched that Harry was certain the Magister Gavra had used Harry as the model when he had sculpted the golem's body. The golem's skin tone had gotten increasingly paler as he sat up waiting for their additional preparations to be completed.

It was only as he realized this; however, that Harry realized the Coronae Magister Magia, Magister Gavra, and Healer Magia Mentaetcorpus had gotten distracted and were currently arguing.

"They're arguing over you," the golem agreed with his assessment in a dry, strained voice.

"You should have said something." Harry chided, wearily. He knew he was exhausted and probably wasn't thinking straight, but clearly remembered that the Magister Gavra and Healer Mentaetcorpus had both commented that the golem would need blood and magic replenishing potions immediately. It surprised him that the golem hadn't thought to say something; surely he could feel that something was wrong, couldn't he?

He wasn't expecting the golem to shrug and glance away, seeming uncomfortable with the attention. Harry stared for a moment until the magister's background argument caught his attention.

"No," Coronae Magister answered a comment from Magister Gavra, who was scowling at him fiercely, "The Rig'anok will not be redirected to gavra training; there are other roles he will be groo..."

"Rig'anok?" Magister Gavra snorted, "Rig'anok's are a knut a bushel, but a trained..."

"Magisters, Harry interrupted; while he was curious about what each of the Magisters wanted him trained to do, that information didn't outweigh the golem's increasing pallor. "May I give him the blood replenishing potion, or should the magic replenishing potion come first?"

It was excessively rude to interrupt as he had, but it would have been far worse to point out that they were neglecting their expected duties.

Seeming to recognize this, Healer Mentaetcorpus snapped his teeth shut on the sharp comment he had clearly been about to make, and after a moment, gestured to both vials and ordered: "Tip them into the chalice together, and pour them as close to the same rate as possible until the vials are empty. Do not stir them, but have him drink the chalice immediately and continue without pause until the chalice is empty. When he has finished, chant: 'per sanguinem, praeterita aboleri, ex familia sanguinum aboler sangu'. "

His hands shaking with the effort, Harry poured the vials into the chalice and lifted it to the golem, who grasped it with an equally unstable grip. Together, though, they managed to keep it to the golem's lips long enough for him to drain it. The thunk of it settling back was quite loud, however, and somewhat jarring - so that it took Harry almost a minute before he remembered to complete the ritual chanting the spell. Both were so tired though, that neither even noticed that when Harry chanted the spell it came out not in Latin or Gobbledygook as the Magister's might have expected, but in Parsletongue.
After HealerMentaetcorpus recovered from his shock, he quietly approached the now sleeping boys, pricked the golem's finger, and dropped the resultant blood into the inheritance potion.

The potion steamed for several second before cooling, but then took on the appearance of a normal - active inheritance potion and as expected, when the potion was poured onto the parchment, it moved first sideways from the name 'Rishard Renaud Elias Fischer-Watson' drawing the sideways line that symbolized a blood adoption to the name "Harry James Potter"... before scrolling backwards through their charge's heritage back to Phineas Nigelus Black (an ancestor whose heritage had been well documented in Gringott's records - extending back as far as the Igntious Peverell) on both his father's side and his mother's side - through the unregistered squib descendants of Mariella Violetta Summerville 'nee Black the half-blood daughter of the disowned squib Marius Black, son of Cygnus Black II and Violetta Black nee Bulstrode by an unnamed muggleborn whose name was magically blocked from inheritance records by a similar blood adoption performed on Mariella Violetta Black by By Violetta Black in the futile hope that the newborn child might have escaped its father's curse.

Satisfied that the desired protections were in place for their charge, the magisters called Hibby and the newly reassigned Ebby to shift their charges to the wards quarters. Then returned to their argument.

Chapter End Notes

per sanguinem, praeterita aboleri: by pure blood, your past erased
ex familia sanguinum aboler sangu: wipe blood from family alike
Manager Griphook waited patiently while the Rig'anok’s charges greeted him as they gathered around the meeting table. While it was not his natural disposition, his years working with the retention of heirs had taught him the benefits of dispensing with some formalities when it came to dealing with young heirs. Particularly in matters related to the Rig'anok. Thankfully the youngling was quick to get his charges under control and turned their attention to Manager Griphook, as planned, and without Harry's common display of customary Goblin courtesy, as the Magister Magia had finally gotten through to the youngling that in mixed company (including wizards or muggles) such behavior, though polite truly did not further Gringotts' interests.

"Greetings Heirs. You are aware, of course, that tomorrow you will be escorted by floo to the Hogsmeade branch of Gringotts and from there taken to the station to await the arrival of the students who will join you in your first year at Hogwarts; however, while Hogwarts is the Ministry's preferred educational track, be aware that each of you may contact us at any time and request to be withdrawn. Hogwarts is not the sole, nor even Gringott's preferred educational option. It is required - however - that you discuss these requests with your retention specialist, who will be attending with you and will have the responsibility of assisting you in addressing any concerns that may arise. If these concerns cannot be resolved and you have consulted the retention specialist and reasonably complied with his recommendations, you may call on any of house elves you have been previously assigned in an emergency or alternately send an owl to request removal upon which time a designated Gringotts' representative will be sent to Hogwarts with the authorization to issue your formal withdrawal. This is not an action easily taken and not one without ramifications, but we - as your guardians - are charged with ensuring your health, welfare, and safety." Griphook paused scanning each of the younglings as he spoke, meeting their startled, somewhat disbelieving eyes. Only Harry's gazed back at him with the full trust and confidence that so few had learned.

Giving them a few moments for the thought to settle in before he began again, "You represent not only your families' futures as heirs, but the Wizarding World's future, and as wards of Gringotts - you represent our nation. We have trained and invested in you - even when there were difficulties..." Griphook paused noting Heir Malfoy's embarrassed expression with amusement, before he continued, "because you have proven that you are worth our investments. While it would cast a positive reflection on Gringott's if you succeed by Hogwarts’ academic standards, know that we do not value your worth on the basis of the grades that you earn or are given there - as we are well
aware that they may not reflect your true ability. Regardless of your educational track, when you have taken your newts, if you are not required to immediately take up your duties as the Lord or Lady of your families, you may seek placement at Gringott's for any position you desire in the same manner that you have become accustomed to during your fostering... On merit, neither increased nor decreased by the possession of a certificate of completion from Hogwarts. That said, I have been given the task of informing you that you are requested to attend a 'Parting Dinner' in President Ragn’rok’s personal dining room this evening at nine bells."

The effect of Rig'anok's work with this group of heirs was almost immediately apparent to Griphook following the announcement - as unlike departing heirs of previous years - Harry's charges did not erupt in emotional displays, though they did look startled by the invitation. Instead, they waited attentively, to either be dismissed or addressed again. Clicking his approval, Griphook began again. "There are several additional matters to discuss: the first being to announce that, yesterday, in order to protect a new charge from the effects of a line-elimination curse, Heir Potter granted the charge the protection of a blood-adoption. His charge, Rishard Renaud Elias Fisher-Watson-Potter, has been released from the hospital wing and is currently being taken to purchase the wardrobes, supplies, and goods you were recently required to purchase Hogwarts as he is both of age and readiness to join you." This drew several shocked gasps from the gathered heirs, who were - thankfully - looking to the Rig'anok with expressions that promised a slew of questions after his departure. Griphook was hardly worried that the youngling would reveal the truth behind the golem's existence. Even without the protection of the fidelus that the Healer had cast, Harry had been quite insistent that the golem be given every chance at establishing a safe and secure background with as few reasons as possible to justify disdain or mistreatment and had thoroughly approved of the 'backstory' suggested.

Picking up again, he threw Harry a sickle's worth of distraction with his next comment, "Additionally, several members of your families have petitioned to meet with you this evening. They are currently undergoing interviews and being required to take vows that they have no intention to cause you physical or emotional harm or disturbance and will not seek to interfere with our guardianship. Their names and interview status may be seen on this updating scroll." He set the scroll down and watched them eyeing it as if it were a boggart... as perhaps it was. Giving them a moment, Griphook offered, 'you may, of course, choose to reject any of the visitors petitioning to see you personally by striking through their name. We will not tell them the results of their interviews until the time to either bring them back or dismiss them and should you choose to reject one, that individual will only be told that their interview did not meet Gringott's standards. They will not know that the rejection came from you in any way shape or form. We expect to finish interviews by four bells but will not bring anyone back until five bells to give you sufficient time to decide."

The final matters I wished to discuss relate to the continuation of your record keeping; henceforth, you will no longer be assessed fines for any errors in recording financial transactions into your journals or ledgers; however, it is in your best interest to continue the discipline you have learned to date as while we will not be assessing any fines to your personal accounts, your errors will continue to be recorded and the measure of which may influence any future applications for positions with Gringotts that include recording components. Additionally, it is an essential skill of estate management that will one day be required of each of you. For any who wish to receive additional estate accounting training, this may be pursued during the summer after your third year if the maintenance of your records remains satisfactory. With that, you are relieved from the responsibilities of your positions for the remainder of the afternoons. All of your managers are aware of this and you are hereby dismissed to whatever pass-times you would like to spend your remaining hours attending.

Pausing for a moment before he left to watch all but Harry eyeing the scroll with trepidation. Griphook considered the group once more before addressing the Rig'anok, "Retention Specialist, your charge is expected to return within the hour, when he is available, you are requested to join me
in my office to finalize the details of his placement."

Apparently recognizing that his charges were too distracted by the parchment to notice him, Harry broke from his compliance to the Magia Magister's instruction and answered Griphook with a politely bowed head and hand gesture signifying acceptance and gratitude. Responding in kind, Griphook nodded and held his amusement until the door closed behind him. Surprising hall guards as he passed, teeth clicking in amusement, Griphook shook his head. While the youngling had proven well-worth the investment, the Magia Magister would definitely have his work cut out for him over the coming years.

Staring at the scroll with trepidation, Draco was surprised when Blaise was first to take it up and scan it before shaking his head and sighing, "Mother failed the interview." He knew his suite-mate wasn't surprised, but reached out and squeezed his shoulder in support. Neville chose to be next, muttering, "Uncle Algie" with a shake of his head as he picked up the quill, inked it, and struck through name without a sign of regret. He did pause for a moment, his hand hesitating over the scroll, the quill almost dripping, until Harry moved up beside Neville, questioning gently, "Nev?" It occurred to Draco, as he watched, that Harry did almost everything gently.

Neville's expression was distinctly uncomfortable as he glanced away, not answering Harry, and Harry seemed inclined to wait, but Draco was having his own difficulty deciding between whether he wanted to just get it over with and see if either of his parents had decided to try and see him or whether he was dreading what he would read there. Finally, letting impulse and impatience make his decision for him, Draco reached out for the scroll, asking for it silently and reading it. Raising a questioning eyebrow at Neville, he wasn't surprised to see the other respond back mimicking one of Harry's customary gestures to give permission. They had all picked up little - almost unnoticeable traits from him, even Draco himself, but he wasn't bothered by the fact. Goblin culture was so closely guarded that almost no one outside of their circles would recognize the little gestures for what they were without the context.

Taking the permission as given, Draco explained to Harry and the others, "It's his Grandmother, the Goblins don't seem to have pinned her down, yet."

"Do you want to see her," Harry asked, again, gently and nodded when Neville answered with a shrug.

"Well, why don't you wait for the interviewers to finish? You may not even need to make the decision." Draco suggested. It wasn't a particularly kind thing to say, but they all understood the truth of it. There was a very good chance that his 'Gran' might not pass the interview; if she had been of the nature to easily do so, Neville would never have been placed in the Goblin's custody in the first place. Neville hesitated a moment longer before nodding in agreement and handing the Quill over to Draco.

It wasn't precisely a surprise for Draco to read that his father had both failed the interview and refused to take any vow. That his mother hadn't, however, and had already completed the vow, without any negative indications of an ambivalent or forced vow was more surprising. As many times as his father had tried to 'visit' him since he'd been brought to Gringott's, his mother had not attempted to see him once. That fact had been one of the more painful to accept of his fostering and even though he had once been closer to his mother, her absence had pushed him to try to please his father, under the mistaken premise that at least his father cared enough to try to see him. Draco's first instinct had him lifting the quill to strike through his mother's name, but he relented after a moment driven by curiosity to see what she wanted to say to him. If it wasn't to his liking, Draco promised
himself, well he was ready to write her out of his life as well."

Millicent took the scroll and struck through three names without comment before turning to Harry and teasing, "So, It's A Boy!"

Harry's response, of course, was to blush and glance away, slightly embarrassed, before defending himself, "If I didn't do what I did, he wouldn't be alive today." Absolute honesty infused his tone; although, none of them would have doubted it. Having been raised purebloods, in the Wizarding World, they had been taught early on everything that could affect magical lines, and line-elimination curses were considered among the most feared, ruthless, unspeakable, and unforgivable forms of revenge taking vengeance out not only on those who had wronged them but every member of their direct lines regardless of their innocence.

"We know Harry," Neville responded with a laugh. "But, what's he like? It must have come up awfully quick, did you at least get a chance to get to know him?"

"No, he was in pretty bad shape and couldn't even talk without magical support. We barely had time to find out if he'd agree to the adoption before we had to start it. When he finally woke up, yesterday, he was so weak he could hardly hold a cup on his own."

"Wow." Blaise commented, and Draco agreed, shaking his head at the thought of being forced to adopt someone he barely knew. He didn't think he could have done it, and Blaise, Neville, and Millicent's expressions suggested they felt the same. He finally voiced the only question that he thought Harry might be able to answer at this point, "So, since you've adopted him and you're too young to have anyone as an adopted son or daughter, what will his relation be as a brother, cousin, or just your heir?"

Based on Harry's expression, it was clearly a question he hadn't considered before that moment as his mumbled answer pretty quickly confirmed. "I don't know. Not my cousin. I have a cousin and we didn't get on at all, but I don't know if he'd feel comfortable if I asked to be my brother, so maybe my just my heir. Do we need to designate a family role; the healer didn't mention it."

No, not technically." Draco agreed, "You might want to suggest he pick an abbreviated name to go by, Fisher-Watson-Potter is a bit of a mouth full."

"I'll mention it." Harry agreed, yawning. Now it made sense why he'd been so tired the past few days: adoption rituals were pretty intense, but Draco had been worried that Harry might have still been suffering from whatever had sent him to the healer after the break in. That brought another line of questions up, but before Draco could ask, Harry unintentionally cut him off, asking, "So what are you doing the rest of the afternoon?"

After talking over their plans for several minutes, and being promised by Harry that he would be happy to attend any of the family visits with them, if they wished, the group departed, Harry to his suite to catch up on his sleep while he waited for his heir, and the rest to their pass-times. As they left the meeting and dining room, Draco paused to realize that while he was excited to finally go to Hogwarts, he was beginning to think that he might miss Gringotts.
Neville turned back from the entry doors to face the Hogwarts Headmaster with a sigh, "Yes, Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Mr. Longbottom, are you truly going to allow a boy no older than yourself, making a rash and petulant decision to deny you the opportunity to attend the school your parents chose for you, that they and your grandparents attended? I believe you are aware of your Grandmother's concerns for your future. She, herself, told me that you both had a very congenial visit yesterday, and she confessed she was quite impressed and believed you could do well here... possibly even make head-boy one day. Do you truly believe she would want you to throw away your education? Does her good opinion mean so little to you, when you are only now reconciling?"

Behind him, he heard Harry's whisper to Draco, "He can answer for himself," and smiled, standing straighter at the implied show of faith from Harry.

"Headmaster Dumbledore, I appreciate your concern for my Grandmother's opinion, but as she's not my guardian, her opinion about the school I go to is irrelevant; however, I doubt very much that even she would be of the opinion that I should let my current skills and knowledge lay fallow for four to five years, just to let my classmate's catch up. So yes, Headmaster, I believe that she would support me going to school somewhere else or even continuing at Gringotts." Neville answered politely.

"Four years, Mr. Longbottom? Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

"No, Sir. I'm sorry; I thought you'd know that the Ministry of Magic makes anyone receiving private tutoring or homeschooling take yearly skills and theory tests at the start of each summer. If the ministry's records of Hogwarts have been kept up to date, I tested at mid-fourth year for potions, transfiguration, and Arithmancy, and somewhere in fifth year for charms and astronomy."

"I was unaware that the Ministry was so concerned as to monitor the goblin's ability to meet educational standards." The headmaster suggested in a tone that even Neville could tell was contrived to be insulting to their guardians at Gringotts, which drew a barely contained huff from Harry, whom he could feel was moving away from the entry doors to stand beside him. Before Harry could comment as Neville was sure he was about to do (if Harry was anything, he was completely and utterly loyal), Draco beat them both to the punch.

"Given how far we are ahead of your first through third years, it's pretty clear that the Ministry doesn't have anything to worry about ... at least not at Gringotts." The unspoken suggestion that Hogwarts might a different story came across as clear as what had been said.

"Neville, Draco, let's go." Harry interrupted whatever comment the headmaster had been about to make, in the tensest voice that Neville had ever heard him use. "We're holding up their sorting and dinner."
"Mr. Potter, how exactly do you expect to get back to London? The express will have already left."
The Headmaster questioned, sounding unreasonably smug.

Hearing the tone, Neville wanted to shake his head.

If the Headmaster thought he was going to get Harry to change his mind by treating him like he was stupid, the man was severely mistaken. Every one of the Gringott's wards had their own story of how they'd taken advantage of information that arrogant customers unknowingly let slip, assuming that, just because they were kids, they wouldn't have any idea what the 'adults' were discussing. Neville and Draco suspected that some of the more foolish customers were even intentionally boasting in Harry's presence hoping to impress the 'Boy-who-Lived'. Out of them all, Draco was most adroit in picking profit out of gossip, but Harry and Blaise were fairly skilled as well. Add to that the Headmaster's veiled insults about the Goblins... and the old man was practically guaranteeing Harry's resistance.

"Thank you for your concern, Headmaster, but the Hogwart's express was not even a consideration. Our guardians require us to carry portkeys keyed to nearest branch so we can deal with personal or account matters as needed. Good evening, Sir." Harry responded politely turning back to where Blaise, Rishard, and Milicent were waiting for them. Turning to join him, Neville fought to keep a straight face, which was only made harder when he noticed Draco's unrepentant grin.

"Mr. Potter!" The Headmaster called out urgently, apparently realizing that he wouldn't get Harry to change his mind.

"I believe we've said all there is to say, Headmaster." Harry answered, turning briefly if only to maintain a bare minimum of politeness. "And, I am certain the other students are more than ready to be sorted and get their dinners."

When they heard the smack of slippers hurrying down the hall behind them, it struck Neville that for as mild-mannered and kind as Harry seemed, he had an amazing ability to take control of a situation without seeming to be trying. It had been the same with Neville's Gran the evening before, and Neville had come out of that meeting realizing that for all of his grandmother's overbearing and strident tone if he refused to let her tone intimidate you and laid out his reasoning, she could be persuaded to consider his perspective. It hadn't been enough of a change for the Goblins to consider permitting unsupervised visits, but it had given Neville some hope of regaining at least one family connection.

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Trying not to fidget, Neville took a deep breath and straightened the sleeves of his robes, remembering how nit-picky about his appearance his grandmother had always been. Standing and appearance were everything to his grandmother, and Neville could only imagine that she blamed him for the 'blemish' on the Longbottom name after his custody had been taken away when his Uncle Algie had pushed him out the window to test his magic.

"Madam Longbottom, this way please." Harry's voice carried into the room as he held the door open for Neville's grandmother to come in. Despite himself and the calm he was trying to maintain, Neville breathed a sigh of relief when Harry sat down beside him. His grandmother wasn't nearly as pleased with Harry's presence.
"That will be all, boy," his Gran ordered, trying to dismiss Harry.

"No, Ma'am, I have been asked to attend this meeting with Heir Longbottom." Harry answered politely. "If you would prefer a different representative, we can return to the manager's office and ask that another be assigned."

"Or you can simply give us the privacy as requested," his Gran snapped.

"No, Ma'am." Harry replied calmly, surprising Neville who was already wincing every time his grandmother tensed. "You have not been authorized to have unsupervised visitation; if this is a constraint you are unwilling to abide by, we can end the visit immediately."

"On your say so?" she demanded.

"No, Ma'am, on our guardians."

"You insolent, little ..."

Finally deciding he'd had enough of her belligerence toward Harry, Neville interrupted her as he stood, "That is quite enough, Grandmother. Harry let's go."

"Neville Franklin Longbottom, sit back down. I did not come all this way, go through the ridiculous interviews, and be forced to take a vow, only to ..."

"Make a scene?" Neville interrupted again. "I would have hoped not, but haven't seen anything to show otherwise."

"You accuse me of making a scene. I am not making a scene; it's this boy - who seems to think it's acceptable to intrude and who has no right to eavesdrop on family business that is making a scene."

Deciding that he wasn't going to get anywhere with her if she wasn't willing to listen, Neville stepped out from behind his chair, walked the length of the table to her side, and resting a hand over the hand she had laid on the table - he pressed a kiss to her cheek, and said, "Goodbye, Grandmother."

"Neville," she cried out in shock. "You can't mean to..."

"Grandmother, I realize that having the retention specialist present is a blow to your ego, but if you would stop to think, you'd realize that everything you have had to deal with to get this visit has been for my protection... protection that was deemed necessary for reasons we won't go into. If you truly wish to speak with me, now is the time to do so. If not, we'll let you go."

It felt so odd just to stand there, waiting for her decision, as she stared at him, but now that he'd given her his ultimatum, he couldn't really back down without giving up ground. He might not be the best negotiator of their group (Millie), but he had learned that much from their guardians. Finally though, she gave in with a weary, "Sit down, Neville."

"Very Well, Grandmother." Neville agreed, returning to his seat.

"I preferred it when you called me Gran." She commented somewhat mournfully. "It must be six years since I heard it."
"Six years, four months." Neville agreed. "How are you? Have you been well?"

"Yes, it has been much quieter in the manor, however, especially with your Great-Aunt Lucretia passing two years ago. I sent a letter to the goblins; did they tell you?"

"Yes, Grandmother. My manager attended the memorial with me."

"Really, I did not notice you there. Whyever did you not come up and speak to me, at least to express your condolences?"

"Is that really what you want to discuss, Grandmother?"

Seeming taken aback by his tone, his grandmother started to answer but broke off before she actually did, seeming to think better of whatever would have been her response. After a moment, clearly switching topics, she commented, "I was rather surprised to hear from the Headmaster that you will be attending Hogwarts, after all."

Stung by the comment, Neville didn't answer her and was beginning to regret not rejecting her visit when Harry interrupted: "I can understand why you might be concerned, Lady Longbottom, but as you can see," he continued as he pulled several parchments out of the portfolio and laid them side by side in front of her, "his early mistreatment has not affected his magical capacity in any discernible manner. " Laying the possibility of any failing at her feet instead of Neville's before he continued, "The first document is Heir Longbottom's ranking's in the Ministry's Annual Traditional Education Assessments. As you'll note in the summaries his scores equate to Outstandings through Standardized Third Year Curriculum on all Subjects tested."

"But...that cannot be, he is only just starting his first year," She protested.

"His scores are easily verifiable through the Department of Educational Assessment, as are the next two documents. The first is Heir Longbottom's Wand-Crafting Certification for single and dual core wands, and the next is his approved application for Independent Study of Apothecary Sciences, which you may or may not realize is a very competitive approval process in which only five approvals are issued in any given year, with recipients of previous years being required to reapply against all other applicants for every year of their studies until completion. "

"Neville, is this true?" Despite the documents in front of her, the disbelief was bright in her eyes.

"Yes, Grandmother, but if you don't believe us, you can verify it for yourself." He knew his tone was getting sharper than was really polite, but it was hard not to feel at least a little irked when their guardians, who were known to be ruthless and un-compassionate in assessing other's worth, openly showed more faith in him than his family who were supposed to care about him whether he had anything to contribute or not.

"Don't take on that way, boy." She snapped at him, but immediately ducked her head with frustrated embarrassment at her slight and mumbled something that he suspected was an apology. Ignoring the fact that she would have never let him get away with mumbling like that, he nodded and waited for her to continue, "You must understand: I had been left with a completely different impression of your education to date. Headmaster Dumbledore said ..."

As insensitive as she had been up to that point, even his grandmother noticed Harry's
expression when his head jerked up in the middle of the comment, and quickly trailed off to avoid saying something that would provoke any more intense of a response. When Harry remained silent, though, she continued, but in a noticeably different direction, "Well, it's not like you have attended a proper day school." Her tone was mildly defensive, but Neville could see that it was mostly to cover her uncertainty of her situation.

"No, that's true." Neville agreed, "Our guardians prefer individualized instruction that allows everyone to work at their own pace. If I had to wait for others to catch up to the topics I'm strong on or pushed ahead to try to keep up to the same general topics as a dozen other students even if I didn't understand, I would probably be only just getting ready for first-year subjects. It's one of the many things I'm going to miss when we go to Hogwarts."

"I see." She murmured. For several moments, she seemed to be uncertain what to say but finally cleared her throat, picked up her purse, and returned it to her lap. Neville wasn't certain, but he thought her hand might have been shaking as she thumbed the clasp open and reached in. "Yes, as to that...Well, in reference to Hogwarts, I mean, one of the purposes of my visit is to give you this:" When she pulled her hand out, she was holding polished, chestnut wand with seven whorls from the handle to the tip.

"Is that..."

"Your father's wand. Before it was confirmed that you will be going to Hogwarts, I had intended to display your father's wand in the armoire of family wands; however, as you will be attending Hogwarts, you should have a proper wand. Your father's served him well, but with a chestnut and Griffin Feather core, it should be adaptable enough for you to master it.

"Grandmother, thank you for the consideration," Neville began, asking Harry with simple eye gestures to ignore yet one more slight against Gringotts. It was clear where her information had come from.

"But you should know, if I did accept it, it would not be to use but to display in memorium. I will be using the wand I crafted toward my wand-crafting certification. Once the core-alignment was verified, my wand approved, and the Ministry-required charms placed, I have consistently used it during tutoring sessions and plan to continue doing so."

"I see." She answered, sounding slightly taken aback. "Very well, then, if you have no objection," she paused to study him for several seconds, before she continued: "I will continue with the installation as planned.

"No, no objection at all."

"I - I see." She murmured again, then stood. "I... you are not at all what I was expecting, Neville. Would it be permissible to write you while you are at school?"

"Of course, Grandmother." Neville answered, curious why she would have believed otherwise. "It always has been."

"It has... I was led to bel-- No. Nevermind, I was clearly misled. Well, then, please expect my owl. It has been a ... a pleasure to see you are doing so well, Neville. I will look forward to hearing from you."
Neville winced slightly when she held out her hand to him as if he were a stranger, but then given her reactions, he supposed they were nearly strangers - so took her hand without comment and bowed over it.

Before they parted, though, Harry interrupted - frustration and irritation visible in his gaze if not his tone when he spoke, "Lady Longbottom, may I suggest if you have any future concerns about Heir Longbottom's well-being or education that you speak directly to the source? Third party information ... is rarely reliable."

"Mr. Potter, do hold on." The Headmaster called out, the sound of his slippers sounding closer, but still close to halfway across the hall.

As the sound drew nearer, the tune Draco had been humming on and off since they had arrived, broke from his lips:

Should I stay or should I go now? Should I stay or should I go now? If I go, there will be trouble And if I stay it will be double So come on and let me know.. Should I stay or should I go?

... forcing a small laugh from Harry, which had been Draco's intention.

"The clash, Draco, really?" Harry asked and behind them, Millicent snorted as she realized that Draco must have been quoting a muggle band.

"The lyrics seemed appropriate." Draco answered wryly, turning with the others as the Headmaster reached them.

"They are. They really are." Harry agreed, as his expression cleared of the distaste that it often wore when the Headmaster came up in discussion.

"My boys," the wizard in question addressed them, ignoring Millicent, despite the fact that it was her expression that had opened up the entire discussion of whether the heirs would even be going to Hogwarts, "Perhaps, we are both being too rash."

The old wizard really should have been better at reading people by now, Draco thought to himself. If he had stopped arguing at the point Harry had suggested letting the sorting hat decide whether they could reopen the House of Lords and be sorted into it - as had been the custom for centuries...or, before claiming that he could not spare another professor to be the Head of House for the House of Lords - forgetting that it had by Hogwart's charter - the House of Lords was always self-managed with monthly review by the other four Heads of House in hope of giving the heirs the opportunity to develop the management skills they would need to later run not only their Ancient and Noble Houses but the Wizengamot and -not to put too fine a point on it - the Wizarding world,

or more to the point, if he had refrained from insulting Gringotts supervision in a variety of comments...

the Headmaster might have been able to at least save a little face. But the warning signs, that Draco, and undoubtedly the other heirs could read in Harry's stiffening position, polite detached mask, and cool tone suggested that the Headmaster was in very real danger of not only personally losing face, but also invoking Harry's wrath enough to see himself sent down from the office of Headmaster and possibly more... and in the end, none of them would still be sorted into the traditional houses.
"Rash, Headmaster?" Harry began in that too mild tone that the heirs were all familiar with. Harry rarely showed his temper, but when he did, it was usually in a calm cool manner that usually left the recipient feeling eviscerated without seeming to have even flustered Harry.

"May I ask how Millicent's asking the sorting hat to consider the House of Lords is rash?"

"How following the guidelines provided in the charter to make this request is rash?"

"How in doing so - as set out in the charter- I and the other heirs present contacted your facilities keeper and care taker to inform him of our intent to request the House of Lords - can possibly be seen as rash?"

" How - as per the charter, we filed our intent to contract with Mr. Filch to warrant that should we be sorted into the House of Lords, we will be responsible for care and upkeep of the quarters and will further accept financial responsibility for the replacement of any furnishings that are damaged beyond common wear and tear - would be considered rushed or unconsidered?"

" How we - as per the charter- provided our current class standings according to the Ministry exams, and requested an appointment on contingency with our perspective teachers and the Heads of Ravenclaw, Slytherin, Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff houses to develop our class schedules, lab times, and House reviews. Was that rash?"

" All of these actions, done as per the school charter's standards according to the last update six months ago, were put into place before we even stepped on the school's grounds. Headmaster. Please explain to me how you believe these to be rash actions?"

"I have not been informed of any of these preparations, my boy, so of course, I had not the proper time to ensure that rooms would be prepared in the unlikely eventuality that the House of Lords might be needed. It has fallen out of fashion these past decades you know..." the Headmaster prevaricated in a soft tone, only then becoming aware of the hall's growing silence after the students and professors had watched Harry effectively take the wind out of the Headmaster's previous arguments.

Harry's less than impressed expression, in Draco's opinion, should have been a red flag to the Headmaster, but the old geezer just kept rambling on - not realizing how ineffectual and out of touch he sounded. Something that Harry, to Draco's delight, seemed only too happy to point out moments later.

"Headmaster, while we did owl you a letter of intent, with copies of all of the materials we have previously provided, the charter stipulations do not require that we do so, nor that we attempt to monitor or otherwise ensure that you have followed up on the requests made... nor - as you claim that you were unaware of our request - are we required to ensure that you go to the minuscule efforts of opening and reading your mail. So please, Headmaster, do not do us the disservice of claiming that we are acting rashly or injudiciously. If Hogwarts is truly not prepared to handle the needs of advanced students or Lords and Ladies in training, there is no reason to continue this discussion any further."

While every word was essentially true, Draco couldn't help but admire how Harry made the last minute plan that they and the Goblins had come up with after learning during Draco's meeting with his mother of various plots that his father had prepared through the children of followers and loyalists in every house - to get his son back, to get rid of Harry, and to drug, blackmail, compel, or poison the other heirs to get control of their seats.

After realizing that it would be almost impossible for the heirs to protect each other if they requested
separate houses as had been originally been planned to build their networks, the heirs, their managers, most of scribes and junior scribes, and various associates, including President Ragn’rok, himself, had spent the night going through every journal, record, and file they had on Hogwarts - until one of the junior scribes found a one-sentence mention of the House of Lords in the charter update submitted by the Headmaster. The sentence wiped out previous three-page descriptions of the house and replaced it with a note that it the house would continue in the same format and manner as it had been described in the original charter. Armed with that and a copy of the original charter that had been filed with Gringotts by the Founders, they had gone to work immediately sending the required documents to Fitch and the professors and only owling the Headmaster after the heirs left Hogsmeade in school carriages giving the Headmaster as little notice as possible to interfere as they were certain he would attempt to do.

"Well, perhaps, if as you say, the Heads of House and Caretaker have received your letters, the rooms have been readied to open, and we may continue with your sorting." The Headmaster answered reluctantly. "Professors?"

It was obvious, at least to the heirs, that he was torn between the threat of them - but particularly Harry - pulling out of Hogwarts and alternately losing the ability to put into action some of the plans he must have had in place - given his loud reaction to Millicent requesting the House of Lords.

"Yes," Various instructors and all of the Heads of House that Draco recognized, nodded in agreement before Draco's godfather answered. "As we mentioned at this afternoon's staff meeting, Albus, preparations have been made for all the students' pre-term requests. We have also received two additional requests after the students arrived - for the use of prescription allergy potions, but Poppy and I have those well in hand."

"I see. Very well then, My Boys, let's get back to the sorting shall we?"
"The nineteenth - Trust is a commodity when given by others -- a folly when given to others."

"Nah, now, there ain't no need fer yeh to be doin' that." Mr. Hagrid blocked Hermione Granger's father as he started up the stairs of the oddly-structured massively-tall bank.

Hermione hesitated before turning away from studying the magical bank. The marble structure was fascinating to look at, fascinating, and confusing. The columns, though individually straight, were stacked on top of each other in a way that seemed intentionally wobbly, which made absolutely no sense to Hermione, who thought it looked absolutely dangerous to even enter. But then, maybe that was part of the point. Hermione wasn't certain what values would be used for advertising in the Wizarding world; the bank might be using the very instability of the bank's structure to highlight the vastness of their magical strength because it would have to take incredible power to hold together such a massive, massive structure of such incredibly disjointed pieces.

"Mr. Hagrid," Hermione's father answered in his almost-completely-frustrated tone. "Please understand that we appreciate your willingness to show us around in place of Professor Flitwick; but, my wife and I feel that it would be better if we take it at ... our own pace, so after you pick up the package you've been mentioning and take it back to the headmaster immediately. You have said several times how important it is, after all."

"Ah, no now. The Headmaster wanted me to show Miss Hermione here around and make sure she didn't go down any of the bad streets. There are some shops here, ye know that shouldn't be gone in to. Ye being Muggles, well ye wouldn't know which was which would ye?"

To Hermione, his argument was rather weakened by the fact that almost on arriving at Diagon Alley, Mr. Hagrid had tried to convince her parents to stop off at a seedy-looking pub called the Leaky Cauldron while sending her off to get her supplies. From her parents' mystified expressions, it was fairly easy to tell that they felt the same. Her mother's hand on her father's forearm was patting in the way that her father described as being like the slashing of an angry cat's tail: a clear warning that her claws were about to come out, and he jumped in quickly to prevent it, waving Mr. Hagrid off.

"Thank you, Sir, but we'll be fine, and stick to the main road. While we here to exchange pounds to your currency, I also wanted to stop in and open a spending account for Hermione to cover any treats or supplies she'd like to get during the year."

"What? Nah, ye don't wanna be doing that. The Headmaster has set it up so that students can order on a Hogwarts account an it'll be billed to the parent's later, so's you don't need to be worrying about whether she's buying stuff she ought not to be buying or spending more than's proper. Why don't you all go 'n get lunch at the pub, and I'll take Hermione in and get that papers on how to do it, so you don't need to be botherin' yourselves with it."

"Mr. Hagrid." Hermione's mom finally stepped away from her father, getting in Mr. Hagrid's face, her expression cold and angry, as she replied, "We have tried to be polite and remain pleasant, but it
appears that you require the blunt approach, so let me be clear with you: neither my husband nor I will be allowing you to go anywhere with our daughter - unsupervised; we will be going into the bank to set up accounts as my husband just stated, and then we will be going home. If you continue to try to force your presence on ourselves or our daughter, we will contact Professor Flitwick to inform him that we will not be sending our daughter to Hogwarts while you are employed there. As it is, both I and my husband have lost faith in Mr. Dumbledore's judgment based on the fact that he would send someone as disreputable seeming as yourself to escort an under-aged school girl anywhere - especially as you seem very intent on getting her away from our supervision. No, kindly go run your errand for Mr. Dumbledore, and leave. We have no further need of your assistance. Thank you." While her mom hadn't precisely yelled, her voice had carried enough to draw the attention of other bank customers, who were now stopped on the steps watching, and the bank's guards, who had moved up to stand behind Mr. Hagrid.

"Is there a problem?" A stern voice carried from behind Mr. Hagrid.

"Nah, nah. No need to bother ya, Mr. Goblin."

"My title is Clerk's Manager Chiptooth. As you well know, Ground's keeper. Now," the manager continued, as he turned to Hermione's mother and father., "Is there a problem? It was reported that you stated your intent to enter Gringottos, but we're being prevented."

Before her father could give the more politic assurance that there wasn't a response, Hermione's mother glared at Mr. Hagrid, and agreed. "Yes, we would like to speak with a representative who can explain what we will need to do to set up spending and savings accounts for our daughter and whether it is possible to arrange a direct deposit from a bank in the non-magic community."

"Ah, I see. Yes, we can certainly set that up for you, Immediately." The goblin gestured to one of the other goblins who had come up behind Mr. Hagrid. "Escort the family inside to the New Account's Manager Silverquill. I will deal with Mr. Hagrid."

The other goblin gave a curt nod and gestured for Hermione and her parent's to follow. As they followed the grim looking creature, Hermione let her manners slip a bit and eavesdropped on the Clerk's Manager who had questioned Mr. Hagrid about his business at the bank as he did not currently have an account with Gringott's and then refused Mr. Hagrid's request to withdraw something from a vault stating that while Headmaster Dumbledore could access the vault for research purposes, he did not personally have the authorization to take something from the vault so could not authorize the groundskeeper to do so on his behalf. The conversation stuck in her mind as she followed her parents up the stairs and she couldn't help but wonder whether Mr. Hagrid was telling the truth about the errand.

Everything Hermione had read about Headmaster Dumbledore portrayed him as a decorated war hero who had gone on to teach at the major magical school in Great Britain, devoting many years in researching and developing one of the primary magical ingredients used in magic healing, and then retired from research to a life of public service as the school administrator and in the magical world's version of parliament. Certainly, he hadn't seemed the type who would have sent the groundskeeper to take something that wasn't his, but despite Mr. Hagrid attempts to separate Hermione and her parents while they were shopping, he had some how seemed awkwardly and a bit oafishly honest in his praise of Hogwarts, the magical world, and especially the Headmaster. If it hadn't been for his attempts to keep them from the bank, Hermione was almost certain that her mother might have written a letter to the Headmaster about his choice of escort, but would not have considered or suggested withdrawing Hermione, scholarship or no.

The two impressions were distinctly at odds- so much so that it reminded Hermione about her father's
frequent warnings that she shouldn't always believe what she read, even if whatever it was had been written by an expert. Maybe this was one of the times he was right. Another of her father's axioms came to mind warning against trusting deals or people who seemed to be too good to be true, and the thought really made her wonder.

Before she realized it, they were seated around a small conference table with her parents and the goblin staring at her - seeming to expect a response from her.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought. Could you repeat the question?"

"Account Manager Silverquill would like to run an inheritance test, Darling," her mother explained, "He needs you to drop three drops of your blood into the potion in the ink well. Mr. Silverquill believes there may be a chance of you being in line for a magical inheritance. Your father and I have already given our permission."

"Oh. Oh, of course," Hermione agreed, startled at the thought, and held out her hand. The manager must have done the test hundreds of times because while she saw him use the pin to prick her finger and a bead of blood well up, she felt nothing. Turning her finger when he held the ink will under it, she counted with him as the blood dripped into the well - one, two, three times. When the three were done, she knew she should have drawn her hand back, but some instinct stopped her and she met his eyes. Without a word spoken, the manager seemed to understand that something more was going on and held the well under her finger again for the fourth and fifth drops.

"Darling, Mr. Silverquill said three times. "Her mother chided.

Manager Silverquill interrupted Hermione's mother with a raised hand, however.

"Lady Magic guides her action." He explained before chanting over the inkwell and dipping a silver-tipped quill into the well. It should have been impossible but the quill seemed to suck up all of the ink and potion in the first dip. Then again, most of the things she had seen since they entered the Wizarding World should have been impossible. The streak of seemingly impossible things continued as he used the quill to write Hermione's name at the bottom of a long piece of parchment then let go of the pen and it stayed upright writing her mother and fathers names the width of a line above hers, then their parents just above theirs - generation before generation for close to fifteen minutes.

When the quill finally stopped, the manager took hold of the quill again and lifted the parchment to study it, starting with the top, but immediately stopping as he read the first name. Without explaining, he tapped a small bell that caused everyone around them to stop and stare at them with surprised expressions before recovering and moving on to whatever errand they were performing. After retrieving an expensive-looking polished quill case, he carefully put the silver-tipped quill in the case and handed the case to Hermione, with a caution that she should immediately purchase a Gladrags Thousand-charm bag with strong anti-theft protections cast on it and keep the quill, key, account book, and card she would be given on her at all times as they could be used to give others access to her account without the need for her to be present to authorize the access. He went on to explain that the bell would summon other managers to provide in depth advice she would like but that her parents would not need to open any accounts or deposit any additional funds to support her school spending; however, could set aside funds for her to practice investing if they wished. Hermione might have found their gaping expression amusing if she weren't certain that her own expression was just as stunned.

The feeling that tucking the etiquette book back into her thousand-charm bag made the bag heavier, despite the weightless charms that were on both the book and the bag... well it had to be her
imagination, Hermione decided; although, she could, possibly, slightly, just may be projecting to the slightest extent the weight of the decision that had been resting on her shoulders ever since the results of the inheritance test had revealed that Hermione was both an indirect descendant and a magical heir of Helewidis Armistad.

The youngest born handmaiden of Lady Rowena Ravenclaw, Helewidis was one of the three whom Lady Ravenclaw's estate had been split among after the founder's death after word reached Lady Ravenclaw of her daughter Helena's and the Baron's deaths in Albania. Unlike the two other Handmaiden, Bonney Brock and Eloise Eoforhild Aelfwig, Helewidis had been a muggleborn and - after Lady Ravenclaw's death - had feared for her safety at Hogwarts and in the Wizarding World where anti-muggle sentiments were on the rise. So after visiting her family in the muggle world and using a memory charm to convince them to leave her behind, as they wouldn't otherwise, Helewidis found sanctuary a nunnery for many decades before her death. From the Armistad's journals, Hermione had learned that she had returned only once to the Wizarding World, just days before her death to make arrangements for her portion of the estate to be properly maintained and to set up the requirements that would identify her heir. While she had never come to regret the life she had taken up at the nunnery caring for the elder nuns and monks with carefully disguised healing spells and adapted potions, she had regretted to some extent never returning to the Wizarding World and putting the education and gifts that Lady Ravenclaw had given her to better use.

It was for this reason that Armistad had set up the inheritance requirements to include that the heir be muggle born, but willing to commit to living in the Wizarding World for at least seventy-five years (half of the lifetime that Armistad had lived and served in the nunnery), that the heir share the thirst for knowledge that Lady Ravenclaw had always sought to engender, and that the heir had the constitution and moral code to work for equity in their world. Having no children of her own, Armistad left the then pittance of her personal vault to the first heir of her younger brother (who had fought the hardest to stay with her) to come to the magical world. Under Gringott's careful management, that pittance had been turned into a trust that by Manager Silverquill's estimation would allow her to live whatever life she wished to live without touching the principal - regardless of whether she accepted the Ravenclaw-Armistad portion of the estate or not. Hermione thought that she might very well want to, but had acquiesced to her parents and Manager Silverquill's suggestion that she take the time to become accustomed to the Wizarding World and learn more about it before taking the vow required to accept that portion of the estate.

And that was how she found herself stepping off the Hogwarts express, at Hogsmeade Station, her mind swirling with everything she had read in the Basics for Muggleborns books, the Hogwarts a History with addendums for Heirs, Etiquette for the Etiquette-less, The Sacred Twenty-Eight Ancient and Noble Houses, and the Similarities and Differences of Magical and Muggle Financial Record Keeping, and feeling absolutely overwhelmed.

The sound and bustling of two hundred plus rowdy students, who seemed intent on spending the last few minutes of their summer freedom in boisterous display - swinging around their trunks and belongings so carelessly that she was almost hit twice didn't help either.

Thankfully, just at the end of the platform, Hermione spotted a small island of calm where six students were standing inside a shimmering shield speaking with Professor Flitwick, and hurried over to join them - hoping that as a professor was with them, they would not mind her sharing the shelter.

To her relief they didn't seem to mind at all, and scooted closer into the shield to make room for her after introducing themselves and turning back to the Professor. Surprisingly, despite seeming no older than herself or any of the others, whom had all agreed with the half-question/half-statement of "first year at Hogwarts?", the slightly slimmer of the two Potter brothers seemed to have taken charge and was thanking Professor Flitwick for coming to meet them and escorting them to the school.
The walk to the school was incredibly peaceful, and Hermione appreciated the time to think. The group she was walking with didn't seem to feel the need to keep a lot of chatter going, but did occasionally point to one detail of the walk, the skyline, or other, and included her in their observations, so she didn't feel like she was being ignored, left out, or catered to just for politeness sake - a feeling that Hermione was all too familiar with and, quite frankly, hated. At primary school, her teachers had every so often tried to talk one of her classmates into making friends with her, but their interests were never the same, the friendships quick to end, and the humiliation of not having a friend only compounded by the fact that some one had to 'try' to be one. She hoped it wouldn't be the same here, but with the weight of the decision she'd soon have to make (and in the perspective of things five years was soon), she had made a firm decision not to let other's feelings or opinions of her matter or hold her back from achieving academically or magically.

From the moment she stepped off the Hogwarts Express platform, Hermione planned to start proving that she belonged in their world; she was going to be top of her class in every class she took, she was going to make a name for herself, and prove that Heiress Armistad, the Honorable Hermione Jean Granger, muggleborn, was a witch in her own right and deserving of the inheritance she had received.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took on a life of its own, and I finally had to split it.

Next up, Hermione's perspective of the start of the sorting, the headmaster's reaction to Millicent Bulstrode's request for the House of Lord's, the Headmaster's argument with Harry, and Hermione's surprise at being sorted into the House of Lords, and getting a bit of a wake up call when she realizes that she's going to have a harder fight than she'd expected to make top of the class.
"The nineteenth – trust is a commodity when given by others- 
a folly when given to others."
(continuation of a split chapter)

For this chapter, blockquotes won't used to represent flash backs but for quotes and 
indents of the sorting songs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Heiress, Armistad?" Heir Zabini asked as he offered his arm to escort her through the Hogwart's Entrance gates.

"You honor me, Heir Zabini," Hermione answered, easily remembering one of the first lessons from 
the etiquette book.

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A week before Hermione had left for school, she and her father had spent most of an afternoon 
practicing some of the basic polite greetings for common situations, interspersed with a good dose of 
laugher and jibes at the almost Victorian ideals they represented ... at least until her mother had 
reminded him that the customs were not that very different than the manners expected in 'lower 
peerage and polite company' ... reminding her father if subtly (and probably unintentionally) that 
Hermione's mother had come from the type of family that would have used such manners on a daily 
basis instead of just special events. Her father had been a little quiet after that, for about ten or fifteen 
minutes, until Hermione asked him whether her mother's Aunt Edith would have thought her 
mother's right cross fell into the realm of 'polite behavior' and started him laughing again. Hermione 
followed it with a reminder/question whether the magical Armistad line that came down through her 
father's ancestors or her mother's muggle Pembrook line were closer to the current peerage.

Wealth and station had never really mattered all that much to her father, as far as Hermione knew, 
but she knew that he had long worried that they couldn't give her all of the opportunities they might 
have wished on what they made a year and still afford to send her to Uni. With her inheritance 
though, all of those worries were now moot, and it gave Hermione a giddy feeling as she watched 
her father realize that and take up the etiquette practice with good humor.

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"The honor is mine." Heir Zabini responded in kind, taking her hand and laying it across the middle 
of his forearm so that her fingertips rested just lightly over where she could feel the base of his wand 
in it's holster.

From what she could tell by the feel of the tip and holster, Hermione had chosen a very similar style 
of holster - with the wand's tip facing out of her sleeve so that a slight tensing of her forearm would 
eject the wand out into her palm. The only difference as far as she could tell was that his was secured 
with straps while she wore a mesh sleeve under her robes (which was considered, according to the 
wand-maker that the goblins had referred her to, more fashionable and ladylike. She had wanted to 
roll her eyes at the wand-maker's comment but decided to follow his advice as she was sure that
fashion—whether frivolous or not—would play as much of a role in the magical world as she had seen it play in the muggle world. Besides, it wouldn't hurt if someone underestimated her thinking she would have to dig her wand out of her bag to defend herself.)

Feeling Heir Zabini's gaze on her, Hermione glanced up to see that he'd been watching her fingers moving over the hidden holster before he'd looked up, amusement in his eyes. Embarrassed, Hermione almost pulled her fingers away, but Heir Zabini covered her fingers with his free hand before she could and gave a light shake of the head to indicate, she thought, that he wasn't offended.

"May I ask a question?" he continued after a moment.

"Certainly," Hermione answered, not feeling certain at all.

"Why did you include 'Muggleborn' in your introduction?"

The question took Hermione a bit by surprise. So far the six students she had been walking with hadn't shown that they were bothered by her being a muggleborn. Still, if anything, the reception that she'd received on the train should have reminded her that the prejudices against muggleborn were still pretty prominent enough that none of the girls who had claimed the train car she'd already settled-in found anything wrong with slipping barely veiled insults towards muggleborns (in general, they claimed, not personally against her) until she was able to focus enough on her reading to shut their conversation out.

"I'm not ashamed of it." Hermione answered, trying to keep her disappointment out of her tone. She'd begun to believe that she might have stumbled on some students who seemed mature enough to build a friendship with.

"Nor should you be," Heir Zabini agreed, surprising her again. "However, it seems to me that you are probably aware of how muggleborns are viewed in some of the traditionalist circles, and open to trying to change their minds, given that you've apparently studied at least one of the more traditionalist etiquette books. So, I find myself slightly confused by your choice to include 'muggleborn' in introductions when it is no longer strictly required nor even fashionable and—to some—might seem like you are pushing your status in their face."

"It's not? But it was on the recommended reading table at Flourish and Blotts."

Wondering why a book store would have an out-dated book on their recommended reading table. In Hermione's experience, bookstore owners and clerks usually gave the great advice on what to read next.

"Well, if you went to Flourish and Blotts that isn't as surprising as you might think. Flourish and Blotts support a particular political agenda that benefits from maintaining segregation between Muggleborn and Purebloods. Contrary to popular belief Flourish and Blotts is not the only book store in Diagon Alley or in Hogsmeade. As an heir, you will have been given a contact book to contact your account manager. If you would like to get a more neutral or updated perspective, you could either request a list of book sellers indexed by political leanings or request a copy of the Gringott's self-updating publisher's compendium. The compendium lists all publicly published texts, that can be indexed by any filter terms, topics, or price range you name and has contact information and instructions for making any purchases."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about it. I guess political biases would have an impact on what's written. I've sort of known that, but haven't really thought about it in terms of making book choices."

"It's understandable. I don't think that most Hogwarts first years will have thought about it. It's not really something that's talked about that much."
"Well, I guess that makes you unusually clever," Hermione teased - hoping that she hadn't gone too far."

"Not particularly," He answered with a knowing smile. "We.." He paused to gesture to between the other heirs and himself, "have had a slightly different upbringing than most students, and our guardians believe political awareness rests at the core of informed estate management and gave us early instruction to develop our critical thinking and political analysis skills."

"Oh, Yes, I can see how that might be useful." Hermione agreed. It did seem obvious when she thought about it: what laws and regulations could easily impact estate holdings and business interests.

"Very, " he agreed, "for instance, if you use the slightly more current greeting, with just your title and name, and give your audience a few minutes to listen to whatever you have to say, your opinion might be taken more seriously than they would have based on the principles they were raised with."

Hermione stared at him for several seconds. She hadn't expected him to actually put that much thought into her perspective, much less pay attention to such a small detail. Most of the boys she had gone through school with to date wouldn't have noticed.

"That's a good point," Hermione agreed, "Thank you. Do you have any particular recommendations for books I should read?"

"For books, no, but there is another matter... Just a moment; I would like Heir Potter's input. Heir Malfoy?"

"Heiress Armistad, may I?" The platinum blond questioned as he canted his head in an unspoken question to Heir Zabini. The darker-haired heir answered with another cant of the head, drawing a nod from Heir Malfoy, who turned back to Hermione with a mild expression of curiosity.

The expression seemed just a bit false to Hermione, but having just been made aware the manners she had read up on might be off the mark, she decided not to question him on it, choosing to go instead with a polite, "You honor me, Heir Malfoy."

"The honor is mine, Heiress Armistad." Heir Malfoy responded in kind, before continuing, "How have you found your introduction to the Wizarding world, so far."

"Quite surprising... And unexpected. There's so much to learn, and so very little time." Hermione answered honestly thinking of how much she had learned in the last month and how little she knew, much less how much of what she'd learned that might not be the full truth.

"Really? How so?" Heir Malfoy asked, seeming more interested than he had been moment's before. She suspected from his expression that he was so accustomed to the wonders of his world that he didn't realize how much it would take for her to learn to think in terms of magic.

"Well, to start, I'm a bit worried that once classes start, I won't be able to keep up in assignments because little facts and details you've learned and grown up with will factor into how you answer questions and what answers will be expected, but won't even occur to me because I think in terms of how it's done in the non-magical world. For example, when we visited Gringott's, one of the staff members suggested we purchase an owl to send mail back and forth while we wait for the wards to be put up on our home and the flop to be connected. But at home, if we wanted to talk to each other, we have these handheld devices that we can use to call each other... Like a floo call. If they hadn't mentioned both options to us before I came here, and someone asked about whether I wanted to get an owl, I would have thought them trying to be odd or mocking me."
"Cellphones, yes. I've heard of them."

"You have?!?" Hermione was shocked. She had assumed that they would be as clueless about the non-magical world as she was about the magical one.

"Yes, Heir Longbottom has quite a few investments in their production and technology."

"And if that doesn't prove my point, I don't know what will." At his, quizzical expression, Hermione continued on a sigh, "I'd thought that you'd know as little about my world as I did yours. It's depressing to think about how much I am going to have to learn just to caught up with you, and I'd let myself hope that I could score at the top of our class by the end of the year."

"That's a bit ambitious." Heir Malfoy answered in a tone that suggested he thought 'unrealistic' or 'delusional' were closer to the truth, but at least his skepticism didn't show on his face.

Hermione knew one of her biggest faults was wanting everyone to respect her and acknowledge her intelligence - and she wouldn't have reacted well if he'd sneered at her. In her last school, her pride in her intelligence had been a poor substitute for friendship, but it was what she'd been able to hold onto and justify feeling set apart from her classmates. She'd been hoping to have at least that coming to Hogwarts, where she'd likely be set apart simply by virtue of being muggleborn.

Trying not to let her realization color her voice, Hermione ruefully agreed, "And that's a bit of a compassionate understatement."

His expression changed for the first time since they'd spoken, becoming less polite and more approachable. He studied her for a second, and she felt like something was changing between them; although, she had no idea why she felt that way. Finally, he took a deep breath and offered,

"Ambitious, but not impossible. My godfather did it, and so did his best friend. He was raised in the muggle world, and she was a straight-up muggleborn. If you back up your ambition with action and intelligence, you should be able to put in a good showing."

"That's kind for you to say, but honestly. Please. Do you think that putting in a good show will be enough for people to overlook that I'm a 'muggleborn'?"

"Overlook? No, but why should they?" He challenged, "But look, and I think I should warn you; there is a very good chance that our school mates will try to paint me with the my father and late grandfather's well-earned reputations of bigotry; but, I'd like to believe that with a bit of guidance I've grown out of that kind of unreasoning hostility. I won't say it will be easy to get some of the strict traditionalists to listen. Some, like my father will treat you with utter contempt. But, you aren't just a muggleborn; you are an heiress. When you're fifteen, you can take up the title of Lady of the Ancient House Armistad. You will be able to begin building on alliances the house Armistad and make new ones even while in school. Ambitions are achievable."

As he spoke, Heir Malfoy's tone went from rueful and slightly embarrassed to earnest - underlying his belief in the possibility with the confidence of his tone and taking her quite completely by surprise. She was silent for a breath before impulse took over and -forgetting everything etiquette rule and prescription, chapter and verse, that she'd read - and threw herself at him, pulling him into a tight bear hug. His breath chuff ed out of him in a nervous, stunted chuckle, and she felt him stiffen in surprise, but he didn't seem to be trying to pull away or out of the hug, so she gave him a quick tight squeeze before letting him go and stepping back to see that he was blushing.

"We have to introduce her to Luna." Heir Zabini chuckled as he returned to their side.

Beside him, Heir Potter nodded to Hermione, then Heir Malfoy, before explaining Heiress Lovegood
has a similar talent for catching us..." he said us, but somehow, Hermione was certain that he actually meant Heir Malfoy "Off-guard. Heiress Armistad, may I speak with you?" He continued, offering his arm to her.

"Of course," Hermione accepted his arm and joined him behind walking behind Heir Longbottom and Heiress Bulstrode who were walking together behind Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter and Professor Flitwick. "I guess this is about the advice that Heir Zabini was thinking of offering?"

"Yes and no; he suggested that I discuss our plans with you and give you the opportunity to take advantage of them."

Unlike Heir Zabini and Heir Malfoy, Heir Potter or Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter (the introduction had been brief and the heirs seemed to look so much alike she wasn't sure which was which now, but) Heir Potter seemed pensive like he wasn't certain he even wanted to talk to her; although, both Potter heirs had been perfectly pleasant earlier. It made her wonder if he wasn't wanting to let her in on something that might get in trouble. Remembering all too easily how quickly cliques bonded - sometimes to the detriment of the more minor (read less popular) members, who could get led into mischief, poor study habits, and frivolous behavior - cliques that she was commonly excluded from, Hermione challenged, "Plans? What sort of plans? I won't be involved in any sort of dirty tricks or taking sides between magicals and non-magicals, or anything like that." She continued remembering Heir Malfoy's mention of building alliances.

Hermione tried to keep her disappointment and defensiveness out of her voice as she spoke but from his expression, she thought she was less than successful. She had started to think that they could potentially be friends and didn't like the idea that they were already starting something. Time and time again she'd been on the receiving end of such groups and regardless of whether she was an heir or not she was not going to be like that just to fit in.

"No," Heir Potter answered, an understanding note in his voice. "We're not interested in anything like that. In fact, I feel safe wagering that no one in this group would ever find much interest in it." He paused considering his words for a moment before continuing, "One of the common traits that most but not all of the Gringott's heirs share is having been bullied or otherwise mistreated, and Gringott's does not retain any heir who seems prone to behave that way."

Not wanting to offend the others Hermione whispered, "Gringott's Heirs? But you don't look like goblins, none of you do. Wouldn't Gringott's heirs be goblins?" and was glad she had a moment later when he explained that they were the wards/foster children of the bank, who'd been taken out of troubled homes and raised by the goblins. Blaise and Draco's side comments of their having 'slightly different up-bringings' and having 'guidance' to grow out of his father's attitude made sense, and made Hermione feel bad about immediately suspecting that they were up to mischief. When he went on to explain that they were going to use their status as Heirs to request consideration for the House of Lords, even though it hadn't been actively requested in recent decades (something that she had read herself in the History of Hogwarts with Heir's addendums and had been been disappointed - believing that she wouldn't be able to be considered). From what she'd read, it sounded like exactly the sort of house she'd need to be in to learn about her title and what all it would entail.

"But won't there need to be older students? Surely, they won't allow us to just supervise ourselves?" Hermione questioned, astonished at the possibility.

Hermione almost expected to hear the standard answer of "I'm old enough to ...

" and a moment later wondered why she had expected such a superficial response when her conversations with the two other heirs should have forewarned her, "There will be monthly reviews by the four heads of the Founder's houses, but in four years we will be expected to take up our heir's rings, name our proxies,
manage heir's vaults, and begin building alliances that can impact our families for generations; in six years, we will be expected to take up our titles, rescind our proxies, take our seats on the Wizengamot, and manage our houses. If we cannot be expected to responsibly manage our own affairs currently, we should not be named as Heirs to a Noble House. This is the time we should be exercising those skills, making minor errors as we might, before we have the welfare and reputation of our houses resting on our shoulders.

Heir Potter's response was so serious and solemn that it made Hermione wonder about his story and how he'd ended up as one of the Gringott's wards, but, seeing how far she'd misread he and the other heirs, she hesitated to ask. Before she could ask anything else about the House of Lords, Heir Potter called his brother... (half-brother?) Rishard over and began discussing whether she should stay with them once they reached Hogwarts or join the other first years coming off the boats. At first, Hermione didn't understand why they thought she shouldn't arrive with them, until they debated the possibility of the Headmaster trying to block her request and reminded Hermione of Hagrid's attempts to keep her and her parents out of the bank. When she mentioned it to the Potter Heirs, Rishard muttered a curse under his breath while Harrison, who'd surprisingly given her permission to use the abbreviated "Harry" form of his name, nodded grimly when Rishard asked if 'this' was what he'd meant. There was some context missing there, but Hermione understood enough of it to agree when they suggested that she join the others so the Headmaster wouldn't connect her to them yet.

After a brief discussion with Professor Flitwick convinced the professor that the other heirs could take care of themselves the rest of the walk to the school, the professor took Hermione's hand and 'apparated' her to the lakeside where other first years were just getting out of the boat. Hagrid was already looking for her, but to Hermione's surprise the professor dismissed his concerns with a white lie that Hermione had been distracted by one of the bookshops in Hogsmeade and missed the boats. Hagrid was quick to shrug the thought off and fitted Hermione into the line right beside him while ordering the red-headed student who'd been standing and waiting to tell her about the school and houses.

Ron, as the red-headed boy had introduced himself, despite neither asking her name nor listening when she finally introduced herself, was quite easy to tune out after Hermione realized that not only was he not going to get a clue that she was already informed about Hogwarts and the house structure, but he that was going to keep spewing the same propaganda that Hagrid had tried to convince her of during the shopping trip. Aside from that, the walk was quite lovely and the rustic landscape surrounding the castle truly beautiful. Still, she couldn't help but miss her previous company and their interesting discussions.

Finally, when it looked like the ground's keeper had taken the longest most-circuitous route to get to the castle's entrance, Hermione managed to slip away from Ron who seemed to feel his job was done halfway through the walk and started yelling back and forth with other boys he'd met on the train.

For the most part, the welcoming ceremony started out just as it was described in *Hogwarts a History*; although, she was somewhat surprised by the size of the hall and the number of students. From what she'd read, she'd thought there would be at least twice as many students as the Hall currently held. And the sorting hat looked almost nothing like it's picture. It looked almost shabby, in fact; although, it's voice still carried around the hall, when the seam opened, it's voice still carried throughout the hall:

> Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,  
> But don't judge on what you see,  
> I'll eat myself if you can find  
> A smarter hat than me.
You can keep your bowler's black-
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave of heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true and unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning
Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your true friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap! (PS)

As a spattering of applause began, Professor McGonagall's voice cut across the sound, calling for,
"Abbott, Hannah"

A moment later, the Hufflepuff House table cheered as they they were the first house called, which was, if Hogwarts a History was correct was supposed to be a good omen for the house's chance to win the House Cup.

Before the sound could die down, Professor McGonagall's voice rang out again, "Bones, Susan".

The hat's cry of 'Hufflepuff roused another cheer.

"Boot, Theodore".

The hall seemed to let out a gush of breath at the hat's cry "Ravenclaw", which surprised Hermione. She thought trios and things that came in three were supposed to be lucky.

She didn't put much thought beyond that, though, as the next name called out was, “Bulstrode, Millicent”

Unlike the other students who had walked up to take the sorting seat, the Heiress Bulstrode was escorted to the dais by Heir Longbottom, who waited to escort her to whichever table she was sorted to. Some of the teachers looked surprised at the courtesy, some pleased, but the Headmaster was wearing the type of indulgent expression watching them that one wore when complimenting a child for being clever after the child had just wiped peanut butter on your clothes. Indulgent because it was socially expected, but annoyed, which really made no sense to Hermione. Even in the non-magical world it was considered polite to escort a lady to her seat in nicer restaurants and formal occasions.
The hat barely sat on her head for a second before it called out. “Stop. Everyone up. We need a new song. Everyone I sorted, back in line. Back in line.

An elderly wizard with an indecently long beard stood up at the sudden commotion caused, calling out two boys at the Gryffindor table, “Messrs Weasley, Please desist and let our kind hat get back to his job. Jules, you were saying?”

The hat protested, “That actually was me, Headmaster,” at the same time the boy’s in question denied, “It wasn’t us.”

"Brilliant…” One continued.

"Utterly,” the other agreed.

"But, not us.” They answered jointly.

"It is a great idea though. Blooming Brilliant,” the first continued their back and forth conversation, only to be cut off by a warning and glare from Professor McGonagall.

"It most certainly is not.”

Her glare promised punishment for any sort of defiance on the point, but from the boy’s grins, she didn’t think they were taking it too seriously.

"Now, now. Let’s get back to it. Jules, you were saying.”

"Right to it... “ The sorting hat agreed and burst into song, again:

In times of old, when I was new
And Hogwarts barely started
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted:

United by a common goal,
They had the self-same yearning,
To make the world's best magic school
And pass along their learning.

"Together we will build and teach!"
The four good friends decided
And never did they dream that they
Might someday be divided,

For were there such friends anywhere
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Unless it was the second pair
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?

So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there and so can tell
The whole sad, sorry tale.

Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those
Whose ancestry is purest."
Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those whose
Intelligence is surest."

Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name,"
Said Hufflepuff, "I'll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same."

These differences caused little strife
When first they came to light,
For each of the four founders had
A House in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin
Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning, just like him,

And those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw
While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,
And taught them all she knew,
Thus the Houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.

So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,
But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.

The Houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with dueling and with fighting
And the clash of friend on friend (OOTP)

original
Until the Noble Four:
Brave, Cunning, Kind, and Wise
Given the choice to bend or break
Sought finally a compromise

A fifth house to rise, the House of Lords
Before the others would fall
With loyalties constrained to none  
But duties to them all  

Born from the Ancient and Noble Houses  
Burdened by fate to one day rule  
These children Brave, Cunning, Kind, and Wise  
Reunite the school.  

While the house falls in and out of favor  
Hidden in history's disguises  
It will always reawaken  
When the need for it arises.  

So, Listen closely Houses Four  
Hear the wisdom in my songs  
Use cunning to ken my warnings  
Be kind enough to change your ways  
and brave enough to see your wrongs,  

The House of Lords will guide you,  
Route disruptions from within  
Restore justice, rebuild without divisions, and...  
Let the sorting Now begin.  

"Now, now. Jules, I don’t know what you’re thinking to dredge up that old…"  

"I requested it, Sir." Heiress Bulstrode interrupted politely.  

"Well. My Dear, that may be, but even so, Jules should no not to indulge every little request. I do  
realize that you have not spent the past five years in the best of circumstances, and may not realize  
any better, but while you are one of the heirs to the Bulstrode family, that does not mean it’s feasible  
to open the ... “  

It rather shocked Hermione to see how rude the headmaster was being to Heiress Bulstrode. First,  
not even recognizing her title. Then, making it seem like a frivolous request she had no right making.  
Then, on top of that, to discuss personal details openly - without Heiress Bulstrode’s permission in  
front of nearly the whole school. That would have never flown in the non-magical world; there were  
even laws to protect students privacy, and Hermione doubted that there weren’t in the Magical world  
as well. At least she suspected not from the large number of uncomfortable and frankly offended  
expressions she saw around the room.  

Turning to look at the other heirs, she realized some weren’t just offended; Heirs Potter and  
Longbottom despite wearing a superficially polite expressions appeared, at least to Hermione, to be  
furious. She wasn’t quite sure who would speak up first.  

Heir Potter won the race, so to speak, stalking down the walkway with a stride that looked a bit out  
of place on someone their age. Judging by the way everyone’s eyes turning to watch him, she wasn’t  
the only one who thought so.  

"As the delegated Heiress to the Ancient and Noble House of Bulstrode, Heiress Bulstrode…” He  
certainly stressed her title before continuing, “By the Hogwarts Charter has the right to request  
consideration to be recognized for the House of Lords.”
"My Dear Boy, I do understand that neither of you were raised in a proper family per se, so may not understand the ramifications of what you are asking."

Again, Hermione was shocked. The Headmaster’s comments were shockingly inappropriate. She wouldn’t be surprised if the Headmaster couldn’t be fined for that kind of slander.

"We fully understand the ramifications of what we are asking for: a suitable placement akin to the requirements of our titles.

"Mr. Potter, I don’t know what tales the goblins have filled your heads with, but…

"My title, Sir, is Lord Harrison James Evan Potter or if you prefer Heir Peverell-Black-Potter. The titles of myself, Heiress Bulstrode, Heir Malfoy, Heir Longbottom, Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter, and Heir Zabini are not tales that our Guardians have filled our heads with they are verifiable fact, and if evidence is required can be provided immediately as we have each been provided with certified copies of our inheritance tests. Now, Sir, may we continue with Heiress Bulstrode’s sorting?"

Hermione was frankly amazed that Heir Potter had the audacity and nerve to stand up to the Headmaster the way he was, even though the man was clearly in the wrong. She would have never thought of doing it personally… much less so firmly.

"Mr. Potter,” The Headmaster tried again, seeming to miss that point. “I’m afraid that simply is not possible.”

"It is Lord Potter, Sir, or Heir Peverell-Black-Potter, Sir. But, you will not need to memorize it if as you say, you can not follow through on our formal request, as we will be leaving. Our guardians have authorized us to withdraw if we are not satisfied that a proper house placement is possible to meet our needs."

"Mr. Potter” the Headmaster scolded, even as Hermione heard several voices from the head table caution, “Headmaster…” and ‘Albus”.

As surprised as Hermione had been when Heir Potter stood up to the headmaster, she was struck speechless when he nodded for Heir Longbottom and Heiress Bulstrode to join them before turning, then turned and walked back down the walkway to the entrance. The whole hall was speechless and seemed to be waiting for the heirs to back down, right until they reached the doors to the hall, and the Headmaster with a slightly disturbed expression, called out, “Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Longbottom, wait.”

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed, this chapter really did take a life of its own and had to be split again to finish the sorting ceremony.

Oh, by the way, if it seems like a lot of heirs and titles, they won't go by them in personal interactions between housemates, so it will taper off some. Hermione just hasn't gotten to know them yet nor they her, so other than Harry haven't done the "but you can call me..." thing.
Hermione nearly groaned as she felt a tug on her arm pulling her into the mass of students and heard an unwelcome, but slightly familiar droning voice nagging at her.

"You don’t listen too well, do ya?" The red-head demanded as he pulled her back to where he and the other boys had been watching the sorting. “Must be a muggle thing. Or... well Hagrid didn’t say anything about how smart you are, so maybe you didn’t understand. That’s okay. I’ll explain again, but you need to start listening up. You need to stick with me, so you don’t get lost or anything. And, remember what I said about asking to be put into Gryffindor. That way I can keep an eye on... an eye out for you” he changed quickly seeming to realize that he’d slipped up.

Hermione kept her expression mildly disinterested - a skill that she'd been given a great number of opportunities to practice, ignoring the slights and insults of the more popular girls at school. After glancing at her to see if she’d noticed, he hurried on, seeming to have decided she hadn’t: “And when the Headmaster gets Harry straightened out and in Gryffindor, he’s going to need you as a friend, so it’s really, really important that you go into Gryffindor, too.”

"Oh, really, and why is that?" Hermione asked, suspecting that it was just one more example of the Headmaster’s attempts to manipulate her.

"Weren’t you listening, I was just telling you. Maybe you are a bit dim. Okay. Listen, Harry’s been living with those goblins for that five years or so, and worse he’s been around that other lot, there. Every one of them from a dark family. Well, not Longbottom, but they’ve got Black blood, so maybe there’s a chance especially with who he’s been hanging out with. Merlin knows, and did you see him walking her up there like that, like she couldn’t even find her way up there, or maybe she’s dim, too. Never know with girls; you lot take the oddest notions."

In the background, Hermione could only just dimly hear the debate going on between Heir Longbottom and the Headmaster, but heard enough to wince when she heard how far ahead they were in their studies. ~~'Well, there goes my shot at being top of the class'~~ she thought to herself and wondered again if she really wanted to go into the House of Lords or into one of the other Houses.

In one of the other houses, she might have a better chance to stand out as a student; well, in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, she would have. In Ravenclaw, she probably wouldn’t stand a chance, and she had no idea what to think about Slytherin. But trying to compete in those houses might very well sacrifice any chance she might have at making friends. There was always the possibility of going into one of the other houses, but staying friends with the Hogwarts Heirs, but she could already imagine the types of names they would call her if she tried that (hanger on, sycophant, gold-digger, and the like. ~~'No, Thank You.'~~ she thought.

As she watched the debate continue, happily letting Ron’s voice slip back into background noise, she
noticed that both Heir Zabini and Heir Malfoy were watching her with appraising, almost concerned gazes. Heir Malfoy cocked a questioning eyebrow at her, and in that moment, Hermione was absolutely certain that if she had nodded or given any indication of distress - one or the other of them would have immediately come to assistance, regardless of where Heir Potter was in the negotiations with Dumbledore over their house. Hermione smiled an unconcerned smile at them and gave the closest approximation of the negative nod she’s seen them use in their silent conversations and turned away if slightly to show her confidence in her ability to deal with the situation. While she appreciated it, she was perfectly capable of putting Ron in his place.

Of course, they had no way of knowing of her mom’s right hook, nor that her mom had taught it how to dish it - verbally and physically, as needed. Still, their concern was appreciated even if not needed.

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Not really, why?"

"Cor, you really are dim aren't you? I was just telling you that Harry will need the right sort around him to make sure he stays on the ‘right path’ ."

"Oh, and you think I’m the right sort, then?” She interrupted him, not really wanting to hear him blather on. ~~ Really, why couldn’t Hagrid have sicced him on someone else?~~

"Well… You’re a muggle, at least, and not likely to buy into those tossers' blag. “ He answered, saying about as clearly as he could without actually slipping up and saying the words that ‘no, he didn’t actually think she was the right sort, but she would do in a pinch because they thought they knew how she’d act without getting to know her’. Grabbing her arm, and shaking her once he demanded “What are you looking at anyway,” before breaking off with a yelp as her heel scraped down across the insole catching a good bit of the top of his foot as it went.

"Oh, I’m sorry,” She offered falsely, “I almost tripped when you pulled me off balance.”

"You did that on purpose, you bint.” He accused.

"Not any more than you meant to pull me off balance,” she retorted. It was only marginally the truth. That little response had come almost on instinct, but it was in response to an instinct she didn’t really try to suppress in the slightest. Really, giving his jaw a quick polish was becoming more and more appealing with every second in his presence. She smirked slightly when he didn’t have an answer to that, and tried to hide it quickly.

Judging from the lessening of tension in Heir Malfoy and Zabini’s expressions, she suspected that she hadn’t been entirely successful.

"What were you looking at anyway?"

"When?“ Hermione questioned, deciding to play as vacant as he seemed to think she was. Without even trying she had already lead him into telling her quite a bit about his or the headmaster’s manipulation and plan for her and one or both of the Potter Heirs.

"When I asked you the first time?"

"Oh, you mean when you tried to pull me off balance?"

"Look, I wasn’t trying to pull you off balance, but yeah then."
"Oh, then, well, I was looking around when you pulled me off balance."

"I know that; I wanted to know what you were looking at," He answered, starting to get a bit red faced.

"Oh, watching over there like everyone else, I suppose; but I don’t know, you jerked me around so hard it distracted me. "

"I didn’t jerk you around!" He protested, starting to lose his temper.

"Yes, you did. I asked if you meant what was I watching when you tried to knock me off balance and you said that you did, so I don’t know why you’re trying to take back your admission now. But, once you admit to something, you really should stand behind your words; it shows a lack of character when you won’t stand behind words."

Just as she saw the end of the debate between the Headmaster and the Gringott's Heirs, she ended the conversation with, “My mother said I should never be friends with people of poor character.” And started to walk away.

"You really are ruddy dense, aren’t you?" He growled at here. ~And, really, slugging him was quickly becoming the only satisfying outcome the conversation could have~~ Hermione managed to slip his hand when it grabbed for her arm again, and finally dropped the polite expression she’d been wearing up to that point, right as the hat called out, "Heiress Abbot, We commend you to the House of Lords."

"What? How did that happen?" Weasley questioned, “He said he wasn’t going to let them sort that way.”

"Who was going to stop it,” she asked, dropping back into her slightly vapid expression for sake of getting information.

"The Headmaster. They’re trying to get away with something, and the Headmaster said he wasn’t gonna let em do it."

"What were they trying to get away with?"

"Dunno." He actually shrugged.

"Then, how do you know they’re up to something?"

"Look at them. Half of them are meant to be in Slytherin. The others… they’re just being misled. Asking for the House of Lords is just straight up Slytherin. Harry wouldn’t do it if he knew. “

"Why not?" Hermione asked, clapping politely as a Miss Edgecomb was sorted into Ravenclaw.

"You wouldn’t understand. Just know if Dumbledore says they’re up to something, that should be good enough for you. He is your magical guardian, you know? He’s just doing what he knows is best for you. I couldn’t believe it when Hagrid told us about your mum mouthing off to him when he was just trying to show you around. Said she was a right shrew about it, too.” He answered, clearly peeved that she hadn’t been listening to him and blindly agreeing.

Realigning his dental work really was the only acceptable response to his snide comment, ~or bruising a few ribs~~ Hermione thought,~~ considering that they were in public~~, but before she could even get her feet positioned properly to give her the best thrust, someone slipped between them and an arm was held out to her.
'May I have the honor?' Heir Potter asked, with a smile. ‘I believe we are due to be called up momentarily.’

'Yes, thank you, but the honor is mine, Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter.’ Feeling a bit mischievous, she drawled the word Heir and stressed the Potter portion of the heir’s title, just to goad Weasley.

'Potter?!? Did she say Potter? What does she think she’s playing at? That’s not Potter.’ He erupted as they walked away just as Professor McGonagall called out, ‘Fisher-Watson-Potter, Rishard.’
Chapter Summary

"The twenty-first – wards and walls are for not, if the ground can not support their weight."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rishard glanced at the child walking beside him, trying to restrain a smirk. While he had only spoken with her briefly during the walk to Hogwart’s gates, she had seemed both more intelligent than to be expected for a child her age and more open-minded than he had expected from a muggleborn. Given her heiress status, perhaps it was to be expected, but that didn’t lead him to expect the bit of mischief he’d just seen nor her immature but marginally cunning for her age and background that he picked up from her superficial thoughts. Moreover, she had actually picked up on potentially useful hints.

"You heard?" She asked, apparently having noticed a hint of his smirk despite having seemed to be looking straight ahead.

"A bit," he agreed, having no intention of giving the intelligent girl any suggestion of his ability to use legillimancy.

"I shouldn’t have taunted him." She sighed, surprising him with her realization that the momentary urge to get a bit of her own back probably wasn’t worth the possible complications it could have caused. It was an instinct he was well familiar with himself and had given into even as an adult many times when he shouldn’t have.

"Perhaps," he agreed, "But it wasn’t overtly indiscreet, and he will be hearing my title momentarily. Even if he did make a scene, there is little that the headmaster can do to block my request as I am my brother’s legally and magically designated heir. Besides, if I had delayed much longer, I suspect that either Heir Malfoy or Heir Zabini would have caused a scene themselves."

"They wouldn’t have had a chance to," The girl whispered back conspiratorially.

"Oh?" He questioned, resisting the urge to read her again.

"I might have been considering clocking him myself." She answered in a lowered voice as they neared the dais, admitting, "I can play dumb when I need to but it really irks me when I’m treated that way; I’m anything but dumb."

The intensity of her tone reminded him of the many times he’d heard it before: from Lucius when he said he was nothing like his father and would erase the man’s identity; from Augustus, vowing he would become someone despite his mother’s beliefs otherwise; from Severus when he swore to never be victimized again. It was a tone that spoke of proving themselves against too many others who’d refused to see them as worthwhile or value them. It was a tone that he too might have used, once, if he’d ever felt inclined to let anyone know of his thoughts or motivations.
"I will try to remember that." He offered, just as Professor McGonnagal called, “Fisher-Watson-Potter, Rishard Renaud Elias,” and the heiress released his arm with a polite dip of a curtsy.

As he climbed the stairs, he heard many of the reactions at the head table, ranging from the Headmaster’s “Did she say Potter?” to Professor Sprout’s “the Fischer-Watson’s, yes, I do remember the family. The daughter Emilia was one of my house before the poor dear succumbed to dragon-fever, but it was Severus’s almost-gasp of ‘Elias…’ that caught him off guard; he had forgotten how close the two had been before Elias Fischer-Watson’s father had signed his heir’s marriage contract and required him to cease association with the half-blood to quell rumors. As both men had been among his most skilled and efficient followers, he had never questioned their involvement and would have interceded with Elias’s father - a supporter, if not a follower, on their behalf, if Elias had not been killed on the land development ‘raid’ less than a month later.

Wondering how to address the matter, Rishard wasn’t prepared for Julius’s pleased voice when it addressed him. “Welcome back, young man. We have been hoping we would see you soon. Don’t worry, the bearded goat can’t hear a thing. We must hurry though. We have something for you.”

"What?” Rishard demanded silently, confused but not willing to admit it and give up leverage or more information than necessary.

"No, don’t be that way,” the hat asked. “It’s something that already belonged to you. The first time you sat down, the bit of me that is from Lady Ravenclaw saw the state you were in and that to survive you had been required to lock a part of yourself away and grow up far too quickly. While she doesn’t have her full abilities to see what will come, she could see some possible outcomes and knew that if we didn’t protect that small part of you, it would be lost forever, so she used the small rip that had already happened to release it, and we’ve held it in trust for you - hoping that today would happen.”

"I don’t understand." He denied, suspecting he did, but now wiling to admit the possibility.

"Yes, you do, but don’t worry, we understood from the beginning and have never judged you for it. Now…”” Rishard felt something absorb into his mind, making him feel almost dizzy as it washed into him, and the hat cried out, “Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter-Perevell-Black, we commend you to the “House of Lords.”

Standing almost numbly, Rishard bowed politely before crossing the dais to wait for the heiress. As he crossed, he could feel the both the headmaster's and Severus’s gaze on him as he passed. Thankfully, the headmaster must have felt that he had lost too much ground because he somehow elected not to stop him. Severus’s gaze was a constant weight.

Surprisingly, while Rishard stood trying to split his attention between feeling out what had changed with the hat’s ‘gift’ and what was going on around him, he was joined by Heir Finch-Fletchley who had been using the facilities when his name was first called, then by an Heiress Frobisher. When Heir Finch-Fletchley hesitated to escort Heiress Frobisher back to where Heiress Bulstrode and Heiress Bones waited with Harry, Heir Zabini, and Heir Malfoy, Rishard quietly told him that he was already acquainted with Heiress Armistad so would wait for her instead. He was glad, a moment later, that he had because it gave him a ring-side seat to once again watch as the Headmaster lost face.

"Welcome Heiress Armistad-Ravenclaw. We commend you to the House of Lords and welcome the return of your bloodline to the magical world.

"No, this is a mistake!” the Headmaster protested, slamming his palm onto the table as he stood. “This is a mistake among many mistakes and must stop right now. Miss Granger, you are well aware
that you are a muggle born, and -therefore- cannot be an heir to any magical line. Claiming to be one, even believing yourself one, much less the heir of a founder is delusional. It is bad enough to think of allowing students to believe that they can self-manage their house and themselves, but allowing a delusional child to believe so… No, I am afraid as Headmaster, I must step in and put a stop to this right now.”

Without looking, Rishard knew that Harry and the other heirs were already coming to the dais to face down the Headmaster, even as the other Professors and Heads of Houses began to caution the Headmaster that he was mishandling the situation, but as it turned out, it appeared that the Heiress Armistad had it well in hand.

"Headmaster, I realize you may be too old to have learned about genetics in school or as it’s called in the magical world - heritage studies- as those classes didn’t start until well after you graduated, and you were quick to shut them down when you became Headmaster.” She answered in a voice that carried in the now silent hall. “It’s really a shame you did because if you had taken those courses, you would have known that like the color of your eyes or hair, magical traits and abilities flow down family lines. Really, you know, if you had thought of it, you’d have probably realized that they have to come from somewhere in the bloodline or as ‘muggles’ call it the gene pool. Now the really interesting thing you might not know is that sometimes a gene goes recessive, that doesn’t mean it disappears but just doesn’t show as strongly. I think you call the children this happens in ‘squibs’…”

"Miss Granger… This is not the time for…” The Headmaster started to interrupt somewhat harshly, only to be cut off.

"Actually, Albus, you started this conversation by challenging Heiress Armistad-Ravenclaw’s status - so now owe her the opportunity to defend her claim.” The sorting hat spoke over the headmaster, “Heiress, please continue.”

"Thank you, Sir.” She agreed, turning to include the four house tables as she picked up her explanation. “So, squibs go out into the non-magical world and make lives for themselves, where they cannot here, and over enough generations, everyone forgets they had even come from this world… But, once every few generations, the child or grandchild or great-great-grandchild of a squib meets the child, grandchild, or great-great-grandchild of another squib and those magical traits, those genes come together and a ‘muggleborn’ is born.”

Almost as surprising as her argument was - was the mantra that he picked up from the Heiress as she spoke…. ~~‘ Channel Mom, Channel Mom, Be Mom.~~ Repeated over and over as she continued her argument, the mental mantra almost made Rishard wish to meet the heiress’s mother, muggle or no, if the woman could inspire this type of example for her daughter to follow.

"That’s why and how I can be the bloodline and magical heiress to the Armistad Estate and the magical heiress to the Ravenclaw Estate. Simple, yes. But, if my word isn’t enough for you, I do happen to have a certified copy of my inheritance that I was planning to submit to be entered in my permanent records as I will need to make adjustments to my third year - and beyond - schedules to make time for estate matters.” She finished, head up and looking appropriately regal as she laid the familiar taped scroll of an inheritance test with Gringott’s very recognizable seal in front of him.

The headmaster ignored the scroll but clearly realized that he didn’t have a valid argument to prevent her placement. Instead, he ran his hand down his beard trying to affect a contemplative air of grandfatherly disappointment that seemed to do little or nothing to dissuade the girl. The only thing he eventually answered was, “You are making a mistake Ms. Granger, one that I hope neither you nor your parents will come to regret.”

Rishard was pressed to wonder what had happened to make the old man so heavy handed in the
years since their last confrontation. Or had he truly been that far gone that he allowed someone who
now seemed to have no understanding of subtlety or cunning? Either way, the man's behavior was
quickly alienating the very children he should have curried favor from, the children who could have
had the strongest voices against the platforms Rishard had promoted in his former life. The man was
a fool, and he wondered how many saw it.

"You are welcome to contact both my parents and Gringott's to verify my documentation; however,
please let me assure you that I will join the House of Lords as sorted or also withdraw and if you
doubt that I have my parent’s permission Mr. Hagrid can verify that they were already on the
fence..."

"As Headmaster, I am your magical guardian, my dear and…

"Only if I had decided to attend Hogwarts, without a magical guardian assigned, Sir, but both of that
my parents have already filed to have that guardianship changed to the Armistad account manager,
so that she can assist in my estate issues as well as continue as my guardian whether I attend
Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, Durmstrung, Salem, or Claremont.

To say Rishard was stunned was an understatement. Had the wizard never had anyone stand up to
him so directly before? Admittedly, Rishard in his previous life had chosen to work behind the
scenes and not confront him directly until it actually came to battlefields. Now, seeing how poorly
the Headmaster handled direct confrontation - seeming to not know how to deal with it - Richard
could not help but wonder if that had been a mistake. The Headmaster appeared to be out of his
depth... dealing with children and that fact was becoming more and more obvious by the moment. A
fact which the Deputy-Headmistress seemed to recognize as she chose to interrupt, “Thank you for
your explanation Heiress, if any additional information is needed, I am certain we can bring it to your
attention at a later date, but we do have other students who are waiting to be sorted.”

"Yes, Ma’am, Thank you.” The young heiress answered - seeming the very model of a dignified
noble as she descended the dais steps and took Rishard’s arm.

Rishard waited until they were several yards away before he commented, “That was rather
unexpected.” … as would be her answer.

"Did I … did I do that?” she asked in a high-pitched whisper. “I can’t believe I just did that.” she
continued, her voice getting slightly higher.

"Stand up to the Headmaster?” He asked with amusement. “Imply that he was ignorant and out of
date? Publically challenge his authority and right to be your magical guardian? Yes and quite
effectively, too.”

"I did?!!” She squeaked in near alarm, and for a moment, Rishard was certain that she was tempted
to turn back, apologize, and reconcile. He was incredibly tempted to read her again, but dropped the
thought after a moment. Certainly, after that display, she had earned the right to the privacy of her
thoughts, which struck him a moment later as an unusual decision for him to make. In the past, he’d
never particularly cared for other’s right to privacy, and he couldn’t help but wonder why he did
now.

The question became a moot point a moment later when the quiet murmur of her previous mantra
~~~ ‘Channel Mom, channel Mom.’ ~~~ whispered across his awareness before he intentionally
ignored it and pulled in his habitual use of legillimency to scan his surroundings until he no longer
picked up her thoughts. Her posture straightened, and the Heiress walked with air of commitment to
join the growing group of heirs.
When they reached the group, Rishard happily handed her off to the congratulations of Heirs Malfoy and Zabini. Heir Longbottom was already headed to the dais for his own sorting, and Harry was watching them both. Wondering what was going through the boy’s mind, Rishard arched a questioning eyebrow.

Harry asked his status with a gesture, then agreed that they could discuss it later when Rishard responded in kind that he was essentially fine. Turning his attention back to trying to ascertain any changes in his mental make-up, Rishard ignored the remainder of the sorting until the end with the last two students, Heir Zabini and Heiress Zeller also joining the House of Lords.

As they began to sit around a table that Rishard hadn’ t noticed appearing, Heiress Bulstrode told him, in a delighted whisper, how the headmaster had attempted one last manipulation - trying to force them into sitting at the various house tables, actually going so far as to suggest the specific tables for various sets of heirs. According to the heiress, before the Headmaster could finish the suggestion, Harry, and Heirs Zabini, Malfoy, and Longbottom pulled out and distributed transfiguration cubes to each of the other heirs, then proceeded to demonstrate the transfiguration spell to create their chairs while Millicent transformed her cube into a long oval table large enough the ten heirs and heiresses of their new house, now seated to his left and right: Hannah Abbott, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones, Millicent Bulstrode, Neville Longbottom, Victoria Frobisher, Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger-Armistad-Ravenclaw, Harrison James Peverell-Black-Potter, Rose Zeller, and Blaise Antonio Zambini.

As they introduced each other and began to eat, Rishard considered the oddly even balance of the house for a random assortment of heirs that happened to be born eleven years before...dark, light, and neutral families -in and almost even mix- with the neutral heirs numbering only one more than the dark or light heirs, a blend of pure bloods, half-bloods, and muggleborn -- for the most part -- from families with strong foundations and rich histories.

~~~’It is going to be an interesting house’~~~ he decided as food and place settings began appear on the transfigured table - provided by Hibby and the assigned Gringott's elves if the Headmaster's disgruntled expression was anything to go by.

Chapter End Notes

And here ends the sorting.
"The twenty-second – a foundation of stone will crack if built upon water."

My Dearest Aunt Amelia,

I hope that my message will reach you in good health and humor and imagine that my mother’s owl will reach you soon, to reiterate our gratitude and announce that due to your naming me as your heir, I was eligible for and elected to the House of Lords. The first House of Lords in four hundred and sixty-eight years.

Did you imagine? I never did. Certainly, the House of Lords was mentioned in Hogwarts: A History, but not in any sense that I would have believed it possible to still be called for today. I wouldn’t have even thought to ask for it if Heiress Bulstrode had not first requested it.

Heiress Bulstrode, by the way, was sorted into the House of Lords, over the Headmaster’s objections, which I just don’t understand. From what two of the other Heirs said during the sorting, it sounded like preparations had already been made, formal letters of intent submitted - with agreement from the Keeper of the Houses and Halls, the Head of Houses, and involved Professors - but Headmaster Dumbledore went on and on about how it just wasn’t possible, which didn’t make sense at all, especially when we were dismissed to our rooms last night.

Auntie, our house is nothing like the dorms you and mum described. We each have our own room, office, and sitting room. They are pretty plain at the moment, but with my own room, I can request some of my own things to be sent here, or add any furnishings I’d like - as my own possessions. While our personal bedrooms are sparse, though, the study areas we have for potions, astronomy, runes, and warping rival mother’s - they do! Seriously!!! We also have a floo that can - according to our reading of the charter- be set to permit us to go to limited destinations, including our family homes, Gringotts, and the Ministry as needed - with our parents and guardians permission. I’ve owled Mum for permission and would like yours as well and have attached the permission slip to this message.

The charter laid a lot of the general guidelines out for us - three pages worth - but I was really surprised how much it didn’t lay out for us, and was really glad that Heir Potter had a good idea what to get done first. Did you know that he has an Assistant Manager’s position at Gringotts, in the ‘Retention and Retrieval’ department? I overheard Heiress Bulstrode mentioning it to Heiress Forbisher and that he had earned a promotion from a ‘Junior Manager’ just days before they came to Hogwarts. When I first heard it, I didn’t believe it - even if he seemed to know what we needed to do to get things started - but then, the heirs and heiresses who were raised and tutored in the Wizarding World submitted their Traditional Wizarding Education Assessment Test scores, and Auntie… He already has owls and newts level equivalency scores. Actually, almost all of the Gringott’s heirs have high scores through third and fourth-year subjects and higher, but his were a surprise. I mean none of the stories about him have ever said anything about how smart he is… or a brother? Did you know he had a brother? None of the books I’ve ever read said anything about a brother. I know you’ve said you can’t rely on unauthorized biographies as fact, but that’s a big thing to leave out.

But outside Hannah, who I already knew, none of the other heirs are anything like I’d expected. Heiress Bulstrode
is almost nothing like her sisters or mother, not even in looks, although you can see some of their family traits, they fit on her better, somehow. She is taller and more heavy set than Hannah and I but not chunky like her mother and sisters. Instead she reminds me of one of the Hollyhead Harpies like her size is more from muscles than... well bulk. She seems smarter, too, but that’s a little hard to compare when her mother and sisters don’t really talk in public. She seems to be good friends with Heir Longbottom as they walked together, sat together, and were often speaking to each other. I wouldn’t have thought that Lady Longbottom was close enough to consider negotiations with the House of Bulstrode, but from how close they seemed to know each other, I suspect he’s off the market.

Don’t get mad at me for saying that. I know you want me to take my education seriously and not just try to attract the attention of potential matches, and I will. From what I've seen so far, I’m pretty sure that it will be mandatory as a being a part of the house. But, at the same time, we both know I’m going to have to have a contract one day, so would it really hurt if I can pick out someone I like now and work on them to try to encourage them - discreetly. I promise I won’t break any rules and won’t behave improperly, and mom has been teaching me about the ‘little ways’ to catch someone’s attention. Being selected for the House of Lords just means that I’ll be closer to other students of our standing, and making friends in the house couldn’t hurt, even if it doesn’t turn into something more.

I don’t know if I would have been interested in him anyway. He’s really pretty quiet and bookish. He said he like herbology and is taking a self-study for apothecary sciences. To me, it sounded so boring, even if he’s over the moon about it, but Bulstrode seemed interested enough, so I guess they might be a good match. Anyway, he’s certainly not the only boy in the house.

He’s not the only cute boy either. Both of the Potter Heirs and Heir Zabini are fit, and Heir Finch-Fletchley’s not bad either, but they aren’t the fittest. Please, don’t tell Mom because I don’t want her to think that I’m even considering it - I’m not - but, out of all of the heirs, Heir Malfoy... Well, if he weren’t a Malfoy, I’d bribe his elf to find out his favorite color and buy a half-dozen robes in the color.

Okay, so I’ve mentioned Heirs Potter, Heir Zabini, Heir Finch-Fletchley, Heir Longbottom, Heir Malfoy, and Heiress Bulstrode; you know Hannah and I believe you know Madam Frobisher, but surprisingly two other muggle born heirs (in addition to Heir Finch-Fletchley, were ‘commended’ into our house Heiress Hermione Granger-Armistad-Ravenclaw, and Heiress Rose Zeller. Did you know that muggle borns were descendants of squib lines? Heiress Granger-Armistad-Ravenclaw explained it referring to both Heritage studies and muggle born science to support her claim. She even said she’d submit her official inheritance test to back her claim. When we sat to eat, Heiress Zeller agreed that her inheritance test showed the same but that she couldn’t guarantee it would for every muggle born. Still for two of the what five(?) muggle borns sorted for our year, to be not only muggle born but heirs - it has to make you wonder.

It’s going to be an interesting year.

Auntie, I’m sorry, I have to go. We’re having a meeting with the other head of houses to have our house rules and schedules approved. I’ll write as soon as I can. Thank you again.

Your adoring niece and grateful heir,
Heiress Susan Amelia Melissa Bones

~ ~ ~

After rolling her message into a tight roll, she slid the tip of her wand down the seam, sealing it with the spell that Heir Longbottom had demonstrated during their first meeting, then searched her memory for the name of any of the elves that Heir Peverell-Potter-Black had introduced them to earlier.
"Canky?" She tried, calling out hopefully.

"It is Cala, Lady Bones, or does the Lady wish to speak with Tanky?" The strangely dignified elf questioned.

Susan really had had no idea what to make of the Gringotts’ elves … or heirs… when she had first been introduced. Much less the interim head of house they had chosen earlier that evening...

“Hibby, Ebby, Sala, Cala, Tanky, Prust: Thank you for your excellent work,” Heir Potter complemented the elves who had joined them from Gringotts to serve the House of Lords. During the short span of time they had been given during the so-called ‘Welcoming Feast’, the Elves had outfitted the reopened Lord’s Hall to suit the ten new heirs and heiresses who would reside there, pulling a standard assortment of furniture for each individual dorm room and antechamber, the individual baths, and offices as well as a conference room, the potions, transfiguration, herbology study areas. The warding table, rune and star charts, and defense figurine were obviously newly purchased, as confirmed by a frown-accompanied nod from Ebby, but Heir Potter had apparently anticipated that they would need quite a bit more to outfit the heirs, and approved the expense with a quick gesture.

From the other heirs’ expressions, Susan could see that they were impressed with the elves’ set up as well, and looked far less reticent than they had when the Headmaster had wished them ‘an enjoyable night of dusting.’ She hadn’t been particularly looking forward to the prospect and knew that the other Heiresses - outside of Heiress Bulstrode, who had seemed remarkably nonplussed by the thought - hadn’t either.

Pushing the thought of the unpleasant old man aside, Susan turned to the other heirs, watching their expressions as Heir Potter suggested: “I believe our first order of business should be to pick out our individual dorm and chamber. When we placed our request, we asked that Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick - as Heads of House - place the standard wards on our each of our dorms. I believe Hibby has the list, once you’ve selected your dorm, please feel free to suggest any ward that you would like to the list. I can’t make any guarantee that the professors can or will add those, but if they are worthwhile we can negotiate for them as a package."

"Negotiate for them? But they’re our professors. They have to put them on for us if it would…” Heiress Zeller protested, trailing off when Heir Potter held his hand up to forestall her.

"Heiress Zeller, after we select our rooms and add ward suggestions,” Heir Potter answered, looking somewhat peeved for the first time, which was a bit surprising considering the … ~~~ ‘Well, it hadn’t been an argument precisely, nor a debate, but a confrontation… yes a confrontation would work ~~~ … The slight irritation in his expression had been surprising - considering the confrontation between the headmaster and Heir Potter, but all traces of his vexation disappeared a moment later his brother cleared his throat and continued: “We can sit down with the Hogwart’s charter and its requirements of the House of Lords. From the information we have, matters of our house are handled somewhat differently, but I truly believe it will not take long to see the benefits of the differences,” Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter assured her when she frowned.

The Gringott’s heirs settled in rather quickly, taking alternating rooms between the other sorted heirs and returned to the conference table within minutes as the elves began to
unpack and sort out their rooms. It took Susan and the sorted heirs a bit longer deciding on the rooms they wished based according to the views.

Susan was sure the walls and windows had to be enchanted based on where the Great Hall had been located, but the views appeared so natural that she doubted anyone who didn’t know about enchantments would be able to tell the differences. Susan chose the suite that seemed to have bay windows looking out over a private garden and placed between Heir Finch-Fletchley and Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter-Black-Peverell. Almost as soon as her choice had been made, one of the elves silently faded in and began to unpack.

When they returned to the conference table, it was to be met with a surprise: the Headmaster’s phoenix was perched to one side of an ornate perch. Sharing the perch, on a small round platform, sat the sorting hat - seeming to wait for their arrival.

Once the seats had filled, the Sorting Hat asked, “Fawkes, if you will”, prompting the phoenix to lift the hat by the ribbon around its brim and rolled his long neck and head backward then flung it forward - unrolling the hat into a scroll of what appeared to be a bright, clean, and well-cared for parchment. Dark letters began to form across the top of the parchment, reading ‘Charter of the House of Lords’ and just below it - in subscript- ‘Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry’, as a seam just above the curl at the bottom of the scroll split and the Sorting Hat’s voice broke into another song.

    Heirs Noble, and of ancient blood,
    Be welcome in the house of Lords.
    Accept, Your Graces, our board and bread,
    Goodwill, and small rewards,
    As but the meanest recognitions,
    Of the services your house affords.

    But hold yourself apart,
    In title, manner, and in bearing
    From the smallest of your gestures
    To the trim of robes you’re wearing
    For some will see naught but your age,
    Though the marks of your station are glaring.

    So hold yourself to the highest standards...
    Above reproach in others’ eyes,
    Till your reputation and behavior,
    Guard against deceit and lies.
    For doing so will gain you followers -
    Even in those who would not otherwise.

    First.
    in every trace and aspect, must your bearing thus inspire
    The respect and the dignity that your role will require.
    Solemn, constant, and regal be - in attitude and attire.
    In all forms and in keeping, with the roles to which you aspire.

    Thus to these guidelines,
    Do adhere:
    Outside your house,
Must your dignity be clear
Refrain from manners, habits, or expressions,
That simper, swoon, deride, or sneer.

In speech, and writing, praise and criticise judiciously ...

The sorting hat's song continued in that vein for fifteen minutes or more proscribing everything from the wards to be cast on their suites to the jewelry they would be expected to wear and the protection charms on each piece to the holidays they would celebrate and books it was recommended they read before finally ending in a somewhat dire warning:

Oh, Last of Lords,
Before the Seer.
To unite the school,
Truth and honor hold dear.
For should these fail, students here
Will go out in the world to spread suffering and fear.

But dread not, Lords, your weighty chore.
Five times have I given this warning before,
And not one - in five - have failed to restore
The knowledge of Lady Magic to its proper place and
Return to us the lessons of her wisdom, power, and grace.

In the wake of his song, Fawkes flipped his head with a practiced spin that flipped the sorting hat back into its former cone shape - the glossy well-kept parchment disappearing back into the wilted, barely-conical brown pile of Hestian’s thestral wool. With a mischievous ‘chirrrrup’, it dropped the ribbon to catch the hat’s brim and flipped it in a neat summersault that landed the hat on the pedestal beside it. Despite not having the ability to turn, the hat seemed to scan them all then chuckled through the ripped seam, “I do so love their reactions the first time they see you do that.”

Fawkes seemed to chirp in agreement before sweeping his wings out, catching the top of the cone, and disappearing with the sorting hat in a flash of flames.

It had taken, not only Susan, several minutes to come back to the present after watching the bird and hat disappear, but eventually they did and began to review and the notes that Heir Zabini and Heiress Bulstrode had taken from the Sorting Hat’s latest song to come up with a schedule and lesson plan to present the instructors who were to meet with them shortly.

"Lady Bones, shall Cala collect Tanky?" The elf questioned, drawing Susan back to the present.

"No, Cala, thank you. I just got lost in my thoughts for a moment." Susan smiled at the elf a bit sheepishly before handing her messages to the creature. “Please carry the first message to my mother, then the second to my Aunt, Lady Amelia Bones in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Thank you.”

"Yes, Lady Bones. If you will?" The elf asked holding out a thin accounting book.

"What?" Susan stared at the creature not understanding until she glanced at the book and saw a page titled ‘Messages Delivered’ and a string of initials and dates. Taking the hint, Susan picked up her quill again, filled out the blocks for date and quantity, and then initialed, shaking her head. It was an
odd thing to do for an elf when they normally took messages and delivered them without question, but perhaps this one was in training or being monitored to make certain it didn’t slack off.

She set the thought aside though, on hearing the ‘ding’ of the conference table’s bell, calling them to the meeting.
Unrolling the-

*Hogwarts’ New House of Lords’ Charter;*
The House of Lord’s request for the recommendations and referral of fifth, sixth, and seventh-year students who might be hired to supervise the Lords’ and Ladies’ ‘laboratory sessions’;
The request for a week’s delay in beginning curriculum
The request to reserve an unused classroom and potions lab for the Heirs who have not already taken the Traditional Wizarding Education Assessment Tests to be tested for a baseline of their skills,
As well as the schedule of visitors and vendors they expected to host during that week to arrange the provision of new robes, complete ‘study’ and ‘accounting’ kits, and other miscellaneous;
Their request to the Keeper of House and Halls to accompany them while they gathered materials for transfiguration blocks
And their tentative proposed course of study as well a request for the lesson plans of relevant instructors…. and their supplementary reading lists

... across the staffroom’s conference table, spreading them out between herself, the other Heads of House (Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, and Pomona Sprout), Poppy Pomfrey, and Argus Filch - Minerva McGonagall scanned the documents another time before looking back to her colleagues and remarking, “I truly have no idea what to say.”

"I can think of a great many things to say," Filius Flitwick answered easily, “Including that I suddenly feel compelled to do a great deal of in-depth research on the history of the House of Lords. Do any of you remember reading or hearing any mention of it?"

"Personally, no; however, after the feast, I visited the library to look it up in the reference copy of *Hogwart’s: A History,”* Pomona began, before continuing with a frown, “Only to find that the Headmaster has checked the edition out.”

No one needed to comment or speculate on the Headmaster’s motive for doing so when the headmaster already maintained several copies of the text in his offices. The headmaster had made his opinion of the House of Lords abundantly clear, and while Minerva had always been a true heart-to-toe Gryffindor, she was not so unobservant as to miss the glance shared between Filius and Severus.

"Something to say, Gentlemen?” She prompted.

"Nothing worth repeating,” Severus answered with a sideward glance to one of the empty frames.

"I’m shocked,” The portrait of the late Headmaster Phineaus Nigelus Black intoned in a sarcastic tone, with a sideward glance of his own to a picture frame where a half-turned chair sat in the shadows of a darkened room and almost blocked the traces of another profile that weren’t hidden by the painted room’s shadow. “Certainly, you don’t think that I would run tattling back to the
"Do not put words in my mouth nor in the Headmaster’s ear to that insinuation, Headmaster Black. I said nothing of the sort,” Severus replied waspishly, “Only that I have no comment to make on the so-called ‘House of Lords’ that others might find worth repeating.”

Despite his irritable tone, Minerva didn’t take the retort seriously at all; not only did Severus walk a very thin line between keeping the headmaster appeased without drawing the attention of the remaining ‘former’ death eaters, but he also juggled maintaining the headmaster’s good favor with protecting his students’ interests and acting as a buffer between the Headmaster and their colleagues - taking on tasks and projects that he had no interest in doing to prevent the other professors being manipulated into them. Added to that, Minerva had suspected for years that the old portrait and the Potions Master had been engaged in a long unspoken, snark-based game of one-upmanship that ultimately transformed into a friendship at some unknown point as they seemed to take too much pleasure from watching each other rant, otherwise.

"My, you are touchy today.” The old headmaster taunted, but Minerva cut him off before he could kindle another of their verbal sparring sessions.

"Please do not provoke him, Headmaster Black, certainly you can see we have quite a bit to review and approve.”

”A pitiful distraction you lot are.” Black replied, and of course, Severus just had to take the bait.

"How terribly inconvenient for you,” Severus drawled, his tone just this side of derisive as he continued, “One would think you would find ample distraction in the Headmaster’s office. Might I suggest you check?”

"Bah, what do you think I need a distraction from? That ridiculous boy is still pouting because he hasn’t been able to suss out a means to rescind a legitimately called ‘House of Lords’... when he should be counting his lucky stars that Madame Pince has not seen how he mishandled his borrowed collection. Our dear librarian would be pushed quite beyond her wit's end to see those cherished relics so abused.”

Minerva winced at the image it brought to mind. Due to the title the Headmaster had inflicted on the woman stating that ‘Librarian’ was a far more modern and understandable title to the students, many overlooked the fact that Madam Pince took very seriously the job she was hired for and was diligent in her duty to curate the relics and ancient texts held at Hogwarts. It was bad enough that the Headmaster refused to follow the rules that for centuries had applied to staff and student alike - restricting them from ‘checking out’ reference texts that had been deemed too rare and valuable to remove, much less removing enough to be described as a collection, but to know that he had been so uncaring of the ward-protected texts that there could actually be visible damage to the texts... Well, Minerva had no doubt that it would be the last straw for the Master Curator, and Hogwarts would lose yet another talented and dedicated staff member, and in Minerva’s mind, there were so few left.

When she glanced across to Pomona, she was certain she saw the same thoughts crossing her mind. It was one they had often spoken of when reminiscing about Hogwarts during their childhoods. So many classes had been removed for so-called budgetary reasons and others yet for political reasons as well as others for vague miscellaneous reasons that Minerva sometimes wondered how the school had ever managed to maintain its standing as a magical academy. When she, Pomona, and Filius retired, she doubted that there would be anyone on staff who could remember Hogwarts at its ‘modern’ peak, running at full capacity, offering rigorous and challenging curriculum, and with Hogwarts students leading the highest scores in Newts and Owls In the International Confederation of Wizarding Communities.
Despite her usual decorum, some of Minerva’s thoughts must have shown in her expression because in an unexpected and unusual show of understanding, Severus’s fingers closed over her hand drawing her attention to his face as he commented, “Before you get too caught up in that particular train of thought, perhaps you should look over the proposals again.” He commented with a gesture, “It might give you a different perspective.”

~~~ 'Blasted Legilimency.' ~~~ While Minerva knew Severus was almost always circumspect regarding his use of legilimency on his colleagues, her catish nature understood his snakish curiosity all too well, and had no doubt that he had at least dipped into her surface thoughts.

Still, his point was a good one. The heirs proposals reflected a quality of thinking that she hadn’t allowed herself to expect from students in a good number of years. If the other students followed their leads, even marginally, it would be a true improvement.

"You may have a point, Severus,” She agreed, while mentally projecting a soft cat’s paw of a jab back at him with a warning, ~~~ ;But, stay out of my thoughts, Dear snake.’~~~

She had the briefest image of a small garden snake sticking it’s tongue out at her before she felt him making his presence noticeable to her as it withdrew. She didn’t doubt that he could have stayed undetectable in her mind for the remainder of the meeting so appreciated the courtesy.

"Thank you. Now, shall we start with the Heir’s request for Wards. I know that you have already put them in place, Gentlemen; however, I do believe it is worthwhile to have their approval recorded. Are there any objections to the requests?’

"No,” Pomona answered quickly, “If anything, in my mind, they are rather too strict, but Heir Malfoy’s reasoning that - as Heirs of their Houses - they will be expected to engage in a bonding contract one day and Heiress Armistad’s point that it was ‘only fair’ to apply the same restrictions to the male heirs as to the female heirs are both valid points.”

"Agreed” Filius added, “Given that same-gender bonding has become as commonplace and accepted opposite-gender bonding, it logically follows that both genders should be restricted from visiting another heir’s bedchambers and require an elf chaperone to be alone in an individual’s office or sitting room. With our current dorm structure, I am not certain that we could practically apply the same restrictions, but it does merit consideration. Perhaps this coming summer, we could ward the dormitory beds similarly.”

"It is rather draining unless you include a focus stone in the warding.” Severus agreed, before adding, “Be certain to camouflage the focus stone, though, for students will dig one out the moment they detect it?”

"Are you already using such wards?” Minerva asked, somewhat surprised, she really had never considered going to that extent with her lions, whom she expected to manage their own ‘affairs’ both literally and figuratively; although, she did make certain that all of her lions received the fertility and protection spells lecture when they reached third-year.

"Of course,” Severus agreed, looking surprised. “I will not see my house disgraced by over-emotional, immature students being unable to complete an arranged bonding due to wantonness at school. I have likewise embedded warded focus stones beneath the quidditch bleachers, in the tunnels, and common student ‘hidey-holes’.”

The derision with which he muttered ‘hidey holes’ drew smiles to their eyes if not their expressions, but on considering that the majority of his students came from well-to-do and politically connected houses, his precautions were hardly unreasonable.
"So, we are in agreement to approve the wards?"

"Aye," they chorused - unanimous.

"Shall we move on then to their addendums to the original house charter?" Minerva questioned.

"Compared to the recitation that Julius gave us," Filius took the topic up, "the only notable differences that struck me were the removal of family and house insignia and motto from their individual robes to be replaced with ‘United Wizengmot’ insignia and ‘Service to all’ motto, which given the role of the House that Jules described, seems ideally suited to avoid the perception of favoring any Hogwarts house much less any family alliances over others… and them the … what did Heir Finch-Fletchley call the mentoring sessions?"

"Take an heir to work days," Severus answered with a dry note of scorn. His attitude regarding it all surprised Minerva, who had expected him out of all of the staff to object to what could easily be perceived as high-handedness, even arrogance, from the heirs, but especially from the son of his former rival.

"I take it you are familiar with the concept?" Poppy chimed in, saving Minerva from having to ask.

"Yes, it is a muggle convention.” Severus agreed with a sour expression that no one questioned as only the headmaster had chosen to be willfully unaware of the younger professor’s difficult background - even Filch, who somehow still resented Severus, occasionally griping over the role he’d played in the prank wars when he, Potter, Black, and Lupin had been students. Minerva suspected though that the caretaker’s resentment had much more to do with Severus’s early skill and prowess that the squib could never have hopes to match than it did with Severus being the favorite target of the self-named ‘Marauders’.

"Heir Finch-Fletchley… If memory serves, isn’t his mum one of Starling Finch’s brood?” Argus finally joined the conversation. Minerva thought he had probably held back to that point due to feeling uncomfortable from having so little involvement with the head of house meetings.

"Wrenna,” Filius supplied, remembering his former student.

"Thought as much. She was one of them attachments to the Muggle Ministry, wasn’t she?”

"Attaches,” Pomona corrected gently. “Yes, she married one of the Prime Minister’s undersecretaries.”

"Speck that explains it then, probably picked it up from there Muggle Ministry.”

"Perhaps, but not entirely.” Filius agreed, continuing, “Before the Legislative and Political Studies courses were discontinued, Fifth and Sixth years who were enrolled in the courses would attend at least two sessions a year. Seventh years were required to attend every major session and were assigned summary session reviews and reflections as part of their grades. Speaking of which,” Filius began before pausing to glance around to each of them as if silently polling them before making a proposal.

After seeming to consider his words for several seconds, Filius finally continued, “I realize this situation is new to all of us and there may be no need to add any additional complications; however, would like to propose that we consider offering the option of a self-study in both courses, at the end of the year - at least to the heirs who are already advanced in their studies- in lieu of pushing them into courses that while they have a sound theoretical understanding of the material and practical applications, the actual casting for would draw too heavily on their cores before the have experienced
at least one of their core expansions.”

“I wonder about that.” Minerva murmured.

The transfiguration that she, the staff, and other students had witnessed the heirs performing at the Welcome Feast fell precisely into the advanced range that Filius was describing.

”The dining table and chairs?” Severus questioned, clearly recognizing what she’d meant. “Yes, I had wondered. When I reviewed their potion scores and their completion journals, I noted between seven and twelve potions that I customarily refuse to have the students brew, even though the concepts behind the potions are well within the fourth and fifth-year course concepts. The ingredients are extremely volatile, particularly if the brewer’s magic is immature or unsettled. In each case, the potions were completed nearly perfect.”

The Heads of Houses sat back to consider the idea, while Argus pulled the scroll with the request for his services closer to study it. Minerva suspected that he hadn’t really believed it wasn’t some sort of prank when the heirs requested his presence at their meeting as well.

”You know,” Pomona picked up the thought after a moment, “the restriction against teaching magic to children younger than eleven has never really made sense to me, and I didn’t understand how it had ever gotten passed in the Wizengamot. My mother homeschooled my sisters and I, before the restriction was passed, and we were doing spells we now treat as second and third-year material by the time we were six or seven. As far as I know, all of the other families in Little Wharton’s were as well. Minerva, you would have been introduced to spells and casting before the bans were passed. Did your family wait until eleven?”

Minerva understood why Pomona hadn’t included Filius, Severus, Argus, or Poppy in the comparison - with Filius’s parentage exempting him from the restriction at the same time as it excluded him from receiving a formal education until his Dueling Mastery opened the way for him to pursue other subjects; both Severus and Poppy young enough that they were after the restriction on teaching magic before eleven; and Argus’s unfortunate situation. Pomona’s point was a valid one, though.

When Minerva was young, her clan preferred their children to attend a central day school supervised by the clan leader’s wife and daughters, instead of home-schooled by their mothers. Quite as Pomona suggested, though, Lady McGonnagal had started them with levitation and sorting spells as the first exercises in practicing letter sounds and later allowing Minerva and her classmates to help with fall harvest- using one-spell warded practice-wands. By the time she entered Hogwarts, learning spells had been merely a matter of learning the spell vocabulary and practicing wand patterns - not trying to figure out how to connect with her core, control accidental outbursts, in addition to learning the basic wand movements before they could go onto patterns, and combining them with the appropriate spell vocabulary.

”Albus felt very strongly that such early learning gave wizardborns too much of an advantage over muggleborns.” Poppy put in dryly.

”What?!?” Minerva knew without the benefit of a mirror that Pomona ad Argus’s shocked expressions matched her own while Severus’s expression went slightly blank.

Filius’s expression was another story entirely, falling between somewhere between rage, disgust, and disbelief as he question, “Do you mean to tell me that Albus has knowingly handicapped four generations of students simply to lessen an advantage that can be attenuated by fifth year when we see fewer than four muggleborn students in any given year, and when only 15% of those muggleborn who do graduate elect to stay in the world?”
There was no question among them why he laid the responsibility for the restriction at Dumbledore's feet even though he had been out of the country during the years that particular restriction had been developing. By this point in their lives and careers at Hogwarts, it was impossible not to realize that the laws and restrictions that the Headmaster, as Chief Mugwump, wanted to be passed would be passed, and those he did not even saw a proper debate before the wizengamot. Minerva realized that Filius wasn’t done yet, though… and raised her hand to warn him, in light of the painted eavesdropper that Headmaster Black had alerted them to before.

Even as she gestured to the painting, they heard the slight wisp-sizzle of an unspoken spell from Severus’s wand hitting the picture and freezing it.

"Severus," Minerva gasped out in a laugh, “You do realize that will only provoke Albus.”

As much as the Headmaster’s eavesdropping and machinations might exasperate them, the staff - and particularly those who had been order-members in the previous war, which only ended due to the fruits of a devastating betrayal from one of their own - tended to overlook his tendency toward small acts of paranoia and controlling behavior, knowing it had been born from that last betrayal. In return, when the little acts eventually grated on their nerves too much, she, Pomona, Poppy, and Filius would send whatever portrait, ghost, or elf was doing the Headmaster’s bidding back to the older wizard with the message that he was over-reaching his boundaries again, and the Headmaster would desist, at least for a time. Not so with Severus….

In Minerva’s opinion, the two men relished in vexing each other. At times, their back and forths seemed to escalate into a battle of wits: Severus detecting and instead of sending the eavesdropper back to the Headmaster, electing to disable the unfortunate party in one manner or other - even going so far as to talk one of the ghosts, who had seemed quite content to be haunting up to that point to cross over. Freezing a picture in its frame, by comparison, was actually one of Severus’s milder returns. In two notable instances, Severus had frozen the picture then proceeded to burn the frame and canvas to within centimeters of their images - locking each of the Headmaster’s spies into a charred prison until their canvases could be rewoven and repainted around them.

For his part, Albus in riposte commonly attempted to out-subtle, out-calculate, and out-wit one of the shrewdest, most strategic, and effortlessly cunning students to grace the Slytherin house that Minerva had ever seen, even going so far as to lay dozens of insultingly obvious ‘traps’ to distract Severus from noticing veritaserum that the Headmaster had coerced an elf to contaminate his dinner ware, goblets, and food with for an entire week. If Severus had not been as gifted in potions as he had, there would have been a very real threat of him overdosing if he had imbibed even a tenth of the contaminations. Yet, the remainder of the time the two wizards somehow managed to maintain a veil of civility and association that Minerva wasn’t certain she could have maintained.

“Perhaps, but we are swiftly veering off topic, Minerva, and have classes in the morning to prepare for.” Severus retorted, “Do we approve the amendments to the Original Charter for the House of Lords or not?”

Acceding to his point, Minerva nodded, “All in favor?”

"Aye,” Six voices approved the update to the charter.

Back on track, they moved through the remaining proposals and having little difficulty in doing so until they reached the request for the lesson plans and detailed plans for completing the individual course of study, which they debated for the better part of an hour before coming to a compromise of giving a temporary approval on the contingency that the four heads of house would supervise the heirs’ study sessions for their subjects and that, for the remaining subjects, the heirs would be required to take the same exams on the same schedule as the classes compatible with each child’s
respective skill level. After magically signing the last document (the proposal for Argus’s assistance in gathering materials for the transfiguration blocks), Minerva was almost astonished to find they had indeed finished.

It seemed to her, from their bearing and manner, that the other staff and Head of Houses shared her satisfaction with the foundations they were setting for the newly awoken house.

How much less her pride and satisfaction might have been, at that moment, if she could have seen under the invisibility cloak to the Headmaster’s expression as he stood in the shadows of the hall, scanning their surface thoughts while they left the meeting.
Pausing as his chamber door closed behind him, Fillius Flitwick sighed deeply and spared a wistful glance toward his armoir. He very much craved a sickle’s worth of Dragonspit, but decided that the hard liquor was neither warranted nor wise, given his next task.

~~~ A knut’s worth of Fairylights, however, would not be an overindulgence. ~~~ He silently allowed.

Drawing the delicate decanter of brandy from the shelf and studying the liquor’s opalescent glow as he began pouring a fifth of a snifter full of the drink. Before taking a sip of the spirit, however, he turned back to the door and drew long four breaths before casting slowly, carefully, and in complete sobriety, drawing a different ‘locking’ rune pattern at each corner of the door then linking them together with a magic freezing charm.

When he was finished, Filius tucked teaching wand into its arm holster and retrieved one of his healing wands from the hidden holster in his jacket. While he was licensed to carry it as a Master Dueller, it was safer to avoid having any questions asked about the almost illicit number of wands that he carried. He was licensed for each, however, wizards customarily carried only one, unless they were engaged in careers such as aurors, who required a second backup for defense, constructionists whose second wand cores were reinforced for working with elemental forces, and healer’s wands whose cores were attuned to working with magics affecting a persons’s mind, blood, and core.

To the left of his desk, under the cover of two goblin-magic-based notice-me-not wards, sat a podium that Filius approached carefully, casting calming and containment spells as he neared the diary setting on the podium’s warded surface. Drawing a small pouch of Venetian sea-salt from his pocket, he simultaneously cast a protective shield over the diary as he grounded the shield’s perimeter to the salt circle he was pouring from the pouch with his free hand.

Finally, when the professor was satisfied that his precautions were sound and sufficient, Filius returned his wand to its mate in his jacket and retrieved the snifter. Swirling his snifter in the warm light cast by the banked floo, Filius took a moment to savor the aesthetic of the shimmering liquid that presented a different glow, scent, and flavor to each drinker before consuming the brandy in a long, slow draw, sighing as it softened the chill of his afternoon’s speculations and eased the tension born from the endurance of a very long day. After draining the snifter, fortified for the task ahead of him, Filius turned back to the podium, lifted the self-inking quill from its stand, opened the diary to the dedication page, and inscribed his greetings.

In terms of stature, Filius could only be described in the kindest of terms as diminutive, despite his mixed parentage. In terms of reputation and proficiency, Filius would describe himself as 'of modest skill', which those who knew him well or who had faced him across a dueling platform would deny
as an excessively humble and undervalued description of the talented half-wizard. In terms of wizarding connections, Filius had risen from the ranks of being spoken of as an anomaly to receiving superficial respect even from the most stringent traditionalists and genuine interest and a moderate following at the conferences and duels he attended. In terms of his connections in Gringotts, his investments had been diverse, sound, and profitable - generally warranting easy access to upper-level managers in the local branch when needed. But, it was in terms of experience and compassion, without question, that professor had few equals in either world, well-exceeding even the Headmaster’s presumed wisdom and much commented on and over-prized years.

For where the Headmaster had withdrawn to the pedestal that the majority of the British Wizarding Community placed him on after Grindelwald’s defeat and insulated himself among the opinions and society of those who held the wizard in highest esteem and followed his whim and word alike without questioning, the headmaster had done little to extend himself mentally or emotionally and so had allowed himself to become entrenched and blinded by his own little researched or questioned beliefs.

In contrast, Filius - after achieving his hard-won Mastery in Dueling and Defense through entering the dueling circuit as self-taught participant (having been initially denied his education in both of his parent’s communities by virtue of the selfsame parentage) had invested himself in continued studies under a Charms Master whose notice he’d only caught by his effective use of minor medical charms on the dueling platform. Adding a Mastery of runes afterward, Filius had traveled the seven continents - studying in Alexandria, Atlantis, Beijing, Beliz, Fuji, Egypt, Mecca, Nirobe, the Nazca Desert, St. Petersburg, Teotihuacan, and Tibet; publishing treatises on the development of ancient and modern wizarding political systems, authoring texts (under his name and a nom de plume) on comparative ancient runes, ancient and modern charms, and universal overlaps of magical practices throughout their worlds; and in doing so, interacted with witches and wizards of every social, financial, political background, and magical polarity.

It was through this experience and the well of compassion born on the journey from being an angry, young, disrespected half-breed to becoming a skilled and self-assured master of four subjects turned professor, turned Head of the Ravenclaw house - that gave Filius the perspective to recognize the opportunity presented him when the dishonored, former-lord Lucius Malfoy attempted to imperius him in the shadows cast by Scribbulus and Scrivener’s Fine Writing Supplies’ overhang. Unaffected by the charm that very few could have thrown off, Filius was entirely aware and unaffected when Lucius sought first to force the diary upon him with orders to get it into the hands of Heiress Bulstrode either in Gringotts’ custody or at Hogwarts then to obliviate his conscious knowledge of the commands. Well-protected from the fallen wizard’s attempts, Filius, nevertheless, accepted the diary, pretended the disorientation to be expected following a successful obliviation, and apologized profusely to ‘Lord Malfoy’ prompting the disgraced wizard smugly dismiss him.

Another result of his experience and compassion was that instead of destroying the diary, as the headmaster would have no-doubt wished, fully aware of both the nature of the author of the journal and well-remembering both the magical signature of his former student and the misguided wizard young Riddle had become, Filius consulted with a cousin in Gringotts’ Hogsmeade Branch. To his great surprise, on hearing his cousin’s report, the branch manager immediately referred Filius to the Coronae Magister Magia, contacting the superior himself before Filius could leave his office to do, and informing Filius moments later that he was being summoned to the London Branch on an Immediate Procurement of Non-Warranting Consultation contract that by custom could only be rejected in person without risking severe loss of standing in their clan.
After a brief explanation and discussion on his arrival, Filius summarily found himself appointed, on stipend, as a guardian ad litem for the incoming Gringott’s heirs during their time at Hogwarts. More surprising yet was his inclusion in the investment plans Magister Magia, President Ragn’rok, and Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow held for the heirs in general and young Lords Peverell-Black-Potter and Fisher-Watson-Potter in particular.

Familiar with the various incarnations of horcruxes from his own studies of universal magical practices, Filius had not been overly surprised that the dispatched and falsely-presumed deceased Dark Lord had created them, nor the manner in which they had been created; however, learning that a living horcrux had been created, that Lord Peverell-Black-Potter had been its host, and that the child had not only approved the safe extrication of the horcrux but negotiated and executed its installment into a nearly eternal golem form (earning the rank of and title of a Novice Gavra, which the heir had yet to be informed of), then adopted the golem giving it a background and the protection of a family - had left Filius speechless for several long minutes.

Thankfully, the Coronae Magister Magia seemed more amused than offended by Filius’s lapse and graciously waited, without reducing the contract’s consideration, for Filius to recover his composure before they began to discuss the possible options pertaining to the horcrux installed in the diary.

Ultimately, after Healer Mensaetcorpus was called to scan for the components of the horcrux, Filius found himself agreeing to the task of assessing the horcrux, under contract, and if viable developing horcrux into a profitable if controlled investment. From the Defense Master and President’s expressions, Filius suspect that neither superior believed that the components of impetuousness, fear, defensiveness, anger, risk-taking, and remorse favored a profitable outcome, but as the contract was warranted against the prospect so that Filius would lose nothing more than he invested in the attempt, the professor decided the potential profitability in more than just financial terms far outweighed the risk and easily committed. Years of being a Head of House had taught him as much about dealing with lost and angry adolescents as his own youth in that state, and in his mind, if the elder horcrux had been redeemable, certainly there must be hope for the younger.

Returning his thoughts to the present as he noticed Tom’s greetings in response, Filius smiled at the seeming eagerness of the writing that scrawled across the page.

After tilting his quill to re-ink the tip, Filius wrote, “Fine thank you. Have you considered my offer?”
Hibby, Ebby, Sala, Cala, Tanky, and Prust waited patienty until the end of the Heirs conference with the Hogwarts’ Head of Houses and select faculty before approaching Lord Potter.

While the heirs raised in Gringotts’ supervision seemed to think nothing of the short queue as they left to return a moment later with their own account books. The heirs who had been commended to the House of Lords based solely on rank and station, instead of request, watched the elves curiously as they handed their own account books to Lord Potter, who scanned the journals before initialling at various points before handing the account books back and accepting another as the previous elf moved on to another of the Gringotts’ heirs and sometimes to a second heir after that.

Hibby watched his fellow elves smiling with pride at their reactions to the bonuses his master was adding to each of their journals. Master Harry had always been kind to he and Ebby, but even at Gringotts bonuses were few and far between. The fact that Master Harry even tendered the bonuses - when he was well-known by elven and goblin alike for being as conservative as any Goblin in regards to his own comfort and judicious in his investments - would factor well in their quarterly reviews and - if a regular occurrence, as Hibby believed it might be - their standing both towards their eventual applications to be considered eligible for bonding to an individual Goblin line instead of to the clan.

"Lord Potter…” Lady Armistad Granger finally spoke, clearly remembering one the sorting hat’s admonitions that as of their being commended to the House of Lords, each of the Heirs were to be referred to by Lord or Lady. The hat explained this was mandated by custom and in honor of their services to the school and the greater community and even before reaching their majority and formally taking up their titles. Hibby knew, though, that earlier during the dinner conversations, Lady Bulstrode had mentioned that the heirs whose OWL and NEWT level scores made them eligible to do so had already claimed both their Heir and Lordship rings, so the heiress's faux paux could be due to that as well.

"Lady Armistad-Granger, have I said something to give offense to her Ladyship?” Master Harry asked overly-formal, despite lifting his eyebrow in a sardonic tilt.

"What? No, no, of course not. Why would you think that?”

"I was under the impression that we had both given and accepted permission to dispense with formal titles in informal settings and conversations.” His tone was dryer than his smile, but the heiress seemed to recognize that Hibby’s master was teasing and answered in kind.

"Do forgive me, Harry, it slipped my mind. May I ask, though, the account books that you have
signed for the house elves… It appears as if you are paying them. From my readings, I was given to understand that house elves were slaves.” While she was clearly attempting to sound neutral, it was clear from her tone what she thought of the elves status.

"Paying them?” Lady Zeller questioned with a derisive snort, “they’re house elves.”

Turning to face her, Hibby’s master studied her for several seconds, before turning back to Lady Armistad-Granger an air of tolerant disdain for the other heiress, as he answered, “While that’s true to some extent and for some families, in other ways it’s a bit of an over-simplification. Excluding Hibby, however, the other elves assigned to our house are in the employment of Gringotts and are generally bound to the clan.

"And Hibby?” The heiress questioned with a frown.

"As of yesterday morning, Hibby is a bonded elf in service to the Noble House of Potter.” Master Harry answered, favoring Hibby with a fond smile as the elf straightened proudly.

“You mean he’s a slave?” Lady Armistad-Granger challenged with a pitying look towards Hibby.

Hibby was almost proud to realize that he was startling everyone when he marched forward and scolded the girl, “Why does Heiress be asking, if she will not listen. Hibby is not a slave. Hibby is magic-bound to Lord Potter’s family, which is be meaning that Hibby is be sharing in the family magic, and it is being helpful in keeping Hibby alive.”

"That can’t be true.” She protested, going on about how elves weren’t parasites or symbioniac or some other muggleheaded name, but Hibby wasn’t having any of it, and was getting ready to fuss at her again when his Master interrupted.

"Hibby, she didn’t grow up learning magical history; it would probably help to explain it to her as you did for me.”

Suddenly ashamed of himself for not realizing it, Hibby bowed lowly to the witch and apologized profusely: “Hibby’s is mosts sorry for speaking out of turn to Heiress and would punish himself if it was not against Lord Potter’s rules.” Behind Lady Armistad-Granger, Lady Zeller let out a scandalized squawk, but Hibby ignored it as the flustered Lady Armistad-Granger hurriedly accepted his apology and urged him not to bow, looking to the others for guidance.

Master Rishard chose that point to join the discussion, leaving a discussion with Lady Bones and surprising Hibby with his agreement, “I would benefit from that explanation myself.”

After glancing between Ebby, Sala, Cala, Tanky, and Prust for tacit permission to reveal not just their history, but their original forms, as he had to Harry when he first related their history, Hibby lifted his shoulders, straightened his back, and released his bindings on his magic. Thankfully, his master’s magic rose up through their bond to support his, making the draw on his magic bearable as he regained the form he would have had if he had sailed to the West... to Valinor with his kin. He was hardly surprised by the children’s surprised gasps as he stared at his reflection of constellation glass that stood on their study table. It had been decades since he had seen himself like this, and would not have been able to have held it even this long without his master’s magic to support his own. After a moment, though, not wishing to waste the impact of his image, he began to explain.

"The entirety of the histories that Lords and Ladies have and will learn are only a very small portion of but one age of the histories that we elves know and haves lived. We’s elves - when connected to the magics of our kin- are immortal, remain unwearied with age ands can recover from wounds that kill wizards and muggles... but can be slain, or die of grief and weariness… or fade into nothingness
as our bodies use up our magics.

The beginnings of what you call the History of Magic started in the middle of what we elves, know of as the Sixth Age, wherein the races of goblins, orcs, dwarves, elves, and man were joined by the births of magical creatures… fairies, vampires, werewolves, phoenix, wraith, veela, and other magical beasts and halfbloods. Man also saw a sundering between the peoples who saw, knew, and could use magic and the peoples who were blind not only to magic itself, but to the magical creatures who shared the land with them… the peoples you is now calling muggles.”

“In the first age, Elves had dominion over all. We’s created writing, song, magic-using, building, metallurgy, forestry, arts, crafts, farming, and shipbuilding, poetry, and many of the more subtle things that grew alongside these as well. For three ages, the Elves lived in total peace and bliss wandering the lands of Valinor perfecting our arts and beautifying its glory, but we became blind to the schemes of an elder, Melkor, the dweller in darkness, who sought to decide all …

Melkor sought to poison the peace of Valinor and bring ruin to the Elves. Adopting a fair and wise form, he began to cultivate the trust of those living in Valinor.

Of the three great guilds, Melkor saw the artists and poets as being rather useless to him; the craftsmen and architects, would have nothing to do with him, being content in their development.

But, the wizards and warriors… desiring more knowledge and power, theys were willing to listen to him, and Melkor saw that, due to their creative skill and strength, they could be useful to his plans.

And so Melkor began to teach them, and for a long while none of his evil was made manifest, for any who sought his aid and counsel benefited greatly from it.

But with his genuine teachings came half-truths and disguised lies regarding the intentions of the rulers of Valinor. Most harmful among these was the knowledge that Men, the Second Children of Illuvatar, would one day appear in Valinor. After a time, Melkor began rumors that rulers of Valinor had brought them to Aman so that Men might succeed them at the end of their age and dwell in glory and beauty of Valinor, as built by the lower and mid-caste Elves, who according to Melkor were expected to give up their lands and seek new challenges and resources while their leaders remained at home enjoying the fruits of Man’s labors and servitude.

(derived and adapted from http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Elves)

"This began many centuries of war," Hibby -beginning to feel the strain on his master’s magic of supporting his elven form- cut his explanation short, "Until Sauron, the last enemy of Elves, and the strongest of the forces to rise out of Melkor’s betrayal was defeated by the destruction of an artifact in which he had placed the greatest portion of his power and life. Only us elves in Lindon, Lothlórien, and Rivendell survived, but most sailed into the West to the undying lands and closed the passage between. Only a small group of our kind, loyal to our Lady Arwen of Rivendell, who wed Aragon Elessar, Heir of Isildur and King of Men. This we remember as the start of the Fourth Age.

We’s who stayed behind stayed to serve our queen and later - when her spirit followed his - we’s stayed to atone to the children of Man for the destruction caused by those who followed Melkor- knowing that our choice dooms us to fade away into nothing as our bodies use up our magic and spirited needed to support our lives... separated as we are from our kin - unless a wizard, family, or clan chooses to bond with us, and shares family magic to support our lives and the lives of our
childrens if the family’s magic is strong enough to lets us have babies. Once we’s been bonded, sometimes childrens of some families that we serve forgets our connections and is not kind, but even so, these small unkindnesses barely touch the pain felt by man caused by our wars.”

Hibby was almost inclined to continue in explaining to Lady Armistad-Granger, why the elves were not slaves, but Ebby stopped him, grabbing his arm as she chastised, “Hibby, yous must stop,” casting a hand at his master by way of explanation.

While the other heirs had left the table to study the tall ethereal form that had shrunken over ages to the gnarled form Hibby had become, his master had stayed at the table, conserving his own energy and letting Hibby use as much he needed. The subsequent strain that Hibby had felt was now apparent in the young lord’s pallid and sweat-drenched face as the boy fought his quickly growing magical and physical exhaustion to simply sit up. Seeing this, Hibby quickly cut himself off from his master’s magic, groaning slightly in pain with the abruptness of the separation and the rapid, unsupported transformation back to his current form. Thankfully, as his master’s magic returned to the child, Master Harry stopped trembling and was able to sit up straighter.

Deciding to leave the explanation at that, Hibby hurried to his master’s side, paused to look Lady Armistad-Granger in the eyes, and reaffirmed, “We is not slaves.” The heiress nodded, her expression almost numb as she took in his master’s condition then the change in Hibby, her eyes both assessing and distant, deep in thought, and having nothing more to say, Hibby took his master’s hand out and shifted his master to his bedroom.

ブレンキン

To say that Albus Dumbledore was furious, as he stormed up the single stairwell to the only inhabited cell in the highest tower of Nurmengard, had as much accuracy as saying trolls were unkempt. The headmaster was enraged and feverously… almost murderously so; as Misha, the elf following behind him at the furthest respectable pace he could go could easily attest - having borne the brunt of the headmaster’s fury since the wizard had read that morning’s edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

"How did you do it?” the headmaster was screaming before his foot even reached the top step, much less crossed the heavily warded threshold. The old wizard’s wand was out, but the waves of hostile magic pouring off the wizard was what worried Misha more as the elf tried to surreptitiously cast his own wards to buffer his former (and longed for) master against the Headmaster’s approach – hoping the differences in their magics would make it more difficult for the wizard to detect. It didn’t always work, but Misha couldn’t bear to pass up the chance to protect the wizard he had grown up serving.

"How d-id I do wh-at?” Misha’s former master croaked, his voice unused to speaking and dry from the near starvation that the Headmaster kept him at - no doubt fearing what Master Gellert would do if permitted to regain his strength.

"Scheme to spread your ridiculous theory about muggleborns?” The Headmaster accused - irrational sounding, even to Misha’s ears.

They both knew that his former master had been imprisoned in complete isolation, accessible only to the headmaster (and Misha-on the very rare event that the Headmaster was trapped in a schedule that would not permit him to bring the pittance of food and necessities that Grindelwald required to survive) for decades, had no contacts who knew where he was much less how he could get out, hidden under a fidelius charm indiscernible to owls and trespassers alike, and promised that he would be staying there until the headmaster reached his promised goal and could drag Master Gellert out to show him how he (the headmaster) reshaped their world to his whim and repressive ideologies. From what he could sense of Master Gellert, Misha doubted that the much-diminished wizard could have
even managed the mobility to simply go down the stairwell if the chains, charms, and wards had been removed, much less found the energy to travel out and find someone to discuss his beliefs, which would likely not have been anywhere near the top of his concerns.

Instead of answering, Master Gellert simply lifted his hands and waved them, causing the chains between his wrist and ankle manacles to click-clank in demonstration.

"Don’t lie to me; I know you must have done.” The headmaster refuted, “A Muggleborn called for the House of Lords, yesterday, claiming to be a Ravenclaw Heir of all things.” The enraged wizard cast spray of compulsions against Misha’s poor former master, causing the emaciated wizard to arch and shudder as each struck, while the headmaster continued his demands: “How did you do it? I know I’ve put a redirect on all owls, messages, and patroni directed toward you by your formal name and variation or alias I’ve discovered, but there’s another one out there isn’t there? What is it, and who have you been communicating with?”

"No one, Albus.” Master Gellert answered weakly, “There’s been no one.”

"Your lying.” The headmaster accused, “There has to have been. The muggleborn practically quoted your theory back to me. Where else would she have heard it but from someone you’ve spoken with? Is it the Goblins? Someone from the colonies? What name are you going by?”

"Albus, you forget. Decades ago, I told you the muggles were already on the track of the truth with their studies of plant hybridization and ‘human biologies’. All it would have taken was one muggleborn in a heritage studies course, or even reading a text on magical inheritance to make the connection.”

"Ridiculous!” the headmaster protested, but sounding somewhat less sure. “In any event, those courses are no longer taught at Hogwarts, and I’ve seen to it that those books are banned from diagon alley shops, and ended mandatory testing on entry to Hogwarts.”

"How could you do that, Albus?” Master Gellert questioned, both exasperated and disbelieving in his former friend and companions words. “They need to know of their heritage and should be tested.”

"I knew it! Somehow you’re behind the inheritance testing.” The headmaster hissed, narrowing his eyes as he silently cast a spell that caused poor Master Gellert to writhe and bite his teeth in pain.

"I’ll tell you how I could do it.” The headmaster snarled as he held the spell, “It was quite easy in fact; all I had to do was mention your little muggle experiments in connection with those tests being done by that German scientist, and the wizengamot was quick to agree. It barely took more than three compulsions to get the vote passed.

"Experiments? I wasn’t doing experiments! I was giving muggle relatives of muggleborn witches and wizards inheritance tests to demonstrate that they shared squib family line, but needed two parents from squib lines for Magic to resurge. I explained this to you decades ago. You know this, Albus.”

"Testing… experiments…twiddle and twaddle. It’s all down to syntax, my dearest friend. I could have said you were ‘testing’, but ‘experimenting’ just had so much more power in the argument, and you taught me yourself that we mustn’t be afraid of using power when it’s needed. It’s a moot point though. The only thing that matters is that the other members of the Wizengamot accepted my arguments, and I was able to keep you from spreading your dangerous theories… until now. But trust me, I will see to it that no other message gets out of this keep, and I’m certain you will come to regret working against the Greater Good.” The headmaster almost growled the words as he finished
his threat, before softening his features and continuing:

"You are right about one thing, though, these muggleborns will have a place in our world, but not in leadership or decision-making roles. No, when it’s time, they will be turned back out to the muggle world to ensure that the muggles do not develop their technologies beyond reasonable and controllable standards. They will become our emissaries, our overseers, demonstrating the limited powers that we allow them to gain, and ensuring that the muggles understand that we have the natural and proper right and power to rule."

"You are deranged, Albus!" Master Gellert gasped as the unspoken spell caused his master to writhe and roll on the floor, releasing gutteral moans from between his clenched teeth.

Despite Master Gellert’s orders to protect himself and serve Master Dumbledore so he wouldn’t be ‘put down’ as Master Dumbledore had threatened when he took Misha from Master Gellert decades earlier, Misha could not stop himself from trying to buffer the spell with a cocoon of his own magic. Unfortunately, though, Master Dumbledore noticed the change in Master Gellert’s reaction to his pain spell and spun on Misha.

"You forget who you belong to, elf!" the headmaster spat, sweeping his wand with a spell that threw Misha back down the stairwell. The violent fall down the long, stone spiral would have undoubtedly killed him if it weren’t for Misha’s natural constitution, but bruised and limping, Misha made his way back up to the tower’s keep where he found Master Dumbledore standing smugly over a burning pile of Master Gellert’s clothing, which had evidently been torn from him with a stringent summoning spell that left red abrasions where the cloth had pulled before tearing. Master Gellert’s chains had been shortened to bare feet from the wall opposite the small turret window and his barely serviceable bed had been banished with the linens joining the burning pile.

"Elf, see to his hygiene,” the headmaster ordered with a sneer, “Then return to the castle. Do will not leave behind a single bit of dust, hair, or material that can be transformed into anything he might find useful to distribute a message. When you return, we’ll discuss your punishment for interfering.”

Turning back to Master Gellert, the headmaster put on a poor mimicry of a caring expression, and threatened, “Do try to remember that this is for the greater good, and we had both agreed that where we meet resistance, it is our responsibility to employ the necessary force to compel our will. This is not easy for me, my love, but the choice between what is right and what is easy never is. If only you would drop your foolish theories and return to our ideals. I could make matters so much better for you if I could trust you.”

Misha held his breath afraid of his former master’s response, but Master Gellert’s expression was more than enough to send the headmaster on his way, with a petulant sigh and a warning, “So be it. Perhaps when I return, next month, you will be more amenable. Elf, half rations until in the interim.”

Misha stayed silent until he no longer felt Master Dumbledore’s presence at the fortress before he turned and ran to Master Gellert, his breath breaking in sobs at the thought of his master’s condition in even a week’s time on further reduced rations with no defence from the cold, which he had long ago been forbidden to give.

"Mish-mish. Easy now. This is probably for the better. I will be happy to leave my little tower, no matter the means. Now, how about we get me cleaned up and you on your way; he can be … difficult... when others don’t follow his little plans.” Master Gellert used the chains to pull himself up a bit leaning toward Misha to make the task of cleaning him up easier, but Misha had other ideas.

Taking Master Gellert’s beard in hand instead of letting it fall to the floor before banishing it, Misha trimmed it close to the skin, then stared at it, releasing it into a transfiguration spell that he hadn’t tried using in years. His magic was a bit sluggish about it, but eventually there was a scroll of parchment
clutched in his hand. With the fire almost burned out, he collected the ashes and looked from himself to Master Gellert before deciding to use his own blood as the base - mixing the two into a thick ink. After sticking the parchment to the wall, he helped Master Gellert rise and turn, holding the handful of ink out to the wizard, who was staring at him with bemusement.

"And who should I write to?" he asked even as he dipped the tip of his little finger into the ink.

"Lord Harrison James Evan Potter, Rig'anok." Misha answered, having no doubt that his former master would recognize the mostly forgotten title. True to Misha’s expectations, Master Gellert arched a questioning eyebrow but started writing.

Chapter End Notes

Contrary to my original plan and expectation, this fic grew in length and perspective beyond what I had anticipated for Harry’s first year. With that in mind, I wanted to give you a little forewarning that I will be splitting off the first year segment of this fic into a sequel.

The working title at this moment is Harrison Peverell-Potter and the House of Lords.

Other potential titles for sequel years include:

Thomas Ellery-Flitwick and the Chamber of Secrets,
Lord Draconis Malfoy and the Azkaban Blacks,
Hermione Armistad-Granger and the Goblet of Fire,
Luna Lovegood and the Order of the Phoenix,
Rischard Watson-Potter and the Halfblood Prince,
and Ariana Dumbledore and the Deathly Hallows.

Some side stories came to mind, but as I am terrible about WIPs, I don’t want to start announcing them yet despite my muses dangling plotlines in front of me.
From a Different Perspective

Chapter Notes

"The twenty-sixth – elves and children hear everything, consult them if in doubt."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Harry,” Hibby murmured quietly as he jostled his master’s shoulder, still uncomfortable with using only his master’s given name even though they were alone, but it had been one of his master’s firm requirements for the bonding, so Hibby had little choice in the matter. “Harry, Sir,” he said slightly louder. “Please wakes up. Hibby has been given a message, Sir.”

"Just ‘Harrrrry’, remember?” Master Harry yawned, slurring his name, but sitting up to take the message from Hibby. Hibby smiled as he noticed Harry pause to study the transfigured parchment, murmuring, “Elven-made,” before he opened the parchment and read the message.

His master paused to rub his eyes and re-read the message, wearing a slightly stunned expression. After reading the message a second time, Harry summoned an ever-fill quill and spelled the parchment thick so that he could write on it propped against his knees. After writing several lines, Harry rolled the message back up and asked, "Hibby, please take this to President Ragn’rok, immediately, and if you can do so without being observed, please let the elf called Misha know that I would like to speak with him as soon as he can speak with me without risking himself.” Harry’s tone was both urgent and angry, causing Hibby to wonder what had been in the message.

Before he could answer that Misha had been waiting ‘between’ for a response, Misha shifted into the room and bowed politely in silent greeting to his master, so Hibby shifted to just inside Hogwarts gates before walking through to escape the wards before shifting directly to London. He could have done so directly from his master’s chambers, but the draw on his magic was so much less than trying shift through the wards.

After arriving at the designated shift point and informing the Entrance Manager Irongate that he had been sent by his master with a message to be read by President Ragn’rok, Hibby found himself to be immediately escorted to the President’s office. After handing the note, Hibby waited ‘between’ while the president read the message before snapping twice in irritation and calling for the Coronae Magister, who arrived almost immediately.”

"The Pendleton-Corchoran stocks are yours.” President Ragn’rok sighed as he waived the scroll loosely in his hand. “Not even a week to settle in before the intrigues begin.”

"It is ever the way - with Riga’noks.” The Coronae Magister answered smugly, handing his brother an account book to sign over the winnings of his wager and taking the scroll to read it in return. After reading the original message and Harry’s notes, the Coronae Magister summoned Hibby with a wave.

"Inform the Riga’nok that I agree; we will begin researching Lord Grindelwald’s claims and return a report with Galleonclaw Thornbrow when the defense master joins him for their next training
session, which should be scheduled this coming sixth day, first hour.” The Coronae Magister ordered holding his hand out for Hibby’s message log and quickly initialed the service provided to column, before dismissing him with the return of the log.

Shifting back to Hogwarts gates, before walking through the school’s wards and shifting to his master’s quarters, Hibby immediately stepped out of between, expecting that his master would wish to hear the Magister's answer as quickly as possible.

"Master Harry, the Coronae Magister agrees and will research Lord Grindelwald’s claims Defense Master Thornbrow will inform you of their findings.” Hibby summarized. While the Cleric Misha’tal Rivendell had been both wise and honorable when they had served Queen Arwen, it had been many centuries since they had been in contact. Despite their once friendship, Hibby was not prepared to trust his fellow elf when the bonds between Misha and the Grindelwald family might force the elf into actions against Master Harry’s interest, much less give the other elf information about a future meeting between Master Harry and another when that information could offer opportunities for ambush or worse.

"Thank you, Hibby.” his master answered before turning to Misha. “If you return in an hour, I will ask you to take Hibby to your master with my response. Please be aware that these quarters have been warded against any elf other than Hibby attempting to enter without my permission, invitation, or order. I would not wish you to be injured attempting to re-enter after you depart, as I will withdraw my permission after you do so. Please go.”

Misha glanced at Hibby, his expression showing the depth of his surprise at his master’s circumspect behavior, but bowed politely before shifting out.

When Hibby no longer felt Misha’s presence, he informed his master and asked, “What is Harry wanting Hibby to say to Misha’s Master Grindlewald?”

"To be honest, I’m not sure, yet.” Master Harry admitted, explaining, “The timing is awfully close to our arrival and tossing a sprite into the headmaster's plans. It could be a trick by the headmaster to get me involved in something that he could use to try and end the Gringott’s custody, or soil our reputations, but if it’s legitimate, I don’t think we should pass up the opportunity to get the information he’s offering.”

"Master Grindewald was being a Gringotts’ client.” Hibby answered. “For many, many years.”

"You’re sure?”

"Yes, Hibby and Tolly weres assigned to Manager Stainedclaw before he was promoted to Paris Branch. Manager Stainedlaw managed four of Master Grindlewald’s accounts.

"Then Gringott’s … Gringott’s would have a duty to investigate if one of its account holders has been held against his will and offer assistance if warranted.” Master Harry suggested with a smile, before nodding with conviction. “Yes, that should work. Okay, get six or seven potion phials, and take them with you. Instead of letting him back in here, go to Misha, and let him know you have my message. Tell Mr. Grindlewald what I just said, that about Gringott’s duty to investigate and offer assistance, but tell him if it doesn’t check out, we’ll also act accordingly. If he is with Dumbledore, we need to be sure that we’ve given sufficient warning. Ask Mr. Grindlewald for as many memories as he can give to support his claims. If he can give them, take the phials to Defense Master Thornbrow. Thank you.”

After Hibby acknowledged his instructions, he retrieved the phials and shifted out of his master’s rooms.
When Severus returned to deliver the faculty’s decisions to the sorting-hat proclaimed ‘House of Lords’, he was somehow unsurprised to find Lord Peverell-Black-Potter and Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter still awake and discussing the next day’s plans with the house elves that had joined the heirs from Gringotts.

Somewhat more surprising, though, was that several of the heirs were also up, and engaged in various practical or academic activities that Severus would not have otherwise expected from first years on their first night at boarding school… particularly away from the supervision of adults or older students. Lord Longbottom was discussing the organization of his rather thoroughly-supplied potions kit with Lord Finch-Fletchley. Heiresses Bulstrode and Bones were discussing the styles of house robes they would have tailored the next morning while Lady Armistad-Granger engaged in a discussion of Magical History with one of the Gringotts elves, judging by the elf’s uniform. Even Draco and Lord Zabini appeared to be discussing a schedule for their study sessions in conjunction with the proposed class schedule that Minerva and Filius had given them earlier. For cluster of first-year students, the practicality of their discussions and activities distracted him almost completely from the message he was to deliver as he watched them - believing himself to be unnoticed.

Most noticeable and unexpected was the level of attention and consideration they paid to the elves input - particularly between Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter and Lord Peverell-Potter as well as Lady Armistad-Granger. They were not alone in their courtesy, as the other heirs and heiresses present - far from the average behaviour of purebloods and magic-born - were treating the elves with an unexpected level of respect: thanking the elves, cleaning up after themselves - as they went -without calling the elves for assistance, asking one or another of the elves for input if they were undecided.

As the professor listened to the elves suggestions and commentary, he found himself having to redefine his perspective on the heirs and the establishment of their house, which he had - at least initially - been tempted to interpret as a show of the arrogance he had once expected to see from Peverell-Potter, especially after the boy’s almost disrespectful, if effective, show-down with the Headmaster. That level of arrogance would not permit this show of equanimity or rapport with the elves. Before he could process that thought further, however, Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter -- looking so very much like his father Elias had when Severus had started first-year, glanced up and caught his gaze studying them. While Severus pushed down the wistful-longing that boy’s similarity to his father woke and brought to mind, the boy whispered something to his adopting-brother and held out a hand to invite Severus to the seat just summoned for him as both heirs stood.

"Professor Snape, Sir, please join us. Can we offer you tea?" Lord Peverell-Potter asked adding a slight bow out of courtesy. The addition of Peverell made the boy’s formal name more palatable to Severus, although he knew he was mentally blocking out the ‘Black’ portion of the boy’s formal name.

"I do not expect to be long, Lord Peverell,” Severus offered, certain that the children would not truly appreciate his presence, regardless of his true interest in the natures that made up their house and the effect that the house and inhabitants might have on Hogwarts. To his surprise, though, both Potters seemed disappointed by the fact - as did Lady Armistad-Granger, Draco, and Lord Longbottom.

As he had already given his welcoming speech to his house and met with the heads of House and Argus to discuss the House of Lord’s proposal, leaving the rest of his evening free, Severus found himself unexpectedly offering his time in the roll of advisor, “I came to inform you that the Head of Houses have met and approved of your proposals, authorized your course of study, and planned schedule for the coming week. Mr. Filch will be contacting you tomorrow, regarding the contract offer, and will be handling any related negotiations and adjustments. There are notes and suggestions
included on each page; however, if you have any other questions, I have finished my duties for the day and can linger for forty-five minutes until curfew, when I will have to leave to patrol.”

The quick smiles that his announcement drew were not what Severus had expected, nor was the dish of chocolate biscuits and cup Earl Gray with two lemon slices and honey that immediately appeared by his hand, before Severus or Draco could summon it. As surprising was the frowns that the elves wore for the first time since they entered the room, confusing Severus until he noticed Heir Fisher-Watson-Potter wave his hand, casting wandless detection charms over this tea and biscuits, before murmuring ‘they’re fine’ to his brother and the elves. Perhaps, he shouldn’t have been surprised that the Goblins had taught the heirs compulsion and potion detection charms, but Severus did find it disconcerting that the heirs and other elves did not trust the castle’s elves. It had never occurred to him to distrust the creatures that had taken care of most of his daily-domestic chores since he came to Hogwarts, and Severus knew himself to be a cautious, suspicious, and not infrequently paranoid man.

His fascination tripled as he considered the prospect; these children, it seemed, were intent on proving that they would not be the ‘run-of-the-mill’ Hogwarts students.

Chapter End Notes

(On a small side note, since posting this chapter, I've almost plotted out the sequel to come out with or before Harrison Peverell-Potter and the House of Lords, the tentative working title is "Severus Snape-Prince and the Philosopher's Stone", also a tale of the first year but from Severus's perspective.)
Quirnius Quirrell stared down at his clenched hands, eyes clenched almost shut in pain as his master raged - cursed Dumbledore; the Ministry; his supposed-faithful who had failed him for ten long years; and the Goblins… most especially the goblins.

Despite the excruciating migraine accompanying the Dark Lord’s vitriolic rant, Quirnius garnered a significant amount of information that his master normally kept well shielded including that his master’s anger largely stemmed from the Gringotts’ prior claims of refusing to take sides in ‘Political Trivialties’ - seemingly denying negotiations between both he and Dumbledore during the previous war, only to reverse their claims and support the child prophesied to be his downfall.

While the boy’s display during the so-called ‘Welcoming Feast’ made it abundantly clear that the goblins had not raised the boy to be the Dumbledore’s puppet, that fact did little to attenuate his master’s rage - when it was apparent that the creatures had done something equally offensive in raising the child to be as formidable as the child appeared to be: having earned owl and newts equivalencies before even entering his first year, having earned and taken up his lordships, having a following that included children from some of the most prominent families in both the dark and light wizarding communities, as well as the audacity and poise to re-establish and secure his own house in Hogwarts - despite the self-righteous old fool’s objections. It would have been amusing, if it hadn’t been so galling to the Dark Lord. In doing so, the creatures had returned the child to the status of being a threat to the Dark Lord and made themselves his enemies despite the Dark Lord’s previously long-held, if disgruntled, decision to permit the creatures their claimed neutrality.

Unaware, in his rant, of how much he was unintentionally sharing with his barely-willing host, the Dark Lord failed to notice that defense instructor was now also privy to the underlying fears prompting his rage.

Even as an infant, the boy had possessed some quality that had permitted the impossible deflection of the heavily-charged Avada Kedavra that he had cast on the infant leaving only a minor scar on the child to demonstrate that he had been struck. The Dark Lord had always reveled in the fact that his seventh-year NEWTS scores had exceeded the headmaster’s own, and the child comes to Hogwarts a seeming-prodigy having earned several OWLS and NEWTS even before his first year. Moreover, the boy came not as a defenseless-untrained child, made malleable by abuse, neglect, and the Headmaster’s abandonment, but as a prematurely - mature and poised young man confident in his competence, authority, and standing with the ability to see through and withstand the Headmaster’s manipulations -- a trait that the Dark Lord had not managed to develop for himself until late in his fourth year. This was not a boy whom he could afford to offer the illusion of using his powers to reunite an abused and abandoned child with his parents as he now had no doubt that the boy would see through to the actual intent of offering only a quick death. Worse yet, the boy had the obvious backing of the Goblins causing a quandary of its own.

One of the primary reasons, Quirnius discovered, that the Dark Lord had ultimately permitted the
goblins to remain neutral - without retribution - had been that they were a potential enemy whom he had almost no intelligence of beyond what any passerby could gain on entering their banking centers; who had control of the financial affairs of not only the government, its employees, and the order’s flunkies but also those of his own followers; who held reportedly unbreachable treaties with multiple nations and races - including those of whom the Dark Lord had weaker alliances with (as more than once, his attempts to gain informations on the goblins from his presumed allies only to be stonewalled if not outright rejected… even by the dementors who reportedly feared no other race or being, but would not even speak of the goblins).

Even the Vampires seemed leary of the creatures. Lorcan d'Eath, the vampires’ go-between during negotiations, had commented only that the Goblin’s nation was more prolific and more dangerous than ant supercolonies Ishikari where a single above ground entry connected to the nests of millions of other queens and tens of millions of other entrances - hinting of the untold number number of muggles reported to have fallen into hidden sandpits and overwhelmed by cascades of ants before even crying out. While artistic in temperament, Lorcan had never given any indication of exaggeration and had seemed particularly cautionary in the comment before he had warned the Dark Lord something that he would find out was all too true later on: he would find no race of creature willing to provide information on, much less stand against, Gringotts, and the suggestion of anything other would be a deal breaker to any alliance he gained.

While the Dark Lord continued ranting over the impact the boy’s unexpected competence and presence would have on the plans the Dark Lord had been concocting for the year, the old fool’s ignorance of everything that he’d intended to do, and the many, many who had failed him during his downfall whom would be paid back and how, Quirnius listened and considered the many thoughts, facts, and secrets passing through his possessed mind during the tantrum before finally coming to a decision, thankful that the Dark Lord had been so confident in his belief that his own occlumency and legilimency skills would warn him of any treachery from the professor and his dueling and defense skills that he had never seemed to consider Quirnius a threat much less anticipate that Quirnius would consider using muggle methods instead of magical and so was unprepared when Quirnius began to murmur in Latin:


In fact, it took several minutes before the Dark Lord seemed to take notice of Quirnius’ murmuring beneath his and several more before the shocked spirit fully translated the chant, and finally began to fight it. Just as Quirnius had begun to feel the slightest sense of separation, waves of agony began to slam through his mind.

"Scheming, traitorous coward, did you think I resided in your mind for months without noticing your little safeguards? Did you truly believe that pitiful muggle spells would have the slightest chance of casting me out? Or that your shields are so formidable as to block the lord you swore allegiances to, invited into your mind, and rendered possession of self and soul to - so eagerly and so willingly? Having bourne my self and soul these many months, you would betray me as I’m set to return? In fear of a child?” He questioned, seeming to forget the fears that Quirnius had discerned only moments before.

Quirnius’s previous certainty that despite the Dark Lord’s vast knowledge of magic’s darkest arts, he would be safe because certainly the Dark Lord would not cast upon a body that he was installed in quickly proved false. Wave after wave of agony coursed through him until he was choking on bile,
shaking with seizures, and bloody tears ran thickly down his face, blinding him momentarily as he felt the Dark Lord presence take hold again - not even having realized that the Dark Lord had even momentarily released him to cast his punishments.

"Oh, no, do not think yourself so easily punished." The Dark Lord sneered, continuing, “Your punishment has not even marginally begun, but - for the moment - you have some use.

ブレンキン

In the Headmaster’s office, Albus Dumbledore was forcing himself to restrain his temper, well aware that the portraits - fueled and protected by the castle’s magic - were not entirely under his control.

His brief visit to Gellert had helped temper his anger, and his later punishment of Gellert’s wayward elf had nearly been enough to calm him - at least temporarily though it would have been more satisfying if he could have killed the repulsive creature, but so long as he held Gellert, the elf was the only being he could trust to obey without question or comment - lest his master suffer the consequences.

Even Hagrid, for as loyal as the oaf tried to be, frequently fell short of his Albus’s expectations and occasionally asked questions about Albus’s orders that came to closer to questioning Albus’s instructions than the halfblood had any right to do. Hagrid’s utter failure to shepherd the mudblood Granger was a perfect example. Worse yet, had been the oaf’s unwitting, drunken admission after escorting the girl - over the the staff lunch - with Quirrell present no less- that he had had done so poor of a job in guiding the muggleborn that her parents had claimed to be prepared to withdraw her and send her to another magical academy and then had been unable to retrieve the philosopher’s stone from Gringotts.

Albus had been so angry at the first revelation that he had immediately decided to use Hagrid’s latest pet as a guard for the stone - certain that the Dark Lord would kill the creature, and in doing so inflict Albus’s punishment on Hagrid for the failure without Albus having to do so- until the second revelation (complete with the goblin’s comments that Albus didn’t even have the authority to remove the stone) had insured that his previous plans to force a confrontation between the possessed DADA instructor and the irritating Potter brat over possession or threat of possession of the philosopher’s stone were null and void.

Truthfully, Albus had almost expected the possessed instructor to resign before the lunch had even finished. Thankfully, though, Voldemort’s obsession with the boy had been enough to keep Quirrell at Hogwarts, at least for the time being, so a confrontation was still possible, though much more complicated due to the intractable boy’s insistence on reviving the blasted House of Lords.

Despite his previous act, Albus had been all to aware of the blasted house, and had done everything he could think of to consign the thrice-cursed house to the distant and forgotten details of Hogwart’s History, never to be called again. But once again, the goblins had interfered.

No one could tell him that the Goblins weren’t behind it all. Even if they had never chosen to align themselves with Voldemort, Albus had always believed them to be enemies to the future he planned. Not only were they so arrogant as to think that they had any right to control the financial affairs of wizards, but despite his generosity, the creatures had never been willing to send their children to Hogwarts, not that he had particularly desired their presence, but Albus had worked many years to build a collection of half-blood or turned students behold to him, who would provide him information on the inner workings and threats posed by their communities. So far, he could only count Sanguini, a vampire - turned close to his seventh year; Lupin - a werewolf turned just after his ninth birthday, and Hagrid, a half-blood giant.
To date, though, he had never been able to get anyone closer into the goblin community, despite hiring the half-blood Flitwick and keeping the eldest Weasley boy under constant compulsions through the last five years to work his way into Gringott’s employee. (The boy had actually craved the useless life of a popular musician before Molly had appealed to Albus for his guidance). Despite the increased access to individuals who actually interacted with Goblins, however, the creature’s confidentiality charms had been unbreakable, thus making his pawns useless. At least in terms of monitoring the chosen one.

When Albus had first read the notification informing him of the Goblin’s interference with Harry’s guardians, he had been enraged with the creatures and had tried to block the little beast’s machinations, but quickly withdrew his objections when he realized that the proof required to return the boy to his relatives was not only nearly impossible (as the muggles only redeeming feature was that they hadn’t neglected and abused their own son the way they had abused and neglected Harry) … but would also expose far too much of Albus’s meddling if revealed. Ultimately, he had even convinced himself that Goblins were perhaps an even better choice than the wretched muggles.

Not only had the creatures not shown any evidence of affinity toward humans, by all accounts they even sent their own children into the mines at an early age to ‘cut their teeth on coal’, reportedly placing their own self value only in terms of what they could offer to the whole - a philosophy that Albus very much wanted ingrained in Harry. By all the accounts given by the various order members Albus had sent to check on the boy, the boy was always engaged in some chore, task, or other physical labor; behaved both humbly and obediently; and had always been unfailingly polite… even by Severus’s anti-Potter - biased standards. Prior to the Welcoming Feast, Albus had believed that the boy would arrive at Hogwarts happy to be among his own kind, craving comfort and approval, and with a child’s preference for play and relaxation - resenting and willing to do anything to avoid being sent back to the uncaring creatures.

Instead, the impertinent child he had faced during sorting was not prepared to view him a mentor and potential rescuer from his guardians … someone whose approval and favor were to be sought above all others. The child appeared to be everything Albus had wanted to insure he would not be: self-confident to the point of being self-righteous, aware of his place and title, competent, and worse yet, independent. He had not only not accepted Albus’s guidance but publically rejected it, refused the house that Albus had chosen for him to go into, and by virtue of going into the House of Lords insured that he would not be directly under Albus’s control. More annoying yet, the boy had both worn his Lordship rings and pins and cast wandless detection charms over his food and drinks periodically through the feast, protecting himself from the compulsions and potions that Albus had arranged.

Gritting his teeth, Albus bent forward over the parchment and scribbled several rune patterns into each of its corners to prevent the portraits from spying on him then proceeded to redraft his plans and determine if any of his preparations could be saved toward a second plan. The parchment was very nearly blank when he sat back, but there was time, he decided. Quirrell was still here, under a year’s magical contract, and as long as he carried Voldemort’s spirit, there was time to arrange something for them to run into conflict over. Voldemort was probably already looking for a way to end the boy’s life.

Feeling marginally more composed, Albus finally turned in, ignoring the portraits who complained as he nox’d the torch lighting his office.

Chapter End Notes
Translation of exorcism ritual from Supernatural:

We exorcise you, every impure spirit,  
every satanic power, every incursion  
of the infernal adversary, every legion,  
every congregation and diabolical sect.  
Thus cursed demon  
and every diabolical legion, we adjure you.  
Cease to deceive human creatures,  
and to give to them the Poison of Eternal Perdition.  
(Exorcism Ritual, Supernatural 2.14)
After joining the other heirs and heiresses in escorting Professor Snape to wish him a good evening after the professor had stayed right up to the minute he had noted he was due for his shift of hall patrols to enforce the school’s curfew, Hermione bid her housemates a good evening and retired to her rooms to think.

The professor had been surprisingly generous with his time, answering their questions as thoroughly as if they had been in class and had given Hermione a great deal to think about after she had finally worked up the nerve to ask the professor an incredibly personal question - but one she hadn’t been able to get off her mind since Heir Malfoy had mentioned it. (She knew that by the custom of the house, she was to call the heir by Lord Malfoy, but she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around it, much less the fact that she was to be called Lady Armistad. Plain-jane Hermione Jean Granger, a Lady. The thought seemed absurd, but not as much as the decision she knew she was on the cusp of making.)

In her heart, she knew that the Professor’s blunt, unvarnished answers had already clenched her decision for her, but she had yet to come to terms with her decision. His unflinching honesty had helped, though:

"Professor…” Hermione had blushed slightly when his sharp gaze turned immediately to her - even as Heir Malfoy, seeming to anticipate what she was thinking, forestalled Heiress Bullstrode from asking the professor another question about potions, noting that they could compare notes in the next morning’s study sessions and nodding pointedly at Hermione in his Godfather’s direction. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes at the gesture, even though she did appreciate the encouragement, but sufficed mouthing “I am” at her housemate before turning back to their professor, who had noticed the gesture and was watching her with an inquiring tilt of his eyebrow (very much reminding Hermione of her mom in one of her less patient moods).

"You have a personal question, Lady Armistad?” Professor Snape asked bluntly, catching Hermione off guard.

"How...er… Yes, Sir.”

"Given the abundant curiosity you have displayed this evening, Lady Armistad, and the rather remarkable number of questions that you have already asked so far, it does not require deep consideration to recognize that any hesitation on your part to satisfy your commendable curiosity would stem from a desire to avoid giving offense. Aside from that, my godson is not so subtle as he would like to believe himself and has laid several hints to preface your interest in how - as a child of mixed parentage- I successfully integrated into a very traditional society.”

Professor Snape’s smile was a mix bemused, slightly cautionary, and something that gave Hermione the impression that he was willing - forcefully willing himself - to be
tolerant of her desire to ask such a question … at least until she got the question out. Hermione had no illusions, however, that if her question crossed over the imperceivable boundary lines of what he was willing to share of his personal history, she quickly find herself on the cutting end of his sharp wit and tongue.

"Yes, Sir. It was explained to me that I would not be required to make the vow to formally take up the Armistad Inheritance until my fifth year at Hogwarts, but in the scope of what I will be required to know to properly execute the responsibilities of my title, I realize that there is so very much I don’t know and don’t even know enough to recognize the gaps between what I don’t know and what I must to navigate your customs and culture. By comparison, five years is so very little time.” Hermione explained her concerns bluntly.

When he didn’t try to interrupt her or offer easy platitudes, Hermione continued: “While the study plan - as approved - will surely give me a better chance of catching up than I would have had in a standard first-year classes, I can’t help but worry that the background facts and details most wizardborn students have grown up knowing will factor into the expected answers to most written assignments, but won't even occur to me because I think in terms of how it's done in the non-magical world. Much less, if I somehow manage to put on a good showing and complete an acceptable level OWLS and NEWTS, will it be enough to give a stepping stone into the circles I will need to travel in when I know that my background will be working against me? I know these are foundational years for education in both worlds, and I don’t know whether or not I’m making a mistake by starting down this path if - in the end- I won’t be able to do what’s expected of me … do something worthwhile.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Professor Snape was actually smiling at her when she finished rambling, even if it was a small, barely noticeable smile that she doubted many would quantify as a smile … but she thought it was.

"Lady Armistad, might I suggest that the simple fact that you possess the presence and awareness to weigh these considerations at the very start of your efforts, in fact, bodes well for your potential prospects?” He offered before holding a hand up to deflect her immediate comment.

“I will not say that your ambitions will require anything less than rigorous pursuit, nor that you will not face individuals and institutions alike that will not change their mindset or offer you opportunities regardless your qualifications, but your ambitions are utterly achievable and they will not be the only individuals, institutions, or opportunities you will be presented with. While many will look upon you and see only a muggleborn, you are an heiress and will one day be a Lady to a house of great influence. If you cultivate this influence, be it political, financial, or other, it will become readily apparent how quickly most are willing to set aside their traditional ‘scruples’ to curry your favor toward if it offers them profit. Others will offer alliances, based on your own merit or their own agendas. Others still will offer honest friendship and support based on shared interests and experiences… But, Lady Armistad those are not the factors that should provide the greatest influence.”

"What should then?” Hermione asked when he hadn’t continued after several seconds had passed.

"Years ago, another asked me similar questions. She shared your background and concerns and I believe intelligence. She was a talented witch in her own right, but I
believe that she might have done equally well if she had chosen a muggle education instead of magical.” His expression if not his voice seemed somewhat distant, and Hermione suspected that he was remembering the person that Draco had described as his best friend.

Hermione let the silence hang for a moment or two before she finally questioned, somehow needing to know how the other witch had decided, “May I ask what convinced her?”

He nodded, but Hermione still wasn’t entirely certain that he would answer given his faraway look. After a second, though, his expression became more present and intense somehow though his gaze seemed less unapproachable than it had before as he answered, “She said it came down to one question that you will have to answer for yourself: having discovered this new part of yourself that comes from your deepest core, a gift of and from unseen and almost unfathomable powers, can you imagine locking it back inside of yourself, and never using it again for the rest of your life, just to live the mundane, normal life you grew up expecting to be your future?”

"Thank you, Sir.” Hermione finally answered, her throat tight.

"You are quite welcome, Lady Armistad.”

"As courtesy allows, Sir. I would be honored if you were to use my given name, Hermione.” Hermione offered, hoping that she was using the proper formulaic for speaking to an adult of higher rank.

"The honor is mine, Lady Armistad,” he agreed with polite nod, his thin barely-there smile, just a bit more there.

As her thoughts returned to the present, Hermione moved to her desk, sat down, opened a scroll, and began a letter to her parents.
The High Review

Chapter Notes

I had originally intended to take this in an entirely different direction; however, Gringotts’ culture (and Gellert both) wanted a bit more attention than other plot points, and it never pays to argue with Goblins. So without Further Ado….

"The twenty-ninth – invest only what you are willing to risk; risk only what you are willing to gain."

At midnight, elf clerics bound directly to the Goblin Seat and the accumulated magic it symbolized and controlled (and thus able to retain the forms that their kin had lost over the centuries) began preparing the council room on the one hundredth eleventh level of the Gringotts’ for the annual thirteen-week Grand Review assessing the investments and returns from each of Nation’s branches.

After sweeping the 1200 quanter dome with brooms of besom and chamomile, the clerics burned thousand-herb smudge-rolls tied in snorecrack and acromantula silk placed exactly seven feet apart around the circumference of the dome until the smoke filled the dome from its center down to the floor in a delicate cloud of fragrance and the herbs bundles burnt to ashes. Mixing the ashes with their blood, the clerics used it to draw runes - casting again the wards that would usher out the activities of the previous year, temporarily suspending the accounts of all Goblins for review and initiating the thirteen-day period of rest observed by every family and member in their community.

During the thirteen days, the nation’s human, were, elven, and creature employees were charged with maintaining the limited services offered to the wizarding world, who had been reminded of the ‘bank holiday’ three months in advance to prepare their accounts for the reduction of available services.

During the first two days of review, the head of each family examined and summarised the accounts of each family branch before submitting the family’s journals for review and joining their families in leisure activities: cart races, dueling tournaments, craftsmanship contests, betting, feasts, and family reunifications. Department heads submitted their journals to the auditors and started the process of closing out their temporary accounts. Directors held dinners for the auditors who sacrificed the time to appraise their divisions. Craftmasters submitted their recommendations for Masteries and announcement of pending projects, new placements, and novice openings. The elders met to decide who would be chosen for council review and who would be invited, and the high auditor sat with his council to decide the costs of buy in to each review level.

On the third day banns were called, the twelve bells were rung, and any banns undisputed, after the last bell rung, were announced for bonding.

The fourth day, the bondings were held. On the fifth, the beddings.

On the sixth day, the High Council was called, and the High Review Begun.

From dawn of the of the sixth morning to First Hour, the presidents from Gringotts’ branches worldwide filled the dome, entering through the portals formed in the spans between each smudge burn.
When First Bell Rang, the audience silenced and turned toward a small dais at least five inches high that had been placed in the center of the dome. Standing in the center of the Dais, a goblin so gnarled that, even with the raised dais, only the tips of his ears and a stray sprig of grey hair could be seen over the heads of those gathered called out: “We are goblin!”

"We are goblin!” The presidents responded in turn.

"Indivisible and equal,” the figure cried out.

"No goblin above review.” The presidents agreed.

"I come to you, called as High Auditor.”

"We come to you to be called for review.” The presidents answered, each taking a knee.

"All those who are called shall stand.”

"Those who do not stand, shall fall,” chanted the audience.

Only three times in their history had ‘called’ presidents failed to stand for review. Those who refused left the dome in chains, stripped of name, title, property, and family - fed to the lowest of mines and forgotten. If, in their lifetimes, they had earned their way out of the mines, their names were yet forgotten.

"Called for High Review this cycle are President Ragn’rok (London), President Ragn’knal (Beliz), President Ragn’ichin (Beijing), President Ragn’prot (Prague), President Ragna’zoft (St. Petersburg), President Rajign (Kolkata), and I, Ragn’theil (of all branches), called in my four hundredth year as High Auditor.”

As their names were called, the chosen presidents rose from their knees, walked through their brethren, and joining the High Auditor, stood proudly for review.

“The cost to review, 2,000 bars Omani Rial ore. Will you pay?”

"We risk to gain." The audience agreed, formulaically, but evident in the tones of many were notes of awe at the almost historically high fee paid the auditors, even considering how many of those being reviewed were long-standing presidents.

The audience separated as twelve pairs of clerics carried Dwarven-forged pallets of Omani Ore into the center of the dome to lay them on the dais. Three clerics on each side, they carried the pallets by virtue of two ornate staffs embossed with runes active and glowing like molten gold in the gaps between between the four rings embedded into each side of the pallets. The two meter by four meter pallets (painstakingly constructed from 1,000 bars each pressed together by the wards cast from the runes on each staff) separated as the staffs were removed from the rings, breaking into individual bars that absorbed into the platform.

”~2000 Omani Rial, who shall bid for the right to review?” The elder intoned.

”~300 Omani,” President Ragn’rok pledged, pulling two Omani Riat’s from an inner pocket and adding them to the pile prompting a tide of surprised murmurs to sweep across the attendants.

While the right to vote in the final review decision was open to Presidents to bid for, it was rare that they elected to do so as they would still be subject to paying for a division of the remaining votes after all bids were taken regardless of any bid they placed and excluding any funds they had already placed in the bidding. Moreover, the cost of review was always intentionally priced outside of their
ability to afford the total bid-price so that no President or Elder could buy his or her way out of review - without bankrupting the individual and thereby relinquishing any political, social, or financial power he or she might have once held. In the eyes of many, being beheaded for financial misdeeds was preferable to such a bankruptcy and the resultant debt bondage (for who among them would invest in such a one as a goblin who willingly chose bankruptcy over review).

“~75 Omani,” President Ragn’ichin bid moments later, placing a coin-roll on the pile before stepping back. Each of the presidents in turn added their own bids; though, none bid higher than fifty Omani. In toto, including President Ragn’rok’s bid of ~300 Omani, only ~1,250 Omani had been pledged when the High Auditor opened the bidding to elders and below.

Coronae Magister Magia of the Clan Ragnrok was first to bid an unexpectedly high bid of ~50 Omani, followed by Gavra Magister, Galleonclaw Thornbrow, and Healer Magia Mentaetcorpus with a surprising ~25 each. Several others followed in bids of ~10 and ~15 Omani, but the most surprising bid came not from any elder, or goblin at all, but unexpected guests - one of whom was among their most honored but longest-absent guests.

Standing in the archway, barely taller than their tallest member, her pale hair glowing like morning light, clothed in the petals of titania arum, but barefoot - the last-born daughter of Una Pandora, Queen of Aes Sidhe, of Tír na nÓg and Elfhame bid, “~500 Omani,” then moved to kneel by one of the presidents in the last row outward.

Visibly shocked by her presence, much less her bid, the High Auditor hurried from the dias, stopping by her side, and protesting, “Nai, Dohwa do Aes Sidhe, No Queen of Tir na nÓg should bow or kneel. Your presence honors us.” While the Fae had welcomed the Goblin Nation into their sidhes and given them free use and reign of their underground kingdom before withdrawing to the Tir na nÓg, no member of their race had attended a single Grand Review since the middle of the Fifth Age, nor seemed to take interest or umbridge in their affairs since.

“’You are very kind, Dokkaebi, but please call me, Luna.” The fair queen smiled as she paused to tuck a platinum strand behind her ear and expose the small inner slice of pearl onion, glistening and fresh, that clung to the cartilage of her upper ear like a niffler’s ear loop.

“Thank you, Dohwa Luna,” The High Auditor bowed to the Fae Queen, before pausing to order one of the lower auditors to retrieve a seat for her.

“Oh no, don’t mind me,” she offered airly, ’I’m quite comfortable right here.” She explained before crossing her ankles and crouching. “I think you were waiting for ~50 more Omani to be pledged before you could start the reviews.”

Non-plussed by her unexpected cordiality and deference paid to him by crouching as if she were a Goblin female of moderate to low status, the High Auditor was left with little choice but to obey, so returned to the dias. Before his second heel had touched the platform, however, a final bid was placed.

“~50 Omani,” added the nervous high-pitched voice, shocking the gathered almost as much as the bid by the Fae Queen, coming as it was from Ebbyalun do Rivendell, First Assistant to Manager Griphook and Fourth Level Liaison to the Bonded Elves of Gringotts, more commonly known as ‘Ebby’. While the Bonded Elves had both attended annual reviews, far more recently than the Fae Queen, it was unlikely that any of the Goblins attending remembered the occasion of their last bid despite it being the momentous occasion when the Fourth President of Gringotts had faced review only two short months after the last war between Goblins and Wizards.

Suddenly frozen under the combined attention of the auditors, presidents, elders, and the Fae Queen,
Ebby squeaked softly before slapping her palms over her mouth in embarrassment. Surprisingly, it was Dohwa Luna who responded first to the Ebby’s anxious reaction, with a soft happy giggle that no one hearing could have interpreted as mocking in any fashion and a gesture that invited the Ebby to crouch in the space beside her.

“Ebbyaliun do Rivendell, join me please?” Dowha Luna offered, the tone making it clear that it was entirely Ebby’s decision and no offense would be felt if refused, but at that point, Ebby was ready to ‘pop’ into the closest shadow and gladly took her offer, hoping that the Queen’s proximity would draw the attention of her. Scuttling forward, Ebby ducked her head to avoid everyone’s gaze as the High Review continued, wishing that her partner and mate could be there instead.

Unfortunately, Hibby was engaged elsewhere - in an equally unexpected negotiation - that was of great interest both to Gringotts’ and his bonded master.

ブレンキン

“Master Grindelwald,” an elf’s voice woke Gellert, who reluctantly blinked his eyes open to see a set of large concerned eyes, barely an inch from his face - staring at him with a strange mix of pity, determination, and distrust glimmering in their gaze.

After seeming to study him long enough to be sure that he was conscious, the elf began to speak, “Master Grindelwald, I am’s Hibby, first-bonded elf to Lord Peverell-Black-Potter, Junior Manager and Rig’anok of Gringotts. Lord Peverells wishes me to bring his replies - as representative of Gringotts.”

Gellert smiled thinly at the stress that the elf placed on the fact that the boy’s response was being delivered in an official capacity that held no personal obligation on his part, then winced in pain as his facial muscles - unused to smiling even thinly - twinged in response. The determination in the elf’s expression only added to Gellert’s dark humor as he suppressed the urge to ask the elf whether he thought Gellert was tempted to or any way able to sue for any breach of trust if the reply had been otherwise. He doubted the creature would really see the humor in it.

Taking his silence as acceptance, the elf continued, “Lord Peverell-Black-Potter says that as a representative of Gringott’s there be’s a duty for him to investigate if one of Gringotts’ account holders has been held against his will and offer assistance if warranted. To do his duty, he has contacted his superiors to starts looking intos of Master Grindelwald’s claims, but warns that if Master Grindelwald’s claims prove not trues, Gringotts will pass judgments for telling Gringotts false things under Goblins laws.”

The elf paused, seeming to wait for some protest or claim of innocence that Gellert simply didn’t have the energy to give before he continued:

“To shows what’s he is telling is being true, Mr. Grindelwald is being asked to give many memories as he can give that shows the truth of what he says. If he can give them, Hibby is to take thems to Gringotts where theys will be logged and tested. If theys is true to magic, Gringotts will give the bestest assistence it can.”

Gellert pulled himself up by the chains on his wrists, splayed his hands wide, and laughed dryly. His voice almost croaking as he answered. “Sorry Hibby, you’ll have to go back to your master empty handed. I’ve no wand you see.” He spread his fingers wide, wiggling them in emphasis.

“Youse needs only be thinking them. Master Gellert. Hibbys can collect them. Whiles you be thinking thems, though, there are other things that Hibby cans be doing. Tell’s Hibby’s whens you is ready.” Without saying a thing further or waiting for Grindelwald’s permission, the elf began to
explore the turret cell.

As the elf went, he waved his fingers in obscure patterns silently but apparently commanding his magic to seal the cracks and crevices in the stone chamber stemming the ever-present draft, soften stones the beneath Gellert making their contact to his skin almost imperceivable without changing the firmness of their stone, and then over him. After the elf was done, despite the fact that he still appeared unclothed, Gellert felt the soft weight and warmth of fine fabrics the likes of which he had not worn in the decades.

Seeming to read the surprise in his eyes, the elf explained, “Misha has said you know of the elves histories, yes?” The elf paused for his answering nod before continuing, “Misha -before- was cleric, and magician, he did not have need to learn how to soften the ground for bedding, how to warm drafty barracks, or turn clothing unseeable to fade into darkness. Hibby was worker turned fighter and guard. Hibby has learned such magics. Misha’s not-bound master will not be able to feel, see, or know that Hibby has done these.”

The elf canted it’s head and stared at him as if it thought Gellert a bit dim before he asked, “has you gathered youse memories ups?”

In retrospect, Gellert decided that he might just deserve the look - as he realized that he had been so distracted by the elf’s actions that he hadn’t even started to focus on the memories. Gellert shook his head but closed his eyes and let his memories cast back to the very beginning of his love/hate relationship with Albus.
With and Without Reservation

Chapter Notes

Originally this was meant to have been the last chapter (and rule of this fic), but it took a mind of its own, so the original second half of the chapter will be split off into a new chapter.

Chp 34

"The thirtieth – if you will not invest in yourself, neither will Gringotts."

"Bidding ~300 Omani, President Ragn’rok of the Clan Ragnrok, you optioned the right to stand first or last for review. How do you stand?"

"First and to any challenge of equals or betters!" Ragn’rok’s response, again sent rumbles of shock around the room. While there was some advantage to being the first heard in any review - before any other reviews could provide example or information to influence reviewers against a positive review, the distinct disadvantage of facing challenges while everyone was fresh and unaffected by after hours celebrations was staggering - particularly when the challenges were not just opened to equals but to ‘betters’, who only attained such ranks by resoundingly winning in their own challenges. At the rank of President, those who qualified as betters were goblins that truly none wished to challenge or be challenged by."

The surprises were not to end there, however, as the High Auditor stood, holding out his hand for his sword and staff, and uttered, “Accepted - to first blood,” into the ensuing silence.

None were surprised when President Ragn’rok remained on the dias, now honor bound to face the gnarled goblin, whom as tradition dictated, also faced review this term and would be invested in not losing the first challenge of the High Review.

"To whomever draws first blood, goes first gold.” Ragn’rok agreed holding his hand out for his own staff.

Around the dias, clerics circled slowly, chanting lighting bundles of grain and dropping them at the base of the dias until the pyre was enclosed in a ring of flame - symbolizing the final battles in which their warriors wrested their nation’s sovereignty from the Human, Were, and Half-blood alliances in the heart of their enemy’s territory -at the start of winter - surrounded by the burning fields and slaughtered livestock that would not long feed their enemy the coming frosts. Neither challenger would leave the dias until first blood fell or the bundles turned to ash - except in disgrace.

After circling, testing, and parrying in utter silence, the High Auditor finally dispensed with the preening and attacked, swinging toward the president with a blow that was as much a test as an actual parry. If Ragn’rok chose to dodge the light blow or rush into an easy attack in response, the High Auditor would have dispensed with him - immediately- slashing his cheek such that it would both collect first blood and denote Ragn’rok ‘losing face’ by unnecessarily challenging a stronger opponent - an error rarely forgiven in the Goblin Nation. Ragn’rok did neither; instead, he stepped into the light blow, deflecting it with his shield and raised his blade to deflect the backslash that would have marked his cheek if he had rushed in. Into the next instant, Ragn’rok returned his own
parry - one that was not in any way a test, and forced the High Auditor to step back with the force of his blow.

What followed, frankly, stunned the audience - silencing them beneath the flurry of clanging and chinging as competitor’s weapons struck each other’s weapons and armor. No quarter was given and would not have been accepted had it been. Nor was there a moment where either stood further than a swords distance apart - often clashing so tightly together they could scent each other’s breath. Not even a hearts treble-beat passed between their strikes and returns, and more than one of their audience caught themselves holding their breaths -- suddenly glancing around, abashed-- to see if their lapse of composure had been observed.

The sweat beading the fighters’ brows had no time to run into their eyes before being flung away by the ferocity of their never-ending, never-pausing blows and counters. Their breaths bellowed in their lungs as the smoke from the burning bundles filled the dome hanging low over the fighters, so very reminiscent of the long-gone but un-forgotten battles that the oldest of witnesses, those whom had been honored by the Gavra-Magister’s skills, shuddered at the echoes of the attacks they had witnessed - the bloodiest battles in the Nation’s remembered history. And yet, no blood spilled; no slice passed the other’s guard, no stab pierced flesh; no thrust met anything but empty space as the body that had been in its aim spun away.

Time must have passed, though none of the assembled felt its passing - none but the warriors’ whose muscles tensed and throbbed with the exertion. Neither fighter gave mind to its passing, though, intent on finding the opening that refused to present itself - to take the other’s blood. Neither wasted their time on feints, knowing they would only be ignored, nor trying to get to a safe distance, which would have only disappeared instants later. It went unsaid that each knew their only recourse was to be found in their speed, agility, and ability to anticipate their opponent’s next move. Between the warriors, no thought was wasted on appreciating or wondering at the other’s skills, only on the here, the now, the slash, the strike, the breath and the step and turn, the thrust and recoil and counter.

For their assembled audience, it was a different matter.

It was only to be expected that the High Auditor, who judged even the eldest of elders, would be so skilled (he would not have risen to such ranks otherwise), but President Ragn’rok?

That was a surprise. To some, like President Rajign of Kolkata branch, it was an very unpleasant surprise, and the stunned President found himself scanning his assembled colleagues for another more likely goblin to challenge when it turned to his review. Rajign had been ‘banking’ on the British branch president reflecting the poor reputation that many held of the British wizarding community, and being an easy challenge of so-called ‘equals’, a view that had been abruptly dashed, with no back up plan in mind.

Others found it a warning as they, too, had somewhat underestimated President Ragn’rok’s, believing him too soft in his dealings with humans, magical and muggle alike (whom some branches refused to even service). President Ragna’zoft (St. Petersburg) and President Ragn’ichin (Beijing) being chief among these.

Others yet, could not help but wonder at President Ragn’rok’s purpose in developing this extent of martial skills. While a certain level of martial skill was, of course, to be be expected, or otherwise would not be tested in the review, the level that he had achieved could not have been without purpose or plan.

Yet another… The Dohwa do Luna Aes Sidhe, Queen of Tir na nÓg observed with a serene smile, pleased that Harry’s mentor and protector held such skill and contemplating whether the president would be interested in receiving training from a warrior of Tir na nÓg. She had left the most skilled -
her guards - behind during the year she had come to observe the Regent Potentia of Magic, but it would be an easy task to summon them, perhaps to train Harry as well.

Sadly, she had to suppress her contentment as she noticed, only moments later, that the immanence of her pleasure had been rejuvenating the bundles of straw, reviving their color and vitality - even as they burned; it would have been an unkindness to permit it to continue. Despite the transformation to the bundles, though, the stout fires continued to burn, filling the dome as if darkness was descending, before finally turning to ash, a fact that - at first - went unnoticed by the elf clerics until Dohwa do Luna’s delighted laughter pealed through the room startling even the clerics, who too, had been engrossed in watching the battle, but now hurried to grabbing up their striking bars and sending loud chimes echoing throughout the dome.

The first chime was not immediately successful in breaking the warriors momentum, every outside element and event being delayed by their focus on their opponent, but by the second chime, the sound had broken through their awareness, and both the President and High Auditor stepped back, raising their weapons high in salute as the chimes declared the battle a draw.

As custom demanded no sword be put away un-blooded, the clerics offered each oiled skins to wrap their weapons in until they could retreat and perform the ritual to properly blood then cleanse their swords before returning them to their sheaths. Once this was done, the two faced each other again, bowing to equals in salute.

To everyone’s shock, though, the High Auditor stepped forward, offering his weapon for exchange, greeted the President, “I am Ragn’theil born of Osterode raised to all branches. The sword I offer is named Wraithward, christened in the blood of the Wraith of Ostrode in the four hundred and seventy fourth year of the Sixth Age, and has defended our Nation through eighty-seven campaigns.”

Accepting the great honor, Ragn’rok replied in kind, offering his sword, “I am Ragn’rok of Islington raised to the London branch. My sword bears the name GrimsNell. GrimsNell forged by Weapons Master Draxn’dal christened in the blood the reaper who defied its master and hunted among the moors of York. GrimsNell came to me in exchange in my fourth review in the five hundred and forty fifth year of this age. I will carry Wraithward with honor and diligence.”

“Hein, the weapon honored by Draxn’Dal and Ragn’rok, shall know only honor at my hand.” High Auditor Ragn’theil answered solemnly as clerics stepped to each goblin’s right side accepted his sword before delivering it into the facing goblin’s left hand. The oilskins where removed for the gathered audience to view the weapons raised in declaration of ownership and either acknowledge or dispute the exchange, before weapons were lowered lowered, then rewrapped, and handed over for the cleric’s blessing while the review continued.

”Do any contest the satisfaction of Ragn’rok’s martial review?” the High Auditor called across the hall. In the rare instances where draws occurred, the review could be contested; however, none were surprised when the call was met with silence: to contest the review, the new challenger would first have to face -and best- the reviewed subject’s opponent, namely the High Auditor, to prove the test flawed, before being permitted to press a challenge against Ragn’rok, himself...

“The first martial challenge and gold to Ragn’rok!” High Auditor Ragn’thiel declared, “Strong stands Ragn’rok to guard our investments well.”

“Strong stands Ragn’rok,” replied even the most reluctant of the assembled, those who would otherwise be rivals and willing to challenge lesser opponents than the High Auditor for a shot at Ragn’rok, but who realized that their only hopes for seeing the popular president shamed would be dependant on the strength of his return on investments.
Elders, do you stand ready to report?” The High Auditor demanding pushing the review forward. Though he was loath to admit it, his battle with Ragn’rok had seriously tested and depleted his energy. It spoke well of the president, even if he could not factor that into the pending assessments.

Beyond the dias, at a table that had been conjured while the straw bundles were being lit for the Martial Review, sat the panel of elders, who had been reviewing President Ragn’rok’s fiscal reports, financial statements, journals, ledgers, and resource development plans. One by one, until the last, each of the elders stood announcing their readiness, until the last - a most grizzled auditor whom all knew and had the misfortune of being audited by at one point or other - raised his voice instead of standing to announce, “I reserve the right to stand until the other reports are dispensed with.”

If ritual and decorum would have permitted, Ragn’thiel would have clenched this teeth and growled. Not only was Cors’kel so fractious that his name, within their department had come to mean Alren’lom (‘insufferable’), but his skills in assessing and predicting the probable success of project development plans had inflated the auditor’s sense of self-importance beyond tolerable measure. Unfortunately, that one key skill had enabled the old snorcrack to invest so judiciously that he had veritably secured his position through many a review, though not yet winning him the services of the Gavra Magister.

“Reservation noted. Elder Pral’n’kulk, in regards to elevating the wealth of the Nation, does Ragn’rok pass review?"

Elder Pral’n’kulk gripped his staff, no doubt ensuring his balance, before the elder raised it to indicate a success full review as he croaked, “by two and seventy-one hundredths percent.” causing murmurs to run through the crowd. A two percent - nearly three- percent increase in the Nation’s wealth was very-very respectable. All sitting presidents were expected to raise the Nation’s wealth by some measure, but a positive review began at exceeding fifteen hundredths of a percent, with a flat review of zero to fifteen hundredths of a percent, and some past presidents had even survived review with negative percentages (losses attributable to the President’s investments and all less than five hundredths of a percent). An increase in the Nation’s wealth of two and seventy one hundredths, while it did not guarantee a favorable review - strongly indicated that the other review factors would secure said review… or so it seemed as each elder stood reporting (and raising their staffs) on the London Branch’s asset to investment, liquidity, and asset turnover ratios, income statements, balance sheets, and equity reports under Ragn’rok’s management and Ragn’rok’s personal return on investments and financial statements, until at last, only the seated Elder Cors’kel remained.

Grimacing, High Auditor Ragn’thiel turned again to the insufferable elder demanded as brusquely as the ritual permitted, “Elder Cors’kel, your fellow elders have, to a one, favorably reviewed financial statements of the London Branch and its sitting President Ragn’rok, will you concede to the panel the right you have reserved? Or do you challenge the consensus?”

“Twill.NOT.concede.my.reservation, High Auditor. Elders, though they be, my fellow elders are far too-easily impressed and would not have been so, had they read scrolls set before me.” Grumbling this loudly, the elder stood, but instead of raising his staff veritably threw it across President Ragn’rok’s records - evoking hisses of shock and displeasure throughout the assembled.. While the Goblins as a race had little time for a majority of the meaningless courtesies that Human’s liked to indulge in, the traditions and courtesies they did adhere to were strictly observed - and of those - none were so deeply ingrained as the rituals of the Grand Review.

If Ragn’rok’s previous reports or performance in the Martial Review had been utterly lackluster or worse disgraceful - the assembled would have still expected more decorum and respect to be shown the sitting president with opposing elders silently laying a staff across the president’s records, instead of disparaging the appraisal of the other review panel and throwing the auditor’s staff down as if the
task itself was odious instead of one of the greatest honors bestowed by the Nation. The elder was far from finished, however, leaving his position at the conjured table, Cors’kel stepped out from behind the table and moved in a manner that he probably thought resembled stalking, and might have resembled the act if the elder had been 150 years or so younger, instead of a rocking shuffle that spoke of martial skills gone to waste from lack of practice and sedentary habits.

While the latter was certainly true, Ragn’thiel had frequently witnessed Cors’kel attending the auditor’s private practice sessions and was hard pressed not to sneer at the other elder for the sham. He doubted that Ragn’rok would be fooled by the pretense if the challenge returned to the dais. Unlike the other elder, however, Ragn’thiel honored both the spell and spirit of their traditions and would uphold the ritual’s requirements regardless of the elder’s lack of decorum. Regardless of how Ragn’rok’s review was affected by Cors’kel’s challenge, Ragn’thiel’s own review would see Cors’kel’s cheek struck bloody for the disrespect the elder had tended to their traditions.

Acting well within the ritual’s propriety, President Ragn’rok answered Cors’kel’s rudeness with a surprising declaration, “I will stand to the Elder Auditor’s challenge and extend the determination to bid assignment.”

His declaration was met with a wave of excited teeth-chatters; it was a bold, almost audacious option that not only politely returned the elder’s disrespect by taking the review decision out of his hands and turning it over to the assembled who had made bids at the beginning of the review, it allowed those who would bid in support of Ragn’rok to secure a proportionate share in the return of investments on the development plans being challenged. Alternately, it offered his opponents the opportunity to individually or collectively outbid his supporters to temper an almost stellar review. While Ragn’rok’s review to this point had proven too strong to be failed outright, if others proved equally strong or nearly so, the weakening of Ragn’rok’s review could result in a change of standing, voting powers, and budget assignment in that year’s council.

There was a very good reason why very few under review took this option as the Nation not only allowed for such harsh measures in their review but favored the opportunity to test its leaders against conspiring forces, sharpening their teeth and claws against to the furtherance of their nations protection. This was why Elder Cors’kel’s face crumpling in disgruntlement brought a great deal of amusement to High Auditor Ragn’thiel; the elder had brought the un-reputable insult on himself and, not having bid at the beginning of the review, now had no voice in the proceedings.

The High Auditor would have been even more amused if he had known that Elder Cors’kel had not found any matter truly objectionable in the president’s plans, not even for the presumed boy king, but had instead been set on undermining the president solely on the basis of his association with the Coronae Magister, who had in the elder’s youth, refused every bid for auditor training under the Magister’s supervision that the elder put to him quarterly for three years, and - in the elder’s opinion- had fouled his reputation in the auditors corps to such an extent that he was still mocked when they were not aware of his presence. The prospect that he may have had any responsibility in his colleague’s critical, if accurate, appraisals had - apparently - never been weighed against his ego, or if it had - had been counted as knuts and sickles against the galleons of his skills, leprechaun’s gold or no.

“Auditor, present your challenge.” Ragn’thiel intoned, suppressing the disdain he felt toward the fractious auditor especially as the auditor returned to the table and seemed to shuffle through the scrolls appearing to look for something. Only when the fractious auditor finally rested - almost uncertainly- on a scroll that the elder did not immediately turn and present did it occur to the High Auditor that Elder Cors’kel’s challenge had been a ruse to draw the London Branch President into a martial challenge in reaction to his disrespectful and deceitful shuffling attempt to presenting himself as if he were more frail than he truly was.
“You can not need a reminder of the first inescapable rule, can you Elder Cors’kel?” The High Auditor goaded, tiring of the spectacle Cors’kel had instigated, unnecessarily, if Ragn’thiel had correctly interpreted his pause.

“No, Auditor.” Cors’kel sniped, his deviance from their traditions showing once again in the failure to use the Ragn’thiel’s proper title as he turn to face the assembled. The scroll raised in his claw, Cors’kel exclaimed, “I demand that Ragn’rok of Islington explain the investments he has made to date and proposes to make in the child that he would see named Rig’anok. A human stripling he would give the reign of magic knowing full-well the last human child so entrusted nearly drew the nation into war. A stripling he would reveal every level of our nation to, every art, and every skill - even those of the galleon claws.”

The Elder’s voice rose in conviction as he finally heard the rising grumble of the audience, unaware that the grumbling had started before he had even begun to describe the investment. Convinced that they were responding to a base prejudice, which he himself did not hold but many in the Nation did, against humans, Cors’kel declared, “I demand that Ragn’rok defend his planned investment in the Potter Child.”
Profitable Investments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stepping out of the floo from the Hogsmeade branch, into the Retention office’s receiving floo, Harry paused to breathe deeply, letting the familiar scent and taste of Gringotts’ environs welcome him back and ease the lingering irritation and tension from his confrontation with the Headmaster when the noisome man attempted to block his attempt to return to Gringotts - on being summoned to the annual review. Relaxing his fists as the everpresent taste of tunnel grit in the air soothed him, Harry finally opened his eyes and stepped sharply back on finding himself staring directly into Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow’s curled eyeridges.

Remembering himself, Harry dropped to a knee, crossing his wrists over the upraised knee, in silent apology for the unintended disrespect. Master Thornbrow dispensed the gesture with a perfunctory acceptance, flicking a claw to order Harry back to his feet and beside him as he left the office.

“Knuts are rattling” Master Thornbrow muttered, bringing to Harry’s mind the Goblins’ familiar metaphor for the First Inescapable Rule - of Knuts rattling through the funnel of an hourglass. Harry dipped his chin in a quick acceptance and rose to follow his most recent mentor.

Following the incursion and attempted theft in July, with Manager Griphook and the Coronae Magister’s agreement, conflicted agreement of Retention Master Morek and Defense Master Dagger-eye, Harry had started specialized training with Master Thornbrow in the arts of galleonclaws, the Nation’s greatest warriors and assassins - after the bank’s ward-readers had determined that the intruder had either been some manifestation of Voldemort’s remaining soul or alternately someone holding and possessed by one of Voldemort’s other horcruxes. On recovering from the ordeal of creating his now-adopted, horcrux-turned-golem-turned-brother, Harry had been informed that the Coronae Magister Magia had intended Harry receive the training even before the robbery attempt for the sole purpose of increasing his prospects of his survival outside of their custody and protection (a remarkably sentimental consideration compared to the standard life-oath of service to the Nation for which most galleonclaws were trained).

By contrast, although remarking on their satisfaction with his progress, President Ragn’rok and Defense Master Thornbrow had been reticent to agree to the proposal, believing that - regardless of his affinity to and acceptance of their ways - Harry’s humanity would undermine his training in the arts and his affinity to their nation. Only after Harry had successfully taken the unexpectedly pragmatic course of negotiating the allegiance of the shard that had been split off with Lily Potter’s murder and installing the soul shard into a sworn golem ally, were the President and the Defense Master prepared to concede that, unlike most of the humanity they dealt with, the presumptive Rig’anok could think and act beyond the emotionality that so often blinded muggles and wizards alike to unpleasant or distasteful realities.

As with all previous decisions made regarding his training and progression in Gringotts’ organization, the decision had been left to Harry. Barely hours after he had finally recovered the energy he’d used under the Gavra Master’s supervision, President Ragn’rok, Coronae Magister, Defense Masters Thorn Brow and Dagger-eye, Retention Master Morek, Healers Dimsflush and Curseseal (a particularly gruff healer who spent a full forty-five minutes criticizing Harry’s spartan diet) met with Harry laid out their concerns, cautions, and opinions before offering Harry the testing gloves that would assess his willingness to receive the training and determine his mental, physical, magical suitability and levels and adjust themselves accordingly. Even with the highest levels of
defense training and swearing their lives in service of the Nation, few among the Nation’s warriors were suited to the calling and fewer still chosen for it.

None knew for certain what qualities the gloves and weapons accompanying galleonclaw training tested for - only that, in the entire history of the Nation, no galleonclaw had ever betrayed their duty, led or participated in any uprising or rebellion of which there had been numerous in the Nation’s history, or otherwise acted without honor. For this reason, the oath and test were sacrosanct!

No fees were ever charged for consideration and testing. No considerations of background, race, age, or levels of previous training could restrict the applicant. No limits were placed on training on those whose testing-gloves transformed from the pale demiguise-zouwu blend into the sheer metallic chainmail claw or talon tipped gloves of future galleonclaws; and as importantly if not more importantly, there was no shame or penalty inflicted if the gloves merely transmuted to granian-grey linen gloves (worn to Grand Review feasts with modest pride and general respect for the oath and calling). Even as a human and one of Gringotts’ charges, Harry would face no derision for the attempt as there had been successful applicants both as young as he (and younger) and human, though none who fit both qualities.

Nevertheless, Harry suspected that even the Coronae Magister Magia was caught by surprise when the the demiguise-zouwu challis began to separate, unwinding into individual glowing threads which stretched to gossamer fine strands of Silver Yttrium.

Mithral’s daughter, prized by the goblin race second only to omani ore, yttrium could only be drawn from the mines that once bore the ancient metal, mithral; smelted only in phoenix flame; and forged only in dragons’ flame. To date, no known alchemist - goblin, elf, or human - had yet successfully transmuted the unaging and untarnishable metal.

Magic, it seemed, held no concern for this triviality though; for as they watched, unwinding challis-strands of demiguise and zouwu furs lost the baser organics as they stretched to almost insubstantial fineness before she replaced the discarded elements with fluid strands of magical energy, re-spinning them into molten - unburning- threads of yttrium… threads glowing beyond the lackluster sheen of silver’s brightest purities… threads, which briefly spiraled out in short strands from the tips of his fingers, like the bristles of a tube cleaner, raising short gleaming cones that stood out from his fingertips, before spinning downwards in constantly reversing spirals that continuously stretched the glowing strands as they re-wove to sheathing his fingers and palms, and wrists in the stylized demi-gaunts that marked them as galleonclaw gloves.

As remarkable as yttrium gloves were, the crafting strands were not content to leave them unadorned, and as they reached the outer seam of the demi-gaunts and reversed their course up the back of his hands to split then spin together in thick strands that took on the appearance of solid silver skeletal bones, knuckles, and joints extending to the tips of his fingers before wrapping and pinching the the cones at the tips of his fingers into longer slightly curled, dagger-sharp talons. With a final flare of magic so intense it was visible, the yttrium strands melded giving the bones and talons solidity. The testing gloves were visibly finished in their task, and if possible, the gloves of the newly accepted galleonclaw seemed to glow almost smugly in response to the air of astonishment it had evoked in the boy’s superiors.

Whatever thoughts the President, defense masters, healers, and Coronae Magister may
have had regarding the test’s outcome seemed insufficiently developed to profit speaking of it as, by silent agreement, they moved directly into planning how galleonclaw training would need to be integrated into Harry’s current training regime and duties with the greatest discretion possible.

While custom held that a galleonclaw entering training was to be publicly acknowledged to the Nation and to the banks employees so that proper deference could be shown even to novice ranks, due to the propensity of humans and were to gossip outside of the bank’s confines and the exigencies of insuring the highest safeguards to Harry’s safety outside of the bank’s dominion, all agreed that the information would be shared only to Griphook, relevant Senior Managers (whose ranks Griphook seemed soon to join), the London Branch’s Masters and Senior Auditors, and Gringotts’ Presidents… and -though with less accord- Rishard.

To both defense master’s great displeasure, it had been decided that Harry’s physical training would be delayed until approved by Healer Curseseal, who would be henceforth overseeing Harry’s physical development and required significant increases in Harry’s healthy but average muscle mass and nutritional reserves before she would permit him to participate in the rigorous training regime. While Harry’s status as a galleonclaw would have otherwise prevented any such limitation, Healer CurseSeal, against Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow and Defense Master Dagger-eye’s strong objections, overrode the customary waiver - arguing that while Gringotts had seen other human galleonclaws over the course of centuries, none of these had taken the test, much less begun the intensive training regime before attaining their physical and magical majorities meaning that there was no precedent on which to predict or anticipate difficulties in Harry’s physical and magical development and that any perception of neglect, harm, or abuse would impede if not outright sabotage the Heir Retrieval and Retention program as well as the Nation’s status and treaties to various magical communities. Excluding the physical training left the defense masters with light weapons training; concealment and concealed attack methods and magics; defense, security, and intelligence strategies; and galleonclaw protocols, culture, and history… In other words, more than enough for Harry to be getting on with, despite the defense masters’ disappointment in having to delay what they viewed as the ‘meat’ of his training.

As it happened, Harry had been left little time for even that training between pre-planning to call the House of Lords and his duties as a junior retention manager, but in that short amount of time before he and the other heirs traveled to Hogwarts, Harry had managed to master the first lesson of galleonclaws: re-activating and (in private) recalling the gloves to the surface that Defense Masters’ GalleonClaw Thornbrow had cast an ‘absorption’ spell over to impel the substance of the gloves to permeate the flesh and pores of Harry’s hands moving through muscle, tissue, and bone into the channels through which his magical core flowed - integrating and becoming a permanent aspect of his magic.

It was this act that Harry focused on as he followed Master Thornbrow through the London Branch’s public entrance into the bank proper and then into the hall housing Gringotts’ internal-only floo system. While he had grown slightly faster with practice, it still took Harry nearly eight breaths to pinpoint the distinct aspect of his core that composed his galleonclaw gloves and redirect the barely familiar energy to reform into the ephemeral - yttrium chainmail gloves and half-gauntlets that now marked his status. As the gloves reformed, Harry was startled but pleased to see that - in lieu of his lordship rings - the house emblems of the Lordships that he had taken up just before traveling to Hogwarts, now filled the shallows between the sculpted bones with yttrium filigreed depictions of the hatching, mantles, and crests of the Peverell, Potter, and Black Houses.
Nodding his approval at the change, Master Thornbrow pulled from his pocket a thin acromantula silk pouch, which glimmered blue with the sheen of the distinctive floo powder mixture it held. Given to the select managers and bank officials who were permitted to travel below the levels accessible by cart, the lapus powder released a tangy breath of bezzleroot sap and blood as he cast the powder into one of the multi-person floos. As the customary green floo fire extinguished before relighting the floo with a brilliant flash of sapphire flames, he caught Harry’s elbow in a careful grip and used it to direct the surprised stripling into the floo.

One of the many protections of Gringotts inter-floo network was that to reach certain levels of the Nation’s settlements which extended below each branch - including the council rooms on the one hundredth eleventh level of Gringotts’ London Branch, the select goblins whose blood had been added to the level-specific floo powders and wards were required be physically in charge of any passengers being escorted, so that if any manager with increased level permissions were taken hostage or incapacitated their body could not be used to access protected levels. Such control was and could be as simple as holding an elbow, shoulder, or leg of the passenger, if the manager registered as conscious, uninjured, and free of coercion or imperious.

Unsurprisingly, the Riga’nok followed his silent directive, as unquestioning as any goblin stripling. Despite the clear disconnect that Thornbrow’s action presented in contrast to the protocol that he had been instructing the stripling in only moments after the striplings yttrium galleonclaw gloves sunk back into his skin, the Riga’nok allowed no glimmer of surprise nor disquiet at the Defense Master breaking his own strictures by not only holding encumbering his own hands by gripping the Riga’nok’s elbow, but in doing so, also caused the Riga’nok to break the very strictures he had so recently been instructed in by permitting himself to be not only touched but directed or impeded in his passages - sentinel strictures that galleonclaws were not to break, lest it hampered their ability to respond to any active or impending threat.

It did not profit questioning why the Rig’anok, who so rigorously adhered to his manager's instructions, failed to question this lapse; even without the security instruction, which would have informed the stripling what Thornbrow was about, there could be no question that it was unprecedented for a junior manager - human, were, or otherwise- to be called to a public review, much less a Grand Review… even in terms of investments made in their management. The stripling, though human, had spent more than enough time in Gringott’s care to recognize this fact as well as the opportunity it presented - if properly managed - to drawing the attentions of potential investors from the Nation’s upper echelons.

By the same token, he opportunity - though unprecedented - held more cutting edges and weights than iron burrs not only for the boy, but for President Ragn’rok, his brother and Thornbrow’s father, the Corone Magister Magia, and Defense Master GalleonClaw Thornbrow, himself. Despite his youth, inexperience, and the sheer audacity of Auditor Car’skel daring to call the stripling to a High Auditor’s review, the Rig’a nok could neither refuse to appear nor fail in his performance -- without compromising President Ragn’rok’s investments in him and undermining his potential path.

In spite this, Thornbrow was heavily constrained by the tenants and customs controlling Grand Review. Of the greatest qualities tested under Grand Review was the notable's abilities to stand on his own merit and the strength of his assets and investments. Even impressive answers parroted from a superior's instructions would not withstand review; with this in mind, Thornbrow cautioned, “hold to mind the strictures you are learning… and the inescapable rules, of course. Your actions and answers must be framed in their reference. If you are perceived as unthinking or intemperate, no amount of merit or percentage of return will recover the review.”
“Yes, Defense Master.” The Stripling acknowledged quietly, showing his deference in tone rather than delaying their progress by pausing and turning to make the polite gesture.

“By custom, as galleonclaw, your rank nearly equals all but the high auditor-bar deference accorded to assembled due age and service - not rank. Anticipate that some if not many will dislike this and seek to challenge you further for the sake of it.”

“Yes, Defense Master.”

Judging their position in the corridor and the length they had yet to walk, Thornbrow decided there was sufficient time for one last tactic and snapped out, “strictures.”

“The Inalterable Strictures,” began the stripling, reciting with quiet confidence, “by which all galleonclaws must abide are that…”

‘No galleonclaw may pursue enemity nor deliver vengeance or offense on behalf of self, clan, branch, or division.’

‘No galleonclaw may set the interests of self, clan, leader, or branch, above that of the Nation’

‘No galleonclaw will shirk from the unending duties of mastering mind, body, weapon, and skills in service to the Nation.

‘No galleonclaw will wallow in arrogance but will - with humility - master their weaknesses as they do their weapons, skills, and knowledge.’

‘No galleonclaw will allow its actions, conscience, or path to be tainted, but with eternal vigilance will stay incorruptible, unclouded, and resolute.’

‘No galleonclaw may strike from malice, deceit, greed, or anger.’

‘No galleonclaw shall dishonor its weapon by the shedding innocent blood; any who should knowingly do so, shed also their honor, claws, rank, clan, and Nation.’

‘No galleonclaw may cast the first strike, nor shrink from the last.’

As the recitation reached its end, Thornbrow clicked his teeth in sharp approval, before commenting, “In the morning, you are to submit a written summary of the seven memory vials that you will be provided with after this meeting,” expressing, without stating directly both his expectation and confidence that the Riga’ nok would perform satisfactorily during the review and their training would continue without interference.

In that vein, he continued, “Each is a preserved copy from the first of our ranks and may not be shared with any of your contingent. Summarize each immediately after you have viewed the memory and do not return the memory from the pensieve lenses to the vial until after you are certain that your summary is complete.” He cautioned, before explaining: “To insure the preservation of these memories, conservation charms on the essences will only permit you to dispense them directly into the pensieve lenses and return them directly from the lenses. The returned of an essence to its respective vial will activate a restocking charm which will ward and soft port the copy back to origin point in our allotted research vaults.”

“Yes, Defense Master.” The stripling replied, a modest appreciative smile slightly curling his lips as they reached the already opening doors.

“Go then,” Thornbrow ordered jerking his head toward the assembly just beginning to become
visible through though the open doors. With a nod of acknowledgement and a quick gesture of thanks, the heir straightened his stance and turned his gaze forward.

“Ter (‘oh’), and speak only in the Nation’s tongue,” Thornbrow continued as if it was only an afterthought, switching to gobbledegook, himself, “your fluency will catch them off guard.”

“Yes, Defense Master Thornbrow,” his apprentice replied in accentless gobbledegook as he stepped in to the dome.

-Deciding it was too late to take another deep or long breath without giving away his nervousness, Harry forced a short half breath out so that the next breath he took as he visibly crossed into the expansive dome would appear as natural and smoothly taken as possible.

Thankfully, the Coronae Magister had thought to discuss the protocols of Annual Reviews and Grand Reviews during his lessons on political studies, so even though it was a bit difficult for Harry to translate his memory of the the Magister’s sketch into a precise layout of the expansive dome, the introduction had been sufficient to inform Harry of the greetings he was to offer, where he was to stand, and the questions he might be asked. How much of an exception the review of President Ragn’rok’s investments in him would be, from the standards the Magister had explained, he had no means to speculate, but felt confident that he would be able to answer any of the standard questions the magister had mentioned.

Though unaware of the fact, Harry moved with more poise and confidence as the familiar aura and magic of Gringotts, the feel of which he was already beginning to miss at Hogwarts, permeated the air around him; the fragrance of incense and grain ash, gathered from each years reviews and transmuted into the next years inks - familiar to him from writing his charges reports, maintaining his accounts, and couriering documents between departments - soothing nerves and tensions he’d had little awareness of from his frame.

-Seeming incensed by his calm, an elderly auditor stalked forward, as much as one could do so with a limp, snarling - in heavily accented English, “Off your knees. Trivializing the respect owed by you humans with a mimicry of obeisance will not be tolerated so do not think to buy your way out of review with such false tokens.”

Offering a silent gesture of denial, Harry nevertheless followed the auditor’s order and stood, even as he refuted the elder’s charge - in gobbledygook (that the Coronae Magister had once told him was almost accentless, lacking only the guttural qualities that young human throats could not produce):

“While I cannot - individually - repay the debt of respect owed to the Nation by my race, from my thirtieth day in Gringotts’ care, and the first day of Gringotts’ uncontested guardianship, I have studiously sought to avoid it’s increase by my actions - following the customs I have learned and observed under this tutelage - excepting only instances of public display that managers have deemed challenging to ‘wizarding sensibilities’. “ Harry finished before adopting the pose of ‘galleonclaw - standing in deference’ that he had been instructed in only seven days earlier. (As a galleonclaw novice, outside of ‘formal Annual Reviews’, Harry was now forbade from kneeling in any circumstance (except select physical training exercises) as the position interfered with his ability to take immediate action if needed.)

He had no idea whether the vibrating silence that had fallen across the dome as he spoke was in response to the fluency of his gobbledegook, the meat of his answer, or the audacity of a youth not simply accepting the chastisement of an elder - much less an auditor, but despite the slow rise of murmurs that followed and the distinctly human-sounding snap of fingers that woke and drew a
following of almost reluctant-sounding clicks of approval, Harry did not turn to look for signs of approval or rejection from the assembled leaders - though he was certain the Coronae Magister would be calling him out for not doing so when next they spoke.

Instead, his gaze was fixed on the elder auditor’s - having noticed as he spoke a shift in the elder’s intent toward him. Where there had been mere disinterest and mild dislike in the elder’s calculated gaze as he had charged Harry with arrogance, as Harry refuted the claim - the antipathy visibly turned from disdain to active ire and hostility. Looking into that gaze, Harry did not need his gruff defense master’s warning to know that the elder was among the few or many who would not easily accept Harry’s integration into the affairs and concerns of the Nation, much less the power it would afford him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, so closes the final chapter of Gringott’s Lesser Known Branch. Thank you all for your continued reading and encouragement. It has been both appreciated and motivating.

I realize this may be a cruel place to leave off, but after several drafts of the Harry’s performance during the Review, I felt that they all came off as a little bit too ‘All Knowing, Super-power Harry’, which is definitely not the air or impression I wish to leave of him.

Yes, he will be more politically savvy than the average eleven year old BECAUSE he will have the Coronae Magister and Rishard teaching him how to be so.

Yes, he will be an advanced student at Hogwarts BECAUSE the Gringotts' educational system equates to highly-motivated, individualized tutoring. Most if not all students, I believe, would succeed or at least be much further along than students without such opportunities.

Yes, he is in training to be essentially a hit-wizard, in preparation for a future where he will have to face a seriously more experienced dark wizard and have a chance for survival. Given that Rishard's been removed, the canon-option of Voldemort's killing curse killing the horcrux instead of Harry is no longer viable. (On a side note, as a potential Master of Death, it seemed only fitting that Harry should be at least conversant, if not capable of, dealing in and with death.)

On another side note, since the time I first posted my mentions of possible sequels "Severus Snape-Prince and the Philosopher's Stone" has definitely come to the forefront and will be the first sequel to Gringott's Lesser Known Branch, detailing the events of Harry's first year from Severus's perspective... or mostly so, in the same manner that GLKB focuses mostly on Harry's perspective of Gringotts.

If you'd like to see more about Harry's performance during the review, I will be including little glimpses here and there through this upcoming sequel- hopefully in a manner that will seem less 'all-knowing' as they are placed in the context of his training, which will be seen more or less through Severus' eyes, as well as his involvement in that training.

Thank you again.
Sequel Alert

Chapter Summary

Just a small note to let everyone know....

With many thanks for your encouragement and continued reading, I am happy to note that the first sequel to Gringott's Lesser Known Branch is now complete and posted at Severus Snape-Prince and the Philosopher's Stone.

Thank you again for the time you've taken to read and encourage my once seemingly-never-ending fic. On a small side note, as it's currently plotted, Severus Snape-Prince and the Philosopher's Stone is anticipated to wrap up in ten chapters, so I'm quite hopeful that I'll be able to post it at a much smoother rate than it took to post Gringott's Lesser Known Branch.

Best wishes and my love to you all,
Brennah_k

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