Summary

Point of deviation: Harry's primary school taught Home Economics. Harry's not going to let the wonders of magic take away his common sense, and if he can get a good deal, he's going to take it. Meanwhile, money is fun, but magic is funner.

Notes

General disclaimer: This will apply for any future chapters I might add as well.

If you recognize something, it's not mine; if you DON'T recognize something, it's probably still not mine. Any writing of mine will be a patchwork of things I think are cool ideas from other people's stories, sewn together by the threads of my personal writing style. That being said, shout-out to xXxLuckyxXx whose story, Servitude to the Dark: The Hand that Guides Me, I heavily borrowed from for the last scene of this chapter.
When the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out immediately and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling. Griphook unlocked the door. Green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins; columns of silver; heaps of little bronze Knuts.

Harry Potter liked to think of himself as a smart, capable young man — the fact that he was on the cusp on adolescence did not detract from his reckoning. Since his first lesson in primary school about life skills and money management, he took to carry pen and paper with him so he could more readily organize his goals and calculate outcomes, monetary or situational. Later on, after he had his ear harshly twisted for musing the likelihood of Dudley having a heart attack if he kept gaining weight at the rate he was, Harry also took to carry a lighter on him for the swift and unrecoverable disposal of any writings that could get him in trouble.

He was always planning what he'd do when he was old enough to not need guardians; how he'd work hard enough to earn himself a scholarship to a decent university; how he'd get a degree in Business and get a lucrative job; how he'd budget his future income and live comfortably. Never had he thought a comfortable lifestyle would come pounding at his door so early in the game and tell him it had only been hiding.

The pile of treasure in front of him made his fingers twitch toward his over-sized pocket. His mind boggled itself with exclamations and questions elbowing each other out of the way to the forefront of his mind. He was rich! How much was it in total? What was the exchange rate? It was almost scraping the ceiling! Was it real silver and gold? How could there be so much? If he wanted to, how long could he live on it?

"All yours," smiled Hagrid.

All Harry's — it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn't have known about this or they'd have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag. Two Hagrid-sized handfuls of the gold coins and half a dozen Harry-sized fistfuls of the silver ones and the Knuts had the towering man nodding.

"The gold ones are Galleons," he explained. "Seventeen silver Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it's easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o' terms, we'll keep the rest safe for yeh."

Harry sucked on his left cheek and gave the pile of money a speculative glance. The amount he had put in the bag was like shaking a heavy piggy bank and having one or two loose pence fall out; it was looking like the money would last him a goodly amount of time. He could swim in it, but until he knew the exact amount, he didn't want to go on a spending binge. He thought back to what he could remember or the supply list. There was a uniform and several books and those generally cost a lot; a cauldron had been mentioned and that was likely not cheap.

"Maybe some more for new clothes and extra books that look interesting too? I wouldn't want to waste time coming all the way back if it isn't enough."
"Good idea. Wouldn’ want to endure tha’ ride again," Hagrid agreed with a shudder.

Harry threw in a few more handfuls before pausing and giving the bag a speculative pat.

He said in a bewildered tone, "This bag isn't getting any thicker or heavier!"

"'Reckon those bags have feather-light and bottomless charms on 'em," Hagrid explained. "It's not everyday a body goes to his vault and yeh can't exactly go draggin' a potato sack o' coins with yeh ev'rywhere — 'tain't practical."

Harry nodded in understanding as they exited the vault.

Hagrid regained his ill look as he turned to Griphook.

"Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?"

"One speed only," said Griphook, not even attempting to appear contrite.

One wild cart ride, a mysterious vault, and a hopeless attempt from Hagrid to be subtle later, they were teetering toward the front doors again. Before they got too far from their escort, Harry was struck with a thought and doubled back.

"Excuse me, Mr. Griphook," the little boy said, recapturing the attention of the goblin. "Is there a way to get a written accounting of my vault?"

Griphook blinked at him, as if seeing him for the first time.

"You would have to speak with your account manager for that. If you'll wait a moment, I'll check for the soonest he's available." He then directed the waiting pair toward available chairs off to the side before making his way through an innocuous door. Not five minutes later, Griphook returned with what looked like a pendant in his fist. "Grimbak will be available at four fifteen today. This portkey will bring you to the departure and arrival chamber at four ten where you will be escorted to his office. Do not take off this pendant until your appointment time."

Harry accepted the pendant and wasted no time putting on and tucking it into his shirt.

"What do yeh need to see yeh account manager fer?" Hagrid asked, looking a bit confused. They stood from their seats and bid the goblin farewell once again.

"I'd like to know exactly have much I have so I can budget properly," Harry explained as they blinked in the sunlight outside Gringotts. "It looks like an awful lot but I don't know how much things generally cost here or how much I'll need to pay for school tuition. I'd like to be fully informed."

Hagrid grunted his understanding before leading them down the steps again.

Harry didn't know where to run next now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life — more money than even Dudley had ever had. Maybe it could sustain him until he was old enough to get a job and he might not have to go back to the Dursleys!
Hagrid had escorted him first to a luggage store where Harry had talked the giant man into letting him get a re-sizable trunk instead of a standard one — further wheedling had won him a password-activated lock as well. From that point on, it was Harry having his run of the shops; getting discounts on his books for buying the complete set of Standard Book of Spells and other book series, a bottomless school satchel thrown in as a bonus; shaving off Sickles from his potion ingredients by purchasing them separately instead of getting the pre-prepared kit; haggling for all he could squeeze at a second-hand shop for gently used scales, phials, a telescope, and a cauldron.

When there were only the uniform and wand left to buy, Hagrid was looking a bit taxed.

"Right then, next is yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I 'aven't been feelin' like myself since the cart ride."

He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling giddy but satisfied.

The robe shop housed rows upon rows of various clothing, many of which Harry wouldn't have been surprised seeing at a Halloween costume party — it seemed the Muggles got at least one thing right. He ambled his way over to a rack of button up shirts that looked like they came out of the Regency or Victorian era and looked for his size. Harry decided to himself that the styles really did look rather nice and if it wasn't for the trailing sleeves and complete lack of synthetic fabrics or modern cuts, it was like any other clothing store in the world.

"Can I help you?" asked a blonde store clerk while Harry was peering about with his arms full of button-ups and various trousers, looking for a uniform section. She smile good-naturedly when he started and whirled.

Harry shifted his load and grinned sheepishly.

"I'm here for school clothes."

"Standard black robes and pointed hat, right?" She took the clothes from him and draped them over the front counter.

Harry checked his list and nodded.

"Right. They're over here," she said, guiding him over to a rack closer to the back of the store. She gave the scruffy clothes he was wearing a calculating look. "Maybe a set with some room to grow so you won't have to worry about them getting too short by the end of the year. Do you know your size?"

"No, I've always worn my cousin's hand-me-downs 'til now and they've never really fit."

"Hmm, well, we'll just throw them on top of what you have on and see how they look," she declared, reaching for a robe directly in front of her.

Pulling the garment over his head and letting it fall to him ankles, Harry couldn't help but think it felt like he was wearing a cross between a monk's cowl and bath-robe. He kept this thought to himself as the salesgirl circled around him with a considering look.

"It looks okay . . ." she said slowly. "I'll probably look better later when you don't have that bulky shirt on underneath." She nodded decisively and turned back to the clothing rack. "You need three, right?"
"That's right."

She hummed and made for the hat display next to the rack. She looked at him from over her shoulder and asked, "What school did you say you were going to?"

"Hogwarts," Harry replied absently, his attention being drawn away by the sound of loud talking further back in the store.

This reply made the salesgirl pause and caused her eyes to widen.

"Hogwarts did you say?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, dear me! A little prince! Merlin, I should have asked straight off! It was just— Well, never mind that! Hogwarts has a separate uniform on top of the standard school robes. Let's get you out of those and have you fitted," she babbled, pulling the black robes back over Harry's head and leading him to a footstool farther in the back, where there were two other boys already being fitted.

As his store clerk began measuring him, Harry discreetly glanced over the other two boys. One was a pointy faced blond that looked about Harry's age — he appeared to be the younger of the two and had a magnificent sneer on his face, directed at his companion. The other boy had dark brown hair and a snub nose — he looked about his mid teens and had affected a bored look the moment Harry had entered his sight.

Harry gave them a nod in acknowledgment but otherwise ignored them.

The blond boy was in the middle of a vehement tirade.

"Listen here, Pucey! I'll not let you—"

"Enough of this. I couldn't care less about how you plan to join the Quidditch team next year. I really don't understand why you insist on telling me about it. I'm hardly captain of the team, now am I?"

Harry made eye contact with his store clerk as the blond puffed up with indignation. She gave him a small smirk in understanding and measured more quickly. The other seamstresses attending to the two arguing boys looked rather uneasy that there was an argument going on above their heads.

The blond boy looked ready to stomp his foot in frustration. He turned his nose up at the other boy and very obviously turned away from him, dismissing him haughtily. His eyes landed on Harry and he straightened.

"Hello," he said, making Harry shift awkwardly at the not so welcomed attention. "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry, his eyes flickering over to the older, dark haired boy who seemed amused that the blond was trying to ignore him now.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the chatty one. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.
"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be and why this boy seemed so enthralled with it that he was bothering another person about it when his first conversational partner seemed to find it tedious.

"I do — Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my House, and I must say, I agree. Know what House you'll be in yet?"

"No . . ." said Harry slowly. Couldn't he tell Harry was not at all interested?

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they? But I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been — imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

"Mmm," Harry replied, wishing the prat would take a hint. Harry glanced over that the older boy again, giving him a discreet beseeching look. He only looked more amused and gave Harry a cheery wink.

"I say, look at that man!" said the blond suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing at two large ice creams to show he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to have something worthwhile to say instead of feeling uncomfortable. "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of savage — lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"Where did you hear that?" Harry asked, incredulous. "Hagrid's brilliant — he's shown me around the Alley all day and has really nice about it."

"Really?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly.

This made the boy stop short of his answering retort, chagrined. He tried to maintain his superior countenance but his contrition was apparent.

"Sorry," he said awkwardly, looking away. He cast about for a new topic of conversation before suddenly blurring, "They were our kind, weren't they?"

"Our kind?" Harry echoed incredulously. What did that even mean? Was this boy racist on top of being insufferable? Harry was starting to get really irritated. "They were both English, and had white skin, if that's what you meant — if you meant religion, I wouldn't know since they died when I was a baby. In any case, I don't think any of that matters as long as they were decent people who never tried to hurt anyone else."
"Don't be silly," the annoyance said impatiently. "That's not what I meant at all."

"What else could you have meant?" Harry shot back, letting his eyebrows furrow a bit in irritation.

"Of course, I meant—"

"Give it a rest, Malfoy!" The older boy — Pucey — cut in with exasperation. "You just don't know when to stop, do you?"

The newly dubbed Malfoy turned up his nose once more.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Alright, young master," Harry's store clerk cut in, returning from where she had gone to prepare uniforms in Harry's size. The other seamstresses gave almost audible sighs of relief from where they were still pinning the robes, trying their best to be invisible. "That's you done. Will you follow me to the front so I can ring up your purchases?"

Harry conceded, hopping down from the stool, not at all sorry for having an excuse to stop talking to the other boy. He grasped at his last thread of civility and nodded stiffly at the other boys.

"I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose."

Harry sucked in a shuddering breath and leaned back in the unyielding, high-back chair. He was seated in the office of Grimbak, his clever-faced account manager, going over far more than just his trust account like he had been expecting. He stared uncomprehendingly at the portfolio of parchment listing his vaults, properties, stock-holdings, and entitlements from various accounts before snatching the file up and flipping through the pages once more.

"This can't be real," Harry mumbled under his breath. He could accept having Potter vaults — though vaults, as in plural, was already more than he was expecting — he could even see himself with his mother's personal vault, but how was he connected to this Black family, and what in the world was a collections account?

He shuffled back to the cover page and slowly re-read the summary of his holdings.

**Harry James Potter**

- **Evans - Heir by Blood**

**Vaults:** #529 (14,437 Galleons)

- **Potter - Heir by Blood**

**Vaults:** #132 (58,032,268 Galleons, 13 Sickles, 23 Knuts and assorted items)/ #686 (-80,063 Galleons)/ #687 (45,100 Galleons, 9 Sickles, 14 Knuts)

**Investments:** 42% Daily Prophet stocks/ 25% Magical Menagerie stocks/ 38% Nautilus’ Newts stocks

**Entitlements:** Wizengamot Seat, 14 votes/ Earldom of Hautmont
- Black - Heir by Name and Magic
- Riddle - Heir by Magic
- Collections Account

**Vaults:** #782, #985, #639 (Total 96,284 Galleons and assorted items)

It still made no sense.

Seeing Harry's befuddled look, Grimbak took the liberty to explain.

"Starting with the basics," he began, "there are three ways to inherit accounts. The first is by blood, which means through the family." — here he pointed a clawed finger to Evans and traced down to Potter — "You are the only child of the late Lily Potter whose maiden name was Evans and you are a Potter by birthright.

"The second way is if you are formally named as an heir, which is what happened with the Black Estate and the Collections account."

Harry blinked slowly in thought then nodded in understanding. His brow creased mildly.

"And what about magic? It has that here, next to Black and Riddle."

"Yes, that's rather curious," Grimbak replied, tapping a claw against his cheek thoughtfully. "The most recent of the Potter family were known to have ties to the Blacks — I believe your grandmother was born a Black. That you are named heir implies that whoever is before you in the line of succession was either childless at the time and still is, or has decided to not have children at all. A magical heir is created when an adult shares his magic with a child whose core is still developing — that you are the Black heir by name and magic implies that whoever is before you in the line of succession was close enough with your parents that they were allowed to perform an adoption ritual on you. Perhaps a godparent."

A godparent? Harry stiffened at the thought. He wasn't sure exactly what a godparent was supposed to do but wasn't that someone who was supposed to take care of him if his parents couldn't? If he had a godparent, did that mean he didn't have to have his relatives as his guardians?

Harry asked this out loud.

Grimbak shuffled through a separate stack of parchment and pulled out a faded looking sheet.

"It says here that your godfather, Sirius Black, is currently incarcerated in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?"

"A wizard's prison, Mr. Potter."

Harry internally deflated. That was just his luck. It was almost ironic. The Dursley's were forever going on about how Harry's parents were drunken wastrels — even though he now knew it wasn't true, he felt as if he should have known that the person his parents chose to take care of him was in jail.
"What did he...? Never mind, I don't want to know." Harry straightened and leaned over the parchment once more. He tapped at the edge. "And this Riddle person?"

The goblin flipped through the pages again, then shook his head.

"No previous business carried out with that name, nor does it sound familiar. I don't believe I've ever heard it in context with the Potters. I would have assumed it to be another godparent but your godmother is listed as Alice Longbottom. She is, unfortunately," Grimbak continued, anticipating Harry's question, "currently in the care of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, in the Janus Thickey Ward for patients with minds declared irreparably affected."

Harry huffed a near silent sigh. Good thing he didn't really expect much anyway. He waved his hand vaguely, signalling that he wanted to move on.

"The next thing you should notice are the inheritable assets, the properties and investments. At the moment, you only have access to the Evans and Potter properties since you are the last living descendant. The other properties are off limits to you until the current Head either gives you access or dies. This is why their holdings are not listed."

Harry nodded in understanding. He decided not to worry over the off limits accounts since he seemed to be decently well-off enough with what was already available to him.

"Entitlements," Grimbak carried on, "are the privileges granted by the Crown to the Noble Families—"

"Wait," Harry cut in, incredulity creeping into his voice. "'By the Crown'? 'Noble Families'? You're making it sound like my parents were part of the aristocracy or something!"

"That's exactly what I mean, Mr. Potter — you would not have entitlements otherwise. Wizarding Britain does not currently have an actual royal family but those of title and land before the enforcement of the International Statute of Secrecy retained their status, since it was through their collective power that the British Ministry of Magic was originally formed."

He peered over the top of his spectacles at the astounded young wizard before him.

"If I may move on?"

Harry nodded mutely.

"As I was saying, Entitlements are privileges, such as voting rights, granted to the Head of House. It's not a common occurrence, but since you are the last of your line you are automatically the Head of your Family. However, you are not obligated to attend to your civic duties of participating in the Wizengamot until you formally claim your lordship, and by Potter Family Law, you are not able to do that until your sixteenth birthday.

"I do, however, recommend seeing to your land as soon as possible. Towns and villages are generally self-sufficient in this day and age, but the county of Hautmont does not have a steward on record and it has been over ten years since the Potter family has sent anyone to see to it's people. They tend pay their taxes more willingly when their leaders show active interest in them."

Questions buzzed through Harry's mind, all of equalling precedence that he wasn't sure what to ask first. Girding himself up, he latched onto the question that's been the back of his mind since the beginning of the meeting.

"Why are there three Potter vaults? The last one is the one I was taken to earlier, and I supposed
one of them is the Family vault, but why is there another?"

"Yes, the vault system can become complicated," Grimbak answered. "The first vault is as you said, the Family vault. The first vault listed on any account will always be the Family vault in cases like this. The following vaults are usually Trust and Retainer vaults listed in order of creation. In this case, your Family vault is followed immediately by your father's Retainer vault. When a minor turns fifteen the status of his vault goes from Trust to Retainer. In the case of a minor becoming a Lord, the Retainer vault will be absorbed into the main vault. The Lord — in this case, you — will then have full control of all the holdings."

"So #686 was my dad's Retainer vault. Why wasn't it absorbed into the Family vault when he was Lord Potter?"

"That is thanks to your grandfather," Grimbak murmured, a bit of fang showing. He shuffled the papers once more. "Charlus Potter was a financial genius, a trait that unfortunately was not shared with his son. Because of his lack of money-sense and... immaturity, your father was regulated to an account completely separate from the rest of the family. Any earnings or debts on the account was to be solely on James. He was later formally skipped over in the line of succession when your grandfather named you his heir when you were conceived."

"Isn't that a bit... drastic?"

"It may certainly seem so but it was a good thing Charlus had the foresight to nip it in the bud, as they say. Especially once your father graduated. Under the misguidance of... shall we say, over-zealous leadership," — here he snarled — "the late Mr. Potter donated his entire, and not insignificant, wealth to fight in the war. It's unkind to speak ill of the dead, especially when I've heard such good things about him, but by the year of his death, he had amounted a debt of nearly one hundred thousand Galleons, as you can see here by the minus symbol before the amount. Only through his sense of honour was your mother's account not given up as well. That, and I suppose her adamant command when they went into hiding that anything left in her vault be placed aside for you. Nothing I said changed you father's mind when he gave away that money."

A puddle of cold pooled in his gut. Harry wasn't certain how to feel. On the one hand, he desperately wanted to think well of his father, especially after learning how highly Hagrid thought of him; he had concrete reason to believe his parents were far better than the lies he had been fed. On the other hand, why hadn't his father been more concerned over how Harry would live if they died? He was shocked at how foolish his father now sounded and felt grateful to his grandfather — the way things were going, it sounded like Harry wouldn't have anything to inherit if things had been up to his father.

A coil of guilt squeezed at the coldness inside him. Wasn't that a callous way to think? Were the riches in front of him already making him greedy? That money had been used in the hopes that Harry himself wouldn't have to live through war. Sure, it was a large amount, and it certainly sounded thoughtless, but it had gone with good intentions. There were so many other options Harry could think of off the top of his head that his parents could have done — including just leaving England altogether, especially when his mother was found pregnant — but the gist of it was, they had been fighting for him. He wouldn't have done the same but he should appreciate that they were willing to spend so much on his behalf.

Since when did he start thinking that millions of pounds and four different properties — completely ignoring the other accounts — were not enough? Harry then vowed to himself that he would always remember the difference between frugality and stinginess.

Easing away from the awkward topic, Harry said, "I want to pay off the debt. Is that possible,
"There's no need," Grimbak assured him. "That debt has been filed as not collectable. Since it was a personal account, and the fact that your grandfather ensured that any debt of your father had no connection to the Potter family, the debt essentially died with him. #686 is just an empty vault that hasn't been cleared for new use yet."

That he was in debt means that he used money that wasn't his. That money had to come from somewhere — someone — and I don't like the idea of anyone being out almost a hundred thousand Galleons just because the person that owes it is out of the picture. I want to pay it if only for my own peace of mind."

"Very well." Grimbak sounded hesitant as if he was not sure what to make of Harry. He finally decided on respect. Clearly the son was not of the same mindset as the father. "I will file the transaction after this meeting and it will be taken from the Family vault."

"Great," Harry said, allowing a ghost of a smile. "Now, what is a Collections account? That doesn't sound like something that everyone has."

This earned him fangs bared in amusement.

"Gringotts opens a special account for those that receive a significant amount of donations. It's common practice for many organizations, especially those that rely on charity. St. Mungo's, for instance, has one and anyone who wants to donate money or entire vaults simply file for a transfer to the Collections account."

"So . . . Why do I have one?"

This caused Grimbak to look at him almost fondly. At least, Harry thought it was fondly, it might have been wonder at his ignorance.

"Are you familiar with your status as the Boy Who Lived, a highly celebrated hero?"

"Hagrid mentioned a bit about people being grateful to me since I didn't die when that evil wizard person tried to kill me."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. A veritable waterfall of gifts pours in from the gratitude. I believe that's where you got so many Wizengmot votes since I recall your grandfather having only nine. #782 has been regularly receiving attention on the thirty-first of July — your birthday I believe. Apparently, some were so thankful, they've signed over entire vaults to you. This is not accounting for the little gifts, of course. The ones sent directly to you. Things sent by owl do not get accounted for."

"I've never gotten owls on my birthday," Harry muttered in confusion. "I didn't even know I was a wizard until I got my Hogwarts' letter. You mean to tell me people have been sending me things for years?"

At the goblin's confirmation, Harry became distressed.

"All this time . . . they must think I'm horribly rude and spoiled! Is there a way I could get a list of the people who've sent me gifts? I want to thank them properly and explain that I didn't mean to ignore them!"

Grimbak looked unsettled and wary at the discovery.

"I can get you a list of the names of the formal transactions, if you'd like. I regret to say
anonymous gifting will be unrecoverable."

"At least that's something. Maybe I can put an ad in the newspaper to thank them and explain that I haven't gotten anything by owl for some strange reason."

"Perhaps you can also add that if they wish to send you things in the future, a transaction at Gringotts has proven to be effective."

"I'll do that." Harry shook his head. This would require further thought at a later date. He resolved to put away the mystery for now.

Harry then threw himself into the budgeting of his Trust vault. Grimbak informed him that the vault would be topped off at fifty thousands — the standard amount for minor of a Noble Family — at the end of every year until he turned came of age or claimed his lordship, whichever came first. Looking at the total before him, Harry was glad that he wouldn't have to be as economical with his money as he had secretly feared. He was, however concerned over the amount missing from the total; he was sure he hadn't stuffed that much into his pouch earlier.

Pulling out a solar powered calculator — that which had intrigued his account manager since such a thing was unheard of in the magical world — Harry added up the sums. He had spent sixty-six Galleons at the clothing store and one hundred fifty-seven on books and supplies. Add to that the two thousand, five hundred eighty Galleons for tuition and he should have forty-seven thousand, one hundred ninety-seven Galleons left. That mean he was missing two thousand ninety seven Galleons.

Harry paused in his confusion. He didn't spend everything he had in his bag — he was sure he still had a good amount left in there. Letting Grimbak work his magic, they were informed that the money pouch currently contained eight hundred ninety-seven Galleons. This left one thousand two hundred Galleons in places unknown.

Grimbak saw his distressed mien and flipped through the portfolio again, searching for what they could have missed.

"Ah, here it is."

Harry perked a bit at that.

"It says here that ten Galleons have been regularly converted into muggle money and transferred to the account of one Petunia Dursley each month to supplement your up-keep. The amount was decided on based on the income the Dursley family has each year. It was decided that the converted fifty pounds per month would be sufficient."

The Dursleys were getting paid to take care of him. Harry felt like crying, screaming, and throwing something, and not necessarily in that order. He literally didn't cost them any of their own money to keep. How many times had he been told that he cost them more money than they could afford and lived only because of their charity? Doing the math in his head, it was obvious that they received plenty and more than they needed to keep him fed and dressed. Yet he wore Dudley's cast-offs and was fed grudgingly. A glance at the cover page reminded him that he even owned the house they lived in.

Their lies were building up. This would not stand.

"Are any of the properties fit to live in?" Harry asked abruptly, a plan drawing itself up. He was not normally vindictive but he was willing to make an exception just this once.

"I believe Potter Manor and the vacation house in Italy have been kept habitable though the
vacation house is currently being rented."

"So I could, theoretically, move in any time I wanted?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter."

"Let's say I find myself in a situation where my relatives and I want nothing more to do with each other or they just suddenly die or something. Would I be assigned new guardians by whoever it is that's in charge of that sort of thing or would I be essentially on my own?"

Grimbak took in the young wizard before him. He found himself appreciating the level-headedness and cleverness being displayed. From what he'd been gleaning from their conversation so far, it appeared that he'd been kept ignorant and not well cared for. He knew the humans didn't like their young to be unattended, especially the ones still in childhood, but he couldn't help but think the one before him would be better off on his own. At the very least in comparison to what his current other option was.

"The Ministry," Grimbak began carefully. "Has a department dedicated to the care of wizarding children. I believe the muggle equivalent is known as Child Services. They don't like minors without adult supervision. However, we both know that if they are never informed, certain children slip through the cracks. I believe that if you are subtle when out in public or at school, you could easily take up residence at any of your properties with no one the wiser. That is, if your current guardians do not kick up a fuss if you don't return to their home."

Harry snorted.

"They're more likely to celebrate among themselves and not question it for fear of jinxing it."

"If that's so, I see no reason why you can't move into Potter Manor at once."

"Well, at least that's some good news." Harry leaned back in his chair and flexed his leg muscles under the desk. This entire meeting was far more that he had been expecting, both in good news and bad, though the good did outweigh the bad. "So what next?"

"Now we go to you Family vault to get your heir ring. That way you'll be free to travel through your properties unhindered. Though you're still only heir, you're also Head of House so you'll be able to dabble with the wards." Grimbak affect a nonchalant look. "Perhaps you could tighten security to keep away undesirable busy-bodies."

Harry grinned as they stood from their chairs and made for the door. A thought struck him as they passed the chamber his portkey had delivered him to.

"You mentioned earlier that my father donated all his money because of bad leadership. Who told him to give away all his money?"

Grimbak glanced at him as they climbed into the cart, as if sizing him up.

"Albus Dumbledore."
This chapter was originally a stand-alone I wrote on a whim when I was thinking about the cliches that usually get written when it comes to a penny-wise Harry Potter. I never understood why a Harry who cares about his finances is so often portrayed as money-grubbing. Trying to be fiscally responsible doesn't make you greedy and/or hateful towards other people! Nor does it make you some financial genius! Let a child be a child even when they're a clever child.
Harry Potter was cosily curled up and tucked away in the empty compartment he had chosen by
merit of being the farthest from the doors, meaning least likely to be disturbed by other passengers.
He congratulated himself on being rather clever to come early enough to have his pick of the
compartments and being imaginative enough to discover that the overhead storage area was actually
quite sturdy — suspiciously sturdy, really; it had to have been magically re-enforced — and spacious
enough to fit him easily thrice over width-wise and twice over length-wise; there was plenty of space
left over for anyone else’s carry-on. With his luggage sitting in front of him, blocking the edge, a
snuggly comforter around him, and a surprisingly comfortable pillow under his head, Harry felt as
content as a hedonistic cat.

He allowed himself the private amusement of purring softly and let his thoughts drift.

Quite honestly, he felt as if this was his first time to properly relax in weeks. His days had been
filled with things he never thought he'd have to deal with; a ridiculous amount of paperwork;
devouring his magical school books; negotiating with companies that had used his name without
permission (through proxy, of course; he had no experience on how to handle himself with fast-
talkers); re-reading his school books; interrogating the talking portraits of his ancestors; work crews
rushing about to check the stability of the properties and wards; getting to know his house-elves;
work crews rushing about to fix the properties and wards; interviewing stewards so he wouldn't have
to deal with all the forest of paperwork while at school; taking notes on his school books; and just
more busy-work that he was far too zoned-out of to remember. He barely had time to wonder to
himself if it was all just an elaborate dream.

His final month of summer had taken off at a dizzying pace the moment he had put on his heir
ring at Gringotts. An empty picture frame near where the ring was being kept had suddenly been
filled by a gaping woman with Harry's messy hair. Her exclamation of welcome was violently
doubled by the sudden appearance of a hysterical house-elf that threw itself as his feet and sobbed
tearfully into his knee. Of course, at the time, he had no idea what a house-elf was or that they
existed and thus reacted with the appropriate amount of shock.

He screamed, as Dudley would have said, like a little bitch.

His scream had terrified the already overwhelmed house servant, resulting in an impromptu
shrieking contest between them. It was only by Grimbak's interference that they were both calmed
down without further incident and the lady in the portrait, the late Dorea Potter, directed the elf,
Mimsy, to take Harry home and see to his every comfort. It was only after he had dug himself out
of the dog-pile of bodies at the bottom of a spiralling staircase did he fully comprehend that he was no
longer at the bank.

Mimsy, it turned out, was only one of several house-elves hysterically happy that their master had
finally come home. He felt completely loved and cherished in a way that was confusing and only
slightly unsettling.

Mimsy had taken to following Harry almost everywhere he went, even away from the manor for
meetings, with only common decency holding him back from trotting after Harry into the bathroom.
It puzzled Harry at first but he eventually just went with the flow, the little house-elf too enthusiastic
and doe-eye'dly cute to deny. It was later discovered that Mimsy had declared himself Harry's
personal elf back when Harry was still a baby. Mimsy was four when Harry was born and he had been utterly enthralled by his young master since then. It had taken him giving up the rights to clean the Entrance Hall and sitting room to get the other elves to stop pouting about Mimsy getting all the fun duties.

That was a point of confusion for Harry — they considered chores fun? Mimsy had eagerly explained when asked.

"House-elveses be for takin' care of masters and masters' house! We made just for that! First, house gets built, then master lives in house and gives house his magic. Longer master lives in house, the more magic house eats up, like baby catty-pillar. Then when house eats up 'nough magic, it wakes up and loves master for being kind and feedings it. House loves master sooooo much, it makes house-elveses to takes cares of master. Then the elveses stay with master's family because we's good elves!"

"Your species was created solely to serve wizards? And you're okay with that? Don't you want to be free to do what you want?" Harry was sceptical of this. He wasn't sure if this was some kind of fanciful fairytale House-elves told their children to keep them well-behaved or actually had some truth in it. They sounded like slaves and Harry was not comfortable having slaves.

Mimsy had denied wanting to be set free vehemently, his bat-like ear quivering in distress.

"Mimsy don't want to be away from young Master any more than he wants to lose his leg! Mimsy is a good elf!"

Harry finally decided that even if he didn't understand how they could be so happy with their lot in life, they still obviously were happy, and if they were happy tending to him and the chores, what sense did it make to argue with them about it? They had obviously built a culture around their servitude and had no problems with it. He suspected his initial problem with house-elves was how much they reminded him of himself but without the cheery attitude. Unpaid labour in general made him unhappy and seeing the elves at work reminded him that he had justice to extract.

Harry had calculated the average price a child cost each month, taking in food, clothes, water, and school fees into account, calculated how much he himself had cost each month, and took into consideration the amount of work and services he provided as well to determine exactly how much of a 'financial burden' he had been. With everything account for, Harry had cost them negative one hundred and ten pounds each month; they didn't use the stipends given to them to provide anything for him and he had saved them quite a bit of money as their unpaid chef, maid, butler, gardener, fix-it man, plumber, and cleaning-person.

He had every intention of getting compensated in full.

Harry let a wicked grin crawl onto his face and twisted himself until he was laying on his back. Satisfaction made him stir from his previous doze but his thoughts were still free-form. He felt like an eagle locked onto it's prey. Tasty, juicy prey. Perhaps he should get more blankets and cushions out and make himself a fort. Or a cocoon. Or a nest.

A nest was good; eagles didn't have forts or cocoons. A nest where he could plan further juicy justice.

Harry couldn't do anything too awful to the Dursleys; he couldn't take them to court for the mishandling of his money or child neglect, or send in a team of goblins to repossess the house, since that would bring attention to the fact that he no longer lived there, but he could definitely make their lives more difficult. Jacking up the price of their house payments and sending an invisible house-elf
to collect the first month's payment of a hundred and ten pounds from Petunia's purse to start was subtle but satisfying.

Satisfying and juicy.

Mmmmm, juicy.

It was to this victorious and vaguely odd thought that he finally drifted off.

Harry was rudely pulled out of his nap by the sound of a sharp voice coming from the direction of his feet.

"—olutely impossible to put up with him. He stuck his nose up at me again and told me that I should "speak more respectfully in the presence of — Sweet Merlin!" The voice seemed to shift to the other side of the compartment.

"What are you on about now?" a grumpy, masculine voice grumbled. More voices echoed his sentiment.

"I knew you were into some weird shit, Flint," the first voice retorted, growing closer once more. "but hiding a body with your luggage is strange even for you!"

"What?" the other voices said incredulously in concert just as a hand tugged at Harry's left foot.

Harry made a sound of dislike and pulled his foot away. He curled his legs up into his body and pushed aside his trunk to get a look at what was going on. There, in his previously, delightfully empty compartment, were four other boys staring at him with a mixture of shock and disbelief. One of them, the one that had pulled on his foot, was the brown-haired older boy from the robe shop, his hand hovering in air as if about to make another grab at Harry's legs.

"Do you often wake a person by grabbing at their foot and shouting about dead bodies?" Harry asked, covering his mouth to block out a yawn. This seemed to snap the older boys out of their stupor and had them jumping to their feet, shouting again. Robe shop boy — Pucey, his name was Pucey — jumped back and knocked into a sandy-haired boy with a pert nose.

"Huh—how—why—WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE?" a gangly, black-haired boy cried, pointing a finger at him.

"I was taking a bit of a nap until someone decided to play wake the dead. What does it look like I'm doing? Writing an essay?"

Harry shifted his trunk further out of his way and sat up, tucking his leg under him like it was story-time. He let his comforter fall into his lap and made to untangle his hair a bit. He peered down at his gaping fellow compartment passengers sleepily. Really, this overhead storage was just like an extra set of seats for short people that loved heights. If more people used them like he now did, the owners of the train could earn almost twice the amount of money on passengers per journey.

"Were you there the entire time?" the yet to be named young man continued, aghast, his bright blue eyes taking in the smaller boy as if Harry was some hitherto unknown parasitic creature that had just burrowed out of his skin and crawled away.
"Depends on what you mean by that," Harry replied, lazily scratching his cheek. "If you mean if I'm somehow a naturally occurring part of the compartment that has been on this train since it was first made, no. If you mean if I've been in this compartment for the whole of your conversation so far, probably, but since I was asleep, I was hardly eavesdropping. If you're asking if I had sneaked in when you weren't looking, no, since there's only one door and and the only other way in is through the window; you'd have to be pretty thick to miss me if I did try to sneak in through either entrance. If you meant that as a statement of general outrage that I'm in you're compartment without your permission, I've been here since an hour before eleven and the train was still empty; if anything, that means you are in my compartment without permission. I should charge you entrance fees."

There was a pause.

The black-haired boy then said, "You pretty much summed up what I meant, what I didn't mean, what I meant subconsciously, and what didn't occur to me to mean until you said it."

"I hope not exactly in that order or I'd recommend that someone had you looked at."

"Alright, alright, stop fucking with Warrington's head," growled the owner of the aforementioned grumpy, masculine voice, an uncommonly tall young man who looked like he ate boulders for breakfast and quaffed on pints of orphan tears to wash it down. He wouldn't have looked out of place in a gladiator battle with a doubled-bladed battle axe in his hands. Someone earlier had called him Flint. How appropriate. "Who are you and why the hell are you up there?"

"'m Harry," Harry said, scooting closer to the edge of the overhead storage to let his legs dangle off. He kicked his feet idly. "I got here early and got bored by myself. I tend to climb to the highest possible spot when I get bored; I scared the crap out of my house-elves once when they found me dangling from the chandelier. Turns out this thing is way stronger than you'd think and it really is rather cosy. I was about to make myself a nest when I fell asleep."

There was an awkward silence in which none of the other boys knew what to say in response to that outlandish statement and Harry dug in his satchel for his glasses. Slipping them onto his face, he wondered if he should have pretended that he was a dead body just to save himself the trouble of making conversation.

"Hey, you're that kid from Madam Malkin's," said Pucey, realization brightening his face, his previously flinty countenance softening. "The one that shut Malfoy up right proper."

"Only for his mouth to keep running since his brain hadn't caught up just yet," Harry added.

"It's no matter," Pucey waved off, sitting back down. "The look on his face when he realized he made an idiot of himself was a thing of beauty."

"All it took was telling him my parents were dead," Harry dead-panned, making Pucey realize he was being insensitive as well. The green eyed boy looked expectantly at the others. "I'm still new to this 'being a part of civilized society and having manners' thing — I still occasionally grunt and let my knuckles drag on the ground — but isn't this past the point that I'm supposed to be introduced to everyone? I've already said my name — there's even a mutual acquaintance here to do the introducing."

"Ah, right!" Pucey straightened and looked a bit chagrined at having to be reminded about his manners by a younger boy. "Harry, was it? I'm Adrian Pucey. Pleasure to see you again. Here next to me," —he waved a hand at Flint — "is Marcus Flint. He was mentioned in passing when Malfoy and I were talking before, he's Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team. This," — he put his hand on the shoulder of the sandy-haired boy with the snub nose — "is Hugh Montague, the strong and silent
type; you'll get more conversation out of a rock. He's on the Quidditch team as well, and a cousin of mine. And finally we have Cassius Warrington — not the sharpest thorn on the thistle but at least he's pretty."

"Bugger off, Pucey," Warrington grumbled, leaning against the door and glaring at the other boy.

"How do you do?" Harry said, letting a suspiciously bright and sweet smile spread across his face. His eyes widen in enthusiasm — the mention of Quidditch in the introductions reminded Harry of a question he'd been eager to have answered. "So, you're all pretty familiar with Quidditch right? It wasn't very big where I'm from so I was wondering: Beaters, they use bats, right? Really hard bats that could do some serious damage by themselves? And they use those bats to hit cannon-ball-like projectiles at the other players; projectiles that could severely maim and injure the others as well. And they're encouraged to do that?"

Warrington, the only Beater in the room, observed the almost maniacal gleam of interest in the younger boy's eyes. Cautiously, he nodded.

"Is there room on the team for another Beater?"

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Harry was perched precariously on the top of a cushioned booth bench in the dining carriage of the train. He had left the compartment with the older boys since his long nap had made him want to stretch his legs and his stomach was demanding attention. Across the table from him was a boy with light brown hair named Justin Finch-Fletchley, and next to him, joining him on his precarious perch, was a black boy with cropped hair, named Dean Thomas. The three boys munched on their excitingly magical candies and felt thankful for not being so out of place any longer.

At least, Justin and Dean were feeling thankful; Harry was too distracted by the wonder that were Pepper Imps, cinnamon flavoured sweets that had him breathing fire, to be feeling self-conscious.

They had met not twenty minutes ago when Harry had rescued Dean from a losing argument with a group of wizard-raised kids about whether football was just as interesting a sport as Quidditch — which was a moot point either way since there was no way some of those stuck-up little princesses would accept that a muggle sport was just as good — and had drawn the offended boy away with a conversation about artistic mediums.

"Excuse me, sirs!" Harry had said, ignoring the offended looks on the faces of the girls that were also standing there. In Harry's way of thinking, if they didn't want to be mistaken for men, they should take care of those moustaches. He addressed Dean. "I couldn't help but notice the paint on your hands and I was wondering, is that acrylic or tempera?"

Justin, who had been sitting alone at a booth for fear of showing how ignorant he was of Quidditch since he too was muggleborn, was pulled into the conversation when Harry asked for a second opinion on the effectiveness of water-colour on poster-board; Harry had claimed it took too long to dry to be preferable, and Dean countered that the way it looked in the end made up for the wait.

Justin had replied that he, unfortunately, wasn't as sophisticated as them and still created most of his art with crayons on notebook paper. All three of them had a good laugh at that and then patently ignored the puffed-up purebloods who were thrown off when Harry had cut into their argument.
Continuing through with his non sequitur, he had expertly disabled the possibility of further disagreement by walking off with their chew-toy without even acknowledging their presence. If they weren't so put-out, they might have been impressed.

"This is so brilliant," mutter Justin as he watched his chocolate frog jump across the table. Dean cut it off before it could leap off the table and tossed it back. "I'm still half-convinced this is all just a dream or something."

Dean nodded empathetically.

"I hear ya, mate. When that McGonagall woman showed up with my letter, me and my mum were sure she was a loony. Took her turning the coat-rack into a giant lizard to get us to start taking her seriously. Mind you, if we had from the beginning, we'd probably would've called the police on her for being crazy."

"You had someone hand deliver your letter?" Harry asked.

"Didn't you?" Justin asked. "I had assumed they did that for everyone."

"Mmmm, I'm thinking they only do that for muggleborns. I mean, I got someone to explain what was going on as well but that was mostly because my relatives refused to have anything to do with the first letter and wouldn't let me read it. Somehow, the school must've known I hadn't received their letter and they started pouring in from everywhere; not just the mail either, one of them ended up in an egg carton my aunt bought!" Harry exclaimed.

The two other boys shared an incredulous laugh.

"Wait, wait," Justin cut in, leaning in, and giving Harry a slightly confused look. "So, your letter came in the mail? Like the post, right? You're from a non-magical family too, aren't you? Why didn't you get someone to explain it all to you from the beginning?"

"My mum and dad were both magical," Harry explained. "Living with my muggle aunt doesn't make me muggleborn as well. The school probably just assumed I'd already be completely aware of magic and didn't give it any more thought. Tough luck, that; all that parchment sent to me must have been expensive. It must have been some automated system since they didn't seem to realize that flooding the house with letters wasn't working at all.

"My uncle was sure we were being watched or something, though, so he packed us all up and tried to make a run for it. Hagrid, he's the fellow that brought me my letter in the end, ended up having to chase us down to this hut on a rock out in the middle of the ocean that my uncle insisted was where no one would find us. It was ridiculous."

"Harry?" Justin asked hesitantly after recovering from his laughter. "Why was your family so freaked out by the letters? I can understand being confused and thinking it was a prank of some sort but the letter itself was hardly scary."

"Turns out they already knew I had magic," Harry shrugged. "And they wanted nothing to do with it. They thought that they could make my magic go away if they kept me away from magic school. Or something like that; Uncle Vernon wasn't exactly coherent when he was shouting at Hagrid that he wouldn't pay for me to be taught 'magic tricks'."

"How can you not like magic?" Dean asked, aghast, as if the notion was completely inconceivable. "That's like saying you hate ice cream or the world would be better with no colour!"

"Like you'd prefer the film with no sound," Justin agreed.
"I don't pretend to understand how their minds work," Harry shrugged. "But enough on that, gentlemen. Are either of you familiar with the card game Cheat?"

Harry held himself completely still, wearing a harsh, stony expression. The herd of first years had been shepherded into the front of the Great Hall where the other students — the ones not entirely ignoring the proceedings by talking with their friends — could freely gawk at them. Harry felt as if he were on a stage in only his underpants only to later realize he didn't even have his underpants on either while a colosseum of spectators looked on, pointing and laughing. When such terror and stage-fright came upon him, it was his habit to clam up tighter than Uncle Vernon's fist around a wad of cash and pretend he was actually a statue made to look like a boy instead of the other way around.

McGonagall had only just finished with the 'D's and Harry was ready to climb the walls.

If he could see himself, Harry would have known that he looked as forbidding as a loosely muzzled attack dog with a taste for human flesh — some of the future Hufflepuffs around him were actually taking note to themselves to be wary of ticking him off in the future, whoever he was. As he screw up his face, Justin and Dean wondered what or who had put him in such a foul mood and if they should be ready to assist Harry in battle or restrain him from gnawing off the arms of his enemy. As it was, Harry couldn't see himself, and was wondering if anyone could tell he was ready to vomit all over the floor.

Sucking in a shuddering breath that made some wonder if he was about to take someone to task, Harry shoved a hand in his pocket to feel the money he had won off his new friends and started to make himself relax, when "Finch-Fletchley, Justin" was called.

Dean and Harry both gave Justin a thumbs up as their suddenly pale friend made for the stool. They had been worried earlier when they saw the hat sitting on the stool up front and thought that they would have to perform some magic with it somehow.

"Maybe pull a rabbit out of it?" Justin had suggested doubtfully. It didn't really seem the rabbit-producing type, though. The concerns were put to rest when the Abbot girl had merely sat on the stool and let the hat be put on her head.

As Justin settled himself on the stool, the remaining two suddenly realized they never agreed on which House they would all try for and they were concerned all over again.

After three breathless seconds, the hat cried, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The eff kind of name was Hufflepuff?

While Harry clapped, he concluded that he'd simply have to do his best to maintain the friendship from separate Houses since there was no way he was joining a House that sounded like one of Aunt Petunia's pet names for Dudley. He met Dean's eye, saw his equally serious expression, and they nodded in silent understanding.

"Granger, Hermione."

There was that fast-talking twit of a girl again. Dean shifted next to Harry and frowned in remembered irritation. Earlier, on the train, she had marched through the dining carriage — looking like she was about to ring their doorbell and ask if they had a moment to talk about Jesus — and
inquired after a toad of all things ("Neville's lost one," she'd said as if whoever that was should be internationally known). After noticing Justin's wand in his hand, she then launched into a spiel about magic, and learning, and the joys of homework that could have won her a place next to a Shakespearean monologue, complete with incomprehensible metaphors and unsubtle asides. As suddenly has she had come, she left, barely letting any of them get a word in edgewise beyond a few sounds of acknowledgement as she lectured and scolded them.

Harry had briefly wondered if he had somehow been sucked into some video game and she was actually a badly programmed NPC that didn't understand social cues or know how to shut up. Dean had said he didn't think there was a person he knew that he liked less.

Granger bolted from where she had been mumbling under her breath and damn near ran to the stool, eagerly jamming the hat on her head.

"Whatever House she's in, I hope I'm not in it," Dean muttered.

Harry guiltily agreed. It wasn't that he particularly disliked her, she appeared to mean well, but her personality wasn't one that he appreciated. She'd have to curb that patronising way of speaking if she was going to make many friends; a ginger-haired boy a few paces off looked equally peeved when she stumbled by him.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat.

The ginger groaned loudly.

"I suppose you're crossing Gryffindor off the list, now?" Harry grinned.

"I can live without bravery as long as that girl's at least five yards away from me," Dean retorted sourly. "You would think she'd be a shoe-in for Ravenclaw they way she goes on about her books but I guess you have to be a certain kind of fearless to prattle on as she does when it's obvious no one wants to hear it."

They waited impatiently, both rather annoyed at having names so near the end of the alphabet, especially since they were getting rather hungry. "Longbottom, Neville" ("Do you suppose he's the one that lost that toad?" Harry asked while Dean grinned at the ridiculous last name) spent the longest amount of time under the hat. It appeared he himself realized this and his relief was apparent when he ran off to the Gryffindor table with the hat still on his head. When the blushing boy handed the hat off to "MacDougal, Morag" the sorting started moving more quickly once again.

Harry barely spared a weak glare at Malfoy when he swaggered up. Dean looked unimpressed with the blonde boys haughty airs as well. The hat barely touched his head before, "SLYTHERIN!"

As Malfoy strutted away, and the Slytherin table applauded, Harry asked, "What does it say about a person that another person — or in this case, a hat — can so quickly shove them into a category — a stereotype really? I assume the hat takes a while sometimes because, of course, people are brave and smart as well as crafty and loyal. Why is he so smug that he wasn't considered to have any other good qualities?"

"Guess he's a one-trick pony," Dean shrugged.


Harry tried tuning out the noise of the hall, instead thinking about how much he could charge his classmates to do their homework. Surely there would be meat-heads around that would be delighted
for decent grades? Five pounds to the Galleon, so five pounds' seventeen Sickles, making ten Sickles about three pounds. That sounded like a reasonable price. Maybe he could increase and decrease prices depending on what grade the customer wanted?

Suddenly, while he was dreaming of charging spoiled brats who couldn't be bothered to do their own work straight out the bum and then later doubling up on prices for tutoring when they had to cram for exams, "Potter, Harry" jolted him out of his fantasies.

"Cross your fingers for Ravenclaw." Harry bumped shoulders with Dean before making his way toward the stool.

Whispers abounded.

"Did she just say Harry Potter?"

"The Harry Potter?"

No, Harry thought to himself, just a Harry Potter. This particular Harry Potter is just The Harry Potter's distant cousin from northern England. Instead of fighting evil, this Harry Potter spent his childhood milking goats and riding cows. So sorry for the misunderstanding.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. Quick-witted, you are. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes — and a nice thirst to make something of yourself, now that's interesting. So where shall I put you?"

"If we can just choose were we go, what's the point of sorting us? Just because we want to belong to a certain group of people, be a certain type of person, that doesn't mean we are that type of people. We should go where we're already best suited," Harry thought in response.

"But isn't the first step in achieving a goal acknowledging the goal, and actively working toward it?" the Sorting Hat quipped pleasantly.

"That's assuming that being in a certain House should be a goal," Harry countered. "After reading Hogwarts: A History, I learned that the Houses were formed so students could be among like-minded individuals that work toward similar goals and learn under teachers that teach in a way that they learn best. Shouldn't a person with a Gryffindor personality go to Gryffindor, where they'll be with people that understand them best, so they can learn more efficiently, instead of going to Hufflepuff just because they want to be known as a hard-worker? There's no stopping them from being known as a hard-worker through deeds instead of pre-conceived notions."

"Well reasoned, young man," the Sorting Hat chuckled. "I hope to see you flourish in RAVENCLAW!"

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter of me addressing cliches I notice in fanfiction.

Why does being in a House have to mean so much? Why should it shape a student so heavily? Yes, the environment within each group is different, but going to Slytherin instead of Gryffindor (for example) doesn't change who Harry is intrinsically. The
Sorting is meant to help teachers and other student know how to best work with the student in question. It's essentially joining one club over another: if someone joins the Chess club, that doesn't mean they're bad at sports, it just means they're more interested in doing Chess instead. Thus you know how to best interact and communicate with them.
Conspiracy Theories

If there was one thing that Harry had learned in all his time of being left behind at places far from home, having his few belongings taken away and/or destroyed, and never being certain when he’d get to eat, it was to always be prepared. Dursleys in an especially stingy mood for whatever reason? He had a cache of non-perishable food bars stashed under the floor-boards of his room that he kept stocked well enough to live off of for several weeks. Dudley leading his friends in the destruction of Harry’s homework? He made copies and hid them in an enormous reference book in the school library, the one that sat collecting dust in a conveniently hidden nook, since no one ever touched it. He was abandoned at a strategically far away location? The Dursleys rarely did this since he was always returned by concerned outsiders, but Harry could have lived in the woods for how well he could take care of himself surrounded by nothing but forest.

It was with all this previous drilling in "always be prepared” that had Harry re-stuffing all his belongings, the things one usually leaves in the dorm instead of carting around to classes, into his trunk. Which he promptly shrunk to the size of a matchbook and shoved into his mokeskin pouch pendant. And then activated the charms to make the pouch invisible and impossible for anyone but himself to lift. All while furtively glancing about, making sure his dorm-mates were still asleep and had no idea what he was up to.

What if there was a fire? Some inexplicable fire caused by unknown magic or someone in the room spontaneously combusting, and everything was destroyed? What if random kidnappers of remarkably prodigious skill broke into the school and dragged him away in a potato sack just like in those movies? What if he fell in a puddle and needed a change of trousers? He heard that the Potions professor liked to give detentions where they scrubbed out cauldrons, what if he needed his rubber gloves and face mask? Some of the portraits looked rather lonely, what if he ended up deciding to play a game with them? He’d need his playing cards and board games in that case.

Really, it was only good sense that he bring everything with him.

Harry stood from where he had been crouched (closest to the door in case he needed to make a quick exit and next to a serviceably large window if it came down to it. His emergency broom would come into play at that point) and made his way out of the dorm. The Ravenclaw common room was silent and empty, not even the most voraciously enthusiastic student awake at this early hour.

As he exited the Tower, Harry checked his watch and mentally created his to-do list. It was currently five twelve, twelve minutes after curfew was lifted. Breakfast was from half six to nine, with classes starting at nine. He had four hours and eighteen minutes to get to the Great Hall, eat, get his class schedule, and make his way to class. He was currently on the fifth floor, just off of one of the main towers, while the Great Hall was on the ground floor, in a different section of the school. The school had moving staircases, corridors that weren't always there, and doorways that liked to play hide-and-seek.

Harry squared his shoulders and strode decisively through the empty corridor. He had absolutely no idea where he was going.

Two hours and twenty-seven minutes later, at seven thirty-nine, A deliriously happy Harry Potter
crawled out from a hole under the Hufflepuff table that had been previously hidden by deceptively light block of stone. He popped out and paid no mind to the wide-eyed upper years sitting at the table that were startled into speechlessness by his unexpected and irregular entrance. With single-minded that was as admirable as it was unsettling, Harry stalked his way to the Ravenclaw table and immediately set to stuffing his school satchel with fruit. Never had he been so thankful for having a bottomless bag.

Not ten minutes after leaving Ravenclaw Tower, he had tripped over nothing and fell through what he previously thought was a stone wall. After getting back on his feet and pushing at the wall, trying to return to the corridor where he'd been, he decided, yes, it was indeed stone, and it was very odd that it was insubstantial only on one side. Concluding that trying to return the way he came would be literally banging his head against a wall, Harry tried his luck following the suspiciously convenient staircase going down that just so happened to be available.

The following two hours could only be described as an adventure. And Harry hated adventures.

The staircase going down went down, and down, and ever farther down, until Harry was certain he must have been several floors underneath the school. That there had been nothing around him to tell him exactly what floor he was on, and the fact that it got progressively darker the farther down he went, had him growing increasingly paranoid until he remembered that not only did he have a wand and knew a light-making spell, he also had several candles and a candle holder in his mokeskin pouch. The comfort of light lasted him only until he arrived at the bottom of the staircase and found himself in an equally dark and also ominous cavern of some sort.

Fortunately for him, several doors were available.

Unfortunately, a good many of them were locked.

It was just as well, some of the locked doors he had tried had frightening noises coming from behind them when he jiggled the door knob; he swore one of the doors was actually breathing. Breathing meant alive, meaning the door was alive, meaning the door was an opening to something alive, meaning Harry might have just been trying to force open the mouth of some man-eating monster that was posing as a door.

As he wasn't in any specific hurry to be eaten by a door, Harry quickly made his way through the first unlocked door he found and locked that door behind him.

"What kind of school is this, keeping creatures that pretend to be doorways out where anyone kind find them?" Harry muttered to himself as he found himself in an equally ominous if better lit corridor, ignoring that he was in a hidden passageway that was significantly out of the way of normal traffic.

The corridor was narrow and winding and seemed endless. It was also exceedingly irregular; he wasn't sure if 'corridor' was the proper word for it. Surely corridors would be more consistent? Whatever it was he was travelling down often changed from flat floor to slight incline, to slide, to stairs going up, to stairs going down, to pile of rubble he had to crawl over, and back to slight incline. There had been fireman poles, sand pits, rock walls, and even giant swinging blades he had to dodge through. An obstacle course? But what would be the point of having one?

As he found himself swinging from vines over a pit of piranhas to reach a ladder on the other side, Harry wondered what genius it was that had the time to set up a pit of piranhas and why they thought they needed one to begin with. And how exactly were the fish still alive? It was obvious by the piles of dust that no one had been down this way in a long time.
"And why does it have to be *me* that just so happens to stumble across them?" Harry grumbled, piranhas jumping out of the water to snap at his heels. He kicked one in the side of the face and kept climbing.

Just as his hand became sore and cramped, the ladder let off at what was obviously a man-made tunnel, what with it being of smooth stone and perfecting square in shape. Harry carefully pulled himself up and made his way through the tunnel on his hands and knees, it being the size of an air vent and far too small for him to do more than sit up straight. As he crawled, he desperately hoped that he'd find his way back into the school proper. It would be just his luck if he ended up missing his classes.

His fervent wish was granted when Harry discovered he was indeed in an air vent and not only that, an air vent that led to the kitchen. He couldn't help but sighed in relief as he peered through the ventilation grate that kept him from falling down onto the heads of the unsuspecting house-elves currently busy at work.

"Excuse me!" Harry said loudly, making the nearby elves jump and whip around, trying to find their guest.

"Invisible young master?" squeaked a blue-eyed female elf carrying a pile of unwashed pots. They were horribly confused when they saw no one else but them around.

"Up here," the boy added plaintively, smacking the ventilation grate a bit.

"Little master, sir!" squealed another elf, pointing his finger at Harry, directing the other elves to his elevated location. "It's being dangerous! What is sir doing up there?"

"Well, you see," Harry began, shifting to lay on his stomach so he could press his face against the grate. "I got stuck in the walls earlier and got myself ridiculously lost trying to get out. Could you help me out and tell me how to get the Great Hall from here?"

What followed was gibbering cacophony as all the elves attempted to give him directives all at once.

"—Getchas down, sir!—"

"—left, then right, then two more lefts—"

"—WALL!? Oh noes, Twiggy will—"

"—trap-door; Lady Hufflepuff puts it—"

"Gregor will be telling the little master what he wants to know!" growled a croaky older elf. He gave the others a severe glare. "Go back to your chores now — Gregor won't be needing no help."

While the other elves left grumbling, the house-elf now known as Gregor gave Harry specific instructions on how reach the Great Hall.

It turned out that Harry had been bumbling his way through what used to be training grounds for Hufflepuff House, back when people took Hufflepuffs seriously. One of the previous Heads of House had been the equivalent of a drilling sergeant and had liked to have her 'Puffs ready to leap out of windows and scale the tower walls if need be. The particular obstacle course Harry was in — the one geared toward fourth and fifth years — left off at a trap-door under the Hufflepuff table.
"Never again," Harry muttered suspiciously under his breath, giving the Hufflepuff table a wary look that was mirrored by the students sitting there. Never again would he underestimate them; he had nearly lost a leg getting out of that hell-hole! However did that house get the reputation of being disregardable fluff?

"Maybe that's just what they want us to think," Harry said louder, an expression of horrified comprehension making his jaw drop, drawing the cautious attention of those nearest to him at the Ravenclaw table. They glanced at each other and elbowed one another subtly.

Maybe the Hufflepuffs were trying to lull everyone into a false sense of security, ready to take their place at the top of the food chain at any moment. They could be the underground rulers of the school, letting Gryffindor and Slytherin go at each other's throat to keep them preoccupied, unsuspecting, while the Hufflepuffs pulled strings behind the scenes.

Harry sent a sharp, narrow look at the nearest Hufflepuff, letting the deceiver know through his eyes that he knew exactly what was going on and that he wouldn't be taken in by their fluffy exterior and glistening eyes. When the golden-haired, older boy looked ready to wet himself, Harry's glare turned harder and more knowing, like he knew all of the other boy's darkest secrets and wasn't afraid of ripping him apart.

"I'm onto you," he whispered forbiddingly. He turned away suddenly, not letting the other boy ready his mind hoodoo to convince Harry the other boy was really innocent and that Harry was just being paranoid after a gruelling misadventure.

Stuffing his fourteenth and final apple for this morning in his school bag, Harry scanned over the Great Hall, looking for the friends he had made yesterday. Unfortunately, Dean wasn't there yet, indeed, almost half of Gryffindor wasn't there yet, obviously being the sort that slept in, and Justin — potential underground shadow king that he was — was also absent, possibly planning his first covert operation to keep the degenerate masses unaware.

Harry ruffled his hair a bit and checked his watch — it was 7:45. He had an hour and fifteen minutes to freshen up, get his schedule, eat, and get to his first class. Professor Flitwick told them the night before that he would hand out schedules at eight. Harry hadn't eaten yet, what with being distracting with hoarding food and the contemplation of a potential centuries-long conspiracy, but after escaping the Hufflepuff Hurdles™ his clothes were rumpled and covered with dust, he needed to wash up and change his clothes.

The dark haired boy sighed, nodding to his house-mates and made for the lavatory just off the Great Hall he had noticed last night. Fifteen minutes was plenty of time to wash his face and put on one of his extra uniforms. He patted the invisible pouch around his neck and smile grimly. Thank goodness he had the good sense to bring everything with him.

Pomona Sprout was curious. She had been curious since the House meeting after the Sorting Feast, when her newest badgers had introduced themselves to the House and the muggleborn Mr. Finch-Fletchley had been bombarded by questions about his knowledge of Harry Potter. He had looked rather overwhelmed and puzzled while his classmates had leapt on him from every side, squeezing him for any tiny tidbit about his friend.

Apparently, as the students had been getting up to be led to the commons, Mr. Potter had waved
to an already departing Gryffindor lad — "looked right miserable, he did; looked like he was ready to stuff a napkin down the throat of one of the girls and make a break for it!" — as he broke off from the Ravenclaws and regarded Mr. Finch-Fletchely amicably. "Too bad we're not in the same House, mate. If we were, we'd have more time to think of how to make Dean feel better about getting sorted with Granger. Cross your fingers that he won't smother her by morning."

"He seemed so nice then," said Megan Jones, an unusually tall, brunette first-year, mentioning that Potter had earlier looked terrifying enough to strangle someone. She had stood not far off from where the two boys had been talking in the Hall. She turned to Finch-Fletchley with a bright gleam in her eye. "Have you known him long? What's he like? Do you know if he really battled a rabid harpy when he was eight and rode it across the Swiss Alps after he tamed it?"

The poor boy looked terribly confused.

It was all well and good to be interested in a fellow student and perfectly fine even if that student was famous — Pomona admitted to herself that this was partially why she was so curious herself — but that was no excuse to pester anyone about him! She had given them a stern talking to when Finch-Fletchley looked like he was regretting being sorted into Hufflepuff. They were underestimated enough as it was, they didn't need dissension among their numbers as well.

She had seen how rumpled the Potter boy looked that morning, after he had climbed out from under the Hufflepuff table, however he ended up there in the first place. What worried her was the look of paranoia that was pasted to his face when he looked back at the table, the look of a person that had gone through hell and still didn't know what he did to deserve it, but didn't plan to let any demons drag him back. What had happened in the time from last night to that morning? Mr. Potter almost made Cedric Diggory cry!

She would have to watch him, that was all there was to it, whether to keep the other students from dog-piling on top of him or to save her badgers from the bed-wetting nightmare that was Harry Potter's glare.

Harry sat near the aisle that split the Potion's classroom down the middle, a fellow Ravenclaw — Kevin something-or-other — sitting on his left, along with the rest of the eager early-birds of his House, and his book-bag set on the bench on his right, saving space for one of his new friends to fill. His textbook was opened in front of him, propped up in such a way that it stood up by itself, and the notes he had already begun on the first chapter were being shuffled in his hands.

The wave of blue students chattered excitedly amongst themselves, making references to things they were hoping to learn, and what they had already read about while they had been reading ahead. It was all very scholarly, and exceedingly different from the other side of the room, which was still empty, since the other House had yet to arrive. Every once in a while, one of the blue-clad students would glance nervously at the door, as if afraid that the other students would do the sacrilegious and be late for class, and thus miss out on learning.

"Are they purposely walking slowly or something?" muttered Lisa Turpin, sitting in the row in front of Harry. She was turned around and talking to the boys in his row, occasionally glancing at Harry, as if she couldn't completely believe he was sitting there.

"They might be coming from a classroom that's far off," defended the boy sitting next to Kevin.
Michael Corner, Harry thought his name was. Michael flipped his dark-brown fringe, saying, "They're not Ravenclaws, you know. You can hardly expect them to be running down the halls for class."

As he neated his stack of pre-prepared notes and pulled out his list of prices that he would charge for homework — drawing the curious attention of Lisa Turpin again — Harry wondered if there was something in the water of the Great Hall that was making the other kids so willing to fall into the stereotype of egg-headed geeks, and if there was, he wondered if this was another layer to the Hufflepuff Supremacy Conspiracy. Brain-wash them while they were still unsuspecting so they would be easier to predict, thus making them pliable to their manipulations.

It was ingenious.

Harry made a note to learn how to conjure water so he wouldn't fall into their fiendish plot. He'd have to shake down Justin for anything he knew when Harry had time to drag the other boy off into a secluded corner.

As if summoned by thought, Justin shuffled though the door of the Potions lab, more or less leading the herd of Hufflepuffs into the dreary classroom. They all seemed to huddle into themselves at the sight of the imposing layout of the room — all dark stone and jars of pickled *something*. One strawberry-blonde girl hugged her book-bag tightly, as if it was a life-line. ("You play your part well," Harry muttered, peering suspiciously over the top of his text book. He didn't trust that trembling lip in the slightest.) For whatever reason, they seemed to have elected Justin as their leader, trailing after him like a duckling would its mother. Judging by the expression of suppressed irritation, Justin was not at all happy about that.

Harry tucked away his suspicions, not allowing himself to let on that he was wise to their under the counter dealings, and grinned at Justin, giving a jaunty wave.

"Justin, ol' pal, ol' chum!" He patted the space next to him on the bench after he put his bag on the floor.

Justin looked torn between relief at an excuse to break away from the herd and irritation at Harry for whatever reason. Relief won out when a tall girl with her brown hair in a pony-tail slapped a hand over her own mouth and looked at Harry in awe; he couldn't sit down fast enough, taking up as much space as he could as well, leaving no room for anyone that might have tried to squeeze in.

The taller dark-haired boy looked very put out.

He huffed, "I've been through such nonsense because of you! Why didn't you tell me you were famous?"

"I'm sure any nonsense that happened while I wasn't with you was no fault of mine."

"So you say." Justin leaned in so his fellow Hufflepuffs couldn't hear him. He wouldn't put it past that Jones girl to openly eavesdrop. "I'm been through the bloody Inquisition since last night, all of it about you and what you've done. I've been asked the most outrageous question from whether you like frogs to how many leprechaun colonies have declared you their emperor. A few of the older girls wanted to know if I could give you their application to join your harem. Here they are, by the way, — a sheaf of parchment was shoved into Harry's bewildered grasp — "Did you know that you can walk on water and swim of land? And that a baby unicorn is born every time you sing? I'm supposed to be the ruddy expert on all things Harry Potter just because we're friends. They've been prodding
and poking at me for anything I might know and won't believe me when I say I don't have a clue about any of it!"

He sucked in a breath, realizing his voice had been steadily rising as he spoke, and returned to his earlier hush.

"So, I want to know why you didn't tell me that you're the magical Jesus and that your cult is rabid."

Harry sat flummoxed, his mouth open ever so slightly in bafflement. He held the short stack of parchments in his hands like he couldn't believe they were actually there.

"Harem?" he wheezed, latching onto the first thing that came to mind.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Justin nodded. "One girl almost tackled me to the ground when I protested taking the forms. Apparently, she had thought you were just a character from a book and had always wished you were real. She even had the entire ruddy series on her!"

That was a first — he had never been accused of being fictional before.

"I had no idea it was that bad," Harry said. "I told I've been living with my muggle relatives, right? Well, I've only been out in the magical public once and I wasn't exactly chatting up my adoring fans at the time."

"But why didn't you tell us you're some huge deal?"

"I hardly think of myself as a huge deal!" Harry protested, tossing the sheaf of applications into his bag. He'd dispose of them later — he did not want to even contemplate a harem. "And what kind of tosser goes around carrying on about how famous he is? Someone not as important as they think they are, that's who."

"So you were being modest, then?" Justin crossed his arms.

"Oh, come on! I probably know as much as you do about this. I can't remember ever ruling over leprechauns or walking on water."

"Then why — ?"

The thundering BOOM of the door being shoved violently open cut off any further attempt at conversations, causing students to jump and shriek in shock. A black-clad wraith of a man — Professor Snape, if Harry remember that murderous intent correctly — stood stiffly from the doorway, glowering forbiddingly at them, causing a girl a few seats down from Harry to suck in a terrified gasp. Like a serpent lashing out, he suddenly strode forward, each step like an aggressive threat of bodily harm, his dour teaching robes billowing behind him. He came to a rigid halt at the front of the rows of tables and regarded them balefully.

Harry wondered if the man was going to swoop out his outer robes like a cape and turn into a bat.

"Clear your desks," the professor said, gazing down his nose at them.

The students scrambled hurriedly to put away any books or writing equipment they had out while the man flicked his wand, making a scroll of parchment float in front of him as he called roll.

There was a sense of pre-formed judgements about the man as called out their names that hinted at prior knowledge and new disdain. Every now and then, he would pause ever so slightly on a name
and a hint of grimace would sharpen the lines around his mouth.

He wasn't nearly old enough to have taught their parents, so that could be from teaching older siblings or cousins, Harry decided. Unfortunately, the grimace didn't bode well for any of the poor souls that were now being mentally associated with their relatives. Even more unfortunately, the professor didn't stop at a grimace when he reached Harry's name, he paused significantly and scowled outright.

At the start-of-term banquet the night before, Harry had gotten the impression that Professor Snape had disliked him, what with how he frowned visibly at Harry over his plate of roast beef. Judging by the familiar look of disgusted detestation — one he had often seen on the face of his Uncle Vernon — Harry could now see that his impression had been incorrect; Snape didn't dislike him — he completely loathed him.

The roll call was finished off with the clipped demand for "Emma Vane" to affirm her presence and the classroom of intimidated students sat in deathly silence. Professor Snape's black look remained as he surveyed the class hostilely.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," He began slowly, his voice barely above a whisper. He paced in front of them like a jungle animal caught within a cage. "Potions is a demanding art, one that always takes more than it gives. Mastering this subject will give you things your soft little minds can scarcely dream of. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses."

Harry wasn't sure about the Hufflepuff half of the class, but the Ravenclaws were as enraptured as they were terrified. Morag MacDougal looked as if she was witnessing a serial killer at work, and knew perfectly well that her life was in danger, but was still falling in love with him. It was incredibly creepy.

"I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death," here he paused dramatically. Then he sneered, "If you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

The silence was echoing. Harry was tempted to get to his feet and applaud the man for such a riveting monologue but held himself back since it probably wouldn't be appreciated. By now, the professor was back at the front of the room, and not a soul dared to move a muscle until —

"Smith!" Snape snapped, causing a blonde boy and girl to jump, both gaping and not remembering how to speak. They glanced at one another apprehensively. "Mr. Smith," he clarified, drawing a gulp from the now pale boy.

"Y-yes, sir?" Smith shifted in his seat, as if ready to bolt at the slightly provocation.

"What is peeled shrivelfig most commonly used in?" Snape took a step in the boy's direction and he looked ready to faint. A few hesitant hands rose on the side of blue and bronze but they were ignored.

Good God, Harry thought, taking in the scene with fascination. Someone get that man on a stage and cast him as the villain. He would wow the crowds as Tybalt from Romeo and Juliet.

"N-no idea, sir. Sorry."
"I had hoped," The professor drawled condescendingly, "that even the most brainless buffoon had heard of a shrinking solution."

Snaped turned his attention to a Ravenclaw girl with caramel skin and a rope of black hair down her back.

"Patil, when would you ingest the leaves of the aconite plant?"

The girl bit her lip, her golden eyes shifting from her desk to Professor Snape's collar, and back again.

"Um, never? Because it's poisonous, isn't it, sir?"

"I wonder what you will do, Ms. Patil, if ever your blood pressure is dangerously high but you refuse to take the heart sedative because there is aconite in it. Or when you don't take a sweat inducer for your fever for the same reason."

Patil shrunk down into her seat, her eyes glassy and her lips trembling.

Professor went back and forth around the room, asking about things like the effects of the sound of a harpy cry, the uses of venom extracted from a toad that lived thirty days under a rock, and how to prepare a branch of yew collected during an eclipse — all things that the class was either ignorant of or too intimidated to answer properly. Harry wasn't even looked at until after the Bones girl suggested garlic kept away vampires, but when he was acknowledged, Snape swooped down upon him like an avenging angel, his obvious hatred smothered underneath an emotionless expression. Perhaps Professor Snape was trying very hard to not let his personal feelings for Harry to cloud his professional judgment.

"Potter!" Professor Snape barked. The unusually harsh sound made them all jump. The emotionless expression seemed to be giving way under the hostility. Well, at least he tried. "Yes, Mr. Potter, our new celebrity." The word 'celebrity' was nearly spat out on the stone floor. "Tell me, Potter, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

By this time, no one dared to raise a hand when a question was not directed at them. Terry Boot had been scowled into tears when he had waved his hand in the air at questions the Hufflepuffs couldn't answer.

Harry blinked and hastily thought back to the introductory chapter they were supposed to start on. Well, there was nothing stopping the professor from starting them out at whatever point in the book he wanted, even though near the end of the third year book was really pushing it. Harry wouldn't have known the answer if he had not bought the entire set and already read ahead.

"You'd get a sleeping potion, sir. It's called, um, Draught of . . . Living Death."

Professor Snape's eyes widened fractionally. It seemed he had not expected Harry to know the answer. Rather unsporthing of him, that.

"Yes, of course. You're a Ravenclaw," Snape said lowly. "Spend your all days with your nose in those books, no doubt." For some reason, that statement did not sound like a compliment. Fitting really, Snape didn't seem the type to give compliments to begin with. "Well then, Potter, name one use of ashwinder eggs."

Oh, Harry knew that one too! He had caught a bad bought of some illness that made him shiver like crazy and Mimzy had brought him an ashwinder egg to eat. What did Mimsy call the illness again?
"If you eat it whole, it cures ague, sir."

Snape's brow lifted minutely in surprise. His eyes then sharpened until they were like black drills, boring across the distance between them and studying Harry as if he were a previously unknown creature and the professor wasn't sure if he would be better off with it alive or dead.

"Indeed," the word sounded almost thoughtful. "Armadillo bile — name a potion it's used in and then name two other ingredients in that potion."

"Wit-sharpening potion, sir." Harry had brewed that quite often when he was learning the duties of being an Earl and had to learn it fast. "It also contains ginger root and grounded scarab beetles."

"Monkshood and wolfsbane — what's the difference?"

"None, sir." Aunt Petunia had that plant growing in her back garden and had made Harry read up on it to make sure he kept it in perfect health. "Those are just different names for the poisonous plant you asked Patil about, aconite."

"Pishsalver is one of the few potions that uses another potion as an ingredient. What is that ingredient and how much of it is used in the standard recipe?"

"It uses two teaspoons of Wishful Thinking, sir." Harry had learned of Pishsalver when reading the magical version of Alice in Wonderland, which turned out to be the memoirs of a Lady-knight that served under the White Queen of the hidden kingdom of Underland. Pishsalver was invented by the White Queen so her troops could re-conquer the castle where the traitorous Red Queen lived without Underland being razed in battle.

How odd that all the questions being asked of him where things he learned by happenstance. Rather lucky for him.

A curl of lip that could have been described as the beginning of a smile — that is, if it were on the face of anyone else — ghosted onto Professor Snape's face. His eyes seemed to shift a bit, looking through Harry instead of at him, as if seeing something not quite visible. He peered at Harry for a few more seconds with that odd expression before turning away to address the rest of the class.

"You will spend the rest of the period reading up on the Cure for Boils. Homework will be an essay on the process of brewing the potion written in your own words."

The students sat in bafflement, none making a move as they stared at the professor.

Professor Snape, in turn, scowled angrily and snarled, "What are you waiting for? An invitation!?"

In a clatter of chairs scrapping and books thumping, the class snapped to their assignment as if their rears had been set on fire.

"You know," Harry whispered to Justin as they bent over their books. "I think I rather like him."

Justin shot him a look that clearly questioned his sanity but made no reply.
The feather in front of Harry sat mockingly, as if pretending it was completely unaware of how Harry glared at it ominously, the wand he held deceptively lightly in his hand sparking in response to his ire. The boy leaned closer to the rebellious filament that sat at the opposite edge of the long table, his chin almost touching the table, getting about eye-level with the blasted feather and trying to scowl it into submission.

The Ravenclaw first years were currently in Charms with the Gryffindors and were immersed in the practical portion of their lesson, having already been put through the lecture and notes portion. The classroom was divided as it had been with the 'Claws and 'Puffs in their Potions class, but there was no physical obstruction keeping them apart this time. Harry had taken advantage of the lack of separation to cozy up to Dean and his new friend Seamus Finnigan who had been muffling their snickers while the Granger twit dictated a thesis on the practical application of charm-work to Ron Weasley.

The Gryffindors were an odd set to Harry's ever observant gaze. He wasn't sure if he'd ever witnessed a group of students that fell so quickly into cliques. Dean, Seamus, and Ron came together by sensing the others' similar disdain for academics, naturally though unintentionally orbiting away from Neville Longbottom, the nervous boy with the toad, and Bem Matthews, a chubby black boy that seemed to have no desire for friends. Then there were the girls: The ones that really stood out were Granger and the two giggling terrors that were Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil; the other six — Fay Dunbar, Kellah Matthews, Rionach O'Neal, Luca Caruso, Gwendoline Darling, and Juniper Nautermeyer — were practically interchangeable as they seemed perfectly at ease with letting the first three take center stage.

It was all very teen movie. It was as if they were only pretending to be the typical group of students. If Matthews and the unassuming six became any less outstanding, they could very well be replaced with cardboard cut-outs and no one would notice. If he wasn't sitting amongst them, Harry wouldn't have realized that there were more than seven first-year Gryffindors.

Maybe it was another part of the Hufflepuffs' schemes. Maybe the seven background characters of Gryffindor were really Hufflepuffs undercover, strengthening their influence over what would arguably be their biggest opposition if they were ever exposed — Gryffindors were supposed to be the ones that fought bravely after all. By infiltrating the house of lions while they were still unsuspecting, they could learn their habits, making them easier to predict and take out should ever the need arise.

Were those even their real names? Did they take out those that were actually destined for Gryffindor and take their places? Oh, God, there were six of them with the girls but only one of them with the boys; what if they've been doing it slowly, snatching a person up and disguising themselves as the person? Was Dean in danger of having his face stolen?

Note to self: make a proper note-to-self later when no Hufflepuffs or their spies are around about warning Dean about properly maintaining the safety of his face.

For now, Harry was having to pretend he wasn't unraveling their elaborate deception one despicable scheme at a time. He was taking out his frustration in a way that wouldn't tip them off.
"Listen here, you fluttery strand of butt plumage," Harry hissed, a fire in his eyes.

Dean looked at him in amusement and wariness, his own feather already been set on fire by Seamus. He listened as Harry trashed talked the inanimate fluff.

"You think I'm going to take any shite from a piece of fluff that needs hundreds of its friends backing it up to be of any use? You should be glad that I'm elevating you above normal feather status and letting you fly by yourself! Do you know what happens to ungrateful feathers?" Harry jerked his thumb at Seamus and Dean's crispy fried feathers. "They get set on fire by their overlord's righteous fury!"

Seamus looked on curiously as well. This was his first taste of Harry's company. He shot a glance at Dean and started to ask, "Is he —?"

Dean shook his head sharply and lifted a finger to his lips in a sign for silence.

Seamus looked confused but complied. He mouthed, "What?"

Dean mouthed, "Just watch." He didn't want that look of murder pointed in his direction.

Harry paid them no mind, too caught up in threatening his feather. He waved his wand at it.

"See this? This wand is capable of taking out creatures far more dangerous than you could ever dream of being. Why, just this morning I battled for my life and defeated a man-eating monster with it! You want to try your luck with me, punk? Are you feeling lucky?"

The feather said nothing but Harry thought he saw it quiver a bit.

He pointed his wand directly at it and growled, "So are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

The feather made no reply.

Harry swished his wand in movements that he made up but felt right and intoned, "Win-gar-di-um Le-vi-osa."

The feather didn't move.

From four seats down, next to Weasley, who was sitting next to Seamus, who was sitting next to Dean, Hermione Granger — she of the massive lung capacity — looked at Harry with a look that couldn't completely conceal her smugness while she tried to tell Harry what to do.

"I told you that you're saying it wrong. It's Win-gar-di-um Levi-o-sa. Your emphasis is all wrong."

She had been going on about the rules of magic earlier when Harry idly contradicted her, saying it was useless to try to force logic onto magic when it was the force that made anything possible, especially the illogical. How else would she explain the main staircase? The three Gryffindor boys that had been the target of her lecture fell in line right behind Harry when he said that he'd prove it.

The other three boys looked unhappily at her. Dean looked ready to shove the girl's feather up her nose.

Harry on the other hand paid her no mind. He wasn't going to take the words of an over-active infomercial host to heart. It was magic damnit. By definition it didn't follow rules. If it was something that could have limits put on it, it wouldn't be called magic in the first place. Harry wasn't
learning atypical particle-wave physics and the practical application of probability field manipulation, he was learning and doing magic.

He poured his belief in magic's lawlessness and stabbed his wand angrily at the inert feather.

"Lift, damn you!"

Granger made to rebuke him again, probably about his lack of proper incantation, but choked on her words when — against her carefully formed logic — Harry's feather shot up off the table as if it had been shot out a cannon. Harry's delighted, "YES!" drew the attention of the other students who then began to ooh and ah. Dean punched the air and the other two boys whooped.

Harry climbed up on the bench and danced about with his wand in the air like a conductor's baton. Professor Flitwick cheered as Harry directed the feather in it's flight, making it dance and twirl, even moving it to tickled Granger's nose as she gaped.

"Well done, Mr. Potter!" the short man praised. "Well done indeed! Take ten well deserved points to Ravenclaw. That's the best control I've ever seen during a first lesson!"

"B-but— what — how did —?" Granger spluttered at Harry, completely thrown by the perimeters of her reality being defied. Honestly, you'd think she'd be more open-minded after learning that magic was real. She wore the crushed indignant expression of a fangirl that had been confronted by the reality that her favourite pairing would never exist outside of her imagination. "But you can't . . . You didn't even use an incantation! All the books I've read stressed the importance of proper pronunciation! You didn't even say the words! It makes no sense!"

As he bounced on the bench, Harry returned Hermione's previously concealed smug look with one of his own, sprinkling a bit of superiority on top just because she had worn it earlier when she managed to complete the spell first. Laughing a bit, he dropped down into a sitting position mid-bounce and bumped fists with Dean.

"As I told you, Granger, it's magic; It's not supposed to make sense."

Posing as a statue was a weak means of disguise, especially if you're standing among real statues and don't look anything like them in their gray stoniness. Posing as a statue of a tree was an even weaker means of disguise when one considered that — besides the aforementioned lack of stoniness — trees didn't wear clothes or have faces, and the people in need of the disguise were generally in possession of such things.

Harry was holding himself immobile among the centerpiece of the fountain in the Transfiguration Courtyard, channeling his inner plant as to fit in with the trinity of stone trees spouting water from their limbs. He wasn't sure exactly what he had been thinking when searching for a place to hide, but he was certain there had been something about hiding in plain sight. That was the last thought he had before jumping into the fountain and clambering past the statues of nymphs paying homage to the trees.

'I'm a tree in the wind. I'm a tree in the wind,' Harry thought as a breeze ruffled his hair — his leaves, he rebuked himself. If he was going to be a convincing tree, he had to put all human thoughts out of his mind.
Harry idly wondered if trees had minds.

He also wondered if he would have been better off pretending to be one of the nymphs instead. At least they had faces.

It was the start of the second week of school and the professors had eased them into homework that grew progressively more difficult as they went along. They certainly didn't hold back when they believed their students capable. The first few lessons had been followed by assigned reading and essays sprinkled throughout. Harry had been a bit disheartened by the fact that none of the meatheads he had his eyes on appeared to need any assistance with their homework. Thankfully, that had changed when the professors seemed to agree as one that it was high time to cram knowledge into their heads faster.

Visions of Galleon signs danced through his head as Harry discreetly interviewed prospective customers on their openness to . . . assisted homework completion. He didn't bother with the other Ravenclaws — the pride they took in being the smart ones made them utterly closed off to paying someone off to do their homework for them, but Seamus had been up for it, as had both Matthews, Luca Caruso, and Rionach O'Neal. He also talked himself into the patronage of Mssrs Crabbe and Goyle, Gabriel Spinks, and Mauricius Pike, all of Slytherin.

He was still too uneasy to approach the Hufflepuffs, because even if — and this was a big if — they weren't juvenile mafia, they were the house of fairplay and hardwork, they would likely feel uncomfortable with assisted homework completion. He'd approach them when Justin could confidently tell him that they wouldn't mob him on sight and try to steal parts of him as trophies.

Fans were terrifying.

At the moment, Harry was both playing hide and seek with Dean, Justin, and Morag MacDougal — a fellow Ravenclaw he made friends with after she caught him creeping out of the dorms at five in the morning — while they also played keep away from Granger. Officially, Morag was It, but it was also silently accepted that if Granger enter the vicinity, the first person to spot her was to scream and run away, efficiently warning their comrades while also getting a lead start.

Harry acknowledged that screaming and running away at the sight of her would likely hurt Granger's feelings a bit, but it wasn't as if Harry had meant to turn it into a kind of game among his friends; he had just panicked and reacted automatically, it wasn't like he was purposefully being mean. Ever since that Charms lesson where Harry had blown her self-inflicted limits on reality out of the water, Granger had been popping up like an unlucky penny, hounding him for answers. It was enough to give anyone a complex! What did where he grew up have anything to do with how he did magic? He didn't even want to imagine how'd she be if she ever found out was earning money by doing other people's homework.

Really, when she had come up behind him when he was actively going off the usual path to lunch just to avoid her, it shouldn't have been at all shocking that he squealed like a stuck pig and bolted out the nearest window — that it was a window two stories up, directly above a tree was also irrelevant; Dean had even had a betting pool going about exactly how he would crack when he did. Morag and Justin had split the winnings since they had both been half correct, Morag saying he would scream and run away, Justin saying he would jump out a window.

Since then, it had been a running gag among them. Harry honestly couldn't restrain himself if Granger came up behind him, but the others had declared it great fun, and had taken to bolting at the sight of her outside of class. He felt bad when he heard Lavender and Parvati teasing the other girl about it — saying some nonsense about boys and being overbearing — but he wasn't going to apologize for his survival instincts, especially since she had conditioned the reaction from him by
herself.

He stiffened further when he heard the sound of girlish tittering headed his direction.

*Think tree! Think tree!*

Harry filled his mind with thoughts of leaves, dirt, and photosynthesis.

Two girls ambled in his direction, talking at a moderate decibel to each other. One was a dark haired girl of moderate height, looking around maybe fourteen or fifteen. Her companion was noticeably taller than her, almost a full head taller. She was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed type that Harry recognized as a prefect. They slowed as they notice the additional figure among the fountain statues, then realigned their direction so they were walking directly at Harry.

Harry kept his mild panic from his face. He could do this. If anyone could do this, it was him.


"What in the world are you doing?"

—ulose. Dammit.

Harry was tempted to remain as he was, ignoring the girls' attempt to talk to him. They might eventually be convinced he was just an astonishingly life-like statue and leave him alone. One furtive glance at their ties dissuaded him of going that route; they were Ravenclaws, they'd wait him out all night if they had to, just to get their answers.

He reluctantly moved out of his carefully chosen pose, flexing his poor muscles to rid him of the cramping in them. Lowering himself into a sitting position and the base of the trees, Harry affected a nonchalant, almost bored look, one that said 'Yes, I was just doing whatever it was you just saw and I don't care that you saw since it's a perfectly ordinary thing to do. Are you saying that you don't?' It was rather a mouthful of an expression and he was relieved that he was no longer obligated to say it out loud.

It was the dark-haired girl that had asked the question, bewilderment practically screaming from her hazel eyes. Harry remembered her vaguely as the sympathetic older girl that had scolded the younger girls away from him when they had questioned him long after he had wanted to go to bed. MacDuff, he thought her name was.

"Ladies," he greeted, nodding at them.

"What *are* you doing?" This time, the question came from the blonde prefect. Her name started with a 'c.' Cage? No, that wasn't right.

"Oh, you know, just . . ." How was he to explain this without being thought a nutter? "Just relaxing in the serenity of the fountain. The nymphs were calling to me."

"The nymphs were calling to you," The blonde repeated back at him, tucking a strand of fringe back into her bob-cut.

Maybe the name started with a 'g.' Greg? No, that was a first name, not a surname.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "They were saying, *Harry, come play with us. Let us worship you as high dryad, lord of the tree trinity.' Naturally, I agreed — it would have been rude of me to deny them."
Craig! That was her name. Something Craig. He really needed to pay more attention to these things.

"Of course it would . . ." MacDuff agreed, drawing her words out slowly. He must have done a poor job of not sounding like a nutter. She shuffled a bit closer to her friend, as if she were worried Harry would go ballistic and attack them.

How to casually leave this conversation before it could go any farther than pleasantries?

"Well, I best get back to it before—" Harry was saved from his attempt at basic human interaction by a sharp scream.

It sounded vaguely of a child's shriek of terror and a bird-of-prey's battle-cry; it even warbled a bit at the end like a distressed songbird. It was also the exact scream Justin always gave when he saw Granger approaching from a distance and had time to work up a good, long shout.

Harry was proven correct when Justin came tearing through a tall hedge bush on the other side of the courtyard like his arse had been set on fire, wailing like a firetruck. Dean and Morag soon followed, Morag holding her robe hem up so it wouldn't obstruct her running and Dean wearing half a suit of armour — that he likely 'borrowed' from the hallway — while the other half was in his arms, both also screaming like lunatics.

Harry saw Granger paused a distance away, likely wearing the expression of confusion and irritation she always affected when Harry and his friends got up to what she called 'absolute nonsense.' Speaking of running away . . .

Harry tipped an imaginary hat at the befuddled older girls, saying, "Ladies," before he climbed out of the fountain and ran, dripping wet, away as fast as he could.

Not two seconds later, he heard the pounding of feet behind him and looked back to realize with astonishment that the two girls were running away with him, confused fright on their faces.

"Why are you running?" he shouted over his shoulder, not slowing down. Smaller than them though he was, Harry was faster.

Craig shot him an incredulous look.

She called, "A herd of first years just ran screaming as if they had just seen the face of evil. I don't care what exactly it was that had you all running, good sense dictates that we run too!"

MacDuff nodded as she panted. They were now streaking through the Charms Courtyard, forcing groups people to jump aside lest they be run over. MacDuff eventually asked in a winded tone, "What are we running from anyway?"

Harry couldn't contain a grin as he thought of Granger's look of anger when confronted with his irreverence.

"Craig wasn't far off the mark! 'The face of evil' is exactly what we should call it."

Morag MacDougal was an Amazon of a girl, standing at a towering 5 feet 8 inches at only eleven
years of age. On a usual day, she braided her brown hair into a mid-length rope down her back, adding onto the no-nonsense attitude she exuded through her firmly pressed uniform and stony expression. Morag was not the sort of girl fuss with her hair or giggle at boys, indeed she was almost agendered in her dealings with other children her age, almost robotic in her polite distance. If one wanted to pick out a young witch to be their model of serious, somber student, they would pick Morag after one glance.

What wasn't known by those that held themselves apart from her by her aloofness was that Morag was actually a very kind girl that was quick to smile and laugh once her aversion to strangers was overcome. Instead of a hate for humanity like most of her dorm mates assumed, it was actually a defensive mechanism to not be hurt by others and their casual cruelty that had her flinty-eyed and stiff-jawed. It was hard to seem easily hurt when one looked as if they could commit murder in cold blood.

It was Morag's unwavering countenance that made her tentative hope at meeting a potential friend go unnoticed. While her heart jumped, her face was as blank as ever.

She had recognized a kindred spirit in the wild-haired boy with genocide in his eyes when they were being Sorted. While her default expression was bored disinterest, she saw that there was more beyond the look of violence, and she had been inwardly triumphant when the same boy — now identified as Harry Potter — had proven her intuition correct by being perfectly personable if not downright cheery not five minutes later when the pressure of being Sorted was alleviated. It was then she concluded that when Harry Potter was nervous, his expression become one of someone on the verge of physical violence.

Nothing came from her insight until nearly a week later when she had woken up unusually early and had decided to relax in the common room instead of laying about since she felt completely awake. She had been sitting a squashy arm-chair, idly reading an article on the life-cycle of the centaur tick, when she heard a suspicious creak from the stairs leading down from the dorms. Not being the sort to get nosy about potentially un-important things, Morag had sunk further down into her chair, easing out of view while still reading her book, so she wouldn't startle whoever it was and they could just continue on without bothering her either.

She didn't expect to see Harry Potter creeping almost silently through the common room with an empty pillowcase in one hand and a house-elf dressed in a tasteful servant uniform piggy-backing on him. It took her a few seconds to process what exactly it was that she was seeing before she did a most un-Morag-like thing — she blurted out, "What in Merlin's name are you doing?"

Potter and his elf froze, becoming the oddest statue ever created. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye before slowly turning his head toward her. The rest of his body then followed suit. They stared at each other for a long moment, Potter, surprised and considering, Morag, bewildered and nervous.

Finally, Potter said, "I didn't know your face could move." This was said in a mildly surprised and wondering tone.

Morag huffed a bit but didn't let herself be deterred.

"What's with the house-elf?"

Potter paused before answering, looking over his shoulder briefly as if he hadn't realized there was an elf on his back.

"Ah, this is Mimsy, my elf," He said as if it explained everything.
It didn't.

Morag was torn between wanting to ask more questions and minding her own business when Potter relieved her of the choice by saying, "Mimsy's friends with some of the Hogwarts' elves so we're off to raid the kitchen for snacks."

There was another pause wherein Potter gave her a speculative looking before smiling almost imploringly.

"Do you want to come?"

Morag was the sort of girl that would have naturally scared other children off through her intimidating height even without it being coupled with her forbidding attitude. She had come to Hogwarts without the hope of making friends with anyone in her year group since the only people that had ever been not put off by her height were those that were years older.

In the face of a short boy — likely the shortest in their year, didn't even look five feet tall, the sort that usually avoided her the most — that was also cursed with terrifying expressions actively requesting to spend time with her, Morag didn't hesitate beyond the two seconds to completely understand what he had just said.

A smile broke out on her face, softening her features. She tossed her book on the table, saying, "I'd love to."

Needless to say Morag then began feeling comfortable enough to stop being so hard-faced all the time. That had been the start of a mutually beneficial friendship.

There had been points in time since then that Morag suspected she might have been getting the better deal in becoming friends with Harry.

With the odd boy came two other potential friends that quickly upgraded from potential to certified though they had their own flavour of personality. Justin Finch-Fletchley was obviously from a well-to-do background with a genteel manner that couldn't be overlooked even when he was shrieking like a little girl and running about. Dean Thomas in contrast came from firmly middle-class with an easy laid-back way about him. And they were both distinctly muggleborn. Toss in Morag from a minor noble family on top of Harry's devil-may-care persona and they were a flock of odd ducks.

But they were still friends and that was more than Morag had ever had. It was because of that that she wasn't sure if she was giving as good as she was receiving when it came to this friendship thing. Harry had brought in two more friends and they had given her reasons to smile and laugh. What had she given them in return? She didn't think she was especially funny or fun to be around. Was she being a bad friend?

It was probably that train of thought that led her to where she was gasping for frantic breath at the moment.

Dean had been curious about the third floor corridor since the Headmaster had warned them away from it. She acknowledge that expressly forbidding something was the surest way to make someone want to do exactly what they had been told not to, but she felt no interest in visiting a place that threatened a violent death. Harry agreed and Justin sided with them on the topic though it was obvious he was curious as well.

It later just so happened that they had been exploring the castle when the staircase shifted while
they were still on it. Being the jumpy sort that Hufflepuffs were known to be, Justin had loped off the staircase as soon as it had settled into its new position, worried that it would move again when he wasn't ready. The remaining three of their quartet obligingly followed after, recognizing the sense in finding stable ground.

That was when Dean realized something that made an unholy grin spread across his face. With too much glee he said, "This is the third floor!"

Justin groaned and smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"If I didn't know the castle moves by itself, I would have accused you of setting this up."

"Me?" Dean said, far too pleased. "As if! If anyone could be responsible for this, it would be Harry."

They had heard from Harry about his astonishing tale of traipsing about the castle on the first day. They were then amused by how well Harry then knew of the school and how he seemed to pull secret passageways and shortcuts from out of his pocket. Morag agreed that if they were pressed to blame anyone, Harry would have been the likeliest suspect.

"I resent that accusation," Harry retorted, a look of mock offense on his face. It melted away under an expression of mischief. "But since we're here now anyway, let's have a look!"

Irritation settled on her face.

"I thought we had agreed that actively seeking out danger was stupid and suicidal?"

Harry shrugged.

"That still stands. But we didn't mean to come to this floor; we were quite literally dropped here. The opportunity has been thrust upon us — we didn't seek it out. Since we're here anyway, why not?"

"A most painful death," Morag ground out, repeating the Headmaster's words from the Sorting Feast. "I'm not sure about you three clowns, but I prefer life, especially when it's not prefaced by 'painful'."

Justin looked like he was on the verge of agreeing with her when Dean eyeballed him challengingly. That of course meant that he would lose his masculine pride if he didn't follow through, so Justin merely straightened, visibly trying to psyche himself up.

"Come on, Morag," Harry continued conjolingly. "It's not like we're going to kick open the door and charge in screaming battle-cries, we're just going to have a little peek at what the fuss is all about and we'll leave. It won't take more than five minutes."

Morag had relented, assuaged in the knowledge that if they had not all been in agreement, they wouldn't have gone in. That satisfied state had promptly flown out the window when — upon hearing Justin almost choke on his gasp as he took the first look — they had all scrambled to get the next look and had fallen in a pile in front of the then wide open door.

A monstrous three-headed dog had greeted them with snarls and rows of sharp teeth. They had ran faster than they ever had, only Harry's quick thinking saving them from being chased as he slammed and locked the door behind them. They ran blindly, not even paying attention to where they were going, the fright of such terrible and immediate death giving strength to their soft limbs, adrenaline preventing them from tiring.

The exhaustion of vigorous exercise catching up to her, Morag didn't even see when Justin pulled up short next to Dean and Harry who were bent over and panting. She ran directly into Justin, causing them to tumble into the other two boys, resulting in another pile-up on the floor.

Groaning, Morag asked, "Why did we sto—?"

The question was cut off when she saw the looming form of Professor Snape staring balefully down at them from his superior height. As they were now, Morag thought he looked exactly how Death would when he came calling.

As the four first years untangled themselves, Snape snapped, "Explain yourselves." His tone was stringent and uncompromising.

In complete contrast to the dread his friends were feeling, Harry was plainly relieved to seen the potions professor.

On his feet again, Harry said, "Thank goodness you're here, sir! There's a vicious beast somewhere off the main staircase!"

Snape's eyes drilled holes into them and his mouth turned down further.

"A beast?" He loomed over them more. "You little miscreants have been snooping around the third floor then. You were expressly forbidden!"

Morag was ready to confess and beg for mercy even though her countenance had turned to stone once again and didn't let a hint of guilt through. Justin and Dean were too terrified of Snape to be expressing anything but terror, but it was Harry that once again was the odd man out.

"The third floor?" He said in a confused tone, urgency leaking away under incomprehension. "Is that were we were?"

Snape's ire deflate a touch.

"You mean to tell me you didn't know?"

"Well, we had been on the stairs when it suddenly changed on us, so we decided to get off. We'd never taken that route before since none of our classes were in that direction so we figured we'd have a look around. See more of the school, you know? That three-headed dog sure does discourage curiosity though."

"You were told to stay away for a reason."

The panic the first years had experienced was fading, the fact that Harry seemed to be talking them out of trouble with Snape calming them. Dean and Justin leaned on each other a bit in relief as they realized that Snape wasn't likely to dismember them. At least, not at the moment.

"What in world is it even doing there?" Harry asked, mind still on the monster dog.

"That is not for you to know, Potter. All you need to know is to stay away and that there are are reasons we are not obligated to give you." Snape lifted his nose at the still panting boys leaning on each other and spared a perfunctory glance at Morag standing stock still like a sinner before their god. He turned back to Harry. "I'll let you off with a warning this time but if I ever catch you lot sniffing around the third floor again, you will suffer my displeasure."
They nodded weakly.

"Now off with you."

With that Snape strode pass them at a determined pace.

They held their breaths as the sound of Snape's footsteps faded.

Dean released his breath noisily and slumped where he stood.

"Christ, I thought we were dead for sure!"

"When that thing tried to eat us or when Snape showed up?" quipped Justin wearily. He smoothed down his dark-brown hair back into it's usual order.

"Does that even matter? At both points we were in danger of dying."

"I suppose that 'a painful death' was not an exaggeration then," Morag grumbled. "How stupid were we to even risk it?"

"None of that," Harry admonished. He was looking unreasonably unruffled after such an ordeal. "What's life without risk?"

"Safe."

"Unexciting," he countered without missing a beat. "I'll agree that the giant beast from hell was a bit more excitement than I was planning, but our curiosity as been cured and we have learned something important."

"Snape's as terrifying as a flesh-eating monster?" Dean asked.

"A spare change of underpants is a must-have in every situation?" Justin chimed in, shifting uncomfortably.

Morag didn't want to even follow that train of thought.

"Rules exist for a reason?" Morag added in her dead-pan voice.

"No, but thank you for trying," Harry said. He jerked his head in the direction they had been running and lead them in a stroll. "We have learned that something massively important and potentially expensive is being kept at Hogwarts' despite the danger to the students. That dog was a guard-dog and it was standing over a trapdoor. If they're going through all this trouble, it's obvious that someone's after it."

Chapter End Notes

I often see Harry only ever making friends with other student after Ron and Hermione severely getting on his goat or completely betraying him. I just don't get it. Other times being friends with other students somehow equates to quite a bit of Ron/Hermione/All of Gryffindor/Dumbledore for some reason/Hogwarts in general bashing. Not every
little change is earth-shattering. Not every childish friendship is going to severely change how a character interacts with other characters. Harry doesn't have to hate his canon best friends to make friends with other people!
If there was one thing that Harry had learned for certain during his relatively short immersion in the wizarding world, it was to never say a bad thing about Quidditch. The first he had ever heard of it was while taking a jaunt through the village nearest his family home, getting familiar with the people that were apparently under his protection. He had been in cognito and had been ambling through the local hangout when his attention had been caught by an energetic conversation a group of lads were having, filled with active gesticulation and sound effects. From the violent movements and worked up tones, Harry had thought they were re-enacting the latest action movie, or whatever the magical equivalent was for a movie.

" — There he was," A wild-eyed young man had said, his copper hair out of place from his enthusiastic retelling. "Damn near five 'undred feet in the air — And this is while it's pourin' down like a coven o' hedgewitches summoned a ruddy flood — and he's jus' hangin' on with only one hand since the other's broken from that Bludger and the wind's too fierce for him to swing back up into his seat! The Gryfalcons' Beaters were circlin' below 'im and gettin' closer, thinkin' to catch him afore he falls, an' then — an' then, you know what he did? The daffy sod swung his legs back like he's about to try to mount about again — and lets go o' the bloody broom!"

Copper-top's friends made sounds of shock and awe. He nodded with vigour.

"I know, right? We all thought he had lost his grip at first but it turned out that mad hatter had seen the Snitch about to fly under 'im and made to catch it with a Suicide Drop. He dropped like a brick and caught the Snitch. He even landed on his feet on the back of the defensive Beater's broom! Most amazin' thing I've ever seen!"

Further eavesdropping and a touch of deductive reasoning later, Harry realized they were not discussing some excessively action-packed film but an actual sport. Hundreds of feet in the air? Clinging to safety by nothing more than a piece of wood? Metal cannonball like projectiles that were shot at other players by use of metal bats? It sounded like low-level guerrilla warfare and the most fun Harry had ever heard of. But there was one thing that bothered Harry:

"The Snitch gets how many points?" he said.

That was when carrot-top's crew finally noticed Harry's presence and then proceeded to berate him for snooping in on private conversation. That of course didn't stop them from confirming the fact that catching the Snitch got 150 points.

A nondescript, dirty-blond boy snickered.

"Where've you been livin' to not know how much a Snitch is worth?"

"Never mind that," Harry countered. "Why does it get so many points? A team that doesn't catch the Snitch could only win if they get at least sixteen goals ahead of the other team — how likely is that to happen?"

"Likelier'n you'd think!" huffed the fiery redhead with offense, obviously the Quidditch expert amongst them. "Keepers got a rough job o' it, mindin' all three of 'em hoops, and if a player gets knocked out with no second to take their place, the team still hasta keep playin' even with tha' missin' position. I remember a game with the Cannons where all their players 'cept the one Seeker was taken out and Gregors still did his damnedest to find the Snitch. Silly sod didn't manage to win o' course but he put up a good show."
Harry considered that for a moment but eventually agreed that being required to continue playing even with missing players, thus increasing the chance of the opposite team to gain the upper hand, was indeed a suitable counter for having a ball be worth 150 points.

He shrugged.

"I suppose that makes sense. Quodpot's easier to understand though."

They rounded on him immediately, and by the looks he was given, one would have thought Harry had made intimations about rounding up their mothers from unseemly places of business and using them most disreputably. With a pack of howling teenagers bellowing after him as he gave chase, Harry swore to himself that he'd never again put down another person's sport, not even accidentally — the chances of being throttled were too high.

Thoughts of Quidditch was once more thrust upon Harry when it seemed the entirety of the first-years were in an uproar over the upcoming flying lessons. Even the cardboard cut-outs from Gryffindor were excited, albeit in their generic, prepackaged way. Seeing them carry on was like watching a B-film set in an American high school, complete with lame one-liners and bleached teeth — it was incredibly unnerving.

That Malfoy snob that Harry had met at the robe shop — and then later once again when Harry was talking the brat's goons into purchasing pre-completed assignments — certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the House teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. Harry took in the tall tales with a grain of salt, thinking that if such accidents had actually happened as often as was bragged, Malfoy would have already been mowed down with air missiles for being an unidentified flying object.

Malfoy wasn't the only one, though: Ron Weasley would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on his brother Charlie's old broom. Harry granted this admission the same skepticism he gave Malfoy, wondering if wizards thought helicopters and hang gliders were the everyday means of travel for Muggles with how often they were mentioned. It was really getting ridiculous. The way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. While Harry was outlining the Gryffindor version of their Charms essay, Morag had told him that Leanne Runcorn from Hufflepuff had been going on about sneaking out when her parents were out to get practice in on her father's broom.

Everyone from wizarding families had talked about Quidditch constantly since the notices had been posted to the bulletin board. Flying, then Quidditch, Quidditch, and more Quidditch — it was like no other sport existed!

What about pegasus racing? What about dueling or beast wrestling? Hell, what about the other broom-related sports? Aingingein also consisted of flying, and there were balls to be thrown and flaming hoops as well! Quodpot was all the rage in the Americas, and Shuntbumps was *jousting in the air*. He'd admit that Swivenhodge and tennis were bastardized forms of each other, but broom racing was a thing; why was there no love? Harry was considering petitioning for school recognized teams for all of these other sports; Quidditch wasn't the only fun to be had and he was eager to be encouraged to dive-bomb someone with the intentions of spearing them with a lance.

Not *all* were eager for flying though. A few girls in Ravenclaw were scared of heights and were squirming at the thought of leaving the ground. Neville Longbottom, the boy with the forever missing toad — seriously, did he actually have one or was he just messing with them? — had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. After watching the boy somehow trip over a tapestry — one that was *still on the wall* — Harry felt she'd had good
reason, since Longbottom managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione 'the face of evil' Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Longbottom was. Flying was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book — not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday, Harry saw a few of them actually fall asleep on her as she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book. Longbottom was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick. Harry wondered why neither of them considered the most logical way of staying on one's broom: firmly grab hold of it — wrap yourself around it in a koala hold if you have to — and sodding *don't let go*.

The mandated day of the flying lesson for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff was actually postponed to the heightened anxiety of the mentioned houses. Madam Hooch was put in the Hospital Wing after being knocked down a flight of stairs by a herd of second years fleeing from Peeves. Normally such a tumble wouldn't be a big deal but the flying instructor had bumped her head on the way down, and Madam Pomfrey wanted to keep her under observation since she was knocked unconscious.

As a means of not wasting more time than necessary, all the first years were assembled during what was supposed to be the Gryffindor/Slytherin lesson. All fifty-eight firsties were milling about the Transfiguration courtyard, waiting for the lesson to begin when Madam Hooch, back on her feet again, strode briskly toward them, a sixth year Prefect nipping at her heels to assist her in keeping them in line.

"What are you all waiting for?" Madam Hooch barked, snapping them to attention. It was clear that she was agitated. "Everyone stand by a broom. Come on, hurry up."

The first years set upon the brooms. They were arranged in four rows with a wider space between the second and third row to make room for the pacing professor. The students organized themselves loosely by House, Ravenclaws beside the Slytherins, since this year's crop of Slytherins had already put themselves on hostile grounds with the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Harry stood next to a passable broom as he looked sideways at the haughty group on his left. He may gleefully take the money of the thicker ones but there was no denying that they were an unpleasant bunch. Such a shame; he was rather fond of the older ones he had met on the train.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch when she saw everyone in place, "and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. A good lot of them did nothing more than twitch a bit though Kevin Entwhistle's did spring up and nail him in the forehead. Morag's did this strange sort of shimmy, rising half way before nose-diving back to the ground. Harry figured that the brooms were sort of like trained animals, responding to command but not when the trainers were uncertain themselves.

It took a few moments, but eventually everyone had their broom in their hands (though Harry did see Stephan Cornfoot covertly picking up his broom by hand when he thought no one was looking). Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry suppressed a smirk when he heard her saying that Malfoy had been holding his incorrectly.

"I've used this grip for years!" Malfoy protested, pinking up with indignity.

Madam Hooch was unimpressed.
"Then you've been doing it wrong for years. The correct hold is like this."

She demonstrated the correct grip and eventually nodded in approval when Malfoy bent his pride enough to mimic her. Straightening, she surveyed the class.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle — three — two —"

Unfortunately, Longbottom was the jumpy sort and kicked off early. Terror blatant on his face, he shot straight up as a geyser went off underneath him.

"Come back, boy!" Madam Hooch shouted, but it was no use, judging by the way he grappled and swerved, it was obvious that Longbottom had lost control of the broom.

Twelve feet, twenty feet, thirty feet off the ground! Harry saw the chubby boy's terrified face look down at the ground growing farther away from him, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and —

"Levioso!"

Harry's wand was in his hand before he knew what he was doing. Longbottom was hovering in mid-air ten feet from the ground, his broom still rising higher and higher without him, an expression of stark relief on his face. When he saw who had him at wandpoint, gratitude made itself known in sobbed words of thanks. Harry slowly guided the boy down to the ground and released the spell when the other boy was at a safe dropping distance.

Longbottom flopped backwards and sucked in gasping breaths as those nearest to him huddled around him and Madam Hooch bustled over to look him over. From across the way, Harry saw Justin face-palm as his ducklings made cow-eyes at Harry. Oh, hell no. He was glad that Longbottom wasn't a grease-spot on the grass but now Harry was wishing he wasn't so widely acknowledge as some sort of messiah; that Jones girl looked like she wanted to extract a sample of his DNA 'for science.'

"A trip to the infirmary for a Calming Draught, I think," the hawk-eyed woman said, easing the boy up into a sitting position. "Come along, lad. You've had enough excitement today."

Pulling the boy to his feet, Madam Hooch pierced Harry with a look.

"Twenty points to Ravenclaw for quick thinking and saving a classmate from harm. Impressive reflexes, Potter." She then turned to address her assistant. "Ease them into the air, Beauregard. When they're ready, let them fly around for the rest of the class. I don't have to tell you to keep an eye out for mischief."

The sixth year boy nodded. As Madam Hooch ushered Longbottom away, he said, "Alright, you lot, let's try that kick off again. On my whistle!"

In between shooting awed looks at the discomfited Harry Potter, the crowd of first years re-adjusted themselves into position once more.

"Three — two — one —"  

Tweet!

In sloppy unison, they kicked off from the ground, some doing well, some wavering a touch, and...
some outright failing. Harry made it into the air easily, smiling in encouragement at Morag who was one of the ones that were wavering.

"Of course you would make this look easy as well," Morag grumbled, a choke-hold on her broom. Her face was pale in contrast to Harry's face that was flushed with excitement.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," said Harry, smiling weakly, ignoring the looks being sent his way. Not good, not good, how to escape?

Morag eye-balled him.

"Let's not kid ourselves here. And what was that spell earlier? That sure wasn't the Hover Charm we learned."

"A precursor to the modern charm," Harry mumbled, surveying the grounds as they drifted. Justin was being coaxed up by Dean twenty feet below them, and some of the girls were playing tag. "Less precise, needing only a swish and jab, and costs more energy, almost thrice the amount. It was made obsolete in the late eighteenth century when a descendant of the spell-creator invented the variation that is currently standard."

"I don't remember reading that in the textbook," Morag frowned.

"It's in the appendix — I've already read the book through a few times."

Most of the class had made it into the air by this point except for a select handful. Among the few was Granger, her hair even bushier than usual from anxiety and embarrassment, jumping up and down ineffectively. She would have been best off with the small crowd surrounding the prefect who was attempting to instruct the stragglers, but she was a few yards back, being taunted by Malfoy and his cronies from mid-air.

Normally the Gryffindors would snap to attention, defending one of their own from insult, but the majority of them were out of earshot, careening about on the other side of the courtyard, and the couple on the ground were too absorbed by the prefect to notice. As it was, the students that did take notice — a handful of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws — were too intimidated from Malfoy's bullying to do anything to help poor Granger.

A desire to escape being stared at coupled with his sense of right and wrong propelled Harry toward the jeering bunch, despite his aversion toward Granger and her repelling ways.

"Need some help, Granger?" Harry asked, puttering forward at a plodding pace, pointedly ignoring her tormentors.

Granger had a look on her face that was torn between her usual expression of wanting to scold him for whatever reason and trying to hold back tears. Her eyes flicked from Harry who was floating there amicably and the green-robed crowd who was now scowling at Harry.

"Help?" she said, as if she'd never heard of such a thing.

"Yes, help — it looks like you're having a bit of trouble getting off the ground."

"As if a filthy brown-noser that spews useless facts to make up for a lack of talent could use a broom anyways!" Malfoy scoffed, put out at being usurped.

His entourage sniggered their support.
"I'm sorry, Malfoy," Morag said, having bobbled after Harry. She rewarded the pointy blond an unimpressed look. "I didn't know that you were included in this conversation."

Malfoy flushed pink with indignation and sneered at Morag.

"And who was talking to you, MacDougal? Do your parents know your associating with the wrong sort?"

"I'll be friends with whoever I want. I don't need anyone's permission, least of all yours!"

"Well, that's nice," Harry said, affecting a look of offense. "I'll admit to being a bit rough around the edges but I'd hardly call myself 'the wrong sort'."

Malfoy looked confused and it was Morag's turn to face-palm.

"He was talking about Granger."

"And here's where I know for certain this is all just a big misunderstanding," Harry replied blithely. "Malfoy has told us quite explicitly how respectable and well-known his family is — talking down about Granger would spit all over that. No one truly respectable would pick on others. Anyone with half a brain knows that true gentlemen never speak ill about a lady, that only insecure low-lives would bully others to compensate for personal failings. Talented, admirable people like the Malfoys don't belittle others, Morag." Harry wagged a reprimanding finger at his friend.

"Malfoy is cream of the crop, his family the best in Britain, he would let his accomplishments speak for themselves, he wouldn't degrade himself by talking big while riding on his father's coattails — the idea is just ridiculous!" With a pleasant smile, Harry addressed the other boy directly. "Isn't that right, Malfoy, old man?"

Morag swallowed a giggle at the blond's tight expression. Without a word further, Malfoy about-faced sharply and flew away before his posse even knew what was going on.

Harry watched the group of Slytherin, his head tilted to the side.

"Was it something I said?" When he didn't get a verbal answer, he looked to Granger who was still standing there, only now she was gaping at them. "As I was saying, you look like you need a bit of help."

"Yes," Granger eventually said, a curious expression Harry didn't comprehend on her face.

"Right, then. Instead of jumping, have you tried pushing away at the ground as if you were pushing away from the side of a swimming pool? That's about the same motion I used to get going."

"A fifty-five foot dive!" Professor Flitwick yelped, leaping from his chair. His eyes widened and he clutched at his throat in shock. "Surely not! He'd be laid up in the Hospital Wing if that was so!"

Beauregard, the prefect that had attended the flying lessons, was quick to assure the disbelieving professor.

"It's true, sir! When I got all the first years in the air, a few of the boys were playing catch with
some bauble and flying pretty high. Two of them knocked into each other and dropped the thing, and Potter shot after it. He caught it not ten feet from the ground and shot right back up without a hitch!"

"Merciful Merlin! Mr. Potter!" The diminutive professor addressed Harry directly. "That was an extremely dangerous thing to do! What if you had broken your neck?"

Harry shuffled a bit in place, fidgeting with the shiny sphere in his hand.

"It didn't seem all that dangerous at the time and Neville would have been heart-broken if his Remembrall was destroyed — his gran sent it to him just this morning!"

"It's admirable that you care so, but I doubt Mr. Longbottom would have felt any better if you had gotten hurt!"

"I say, sir," Beauregard said, looking eager. "The Quidditch team could really use someone with that kind of talent; Charlie Weasley couldn't have made such a catch! Was that your first time on a broom, Potter?"

Harry nodded hesitantly.

"He's got the build for a Seeker as well — light and speedy. I'd love to see him after some training what with him being such a natural at it!"

Professor Flitwick looked intrigued.

"I thought you planned on holding tryouts this Saturday?"

Beauregard nodded.

"I was, sir. The team needs a Seeker and two Chasers. I've got my eye on a pair that might do well as Chasers, but there weren't any promising Seekers that I knew of. With Potter, we might have a real shot at the Cup!"

Harry to join the Quidditch team? Harry was shocked. When he had been thinking about petitioning for other sports teams, he hadn't thought about joining the existing ones. He thought the Quidditch teams would be hugely exclusive in their line-up what with how manic wizards were about the sport. He was also a touch disappointed, he had really wanted to be a Beater.

Flitwick stroked his beard in a contemplative manner.

"It would do my heart some good to see Severus and Minerva's faces should Ravenclaw triumph. Those two go at it like cats and dogs over the Cup." He signed suddenly. "Unfortunately, first years are not allowed on the Quidditch teams. Any chance for Ravenclaw’s victory will have to wait for next year at the earliest."

"Excuse me, sir," Harry said as Beauregard looked heavily disappointed. "I thought the rule was that first years were not allowed to have their own brooms with them. I don't remember reading anything that said explicitly that they weren't allowed on their House teams."

Beauregard perked and looked hopefully at Professor Flitwick. The professor pulled out a darkly-covered book and flicked through it briskly. Finding the section where rules applied to Quidditch teams were, the short man beamed when he found what he was looking for.

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Potter! If you're fine with playing on a school broom, there's no reason at all for you not to be on the team!"
Beauregard's face fell a bit.

"The school brooms aren't exactly in peak condition — some of them are downright dangerous to be on. Surely we could get him a better one?"

"First years are not allowed their own brooms, Mr. Beauregard," Flitwick reminded the crest-fallen prefect.

"That's alright," Harry chimed in, his mind churning out potential solutions to the problem. "I don't mind playing on a school broom, surely a few of them a perfectly fine to use. And maybe a better solution will come to us later?"

Harry had a letter to write.

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Two nights later at dinner, Headmaster Dumbledore stood to make an announcement, a cheery mien making him glow with delight.

"I'm pleased to announce that earlier this evening, Hogwarts received an anonymous donation of twenty-eight new Nimbus Two Thousand brooms for the use of the House Quidditch teams."

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Harry wasn't sure how he kept finding himself in these situations. The thing with the obstacle course was a complete fluke, as was the mess with that cerberus on the third floor. He'd admit that he'd flirted with adventure when his curiosity got the better of him the time with the forbidden corridor, but it wasn't as if he was actively looking for a chance to run for his life when he peeked through that door. What kind of idiot sought out deadly challenges? Certainly not the kind of idiot Harry was.

That didn't change the fact that he was currently gaping like a loon at the sight of a twelve-foot tall monstrosity lumbering it's way down the corridor he had just about to turn into like it was out for an evening stroll.

It was Halloween and Harry had awoken from nap to realise he was late for the Feast. The Feast that was compulsory. Leaping to his feet from the couch he had been sprawled out on, Harry stuffed the essays and worksheets he had finished into his bag and bolted from the quiet nook hidden under the base of a statue of the founders that he had claimed as his study room and den of deceit. Hoping to get to the Great Hall in quickest way possible, he had made use of a secret stairway built into pillar that Filch used to catch students unaware while making rounds.

Harry had been barreling down the staircase, almost flying through the opening that was illusioned to look like plain wall when armoured green legs the size of three of him stomped by, the ground quivering as it passed. He had fallen backwards onto his rear when he jerked back violently, covering his mouth with both hands instinctively as to not make any noise that could attract the attention of whatever that was.

What the hell was it? Why was it in the school? These were the questions Harry wanted answered
as well as 'Is that BLOOD on it's club?' and 'Oh, my god, oh, my god, why?'

Harry might have decided to camp out the rest of the night in that hidden alcove if it hadn't been for the sharp, girlish shriek that came from the direction that the beast had bumbled. Harry was many things, many of them uncomplimentary, and he wasn't ashamed to say that he was uninterested in risky ventures to the point of being outright slothful, but one thing he wasn't was a coward that let people get hurt right in front of him. Without further thought, Harry sprang from his hiding place and sprinted toward the direction of the scream.

Streaking down the corridor, Harry saw a door flung wide open. Sounds of smashing and a student shouting in terror rung out. Wand clenched in hand, he sped through the open doorway.

It was a washroom. Stalls were crushed, wood and porcelain scattered every which way. Sinks were smashed, their pipes spraying water widely. In a dark corner under the last remaining sinks, Hermione Granger was cowering. The whatever it was was snarling, his club plowing indiscriminately through whatever was in arm reach.

Harry levitated a chunk of porcelain and chucked it at the monster's back. It roared in outraged and began to turn.

"Granger, move!" Harry bellowed, flinging more broken pieces of something. Granger scrabbled to the side, taking shelter underneath an already destroyed stall, hiding out of sight.

The towering creature blinked stupidly with incomprehension at it's small opponent before it rushed at Harry. The boy leaped backward, shooting out a knock-back jinx, but it did no good; the spell might as well have been a breeze for all the good it did. A giant club was swung in his direction from above but he jumped to the side, missing certain death by a hairs breadth.

Club flying up again, Harry darted forward toward the thing, throwing it's swing off-balance as it overshot and managing to get behind it. He caught up another piece of debris, a jagged side of wood this time, and sent it soaring with all the strength he had as the beast got itself turned around once more. Howling in pain, the thing staggered backward as the spike impaled it through it's side.

Granger gasped and squealed behind clenched hands but Harry didn't pause long enough to react beyond nailing the thing again with whatever he could get. Its club was flung up from its grasp as it staggered and Harry took the opportunity presented to him.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club was caught mid-fall. Even as it was caterwauling in agony, the beast gaped at his floating club, not understanding how such a thing could happen. Harry jerked his wand down sharply, a satisfying crack cutting off the groans of pain. Without further fuss, the creature slumped to the ground, making the floor shake again with the weight of its fall.

Harry dropped to the ground as well, the relief of still being alive making his knees weak. He slumped against the lavatory wall and ran a shaking hand through his sweaty hair. The silence that followed was almost deafening.

It was Granger that finally broke the silence. Crawling out from her hiding place, tears still dripping from her face, she stuttered, "Is — is it . . . dead?"

Harry sucked in a breath before releasing it haltingly. He cast a weary eye to the still form not five feet away from them.

"I don't think so," he said. "That stab wound looks bad, but I think it's just unconscious."
Harry climbed to his feet, swaying slightly. He turned to Granger and offered a hand to help her stand.

"Let's go. We should tell the teachers and I don't want to be here if that thing wakes up again."

Granger had just been eased onto her feet when a sudden slamming and loud footsteps made them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape immediately bent over the troll, taking it its state. Professor McGonagall was looking incredulously at Granger and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry; her lips were white.

"What on earth were you thinking?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. "You're lucky you weren't killed! Why aren't you two in your dormitories?"

It was apparent to anyone who looked at her that Granger was in no state to answer questions. Seeing no reason not to, Harry said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but why would we need to be in our dormitories now? Isn't it still dinnertime?"

McGonagall's fury cooled to irritated confusion.

"Do you mean to tell me that you weren't in the Great Hall earlier? Where were you, then?"

"I fell asleep after finishing my homework, ma'am. I was in a room down the corridor from Ravenclaw Tower that my friends and I use to study. I saw I was late for the feast so I was going down immediately."

"How did all this happen, then?" Snape asked, his voice sharp and he cast a dark look over the bleeding beast.

"Well, I was coming down a set of stairs I found behind a hidden wall. That thing passed by me but it didn't see me, and I was going to wait until it was gone to go find a teacher, but I heard Granger scream and came running. She was in here, and the room was already pretty smashed up, so I distracted it a bit enough for her to find a better place to hide, and then I just kept flinging whatever I could get at it.

"It didn't react to a knock-back jinx, so I shot it with a plank of wood. It was in enough pain for me to knock it out with its own club though Granger was a bit worried I might have killed it. Did I kill it, sir?" Harry said, tugging at the hem of his sleeve in worry.

McGonagall and Quirrel both looked to Snape for his answer but the hard-faced man shook his head.

"The pike is in deeply but it's merely unconscious."

McGonagall shook her head in distress.

"And why were you here, Miss Granger?"

Granger looked up miserably, her expression exhausted.

"I — I wasn't at the feast either. I've been feeling poorly since Charms so I've been in here since."
The Transfiguration professor breathed deeply from her nose.

"I don't think I have to tell you how extremely lucky the both of you are to still be alive. Are either of you hurt?"

The two looked to each other but shook their heads.

Harry said, "Granger might have gotten a bit scratched up from ducking under the rubble but I'm okay beyond being a bit winded."

"I'm fine," Granger assured when McGonagall made to check her over. "A little dirty and wet but alright."

"You will be going to the Hospital Wing for shock treatment all the same. Madam Pomfrey would be furious if she didn't get the chance to look you over. Potter, ten points for quick thinking. Another twenty for saving another student from harm. Not many people could take down a fully-grown mountain troll and live to tell the tale! I trust you have things under control here?" The last statement was directed at Professor Snape, still prodding at the now identified troll.

The man in question nodded tersely.

McGonagall nodded jerkily. Ushering the two first years out, she said, "Very well, then. Off to the Hospital Wing with the both of you."
The thing about being on the Quidditch team that Harry hated the most was the fact that he was expected to put everything aside for practices including homework and spending time with his friends. Because he had started to think of the students in the way that was stereotyped (that brainwashing substance had to be in the air instead of the water — had he started conjuring his water months ago. A gas-mask would be his next investment), Harry had thought the reason Ravenclaw hadn’t won the Cup in several years was because the academic types didn’t really get into sports. How very wrong he was. It was not lack of passion that thwarted Ravenclaw, it was that fact that they came up with elaborate plays that looked good on paper but were supremely difficult in practice.

Harry was baffled when he deciphered Beauregard’s plays. Dip, and swerve, and roll, and . . . he had to do what with his leg? Bend back at a . . . that was certainly a hellish angle — he wasn’t sure if a human spine was capable of contorting that far. And that was only for the Seeker position; the Chasers were told to do such maneuvers that wouldn’t be out of place in a circus act. Why they were going through so much trouble, Harry didn’t know since it was well known that the main contenders for the Cup, Gryffindor and Slytherin, stuck to plays that were infinitely more straight-forward. Oh, sure, Slytherins played tricky, and Gryffindor’s Captain Wood was all for almost mechanical teamwork, but Harry doubted either of those teams had pulled out a protractor during training.

After witnessing a Ravenclaw Quidditch practice, Dean praised Harry’s flexibility and asked if he had ever taken gymnastics.

“I have better things to do than balance on my thumbs and turn myself into a pretzel,” Harry denied, holding a cold compress to his lower back as they hobbled to dinner. Or rather, Harry hobbled as his friends hauled away the stretcher they had brought along after hearing him describe previous practices.

“You did a jolly good job of it either way,” said Justin, patting Harry on the back in an encouraging manner. Harry swatted the hand away and hobbled faster.

“Are sure you don’t want to go to the Hospital Wing?” asked Morag. She had been eying Harry critically since he had stumbled out of the locker rooms.

“I’m just a bit sore,” Harry countered, gamely trying to straighten up. He didn’t notice as Dean came up behind him, stretching out an arm. “Nothing to see the Madame Pomfrey about. I’ll be right as rain in the morn— ACK!”

Harry fell forward and landed in a twitching heap on the ground. Dean stood wide-eyed and frozen with his hand outstretched, sheepishly retracting the limb when Morag and Justin speared him with a severe look.

“This could be considered self-harm,” Morag agreed, hauling Harry’s torso onto the medical equipment. “Maybe even bullying too.”

With a tap of her wand, the stretcher and its burden became feather-light.
Justin and Dean lifted Harry and began hauling him away.

“Whatever it is, it needs to be curbed,” Harry rasped, sucking wind as he caught his breath.

From that practice on, Harry had done his damnedest to go through the least amount of effort he could manage without being kicked off the team. He refused to be measured, and even outright ran off when the captain told him to try to put his head between his knees by bending backwards instead of forward. Harry wasn’t sure when he’d ever need to be able to perform such a feat, but it would probably be if he ever decided that magic wasn’t for him and ran off to join a traveling freak-show instead.

Beauregard become visibly bothered by Harry’s lack of cooperation, especially since his insubordination was encouraging the others to cut back as well, but there was little the older boy could do about it since Harry proved time and time again that he was the best Seeker Ravenclaw currently had to offer. Beauregard had tried to frighten Harry into compliance by bringing potential Seekers in to threaten his position, but that plan backfired on the captain when Harry caught all the Snitches released single-handedly, even snatching one up from the top of a competitor’s head. He was slightly appeased when Harry did simple variations of the gymnastics originally taught to him, but he was denied when he tried to get the younger boy to jump from broom to broom mid-flight.

The absurdity of some people.

“Beauregard, I’m not sure if we’re playing the same game here. This is Quidditch, right? I’m pretty sure my job is to catch the Snitch, maybe interfere with the other team’s plays if I need to. I admit to being new to all this but I don’t think they do yoga on their brooms in the professional leagues.”

Granger had been subdued since the stint with the troll. She still trailed after Harry and his friends when she could get at them, but no longer did she fling questions at him, nor did she try to show him up in classes as she had been since the thing with the feathers. It honestly pulled Harry’s paranoia down from Vietnam veteran to cat burglar, but it also concerned him since it was obvious the change wasn’t completely good for Granger herself. The hostility her housemates felt toward her lessened since she no longer choked them with facts and figures, but none of them had come forward to befriend her.

Harry wouldn’t have given it much thought if he hadn’t seen the miserable look on Granger’s face one time in Charms when they needed to pair up and no one volunteered to partner with her. Harry wasn’t sure why Granger so desperately wanted someone to be friends with her; he liked having friends now that Dudley wasn’t around to bully other kids away, but Harry had been perfectly fine before without them and didn’t yearn for them when he went without. To Harry, friends were like an apple pie a la mode; wonderful the way it was, but still very good without the ice cream on top. Granger clearly didn’t feel the same way.

He hadn’t missed the way Granger looked expectantly at him every once and a while when excited classmates shook him down for the story of how he killed the troll. Whenever she overheard, she would perk up and listen as Harry explained what had happened for the nth time. Likely she expected them to be thrown into friendship by the binds of shared trauma. Too bad for her that Harry didn’t live a day without some sort of traumatic event happening; he was desensitized to the usual trappings of conventional bonding.
Harry had toyed with the idea of being friendly with the girl, even jotted down some things they could do together if Granger ever became aware of her social deficiencies and corrected them. The idea was trashed when he overheard Brown offering to teach Granger ways to do her hair, and instead of accepting Granger scolded the other girl for wasting time on such frivolous magic. Harry lit the page on fire without a second thought.

Harry was frustrated out of his mind at the project he had spread out before him. Surely such a little thing shouldn’t take so much effort! Why was such a simple matter so difficult to achieve? Well, he supposed that if such a thing were really as simple as he had originally thought, it would already be in existence and he wouldn’t have had to create it himself.

A self-inking dictation quill with an auto-correcting nib: was that too much to ask?! He had the ink cartridge from he had salvaged from a self-inking quill he had squeezed to destruction (by accident!), a dictation quill he had asked Ailsa Craig, the prefect he had scared into running from Granger, to buy for him when she went to Hogsmeade, and an auto-correcting nib he had found under his bed; he had everything he needed to make his desired writing implement! So why wasn’t it coming together?

It was two hours after dinner and most of Harry’s dorm-mates had already turned in for the night. He had been at his bed-side desk since the last class, forgoing dinner altogether to experiment with his writing tools and snack on the fruit he kept in his satchel. He was certain he was on the brink of genius when he started. Four hours later, he was still on the brink but it still remained just out of reach.

Harry looked sternly at the unattached parts sprawled indolently on the desk he used to draw up the homework he did for his customers. He wasn’t having any trouble finishing all the work on time or anything, indeed he could easily pick up a few more jobs without breaking a sweat, but the fact of the matter was that he could be far more efficient with his time with the quill (or quills) he wanted. Efficiency with time would mean he’d have more opportunity to laze about or come up with other methods of money-making, and Harry was all about lazing about and rolling in the dough.

After discovering what a relief it was to not be pinned down with more chores and tasks than there were hours in a day, Harry had resolved to do as little as possible while still achieving the tasks he set for himself. No wasted movement, no extra fluff, efficiency in everything, this was his new life mandate. This was the reason he was unimpressed with Beauregard’s plays, the reason he was not going to try to turn Granger into a semblance of socially-acceptable human-being, the reason he absolutely needed the quill that was refusing to be built.

He had managed to attach the ink cartridge to the body of the quill and locked down the nib in place, but the handling was awkward, and it all fell apart a few lines in. No only that, it was unattractive as well, as much a mockery of nature as Frankenstein’s monster. Maybe he could charm a Muggle pen? No, pen didn’t work well on parchment, nor would the magic stick very well to it, being plastic and rubber.

Harry girded himself up. He wasn’t about it let a quill get the better of him, he’d figure out how to do what he wanted and that was that. Hell, once he got it right, he’d make multiple of them and then make it so they copied handwriting as well! And when he achieved that, he’d put it on the damn market and call it the Potter Pen!
Resolved, Harry took up the parts once again and threw himself into invention with all the fervour of a religious terrorist.

A statue of the historically famous witch, Wendelin the Weird, was stood off the main corridors of the fourth floor, next to an unobtrusive door that led to a disused part of the Library. Wendelin’s statue portrayed her in the position that had her making history, standing tied to a stake, stone flames frozen in a stony dance at her feet. Her expression was tickled, thoroughly amused despite her position. Indeed, history books would tell that her amusement came because of her position, tied up and burning all.

Normally, any student that passed through this corridor would barely give their surroundings a glance, too busy with leaving the bland area behind. Indeed, even with Wendelin cackling at her immolation, the corridor was empty of any portraits or tapestries, being one of the dourest sections of the school. It was because of this, coupled with the fact that the corridor didn’t connect to any of the other corridors where classes took place, that students rarely passed through, not even realizing that the door they took for an entrance to a broom closet (if they took any note of it at all) was actually a way into the Restricted Section of the Library that bypassed the protections keeping the students out.

It was in that same corridor that something exceedingly odd was happening. Wendelin’s skirt — reaching the ground as per the mode of dress back when she was alive — was being lifted from the base of the statue, revealing a pair of luminescent eyes and a dark head of hair peeking out from between stone ankles. This was not the birth of another statue as some might think if they had been partaking in questionable substance, this was Harry Potter yet again trying to figure out where the hell he was.

“Where the hell am I?” Harry grumbled. He carefully pulled himself out from behind the cloth trap-door he discovered after being tripped down one of his usual hidden staircases and sliding down an incline much like one would find at a McDonald’s play area. He scrambled up far enough that he could lift himself to sit on the ledge.

He took in the sight of the statue he found himself sitting underneath, the way he was half laying underneath it and the way the cloth that was supposed to be stone skirt bunched around his waist. He flushed a head-explooding red and shuffled backwards as fast as he could.

“This isn’t what it looks like!” he exclaimed to the empty corridor, frantically looking left and right. His blush died down when he realized there was no one around to witness his apparent molestation of school property, sighing in relief and slumping against the wall. Thank the powers that be for little mercies.

He had never been in this corridor before, nor did he recognize the landmarks of the other corridors where they intersected. Based on the fact that he had fallen down the stairs and then slid downward, he would have claimed that he was somewhere on the lower floors, but he wasn’t 100 percent ready to stick with the claim seeing as he had once walked up a hidden stairwell from the fifth floor and ended up in the basement.

Harry would have eventually chosen to follow the corridor left or right if it hadn’t been for the smell of books hitting his nose while we was brushing himself off. He had grown very accustomed to the scent of wizarding books during his stay at his family home as well as frequent visitation to the school library; Harry knew books when he smelled them. That he could detect the scent of
parchment coming from the door next to the statue he had unintentionally harassed made him curious. A room filled with books? Was it an old classroom?

Harry teetered over to the door and found that it was open. Wondering at his luck, he pulled it open and was greeted by the sight of towering shelves of books stretched out before him. Those shelves looked mightily familiar. Harry cautiously entered, noticing the window he always sat under while studying in the library off in the distance. Judging by the positioning, he would be standing in... no... It couldn’t be... was he in the Restricted Section?!

Harry muffled his delighted yelp with both hands, bouncing on his feet. This was way too good to be true. He had been scheming on how to get in here since the beginning of the year! He had been chomping at the bit for a chance since he had first walked pass the gated section and saw a fascinating title just at the ending the shelf row, and had been denied the chance to get at it by the oppressive Madame Pince.

But he was in! Here was his chance! Fascinating things made all the more interesting by the fact he wasn’t supposed to have them!

A title popped out at him. *The Element Encyclopaedia of 5000 Spells.* Yes, please, don’t mind if he does.

The day of the Ravenclaw vs Slytherin game came more quickly than Harry had anticipated. The day was freezing, cold enough for snow but not enough moisture in the air. The wind blew frigid and dry, making Harry quiver down to his bones even while he was bundled up as much as he could without hindering his movement. It was the most anticipated game after the Gryffindor vs Slytherin game that happened earlier, but Harry couldn’t work up as much enthusiasm as before while he was losing feeling in his fingers.

It was Ravenclaw’s second game of the season, and Beauregard had been tearing into them with plays and formations of various difficulty after witnessing how Slytherin had stomped all over Gryffindor after incapacitating a Chaser and having their Beaters bully the Seeker away from any glance of the Snitch. Harry had heard that Captain Wood had tried to drown himself in the showers afterward; he wasn’t sure how he felt about going up against a team that so appallingly did whatever they could to brow-beat their opponent. Hopefully, they would underestimate him and devote their harassment to other players.

The game started well enough. Everyone got in the air and into positions with no mishap, though people had finally noticed that there was a body in the air far smaller than was usual and excited, disbelieving cries were called out when they realised that it was Harry. Beauregard had wanted to keep Harry as a sort of secret weapon and kept him on reserve for Ravenclaw's first game so that he could witness a true match before he would be expected to participate. Judging by the bewildered and unimpressed looks from the Slytherin team, Harry had been secret for certain, though how much of a weapon he’d end up being was still up for debate.

Harry flew high, staying out of the way and getting a bird’s eye lookout for the Snitch. The Slytherin Seeker, Terrence Higgs was doing a form of the same, though he was doing so more leisurely, obviously not taking Harry for much of a threat.

“Slytherin in possession,” Lee Jordan was saying, “Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers and speeds
toward the — wait a moment — was that the Snitch?”

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

There it was! In a great rush of excitement Harry dove downward after the streak of gold. A blur of green shot toward him from the right — Higgs had seen it, too.

Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch — all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs — he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead — he put on an extra spurt of speed —

WHAM!

A roar of rage echoed from the Ravenclaws below — Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry’s broom spun off course, holding on for dear life.

“Foul!” screamed the Ravenclaws, doubled ferociously by Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Ravenclaw. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Harry growled in frustration, glaring at the larger boy in irritation as he flew by.

“What was that for?” Harry called, making a face at Flint.

Flint grinned unpleasantly in reply.

“All part of the game, Potter! Best get used it it!”

Harry huffed and pointedly flew away.

Both sides scored a few goals as the Seekers circled the field, eager to end the game and get out of the cold. Harry had noticed that Higgs was trembling as much as he was, just as lacking in body fat as the younger boy.

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened: His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall and his panic had him gripping the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. What the hell was going on? These brooms were new, they weren’t supposed to be defective!

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off! But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off, so what the hell was happening?

Harry tried to turn back toward the Ravenclaw goal posts — intent on telling Beauregard to call a time-out — and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. No matter how he jerked, he couldn’t turn it at all; he couldn’t direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

“Gah!” he yelped, drawing attention away from the scoring Slytherins. Fingers were pointed at him from the stands, sounds of concern popping up and Harry was tossed about.

“I say!” said Jordan, worry in his tone. “Potter’s really tossing about! Is something wrong with his broom?”
No answers were offered as Harry was bucking and shaking like he was riding a mechanical bull, but the near violent jerks spoke for themselves.

His broom suddenly began to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on. A wail of distress was heard as he hung on by the skin of his teeth. Then the whole crowd gasped as Harry’s broom gave a wild jerk and Harry was swung off of it. It was only by a tight grip of his guiding hand that managed to keep hanging on. The broom shuddered further but still did not dislodge Harry from his death-grip.

The other players began to abandon their positions in favour of hovering closer to him, hopefully to catch him should he finally fall. Even some of the Sytherins drifted over, though Flint did score a few more times while no one was stopping him before edging his way over.

Well, this wasn’t how he expected to die but it was a good a way as any.

“Morag!” Harry bellowed.


A yip of shock was his answer, before his friend pushed her way to the front of the Ravenclaw crowd with single-minded ferocity.

“What is it!?” his friend cried, terror in her voice.

Harry’s face was solemn even as his eyes tracked the glint of gold he had caught sight of when his broom began to heave about.

“My Will is in my uniform-robe pocket. Take it to Gringotts and divide my vaults in three. Hedwig goes to the person that can explain how magnets work.”

“What are you saying, Harry?!” wailed Morag, her face a picture of distress and disbelief.

Harry swung his legs back until he was parallel to the ground.

And then he let go of his broom.

“HARRY!” The stadium echoed with screams as the boy plummeted.

“Tell Mimsy I love him!”

“**Harry James Potter, how dare you do such a recklessly foolish thing?! Do you know how much you scared the life out of me?!**”

Harry was stretched out on a bed in the Hospital Wing, his three best friends berating him with a tenacity rarely seen outside of jungle cats tearing into their prey. It was after the Quidditch game which actually ended in Ravenclaw’s favour; — 230 to 120. Harry had caught the Snitch during his free-fall plunge, landing on Warrington’s broom with barely concealed glee even as his backside ached from the decidedly ungentle landing. Warrington had gaped at him as Harry’s team-mates converged on them, bundling Harry off within their midst, looking him over for injury.

“When I said ‘die trying,’ Potter,” Beauregard had said after checking over the boy himself, “I
didn’t mean *die* trying.’’

The rebukes for letting himself almost fall to his death were cut short when Harry had thrust the still struggling Snitch under Beauregard’s nose, making the older boy go cross-eyed with wonder.

“You caught the Snitch,” Beauregard had mumbled, wide-eyed. Grinning like a maniac, he turned back to the waiting crowd. He bellowed, “HE CAUGHT THE SNITCH!”

Madame Hooch had already landed and verified that the Snitch had indeed been caught. Caught between elation and fright, the crowd (excluding the Slytherins) hollered and cheered. Harry had been carted off to see Madame Pomfrey before he could make a break for it, and Morag had been ripping him a new one the moment she was within scolding distance.

“Here now, Morag,” Harry wheedled. “I knew what I was doing, Beauregard had me practice doing jumps like that during practice!”

Justin made a sound of disbelief.

“I was under the impression that you told him flat out that you wouldn’t do any foolishness like that.”

Harry winced.

“Alright, fine, so I’ve only done it a few times, but think of my options! It was either jump or get thrown off! Better I go on my own terms than with no choice.”

“What was going on with your broom anyway?” Dean piped up. “Did something happen when Flint slammed into you?”

Harry shook his head.

“Worse have been done to lesser quality brooms and nothing like that has happened. I have no idea what was going on.”

Morag huffed in frustration.

“I doesn’t make any sense! If it were anywhere else, I’d say the broom was being jinx’d! But who would be able to, let alone want to? Harry can be insufferable (‘Hey!’), but he hardly incites murderous intentions.”

“So we have no idea what happened?” Justin asked, crossing his arms unhappily.

“Well, like I said, it was like someone jinx’d the broom, but who hates Harry enough to want to almost kill him?”

Harry thought about it seriously.

“Would you like a list of everyone, or would a list only including those that can do magic be enough?”
A Treasure Trove of Trouble

The possible treasure hidden on the third floor had been prodding at Harry’s brain since he realised its possible presence. Harry had been denying himself the chance to go snooping for peek at time, reminding himself that being chewed up by a three-headed dog wouldn’t be a fun way to go and that riches were all well and good if it didn’t kill you to get to it. The temptation driving him batty came to a head when he was reading up on mythology of Hades — Greek sorcerer turned muggle deity of riches, thus Harry’s hero — and discovered that Hades’ kingdom had been guarded by the original Cerberus.

Further reading into the matter of the Hades’ guard-dog informed Harry that the beast was dealt with in several different ways by a handful of yahoos bonkers enough to tangle with creature twice the size of a mammoth. Herakles wrestled it into submission as a part of his Twelve Labours, but Harry wouldn’t dream of trying to do so as well unless he was the size of Hagrid. Aeneas followed behind a god-possessed oracle that drugged Ceberus into sleeping, but that option came with the guilt of being a drug-dealer. Theseus’ and Sisyphus’ ways were also a bust since they required outside help from someone already in control of the dog; Harry wasn’t about to let any professor know he was thinking of entering their metaphorical underworld.

Harry was on the verge of giving up when he came across the story of Orpheus. And then promptly wished he hadn’t spent so much time going over other methods. Orpheus got around the Ceberus by playing a bit of music, putting it to sleep. Why hadn’t the stupid book said so sooner? Harry couldn’t fall to sleep that night for imagining how easy it would be to sneak past the cerberus if he could get his hands on an instrument or a music box. Maybe he could even sing! Would the beast like a lullaby? Who cared what it would take if he could see what all the fuss was about! Harry resolved to hop to it as soon as he could.

In the morning, Harry remembered that life was important, so he couldn’t go bursting in on the monster with only a song in his heart as protection. He’d have to find some music equipment and see what would work before even thinking about flying down that trap-door to find whatever treasure awaited. He wasn’t one for adventure but he really wanted to know what they were going through so much trouble for.

He just had to get an instrument first.

“Alright team!” Harry barked, tossing his book onto the table with a resounding THUMP!

His friends jumped, Justin even shrieking a little. They looked up from their assignments with wary expressions on their faces.

The four of them were holed up in their hidden nook on the seventh floor, finishing up the last of their homework for the week. It was Friday already and they were all looking forward to goofing off for the weekend. Justin had been absorbed in a Transfiguration worksheet and Dean and Morag had been helping each other with a Defense essay when Harry bounded in with a book the size of his torso held on top of his head like an indigenous woman carrying a jar of water.

“What is it?” asked Justin, his tone as hesitant as his expression.

“I’m glad you asked, Justin, ol’ pal, ol’ chum!” said Harry, the merry look on his face belied by the power stance he had over his flopped open book. “No doubt you’ve been thinking about visiting the third floor again—”
Three heads were shaken fervently in denial.

“—And no doubt you’ve been despairing about how to get past the cerberus,” Harry continued blithely, flipping through the pages. He made a sound of triumph and smacked the page he had landed on. “Well, I’m here to tell you today that you no longer have to yearn fruitlessly for such an impossible task; I’ve come up with a way for us to easily slip past the beast and discover what wonders lie beyond!

“Who’s with me?” asked Harry putting a fist to his hip and thrusting the other into the air.

Justin and Morag exchanged glances while Dean avoided eye contact.

“Harry . . .” Dean started, not looking away from his essay. “I’m all for doing cool stuff but that dog was straight out of Hell, man. I almost wet myself, I was so scared.”

“Justin did wet himself,” Morag chimed in.

Justin flushed the colour of bubblegum.

“I thought we agreed we’d never speak of it!”

Harry deflated.

“But, but!” He flapped his hands helplessly. “It’d be so easy this time! All we have to do is play it some music and it’ll fall straight to sleep! It says so right here in this book!”

Morag eyed him carefully.

“And where did you find that book?”

Harry fidgeted with the corner of a page.

“We–ell . . .”

Morag frowned and reached for Harry’s book.

The short boy pulled it out of her reach and hugged it to his chest, looking like a toddler clutching a picture-book.

“Nowhere important really! Just in the library of course!”

“Harry. . .” the warning was distinct.

“Alright, alright, I got it out of the Restricted Section. There, are you happy?”

“The Restricted Section?!!” she squawked. "How did you even get in let alone check it out?”

Harry assumed a haughty mien, turning his nose up.

“I have my ways,” he replied vaguely.

“You mean you sneaked in and nicked it when no one was looking,” said Dead, trying to suppress a grin.

Harry waved off his words.

“You say potato, I say rutabaga. The point is,” he carried on when Justin and Morag made signs
of protest. “I have it on good knowledge that a little music will send the beastie right to sleep even with us directly under its noses, and we’ll be able to see what they’ve got in that trapdoor.”

“Why do we want to know?” asked Justin. “It doesn’t seem worth the trouble.”

‘Doesn’t seem worth the trouble,’ Harry echoed, looking at the Hufflepuff as if he was an octopus climbing a tree. “Think about how much it must be worth, man! It’s being protected by a XXXX Class Magical Creature on top of being behind wards as old as England and known to be as secure as the Ministry of Magic. If it’s worth all the security, it’s worth a few moments of our time to get a peek at it!”

“But will the pleasure of just finding out what it is and nothing else be worth sneaking past that XXXX Class Magical Creature into what might be even more security, thus risking punishment on top of injury?” Morag countered.

“I’m with Morag on this,” said Dean.

“But I wanna know,” Harry groaned, plopping down on a seat and dropping his head to the table.

Justin pat his shoulder in a consoling manner.

“Maybe they’ll tell us about it at the end of the year.”

“Unlikely,” Morag shot down before Harry could even look hopeful. She turned back to her essay. “They might tell us when the danger’s over but they won’t be telling us what they’re hiding. Pass me my blue ink would you, Dean?”

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Harry was not one to be discouraged when he made up his mind about something. The cerberus’ weakness for music was a total life-hack and he wasn’t about to let it go to waste just because his friends didn’t understand that riches beyond imagination must be hiding just out of their reach.

He resolved to stake out the third floor corridor when he discovered that the teachers had something of a rotation going on to patrol the floor against nosy buggers like Harry. More often than not it was Mr. Filch and his cat that watched it, the teachers too busy with classes and grading to put more hours in.

It was his fourth night of observing from inside a sort of air vent in the ceiling — one he had shuffled through on the first day of school — and he had only the bone-structure of their schedule figured out. Filch was inconsistent in timing when he got to the forbidden corridor and the teachers popped in without rhyme nor reason. Hagrid had stopped by a few times, likely to feed the beast, but other than that, not one adult seemed to do any planning for their patrol time.

It was almost curfew. He had been grumbling to himself about the tight fit of the vent for ten minutes already and a new staff member hadn’t been seen for twenty minutes already. Harry was about to call it a night when he saw the oddest sight.

A hunched-back one-eyed witch statue was not far off from his vent. He had never given it any more attention than an idle once-over as it was much like any other statue in the school. In this case, it was doing something very uncharacteristic for a Hogwarts’ statue; its hunch was splitting open,
revealing a hidden tunnel.

Harry slowly pulled open the vent, grappled down a tall suit of armour and then hid behind it to get a better look.

Out of the witch’s back came a pair of identical redheads, ones Harry had seen quite often when buddyng up with Dean and his two best Gryffindor friends at the Gryffindor table. Fred and George Weasley heaved themselves out of the witch as if they did it every day, not even bothering to glance around in fear of being discovered. This of course backfired on them when they made to walk back to the door that opened to the Grand Staircase and immediately saw the wide-eyed face of Harry Potter gaping at them.

They stared at each other a moment, both parties too shocked to say anything.

“I say, Fred,” one of the twins said. “Didn’t you say the floor was clear?”

“It was,” the other replied, flabbergasted. “No one was on this floor not half a minute ago!”

“Then how did Potter here manage to get here in those few seconds?”

Both twins pinned Harry with a piercing look, as if they were trying to laser him into answering.

Harry squirmed under the attention.

“I’m not sure how you would know but I was technically one floor up until just now. I saw that statue acting up and wanted to have a look.”

“Now how could you know about the statue—?”

“—if you were one floor up?”

“And how did you get down here so fast—?”

“—when the stairs are all the way out there?”

Harry had heard them finish each others’ sentences before but never had it made him feel overwhelmed before.

“Oh, um, there’s a vent over there.” Harry waved in the general direction of where he had been. “It pretty much goes all over the school. I was curious about the teachers patrolling this corridor and wanted to have a look.”

The two took in the sight of the vent with unconcealed incomprehension. They shared a quick glance before looking back to Harry. Sly grins were on their faces.

“Well, well—”

“—a fellow mischief-maker!”

“How did you know about the vents?”

“We’ve never heard anything about them before!”

“It was a bit of an accident,” Harry admitted. “Got lost and wound up in the walls, trying to find my way back through all sorts of weird hidden rooms. There’s an amazing amount of secret passages and staircases all over the school.” He gave them a wry smirk. “Not that I have to tell you two that.”
“We didn’t realize there were more passages than we already knew about,” admitted one twin, likely George since he had called the other one Fred.

“That vent certainly wasn’t on the map,” added Fred.

Harry was confused.

“Map?” Did they give out maps of the castle in Gryffindor?

The twins grinned at him gleefully. As one, they threw arms over his shoulders and lead him in the direction of the Grand Staircase.

“How about an exchange, little trouble-maker? You tell us what you know of the secret passages and we’ll tell you what we know.”

Out from a cloud drifting across the ceiling of the Great Hall, a rope ladder unfurled until it ended just three feet off the ground, halfway between the wall and the Slytherin fifth-years seated with their backs to the wall. The fifth-years mentioned didn’t notice the odd occurrence, too absorbed in their afternoon meal to notice anything besides their plates. Everyone else on the other hand — the Slytherins not too distracted by food, the students of the other Houses, the ghosts that were drifting by, the professors supervising the meal — gaped at the sight. Like a prelude to the second coming of Christ, a small figure descending from the ladder, appearing to be climbing right out of the sun.

The figure reached the bottom with little pomp, as if such an entrance was performed everyday, and straightened their clothing in a fussy manner.

Frowning at the inconvenience, Harry Potter huffed. He shot a flat look at his rope ladder and tugged at it sharply, watching with the rest of the Hall as it collapsed into itself, forming a perfectly average rope and slipping from the rafter he had hitched it to. He coiled it up again and tucked it back into the pocket in his satchel where he always kept it.

Nodding to himself, Harry strode up to the gorging fifth-years and wriggled himself in between two of the larger ones, firmly seating himself at the table. With nonchalance borne from years of pretending that his cousin was a human being instead of the hippopotamus he really was, Harry fixed himself a plate and started eating before the boulders on either side of him realized something had changed.

“Potter?” said the burly youth on Harry’s right with arms as thick as Harry’s middle. He was a Slytherin Harry hadn’t met yet, and he regarded the younger boy with same askance all of the House of serpents did when being confronted with his existence.

“Yes, hello,” answered Harry around a bite of roasted chicken.

The interplay drew attention to the new addition among them.

“What the hell?” asked many a bewildered upperclassmen. Slytherins naturally settled themselves into a hierarchy, only ever sitting outside their year-levels if they had multiple friends in older years. That the titchiest of the titchy first-years, not even in the same House, planted his rear in their presence was mind-blowing to them.
“Potter . . .” groaned Flint, the mountain on Harry’s left. “Isn’t it enough that you’re a bother on
the Quidditch pitch?”

Harry frowned at him reproachfully.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Harry rebuked. “You always disappear the moment I catch
sight of you.”

“You can’t take a hint?”

“Are you saying you’ve been avoiding me on purpose?” Harry’s tone was offended.

Flint gave him a flat look, lifting a drumstick to his mouth and ripping a chunk out.

“I’m saying your hounding me is a bother. And my answer is no.”

“You don’t even know why I wanted to talk to you!” Harry protested. “It’s not like it’s written on
my face!”

“Potter, if you were anymore transparent, you’d be invisible.”

“I just want—”

“No.”

“But I—”

“No.”

“Can’t you—?”

“No.”


Flint slammed his cutlery down and glowered at the younger boy.

“Potter, I already have enough of your groupies planning out my murder because you damn near
fell to your death. Apparently, your broom acting up was my fault. I’m not going to fuel the flames
by actively helping you commit suicide through unusual means. Would I be safe in assuming all the
other captains already turned you down?”

“But it’s the stupidest thing!” Harry cried, smacking the table in irritation. “I’m allowed to fly
hundreds of feet in the air with nothing but a branch of wood keeping me up but I’m not allowed to
play with the charmed cannon balls? I’ll have a bat! How is that even dangerous?”

“Not my problem.”

“Are we just going to ignore that he came out of the bleedin’ ceiling?” interjected an exasperated
voice. Adrian Pucey stood with his hands on his hips, vexation written all over him.

Murmurs of agreement sounded, also curious.

“The hell are you on about?” Flint grunted, digging into his food again.

“Potter! The ceiling! And where the hell did the rope come from?”
Harry reached for an egg custard.

“I was playing hide and seek with my owl when I saw Flint having lunch. I always have a length of rope with me so I climbed down. I should probably go back to looking for her soon; Hedwig’s so impatient when it’s her turn to hide.”

The winter holidays sneaked up on them like a serial killer from the Scream series. One morning mid-December, the school woke up to find the grounds covered in a layer of snow that came up to a first-year’s knees. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching an auxillery of snowballs to follow Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

Everyone was eager for the holiday to start. Chatter about seeing families and receiving presents were the talk of the castle. Not only that but they were relieved that the days of shivering in the dungeons, breathing out snowflakes were nearing their end.

Harry had been thinking about going home for the break but his steward had owled him, saying the workers repairing the manor had accidentally set fire to the West Wing and that he advised Harry to stay at school while everything was being fixed. He figured that staying at the school wasn’t going to be any hardship and put his name on the sign-up sheet for those staying for the holiday with no compunction. His friends fusses over him a bit about it since all three of them were returning home but he waved off their concerns, citing freedom to mess about the school all he wanted as reason enough to not be bothered.

The Weasley twins seemed to have taken him under their wings much to the anxiety of many teachers. As the two redheads swooped in to drag Harry off whenever he had a free moment, staff and students alike worried themselves into knots wondering what catastrophe such a terrible trio could dream up. They worried for naught of course; Harry wasn’t the type to play pranks, especially not ones that people saw coming. The three spent time wandering the secret passages they had discovered, the twins even showing Harry the map they had mentioned, a masterpiece of enchantment that showed secret locations and the movements of people within the school.

The passages Harry had discovered were mainly ones that were not on the map. The twins were elated to learn that the few that they knew were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg and offered to lend the map to Harry should he ever need it as thanks for showing them.

To get better acquainted with the passages, the three decided to play a game sort of like Capture the Flag. Each of them would hide a flag — blue for Fred, red for George, and green for Harry — and then set out to find one of the other flag and return to home-base — the kitchen — before the others, all while staying away from the public rooms and corridors. They had thirty minutes to find a good location before they had to go search for the other flags.

At the moment, Harry was in a circular room with tall pillars and a short set of stairs that led to an indention in the floor. It put him in the mind of an auditorium but it was smaller and what would’ve been the stage was inverted. There was a door opposite of him but the dustiness of the room told him that the room hadn’t been used in years at the very least.

Harry trotted over to check the door anyway. The handle jammed — definitely locked. This had
to count as away from the regular rooms and corridors.

Harry pulled the green handkerchief he was using as a flag from his pocket and began looking for a place to stash it. The pillars had torch holders but that was too obvious a place for Harry’s tastes. Maybe this wasn’t a very good place after all, the room was pretty bare besides— What was that?

He had been trailing his fingers on the walls as he walked the room. Just now he felt an odd indentation near the spot he head popped out of. Harry ran his fingers back over the place again and made a sound of triumph. There, giving way under the pressure of his stroking, a slot in the wall appeared, just big enough to put a lunchbox.

Wondering at his luck, Harry shoved his flag in and watched as the slot disappeared again. He smirked victoriously. Let’s see those ginger devils find that.

His task complete, Harry felt about the doorway that led him to that room. Unfortunately, it seemed to be of the same design as the wall he had fallen through on the first day. How was he supposed to get out now? The only other door was ruddy locked.

Harry considered waiting for the twins to find him, glaring at the room at large. He went over to kick a pillar in frustration. He was getting in some serious anger relief when the blasted pillar gave way after the fourth kick. He fell in arse over tit, landing in the corridor he had been wandering before he found his flag hiding spot.

Brushing himself off, Harry grinned and trotted off back the way he had came. He checked his watch. Six more minutes until they had to go look for the other flags. He peered around a corner covertly. There was nothing stopping him from getting a head start, now was there?

The game of Capture the Flag was put on pause to be continued at a later date when it became clear that none of them were going to find the others’ flags anytime soon. In hindsight trying to find a handkerchief being hidden in the hidden passageways of an enormous castle wasn’t exactly a quick job. They’d all search for a few hours every few days but none of them were any closer to the goal. On the bright side, all three of them likely knew the school better than even the Founders.

Christmas came with a pile of presents to be opened in the Gryffindor common room. All of his roommates had gone home for the holiday and the twins had asked Professors McGonagall and Flitwick for Harry to sleepover in Gryffindor for the holidays. Their request was granted and Harry had the time of his life rooming in the Gryffindor third-year boys’ dorm.

All four Weasley boys were staying for the holiday since their parents were visiting one of their older brothers in Romania, the family dragon-tamer, Charlie. Harry was fascinated at such a profession and prodded them for all the information they could give. His curiosity endeared him to Percy, the oldest of the four of them. Fred and George despaired, saying, “You’re leaving us for the dark side!” but Percy gave them a stern talking to that they mostly ignored about encouraging younger students to seek out knowledge.

Harry wasn’t certain why Percy wasn’t in Ravenclaw even though he was very Ravenclaw in personality. He considered the possibility that the older boy was braver than he was intelligent, but decided to keep such a thought to himself, since it would hardly sound complimentary out loud.
Harry received a rape-whistle, water-wings, and a crash helmet from Dean; a book on magical parasites from Morag (he had told her about his fascinations with parasites after Dudley came home with a leech once); and The Princess Bride from Justin (“It makes about as much sense as you do” was written on the note that came with it). The Weasley twins had coerced their mother into send him one of the jumpers she made them every year as well. He thanked them profusely and pulled it on at once — it really was the coziest thing.

As the Weasleys popped out to get some breakfast to bring up, Harry opened the rest of his presents. Amidst the packages of sweets his more casual friends had sent him, Harry found an unmarked package as well. Being the cautious person he was, he called for Mimsy.

“Master Harry sir is needing Mimsy?” Mimsy squealed, bouncing.

“Hello, Mimsy. Could you tell me if there are any spells on this package?” Harry handed said package to the eager house elf.

Mimsy turned it over a few times with a serious expression on his face and snapped his fingers. When nothing happened, he returned the package to Harry with a bright smile.

“There’s being no nasty-nasty magic on Master Harry sir’s present! The only magic Mimsy was finding was the present itself, and that’s being aaaaalll safe!”

“Thank you, Mimsy.” Harry nodded as he unwrapped the gift.

Something fluid and silvery gray sat within. Curiously he picked it up, marvelling at what proved itself to be a brilliantly beautiful cloak. Getting up, he rushed up the stairs to the twins’ dorm room to see how it looked on him.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror, Harry pulled up short and gaped. His body had vanished! He instinctively whipped the cloak off and threw it in front of him.

“Mimsy!” he called again, shock pitching his voice higher.

Mimsy popped in once more.

“Yes, Master—? Oh!” Mimsy clapped delightedly at the sight of the silvery cloak. He picked it up and danced with it. “Master Harry sir is finding Master James’ invisibility cloak! Mimsy’s mummy told Mimsy about it!”

An invisibility cloak? Harry received the cloak from Mimsy once again, peering more closely at the thing.

“It. . . It belonged to my father?”

“Yes, sir, Master Harry. It’s being Master James’ and before Master James, it’s being Master Charlus’. Mimsy’s mummy was telling Mimsy that it’s being in the family for centuries!”

So it was an heirloom. But how was he receiving it as a gift it it already belonged to the Potter family?

Harry trotted off back to where he left the wrapping, hopping to find some sort of clue. There, underneath where his cloak had been sitting, was a note. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the words:

*Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.*
— A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature.

“Mimsy, do you know who my father lent the cloak to?”

“Mimsy does! Before Master James and Miss Lily went into hiding, Master James let Professor Dumbly-door borrow the cloak.”

Professor Dumbledore. Harry wasn’t certain how he felt about the Headmaster, but he was reserving judgment until he talked to the man himself. He appeared to be a jolly fellow; he couldn’t be too bad if he was returning an heirloom he had been safekeeping.

Putting serious thoughts out of his mind, Harry grinned at Mimsy.

“Fancy sneaking up on the Weasley twins?”

The students had returned to Hogwarts after a restful winter holiday. It was the weekend before class started up again and the students were busy finishing up winter assignments while the teachers were engrossed in their lesson plans.

In an alcove near the Boathouse, a location rarely used outside of getting the first-years in the school, a fidgeting figure stood nervously beside a door to the Reception Hall. He was shuffled just outside of a shadow, still within easy ducking distance if someone entered the out-of-the-way nook. Discovery was unlikely though, the mustiness of the air lending credence to the fact that the place was all but forgotten, the door to it appearing to be a portrait, much like the Gryffindor common room.

At this time, most of the school was either in the Great Hall for dinner or heading back their their common rooms, ready to turn in for the night. The person plastered against the wall of the hidden room had slipped away when the opportunity had arisen, breaking away from the sleepy crowd with no one to notice he wasn’t where he should be. He arrived at the agreed upon location early, elated that he hadn’t kept the person he was meeting waiting.

The person had been there for no more than five minutes and yet he was already sweating like a fat guy after eating. He was new to this cloak-and-dagger business and he wasn’t sure if the reward would be worth the anxiety that accompanied the wait.

As if to startle his stuttering heart into stopping altogether, a sofa and the floor beneath it shifted aside, revealing an opening in the floor darker than a grave-digger’s heart. Out of the shadowed depths came a cloaked figure, more heavily robed than an Elizabethan nun. This new person oozed out of the hole in the ground and glided toward the fellow with delicate sensibilities that was convulsing in fright at the peculiar mode of entrance.

“Wha—How—? B-b-but the door—?”

“Silence!” the cloaked figure hissed. Giggling and the pitter-patter of footfall could be heard distantly, as if coming through several layers of fabric.

The troubled fellow spasm’d for a moment but fell silent all the same. The pair stood without
speaking for a breathless moment until all sound faded away.

“I believe we both know why we’re here?” said the second person, tone becoming mild.

“Y-yes . . .” the first person warbled quietly. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a nondescript pouch, holding it out as if for protection. “A-a-and you have the . . .?”

“Of course. It’s right here.” A sheaf of parchment was brought out, causing the first fellow’s mouth to go dry.

“Th-that’s . . .?”

“Yes.”

Property was exchanged swiftly, the first fellow already looking through the parchments, the second person weighing the pouch in their hand expertly. Nods exchanged, the two figures made to leave their separate ways.

Stopping at the door, Ernie Macmillan, a first-year Justin had cleared as safe to interact with, turned and said, “Thanks for this — I don’t know if I’d survive my mother’s wrath if I got another bad grade on a Potions assignment. You wouldn’t believe the chewing out she gave me when I got home!”

Melting back into the darkness, Harry Potter peeked out from under the cloaked costume he had nicked from the abandoned theatre classroom and grinned.

“Think nothing of it, old chap. For the right price, I can get you anything you need.”
With the Invisibility Cloak now in his possession, Harry had a much easier time of staking out the third floor corridor. With the map the Twins let him borrow, it was even easier to keep up with the comings and goings. He spent several evenings just wandering the school, invisible, peeping into the secret locations shown on the map while keeping an eye out on the third-floor patrol.

Harry found the most interesting places during his nightly strolls. There was a dusty corridor on the first floor dedicated to tapestries and portraits stretching back over a thousand years; he had overheard several inhabitants speaking in what might have been Old or Middle English; it was harsh and vaguely Germanic. There was a room dedicated to lost items the house-elves had found around the school on the fourth floor that had a veritable hill of wands lost over the many years Hogwarts had been running. There was even a block of holding cells in one of the towers, the disused one that was apparently used to house prisoners back in the Middle Ages, if the wild-eyed gent in one of portraits at the bottom of the tower was to be believed.

He had been ambling through a mostly empty corridor on the seventh floor, idly imagining what it would be like if he ended up finding some lost treasure from all his wandering, when he past the strangest tapestry. At first, he had just walked past it, but when his mind caught up with what he had just seen, he immediately doubled back to affirm the sight.

There, in all their horrendous glory, were a group of trolls dressed in ballet costumes. Pink tutus and ribboned slippers on all of them.

Harry immediately rubbed his eyes. He looked up again but the sight was unchanged.

*Whhhyyyyy?*

A wizard was standing in the middle of them appearing to be trying to conduct them about with his wand but having questionable success at it. A few of the trolls looked to be hitting him with their clubs. On a metal plate underneath the tapestry, Harry read the words *Barnabas the Barmy*. Harry could see why such a loony was named in such a manner.

Shaking his head, Harry began to walk away again. He wanted to find treasure, darn it all, not absurdity!

For a second time, he was stopped short. With the creaking and scraping of brick on brick, the wall opposite of the tapestry was churning and shifting. Before his eyes, a door appeared in the previously empty wall.

Huh. That was new. Harry checked the map. Another one not yet documented too. He jotted a note of it and — throwing caution to the wind — went up to the grand double-door to pull it open.

The room could easily be called a hall, it was all high ceiling and pillars; the height of the room reminded Harry of the Entrance Hall. It wasn’t anywhere near the length of the Great Hall, but it was definitely larger than the combined floor space of both stories of Number 4. Remarkable enough, the room was also full to the brimming with enough stuff to give a pack-rat wet dreams.

He had found that treasure he wanted.
Among the broken and rusted junk that wouldn’t be out of place in a scrap heap was an incredible wealth. Thousands upon thousands of books, many of them rare and out of print; a king’s ransom that came in the form of several trunks filled with jewels; a luggage shop’s worth of school trunks, almost all of them fully stocked with the typical student’s belongings, school supplies and personal item included; an orchestra’s worth of instruments were strewn about, all of them old enough to be worth more than his yearly school tuition. It was unbelievable! Not only that, but there were fascinating magical objects as well. He couldn’t figure out everything, but he had read enough fairytales on the sly to know things like a picnic basket charmed to be endless.

He had also spent enough time in the Ravenclaw common room to recognize the lost diadem of Ravenclaw.

Harry debated with himself long and hard, but he eventually decided that he just couldn’t keep Ravenclaw’s diadem to himself. It was too important — it would be like finding the Holy Grail and not sending it to the Vatican. Besides, he ended up scaring the hell out of himself by accidentally spilling something from one of the phials in the room on the diadem, resulting in the head-gear admitting the most ghastly screeching he had ever heard. After the blood-curdling noise had died away and the area around the diadem was a melted mess, Harry decided that no borderline-holy relic should be kept anywhere near him.

He gave the diadem to his Head of House that very night, telling a tale of finding it a room that didn’t exist the first time he looked and ceased to exist again when he left it — it was all technically true but didn’t give away the fact that there had been a lot more than just the diadem in there.

“MERCIFUL MERLIN!” Flitwick had squealed, starting violently and jumping onto his desk in shock. He was too overcome by the fact that a highly magical artifact that had been lost for hundreds of years had been found once more to be think further on where exactly it had been found.

Harry was awarded Special Services to the School the next day and a plaque of his very own to be hung in the Trophy Room for generations of students to come to polish during detentions.

“And you just so happened to find it?” asked Morag, giving him an assessing look. He explained himself more fully after his awarding had been announced. “And it just so happened to be in the castle?”

“That’s right!” beamed Harry, fiddling with a shoe made of glass. How odd, he had dropped it earlier but it hadn’t shattered — maybe it was actually crystal? He shrugged at Morag’s unsatisfied expression. “I don’t know what to tell you. There I was, minding my own business, taking a stroll, and suddenly a door appeared. I took a peek in of course — what else could you do when a door materializes? — and there it was, sitting on a bust as innocently as you please. What a world, right?”

Well after midnight, within a deserted old chamber, a figure sat hunched over a work table. Their brow was tensed in concentration and dripped with perspiration; their hair stood on end from frustrated fingers raking through them; they had a fanatical gleam in their eye that bordered on manic. Every other breath, agitated mutters escaped them as they toiled at their chosen task. The floor surrounding them with littered with the gutted remains of their experimentation.

In a fit of temper, the patchwork monstrosity under their fingers was shoved away. Darkly splatter fingers ran through knotted tangles once more, leaving gooey residue in their wake. They buried
their face into those stained hands and groaned in vexation.

“Investigative log,” croaked the ruffled researcher. A quill sprang to life against a ready sheet of parchment. “Date: 14th of January, 1992 Anno Domini. It is currently the witching hour and I find myself on the verge of a breakthrough. Unfortunately, I have been on the verge for several days now. If I am to be completely honest, I have been standing at this precipice for long enough that this edge of glory could rightly be called a plateau of inertia. I am so close but success remains just out of grasp.”

They expelled a breathy sigh through their nostrils and leaned back against their chair.

Unbothered by the fact the quill was still receptive, they muttered, “Maybe I’d get on better if I didn’t stop every few hours to complain to a log about my lack of success.”

They chaffed under the thought of getting back to work but acknowledge that pulling another all-nighter with every likelihood of being caught wouldn’t be worth it if they didn’t work at what they intended to accomplish. They deliberated for a good ten minutes before they finally worked up the conviction to get back at it.

With a miserable groan, they straightened in their seat and pulled the project back to them.

The game of Capture the Flag was officially back on. Fred and George had a weekend completely free of homework and were once again itching to get back at it. Unofficially, all three of them had been searching every now and then when they had a few minutes free, but it just wasn’t long enough to actually get much looking done.

Harry was trotting along a familiar looking passage when he arrive at the location where he had hidden his flag. He considered just moving on, but shrugged his shoulders and entered the room again. Why the hell not?

Entering the room, Harry frowned in consternation. It seemed the room wasn’t as disused as he had thought; he’d have to find a new place to hide the flag. Hopefully, the twins wouldn’t count it against him.

The room was noticeably cleaner than before, the dust removed and the torch holders polished. There was also a new addition. There, placed in the middle of the indentation in the floor — as ostentatious as a peacock in a cage of pigeons — was a grand mirror. It stood on clawed feet, looked older than dirt, and was as intricately designed as an Elizabethan noblewoman’s gown. But what was it doing here? It was far too fine a thing to be kept in a room that had been neglected for years.

Harry stepped up the ornate slab of glass to admire the filigree; magic must have been used to make it, he couldn’t imagine human hands being steady enough for all those minuscule details. It even came with a lovely inscription: Erised stra ehr uoy tbe cafu oyt on wohsi. He didn’t know what language it was but it sounded lovely when he read it out loud. Such a mirror deserved a finer resting place.

A movement caught Harry’s attention. His eyes widened in alarm for one heart-stopping beat — he even drew his wand — but he released a breathy sigh when he realized it was just his image. Really, after all the talking mirrors he’s already come across, one would have thought they would
stop startling him.

His reflection smiled at him, canting its head to the side.

“Erm, hello,” said Harry. He figured it would be best to be polite since there was nothing stopping the enchanted object from tattling on him if whoever brought it here came back. “You weren’t here last time I checked. Have you been here long?”

His reflection’s smile grew wider but it only shook its head.

“Ah . . .” said Harry, scratching his cheek. “Is that a no, you haven’t been here long, or a no, sorry, you can’t talk?”

The image appeared to giggle and raised two fingers in response.

“I beg your pardon. I suppose I should stick to yes or no questions then?”

The image nodded. It held a hand out as if wanting something to be put in it and tilted its head to the side again in question.

“I’m assuming you’re asking what I’m doing here.” Another nod. “My friends and I are playing a game where we find each other’s hidden flag. I hid mine in here back before you came along and I came to check on it. I’ll have to move it though; we’re supposed to use only unused and hidden locations.”

His reflection blinked rapidly at him and waved its hand again in a circular motion.

“Erm, sorry, I don’t understand.”

The image repeated the action.

“That must be bothersome,” Harry observed. “Do you know any sign language? I’m familiar with the British alphabet.”

Another shake of the head accompanied by a bemused look.

“None at all? That must get frustrating. Would you like me to bring you a book on sign language next time I come? Maybe we can have a proper conversation then.”

His reflection brightened and nodded eagerly.

“I’ll get right on it,” Harry told the mirror. “I have to go now though. We agreed to meet up for lunch and the climb back the way I came takes at least twenty minutes. It was lovely to meet you.”

Harry turned to go but a frantic motion from the reflection stopped him.

It held up a hand in the sign for waiting. It then put a hand into the pocket of its trousers and pulled out a fist-sized stone. It appeared to be an uncut gem, possibly garnet by the colour of it, though it did have silvery sediment embedded in it on one side. His reflection winked and put the stone back in its pocket — and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket.

Eyes wide, Harry reached into his trouser pocket. Wonders upon wonders, the stone was really there. He pulled it out and stared at it.

“Wow . . .” Harry didn’t know what to say. Could all mirrors give out presents? “Is this for me?”
His reflection grinned cheerily and nodded.

“It’s lovely. Though, if this is compensation for the book I’m bringing you, you really didn’t have to — this looks like it’s worth far more than any sign language book I might find.”

A hand was waved dismissively.

After a few more thanks and a promise to visit soon, Harry set off to return to the school proper.

There were times that made Harry wonder if he should have kept in better contact with Hagrid. That was not to say that Harry had tossed all care for the man aside after their shopping trip — he frequently spoke with the man whenever he caught sight of him, he had even helped him sweep up the fir left on the ground after the Christmas trees had been dragged in — but it wasn’t as if they were anywhere near as close as Harry was with his other friends. The differences between a student and a staff member resulted in a natural distance. It became regretttable to Harry when he heard that a wall of Hagrid’s hut had been burned down; through dragon-fire if the rumours were to be believed.

“Dragon-fire?” Harry echoed incredulously.

His informant, Dean, nodded his head solemnly, but he wasn’t able to contain the excited gleam in his eyes.

“ Heard it from Ron,” Dean confirmed. “Said he was doing a detention with Hagrid when he caught sight of a huge egg in the fireplace. He didn’t think nothin’ of it until Hagrid’s house damn near burned down. Said it was bloody obvious now that he thought of it that Hagrid got himself a dragon egg.”

“But where would he have gotten one?” asked Justin, looking doubtful. “I’ve been told that dragons are illegal to own; it’s not like he could’ve popped down to the shop and picked one up.”

Dean shrugged.

“Maybe he got it off the black market or somethin’. It’s not like just because it’s illegal no one’s sellin’ them.”

“Are you accusing Hagrid of being a criminal?” said Morag, crossing her arms. “That’s a horrible thing to say — Hagrid’s never been anything but nice.”

“Now don’t go puttin’ words in my mouth,” protested Dean. “It’s not like I blame him. It’s illegal to own a tiger but you can bet that if someone tried to sell me one I’d buy it, no lie.”

“But why would he get one?” said Harry. “He told me before that he wanted a dragon as a kid, but he lives in a wooden house. Dragon plus wood equals ashes.”

“Why don’t we just ask him ourselves?” said Justin. “That way we can get the truth without any questionable additions.”

“Good idea!” said Harry, perking up. He shoved his books into his bag and stood from the table. “Lunch is only half through so we have plenty of time to get our facts straight.”
It eventually came out that Hagrid really did have a dragon, but fortunately for the sake of the students, that dragon had already been delivered to a reserve the night before.

In that old no-longer-deserted chamber, there was once again movement.

“AAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGGHH!”

A ghastly howl echoed through a dimly lit room. What objects that were not thrown bodily against the wall trembled against the sudden onslaught of furious magic writhing through the air.

“DAMN IT ALL TO THE DARKEST DEPTHS OF HELL, WHY WON’T IT WORK?!”

A figure staggered into the light of a moonbeam that seep in from the window. They were drenched in dark fluids and shaking aggressively enough to put a rabid dog to shame. In their fury, they flung down the mangled heap in their hand and stamped it into the stone floor, growling in vindication when it ruptured underfoot and become no more than a crusty stain.

“By the gods, I’ll make this work even if I have to rip apart every single blasted one of them!”

Harry chewed slowly on his Chocolate Frog as he read over the card he got this time.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

currently headmaster of Hogwarts

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicholas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

“Huh,” Harry breathed, swallowing his mouthful. He hadn’t known that Dumbledore had worked with Nicholas Flamel; he hadn’t even known that the old alchemist was a real person.

At the thought of Alchemy, Harry wondered if philosophers’ stones were real as well. That was the original point of the stones, right? All those medieval scientists were forever researching ways to turn base metals into gold and squeeze out immortality juice from whatever they could get their hands on. And Nicholas Flamel was known through Muggle legend to be the man that succeeded where others failed. Did that mean he was still alive? Did that mean Harry could make one too if he tried?

After a moment’s contemplation, Harry decided that such thoughts bore further investigation at a later date. At the very least, he had to finish his chocolate.
“I’m back!” Harry called out. “Did you miss me?”

He trotted up to the mirror with a smile. The smile was returned tenfold when his reflection realized who he was. It waved back ecstatically in reply.

“I got that book I promised you.” Harry held up the language book. “Not only does it teach the alphabet but it’s also a dictionary of words with individual signs. I thought it might be fun to learn those together.”

His reflection beamed and made grabby hands.

Harry tilted his head in confusion.

“I’m not sure how you’d be able to hold it considering you don’t have physical hands. Why don’t I just read it out to you?”

Adamant, the image shook its head and made grabby hands more insistently.

“Well, alright, if you really want, but how am I supposed to give it to you?”

His image rolled its eyes. It pantomimed putting the book to the glass of the mirror.

Harry was skeptical.

“Are you sure this’ll . . . ?” His reflection gave him stern look. “Alright, alright, no need to get shirty. Here.”

He lifted the book to the glass and pressed it there. As he pressed, his reflection took on a look of concentration. Before he could say anything, the book sunk into the glass as if the glass was jelly.

“Wow . . .” Harry breathed as his reflection plucked the book out of his fingers before it could fall. “It’s like Alice in Wonderland! Or rather, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There!”

His reflection made an inquisitive face, holding the book to its chest as if snuggling with a plushy.

“It’s a muggle story,” Harry explained, running a finger down the glass that had just consumed the book. “I found out a little while ago that it was based on the memoirs of a witch. Alice is a little girl that ends up going to this place called Wonderland where nothing makes sense and she meets all sorts of strange characters. In the second book, she went through the mirror in her living room and arrived in a place called Looking-Glass Land, a place where everything is opposite of reality. She went through her mirror the same way the book did just now.”

The reflection looked intrigued.

“I know, right? It’s quite the coincidence. I can bring those books for you as well if you want. But enough on that!” Harry plopped down on the floor in front of the mirror and raised his hands. “Let’s get started on teaching you the alphabet. Maybe we can spell out your name soon.”
Chapter End Notes

Why is it that writers don’t often make use of background characters or the disposable plot devises from canon? I'm pretty sure I'm the first person to ever make the Mirror of Erised more than just any other enchanted mirror.
A scream of mad cackling rent through the peace of the midnight hour, jolting those that didn’t sleep deeply out of their slumber and into what sounded like a waking nightmare. Bats were startled out of their rest, and swooped into flight at the shrieking, echoing sound.

“It’s . . . IT’S A—LIIVIIIVE!”

Those that heard those gruesomely delighted words would tell tales of a violent new ghost haunting the halls, detailing their imaginings of what could have possibly happened to have drawn in such a horrible creature.

The next morning, it was a baggy-eyed but bouncy Harry Potter that arrived at the Ravenclaw table, showing off his new invention, patent pending. The Potter Pen™ was now officially a thing.

“Not only is it self-inking and auto-correcting, the ink changes colours, and the texts dries instantly!” Harry held up his project up for his fellow scholars to admire. He had spent a bit of time transfiguring it to look attractive as well, so it ended up looking like a quality quill crossed with an expensive fountain pen. “It’s charmed so when it’s in dictation mode it only responds to the voice of the person who activated it; nothing like those other dicta-quills that pick up what everyone says. Of course, if you want to it to take record of everything, I also gave it what I called ‘Scribe mode,’ which will not only write down everything it hears but also remembers it so it can be written again at a later date. So, like, if you set it to record everything Professors Binns says in class in your notes, but then you lose those notes, it can write another copy for you.”

Harry stroked the Pen where the base met feather and then held it out to one of his dorm-mates.

“Try writing with it.”

The boy — Michael Corner — did so, writing out his name idly. He looked up in surprise.

“It doesn’t scratch or drag!”

Harry beamed. He took back the Pen and pointed his finger to the nib.

“Observe the rounded tip. The Muggles use a similar design in their writing devices that they call ball-point. This modification of the nib causes the quill to glide over the parchment and distributes the ink evenly, removing the chance for blots. And not only that,” here he quickly wrote out Corner’s name as well before holding up the page. “As you can see, this quill can also mimic hand-writing. Instead of writing out your assignments by hand, you can just set it to dictation mode and it can do the writing for you; no more writing it out again after you’ve finished the rough draft.”

Harry was all but mobbed by Ravenclaws clamouring to get their own Pens. He left breakfast that day with a stack of order-forms from over twenty people.
“E-R-I-S-E-D . . .” Harry said aloud as his reflection slowly spelled out its answer. “You’re name is Erised? Like what’s written at the top of your frame?”

The reflection made a fist and did a knocking motion, the sign for ‘yes.’

Harry was once again in the chamber with the enchanted mirror. He had originally come down for a visit every two days, often enough that the mirror wouldn’t feel abandoned by him but not too often that people would wonder where he kept disappearing off to. During those times, the mirror would tell him stories of events it had been around to witness and people that had sought it out. Harry found the history of mirror utterly fascinating; he doubted he’d ever get enough of learning more about it.

The visits had trickled when exams began approaching, slowing to around once a week. He made sure that he brought lots of books when he did arrive though, making sure that the mirror had something to occupy itself with during the down time. Consequently, dozens of books had been donated to the good cause, including but not limited to the complete works of Shakespeare, the Sherlock Holmes series in one anthology, the James Bond series, the Chronicles of Narnia, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and handfulls of other stuff ranging from plays to the newest fiction he could find.

Suffice to say, the mirror forgave him for the minor neglect. The consumption of books also gave them the added bonus of having topics to discuss during their time together as well. Harry had found himself growing increasingly fond of the enchanted mirror, deciding that he often had more interesting conversations with it than with some of his classmates.

Today, Harry had popped down to tell the mirror about a student in his year that he had just met even though they had been sharing all the same classes. She was dreadfully shy and all but fainted when her friend introduced her to him. It was then that he remembered that he hadn’t yet learned the mirror’s name, and thus prompted him to ask for it once more.

“Is that sentence there you’re full name then? Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi? Bit of a mouthful, isn’t it?”

“It is actually supposed to be read backwards,” Erised signed out. “Properly, it says, ‘I show not your face but your heart’s desire.’ It is a description of my function.”

“Oh? But I don’t see anything but you when I look! That is, I see myself but with you as the person inside the body.” Harry wasn’t sure what that said about him.

Erised laughed soundlessly.

"If you had waited a moment more, you would have seen what you were supposed to. Instead, you addressed me, drawing my magic into a different function.”

Harry considered it.

“So, it’s possible for you to show me my ‘heart’s desire’? But what does that even mean?”

“Often, it is something those that look do not even know that they want, or that it is what they want the most. Sometimes it is something abstract, like being the best, other times it is something like a loved one.”

“So . . . what’s the point of looking? Can you give it to us?”

Erised shook its head while making the sign for negation.
“I am a mirror. I can do nothing but show one what they look for. Many times what they want is something they simply can never have.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying,” said Harry. “But I don’t think creating such an enchantment was very worthwhile. I don’t understand why anyone would want to see something that’s impossible to achieve. It would get depressing, wouldn’t it? Wouldn’t it be better if you showed them something that would make them happy that they could make come true? Like a lonely person being shown who to be kind to so they could make a friend, you know?”

Erised smile faintly at Harry.

“It is not my place to say whether or not my creator was right in creating me. I can only fulfill my purpose.”

“I’m not saying they shouldn’t have created you! I’m saying it would make more sense to me if you showed people the path they could take if they wanted to reach a viable goal and thus become happy.”

“Maybe you could make such a mirror,” Erised suggested.

“Oh, but I doubt I could give it as wonderful a personality as you,” teased Harry. He paused. “Say, Erised, you know everyone’s greatest desires; what is it that you want?”

Erised did not say anything for a few moments. It looked pensive and a touch confused. Finally, it looked up and smiled fondly at Harry.

“You are such an odd person, Harry Potter. I am a mirror; I am not the dreamer, I only ever show the dreams.”

Business was booming! Now that exams were creeping up, Harry’s usual suckers customers had realized that they had screwed themselves over for the long run; many were average at best in their classes and that was with Harry doing their assignments for them. Naturally, this led them to a scramble to cram everything they were supposed to have learned since the beginning of the year in the few weeks they had left before finals. This, of course, also led to the second phase of Harry’s master-plan from the Sorting.

As Harry had expected, his customers came crawling to him for solutions to their academic woes. In anticipation for the new demand, he had subtly inquired about what testing would be like and had discovered that the matter they would be tested on had been the same for longer than anyone could remember. As far as he could tell, first years were always required to do a basic animation charm (like making an object move a certain way), turn a small animal into a decorative object, brew one of the potions from the end of their potions textbook, write an essay about an invention created within the last 100 years, answer a multiple-choice about plant safety, detail the planets and their moons, and demonstrate the hexes and defenses they learned during the year. It would be easy enough for someone that paid attention during lessons and did the minimal required reading, but of course, his customers weren’t that sort at all.

It was not to say that they would fail miserably without Harry; it wasn’t as if they had shoved all their assignments off on him. All of them had classes that they took genuine interest in and thus
would be fine to test for. Unfortunately, for the classes they had foisted off on Harry, they were as useless as a foot growing out of someone’s shoulder.

Seamus Finnigan and the four out of the seven props from Gryffindor were thrown into a tizzy; the latter quartet resembling wet cardboard in their dispositions. Malfoy’s meat-shields, Gabriel Spinks, and Mauricius Pike from Slytherin were also bothered, the second pair sending suspicious looks at Harry, as if they suspected him to have been planning this all along (not that he would tell them they were correct). And let’s not forget the newest additions to the list of Harry’s regulars: Roger Malone and Oliver Rivers, two Hufflepuffs that certainly weren’t a part of the House because of any work-ethic. All eleven of them together made a crowd of jittery slackers.

Rising to the occasion, Harry had formulated cram plans tailor-made for each customer in need (for a small fee, of course). He staged short study sessions dedicated to different subjects from day to day wherein he instructed them on practical application of the tasks they would likely be asked of. His impeccable notes taken throughout the school year were passed out after being edited to suit the comprehension styles of each person, highlighted and detailed in the areas the individual was likely to need most help. If that wasn’t enough, he even made it so the notes were in their own handwriting, taking away the possibility of them being called out on not doing their own work.

Harry was kept busier than a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest, but he thrived under the pressure.

“You’re alright, Potter,” Gabriel Spinks had said, eying Harry with a look of grudging appreciation. It was after a crash course on Defense, Harry’s best subject. “I don’t doubt you’ve got this situation in your pocket, but I reckon I can respect a bloke that’s managed such a drawn-out scam.”

“Calling it a scam would imply I’ve been dishonest in my intentions or have somehow swindled you out of what I’ve promised,” Harry had said as he deactivated the spell on his quill that recorded the happenings of the sessions. “Not once have I deceived anyone about my services, nor have I supplied anyone with anything other than what they’ve asked for. You can call it a scheme, but using the word ‘scam’ is both incorrect and insulting.”

“Ravenclaws,” Pike had snorted. “Whatever you want to call it, the fact of the matter is: you’re not half as out of the loop as Malfoy’s got everyone else believing.”

Even as he jauntily jingled the coins in his pocket, Harry adopted the dazed, distracted mien characteristic to Ravenclaws outside of class. “Mmm, is that so? I’m not sure what you mean though.”

It was sweltering hot that day, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. One would have thought wizards would have invented a means for indoor climate-control during all their time playing with singing hats and teacups that bit noses. Alas, if such a thing as magical air-conditioning existed, Hogwarts didn’t make use of it.

To Harry’s dismay, they had been given specialized quills for the exams, one that had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell. Harry hadn’t enchanted the Potter Pens with cheating mechanisms of course, but he was still disappointed he wasn’t allowed his invention; they had been invaluable since he had completed them and he hadn’t used any other type of quill since.
They had practical exams after the written portion.

Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his classroom to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Harry did just that and cast a minor illusion on it as well to give the fruit a little top-hat and a pair of active hands. His Head of House had been tickled by his additions and gave him extra credit.

Professor McGonagall watched them with her gimlet eyes as they turned mice into a snuffboxes — points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was and were taken away if it retained any of their mouse-like features, like tail or whiskers. Harry wasn’t really one for ‘pretty,’ but he gave his snuffbox a lovely glossy sheen to it, much like the inside of a clam shell.

Professor Snape made it his business to make them all nervous, stalking through the rows and breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion. Harry liked to think he did rather well. His potion wasn’t exactly like how Professor Snape demonstrated, but he also knew that there wasn’t anything that could be classified as ‘wrong’ with it.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. Harry was among the many that found the class a cruel and unusual punishment, and the exam for it was no less painful. Fortunately, it was actually the shortest examination period. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who’d invented self-stirring cauldrons and they were free in the wind, free for a whole wonderful week until their results came out. When Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn’t help cheering with the rest.

“Want to go play Gobstones out by the Lake?” asked Justin, stretching luxuriously when their quartet convened in the Entrance Hall.

There were no objections, so they followed the crowd of students finished with their testing out to the Black Lake for their well-deserved rest.

Shame it didn’t last. Not in Harry’s case at least.

Harry was not having a pleasant evening. Well, a more correct way of putting it was that Harry was not in a pleasant situation, one that had been going on for an indeterminable period of time but just so happened to have begun sometime during that evening. It really was the most dratted thing. Things had been going so well that day too, right up until the moment he had been knocked unconscious for however long and then awakened to find himself in a different location with the person he assumed was his abductor.

He was having a hard time processing who it was he was seeing though.

“Wait—wha—?”

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry. The boy overbalanced when he started and tumbled to floor, jamming his shoulder as he landed.

Shifting into a sitting position, Harry groaned and mentally face-palmed.

In hindsight, the situation with Quirrell was a lot like those cloak-and-dagger novels, very the-
butler-did-it-esque. Harry wasn’t sure how he had missed it; hadn’t he read all those who-dun-its while hiding out in the library from Dudley? He should have known; it was always the guy everyone else dismisses. Things had been going story-book since the Hogwarts letters came, it would logically follow that his ‘bad-guy’ would follow script.

“No doubt you expected Severus,” Quirrell laughed. “He does seem the type, doesn’t he? So useful to have him swooping around like an over-grown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?”

Anyone who’s ever read a book intended for audiences that think beyond face-value, that’s who. Snape’s too blunt in his disposition to be the true villain, he was too obvious. If they were casting roles, he had the makings of a reoccurring antagonist since he was a big part of daily interaction. The real baddies were the ones that stayed to the sidelines.

So why hadn’t Harry realized that until just now?

Well, maybe Harry was being hard on himself; if the situation truly followed script, the villain would be Filch, or maybe even Hagrid. They would have suited the ‘butler’ role more properly, and it wasn’t like Filch needed an excuse. Hell, Madam Pince would have been perfect. If everyone were to be placed in roles, Snape would have been the main suspect, the crime would have actually been committed by Professor Sprout in the Dark Tower with a riding crop, and Quirrell would have been that wimpy bloke that panics and end up being the next victim after he stupidly runs off by himself.

In any case, it appeared that the wimpy bloke was actually the murderer this time around, and Harry — the protagonist, the one that should have been catching the villain red-handed — was starring in the role of damsel in distress. Sod it all if he hadn’t bollixed up his own fight scene.

In a story with a plot-twist that could have been seen a mile coming, Harry Potter is: The Boy Who Lived to be an Idiot. Coming soon to a theatre near you.

Quirrell eyed him contemptuously.

“You’re too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you’d seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone.”

Harry couldn’t believe it.

“You let the troll in?” The mad hatter had fainted! What about that said he could handle a troll?

“Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls — you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off — and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn’t even manage to bite Snape’s leg off properly.

“Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror.”

It was then that Harry recognized the location he was in. It was the dusty old room Erised was kept in! But . . . what— how—? He thought they were in that place the cerberus was guarding; wasn’t the fabulous treasure being protected the thing Quirrell was after? What the hell were they doing in a decrepit tomb of a chamber that housed only a lonely mirror?

Quirrell was muttering something about besting challenges and overcoming Dumbledore’s ‘pathetic protections.’ Was this really what all the fuss was about then?
Harry was righteously indignant. Why was nothing going his way today? He had thought up a host of ideas of what could be so important that so much trouble was being done to protect it — from the One Ring to a signed autograph of Merlin — and it turned out that it was just his friend being treated to the usual poor hospitality.

“This mirror is the key . . .” Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. “Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this . . . but he’s in London . . . I’ll be far away by the time he gets back . . .”

Well, that was appropriately ominous. Though what he wanted with a mirror, Harry didn’t know.

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

“I see the Stone . . . I’m presenting it to my master . . . but where is it?”

If Quirrell had been looking he would have seen Harry’s eye grow to House-elf proportions and his face drain of colour. Luckily, the turban’d man didn’t notice anything and thus was also ignorant of Harry’s sudden jolt into a frenzy of trying to wiggle free.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

“I don’t understand . . . is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?”

Oh, could this day get any worse? First kidnapping, then plot-twists back to back, and now his friend was in danger of being destroyed? He just couldn’t catch a break! Harry wriggled furiously, trying to scratch the rope on the rough stone floor. If he could just get his hands free . . .

Quirrell was either terrible at being aware of his surroundings or he just plain didn’t care what Harry was doing. He was still talking to himself.

“What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!”

And to Harry’s horror, a voice answered. It seemed to come from Quirrell himself.

“Use the boy . . . Use the boy . . .”

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

“Yes — Potter — come here.” He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off.

Harry got slowly to his feet, keeping a wary eye on the older man.

“Come here,” Quirrell repeated. “Look in the mirror and tell me what you see.”

What Harry wanted to know was why Quirrell seemed to believe that Erised was an important part of getting the thing he wanted. Sure, Erised was standing in the middle of the room, looking all majestic and vital, but that could have easily been a diversion. Erised could have been a red herring while the Stone was hidden in that cubby hole Harry found.

“Well?” Quirrell demanded.

Harry saw his own reflection, of course. His and Quirrell’s. He wasn’t sure what Quirrell expected him to see, but besides Erised taking over his image again and blinking curiously at him, there wasn’t anything remarkable to report.

Harry watched as it took in the scene with widening eyes. It was quite obviously disturbed by
Quirrell looming over him menacingly. Then, as if it understood Harry’s predicament, it nodded empathetically. It made a great show of pulling something out from behind it.

Harry started.

“Is that . . . ?”

He stepped forward unconsciously and reached out to what Erised had in its hand.

Quirrell jerked Harry back by the shoulder.

“What do you see, boy?” he demanded.

“The mirror . . . it’s holding out . . .”

Quirrell gained a greedy gleam in his eyes.

“It’s holding something out to you?”

Harry did not respond. Instead, he lifted his hand to the glass as if to reach through it. Wonders upon wonders, his hand began to sink in before their very eyes.

Quirrell jerked Harry back again, this time flinging him away as well. Harry was once again strewn across the floor.

Harry watched from his crumpled position as Quirrell eagerly placed his hands to the glass of the mirror and cried out in triumph as he began to sink in. Harry was in prime position to see Erised grin at him from the other side just before it latched onto the older man’s forearms.

“Ah!” Quirrell called out in alarm as he was tugged forward. “What is this magic?!” His cries went unanswered as he was pulled deeper into the surface of the mirror.

“Wretched fool!” hissed the voice from before. It sounded panicked.

Harry saw as Erised stepped away from the sinking man and shared a look with him. The object it had shown him before was once again raised into view. With its free hand, it ran through a series of single-handed gestured.

B-R-I-N-G—O-U-T

Though he didn’t understand, Harry dug his hand into the mokeskin pouch he carried with him everywhere and drew out the thing Erised told him to.


Harry didn’t have time to question such an odd command when Quirrell’s shrieks reached the desperation of a man being eaten alive. He was almost completely in save his head, which he fought to keep free. When the sounds were being muffled by his mouth disappearing into the mirror, Harry darted forward and thrust the object into the surface as well.

Harry’s action proved too much for the mirror to handle, and it began to tremble. It groaned in its frame and its clawed feet seemed to stomp the ground. As the back of Quirrell’s head finally dissolved into the glass, cracks appeared on the surface.

“Wha—? Erised!” Harry exclaimed in alarm. Paralyzed with confusion and dismay, he could only watch as his reflection lifted a hand and smiled warmly at him while hairline fractures distorted
The mirror shattered out, raining glass and debris forward. Even as he was struck and cut by the shower of shards, he didn’t pull back. He couldn’t look away.

“ERISED!” Harry cried. “NO!”

But there was nothing for it. In the ruins of glass and metal framing, there was no body to be found nor any outside movement in the broken shards. There was nothing left from the encounter beyond the scratched up thing that had acted as the catalyst to the destruction of the Mirror of Erised.

Dean Thomas was not one for bold proclamations and grand gestures despite the fact he was a Gryffindor. He was no Neville Longbottom, but he knew how to calm down and pay attention. The truest test of this disposition came when an older dame dressed like she was off to a Halloween party knocked on his door and turned their coat-rack into a lizard.

He had always been more into science-fiction than fantasy growing up so hadn’t considered that what he took for psychic powers might actually be magic. He had learned what little control he had over the levitation thing from watching all sorts of alien/futuristic movies that had people dealing with such things. Truthfully, there had always been a deep-seeded fear in the back of his mind that he’d eventually be discovered by the government and then taken away from his mum to be experimented on. His mum blamed it on too much television but Dean knew she worried about such a thing happening as well.

When McGonagall told them that there were people just like Dean spread out the world and that there was a school to teach him how to control and better use his powers, he was over the moon. He wasn’t alone! What he did was magic! There was absolutely nothing wrong with him! His mum hadn’t even considered keeping him from Hogwarts, especially after she heard that Magicals had their own communities and governments — something about a brighter future and better opportunities.

He hadn’t thought he’d many friends. When he had gone out for school supplies with McGonagall and a herd of other muggleborn, he had been a bit intimidated by how . . . how bright the shopping district was; everything had so much more presence than he was used to. With his casual muggle clothes and ignorance, he had felt grubby and insignificant. The belittling looks sent in their direction from the well-dressed sort didn’t lend him any confidence either. ‘Purebloods,’ the wandmaker had told him when he asked. They didn’t care for Muggles and thus muggleborns by association. (probably because of those witch-burnings.) Dean had gotten on the Hogwarts Express on the 1st expecting his only interactions with other students to be with other muggleborns.

Dean could admit that it was because he wanted to prove there was nothing wrong with being muggleborn that he got himself involved in a conversation about Quidditch. Thinking on it now, he wasn’t sure why he had thought it was a good idea to try to convince a crowd of those snooty, high-born types that football was also fun, but it had to be by the grace of divine intervention that Harry Potter swooped in when he did and rescued Dean from his dying argument.

Dean was no genius, but he knew right off the bat that Harry was something else. Dean didn’t know what that something was, of course, but he assumed it had something to do with the other boy’s odd personality, the sort that put you at ease even during situations that would normally be
tense or awkward. It took Harry all of thirty seconds after he had entered the carriage Dean was in to save Dean from an uncomfortable conversation, set him at ease, draw in another person to talk to in the form of Justin Finch-Fletchley, and had them well on the tracks toward friendship. It took a certain type of over-familiar to manage all that without putting people on their guards.

When he had found out that Harry was actually a some huge deal known all over Britain, Dean had thought that he would be pushed aside by the horde of drooling fans. That was the way it went when someone was that popular, right? His dorm-mates certainly talked about Harry as if he was the biggest thing since the invention of fire, and he had it on good information that Justin’s House had pounced on him as well. In the face of so much adoration and fawning, what could two muggleborns offer to The Boy Who Lived?

Harry, of course, had been the same cheery goofball the next day and seemed to not notice the slavering crowd that dogged his footsteps at all. Ditch Justin and Dean for worshippers? He didn’t even seem to realize it was an option. Instead, Harry stuck to his first two friends loyally and even brought in another person to join them. Out of everyone that he could have brought in, Morag MacDougal was the last person Dean thought Harry would make nice with. She wasn’t a fangirl, but she seemed as personable as a pair of scissors. She, of course, then revealed herself to be just as surprising as Harry, and Dean couldn’t think of any other girl he’d rather be friends with.

Dean wasn’t one for mushy, touchy-feely rubbish, but he could admit to himself at least that Justin, Harry, and Morag were his very best friend; not even Seamus or Ron could make him change his mind. There was something about them when they were all together, he couldn’t put his finger on it, but it was like they just . . . fit. It was like they were four pieces of a puzzle, balancing each other out. Dean couldn’t imagine being without them.

It was this deep fondness for their four-man band that had Dean terrified out of his mind when he was told that Harry was in the Hospital Wing. Again.

The thing with Harry was that he seemed to walk into trouble like normal people walked into classrooms. It was like a daily occurrence with the younger boy! If it wasn’t getting hopelessly lost in the confusing maze that was Hogwarts castle, it was running into monsters that had absolutely no business being in a school. The three-headed dog was bad enough; the troll that he stumbled across and then had to save Granger from was more than anybody should have dealt with.

But Harry did deal with more. It came in the form of nearly falling to his death from over a hundred feet in the air after his broom went mad. It was like someone was out to kill him! But why would anyone want to kill Harry? Hadn’t he saved them all from that You-Know-Who wanker?

Dean had been worried when Harry never came back from the loo the evening before when they had been in the middle of a card-game. Morag had brushed it off as Harry likely just getting up to more of his shenanigans that he’d tell them about the next day, but Dean couldn’t brush off the bad feeling he got. It had been a while since one of the more life-threatening fiascoes had happened — what with Harry working himself into the grave with his underground assignment-completion gig — and Dean’s paranoia was on the rise.

Dean was proved right when Flitwick had discreetly come to collect the remaining trio before breakfast and escorted them to the Hospital Wing. As they were bustled away, Dean’s imagination went wild with the possibilities of what could have happened and what condition Harry was currently in. He could have been mauled by chimaera this time! He could be in surgery right that minute with Madame Pomfrey sewing his guts back in and telling him he’d have to live his life without arms anymore!

They entered the Hospital Wing to find Dumbledore walking towards them with a thoughtful
look on his face and Madam Pomfrey busying herself at the cot Harry was occupying.

“Here to see Harry, are we?” Dumbledore said with a smile when he caught sight of them. He took pity on them when he recognised their anxious faces. “Not to worry, he’s already been set to right. Madam Pomfrey had him patched up in a thrice.”

If Dean was the type for over-dramatics like Justin was, he might have fainted from relief. From what he could see, Harry was whole and well enough. As it was, he had to catch Justin when the other boy actually did swoon from relief.

Dean gave Justin a flat look. He might have sympathised, but this was no time to be putting yourself in a Hospital cot — one of their number was already bed-ridden, for Christ’s sake!

“Thank you, sir,” said Dean.

Dumbledore nodded at them and continued on his way, taking Flitwick with him as he went.

The three of them huddled on the opposite side of the cot from Madam Pomfrey. The matron gave them a quick glance before returning the spell she was waving over Harry.

“What happened?” asked Morag, her tone thoroughly displeased and her face settled in defensive stoniness.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips as Harry gave them sheepish look.

“He needs rest,” the matron stressed.

“Just five minutes,” Harry pleaded. “I’m sure I’ve scared them something terrible.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, come on. You let Professor Dumbledore in . . .”

“Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. Did I not just say that you need rest, Mr. Potter?”

“I am resting! Look, lying down and everything!” Harry made wide puppy-eyes Dean hadn’t known he was capable of. Dear God, those things were lethal. “Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey . . .”

They could actually see Madam Pomfrey softening.

“Oh, very well,” she finally relented. “I’ll allow you lot five minutes to talk, but that’s that.” She sent them a strict look and got up to return to her office.

“Harry?” said Justin. His tone was wary. “What’s happened this time?”

Harry checked to see if the matron was out of ear-shot before he sat up. Visibly girding himself up, he sighed and said, “I suppose this all really began back before school even started . . .”

Dean could already tell he wasn’t going to like what he was going to hear.
Half a week into summer break, a boy sat at his home desk, working at a letter he had been meaning to send as soon as he got home.

Dear Mr. Flamel,

My name is Harry and I am eleven years old. I have recently finished my first year at Hogwarts. During my time there, I have discovered many things, not just about learning magic but about the school itself and things lost there. It’s a large castle so you can imagine that I found quite a lot of things.

The reason I am writing to you is because I have found something that I’ve learned belongs to you. I’m not sure why Professor Dumbledore had your Philosopher’s Stone hidden in the school, but I came across it by accident. At the time, I didn’t know it was anything besides a pretty gem but I decided to keep it since it really was too pretty to just leave it where I found it. I’m now glad that I did take it when I did since someone broke through the protections and tried to steal it at the end of the school-year. They were quite insistent about getting it, sir, and they even abducted me during their break-in because they thought I was onto them.

In any case, I have sent your Stone along with this letter. Professor Dumbledore told me that he thought the Stone had been destroyed during the failed robbery, that he had told you and your wife about it, and that you two were settling your affairs because you would die soon without the Elixir of Life. I didn’t want to tell the headmaster that I had found the Stone before anyone could get at it because I didn’t want to get in trouble (I didn’t mean to go into a forbidden room; I got there by accident, I promise!), but I absolutely wouldn’t keep the Stone if you would die without it even if it really is the Philosopher’s Stone.

I’m sorry you were made to believe it was lost. I can’t imagine how it must have felt. Professor Dumbledore said that ‘to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure,’ but I don’t think that would make dying any less scary. I’m sorry for all the trouble.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter.

Harry put down his quill and rubbed his eyes. He got up, stretched, and beckoned Hedwig from where she was perched waiting for the letter.

“Make sure to take breaks on the way there if you get tired, alright?” he told the owl with a fond pet to its soft head. He charmed the pouch he had put the Stone in with a Feather-light Charm as to burden Hedwig the least.

Hedwig chuffed agreeably and flew out the window.

Harry sat back down and watched his owl fly away until she was but a speck in the distance. Once she was completely out of sight, he reached up to the shelf above his desk that he used to hold stationary and writing supplies and retrieved a small metal object he had placed there earlier. It was what had remained after the Mirror of Erised had self-destructed.

It was one of the many things he had found in that room on the seventh floor. He had almost overlooked it with all the other more eye-catching magical objects drawing in his attention. It was small enough to fit comfortably in his hand and was scuffed with wear and old age. Harry didn’t doubt it was lovely back when it was first made, but as it was now, it didn’t look like much more that scrap metal waiting to be melted down.
Looks were deceiving, of course.

Harry shifted his hold until he clutched the object by its handle and rubbed the side of it very purposefully. As he watched, the magic lamp quivered ever so slightly before it spewed out dark green smoke from its spout.

The smoke swirled and condensed into a figure. Features soon emerged. A tall man, unusually tall, with dark hair and incredibly pale skin now stood before Harry. For all that he was remarkably handsome, everything about him was sharp and spidery. He wore heavy robes that reached and dragged on the ground that looked something like a monk’s habit and teaching robes. As his formation was completed, he sucked in a sharp breath and opened his eyes, revealing red irises.

When he caught sight of Harry, he breathed, “Harry Potter . . .”

Harry did not hesitate. He darted forward and wrapped his arms around the man’s waist. He did not loosen his grip even when the man flinched.

“I know you’re still getting used to having a physical form,” said Harry, tilting his head back to grin at the man. “But what better way to get used to touching than through hugging?”

The man hesitated for a moment before returning the hug.

“You are an odd one, Harry Potter.”

“So you’ve told me before.” Harry pulled back only to tug on the man’s hand and point to the direction of the door. “But we can discuss my oddity some other time. Right now, there’s so much else for us to do! Come on, let me give you a tour of my house.”

The man obliged and allowed himself to be dragged along by the boy. He looked appropriately interesting in his surroundings. He commented, “This is quite a large manor for one person to live in.”

Harry grinned.

“I suppose you’ll have to stick around to keep me company then, won’t you, Erised?”

Chapter End Notes

Erised lives! I feel like that should be a meme or something . . .

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