ATRONACH

by Hayato (TheLennyBunny)

Summary

AU- Harry is introduced to magic and its society early, and discovers a power that opens limitless but troubled doors. He discovers he is an atronach- essentially a magic sponge. With this in mind, he handles Hogwarts differently, with more cards up his sleeve than what's thought. Slytherin!Harry, Neutral!Harry
Chapter Notes

Hi guys! Right now, it's June 2017, and I've come to the conclusion that I should say something. This story was my absolute first! The first multi-chapter, in-depth story I wrote, with attempts at characterization and plot. And I like it for the most part! However, I'd also like to have a small disclaimer: There are a lot of problems with it that I don't want to correct, for fear of losing the effect it had! Cliched things that don't fit with reality, or discrepancies and miscommunications, they're all there. However, I hope that readers seeing it now, a year after its end and four after its beginning, can still enjoy it! Thank you so much for reading <3

As many probably know through overly-invasive news sources, Harry Potter was sent to live with his muggle relatives after the war heroes James and Lily Potter died. He was one-year old, a half-blood, and was reputed to have defeated the Dark Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or Voldemort. Albus too-many-middle-names Dumbledore will call sending him there as a measure to protect him and keep him from being put into the limelight for the next ten years. As the majority of the Hogwarts staff know, Professor Minerva McGonagall chewed said Albus Dumbledore out for weeks after this decision, claiming the muggles were the worst kind of people, and that sending Harry there was no good. In all actuality, the woman was completely right, and if it weren't for the subsequent "childhood", many, many problems could have been avoided; on the other side of the coin, certain events would not have happened, making the situation all the worse. Maybe Harry would have grown up to be some dependent, reckless, angst-ridden child. Who knows? But, the farce of a childhood that was Harry Potter's did indeed happen, and not much could stop that. Thankfully, some could make it better at least.

At Number 4, Privet Drive, there lived a "normal" family of four. The mother stayed home and watched her child, the father went to work and paid bills, and the son went to school and was generally viewed as problematic, as children can be. The mother, Mrs. Petunia Dursley was a picture perfect woman, although her pictures weren't very pleasant to observe. She often gossiped with and about the neighbors, and was very lazy. The father, Mr. Vernon Dursley, was very quick-tempered, and loved to gobble anything that came across his gullet; his leisure activities often involved the couch, tellie, the nephew, or brandy. Sometimes, it was a combination of them. The son, Dudley Dursley, was a bully of a child, and often delighted in extracting lunch money from smaller children or tormenting them.

The nephew, Harry Potter, was a small boy, very much liked by his teachers who adored his quietness and love for learning. Little Harry was constantly reading in his free time, and was looking forward to when he was older and able to reach the higher shelves in the school library. Harry went to school of course, but also cooked, cleaned, and straightened up the Dursley house every weekend and afternoon. He had done so for as long as he remembered, and had long grown use to the routine. He of course knew the Dursleys were not his actual family, as his mother and father had died in a drunken car crash- according to Aunt Petunia. They took him in when they died, and it led from there. It was a dull life, with not much happening beyond a few incidents that were not mentioned for fear of beatings, and said horrendous beatings themselves. Uncle Vernon was usually the one

---

The Beginning
delivering them with a belt or cane, unless Aunt Petunia had her frying pan at hand. Until the March of Harry's second year in school, it was practically boring for him. Until.

Harry could pinpoint exactly where everything went strange, and doubted he would ever forget it. After all, if that day had never happened, he would have been left in the dark water to swim for himself.

It was a pleasant Saturday in terms of weather, not a cloud could be seen; it wasn't too hot or too cold, a miracle in England. The pollen wasn't overbearing, and the plants were cheerfully swaying in the breeze. Truly, the wonders of Spring should never be ignored, especially when one is trying to weed a garden as Harry was. Harry, at his young age of 6, was currently pulling weed after weed out, trying to ignore the aches in his arms and dryness of his throat. Aunt Petunia had shoved him out here after making him cook breakfast (seven pancakes, five pieces of bacon, two big, fat sausages, and two pieces of toast for him), and had barked at him to finish by lunch. Right now, the sun was nearly in the middle of the sky, and he was near done, thankfully.

Harry was relieved, as the last time he hadn't finished on time, Uncle Vernon had gotten this- look-on his face, and Harry was barred from eating for the rest of the day. He supposed he should be angry at that, but it was far better than what could have happened. If you didn't finish your chores on time, you were punished. Sure, he was upset, but so were the pits of life. Harry was lucky he wasn't slapped around a bit. He was pretty sure it was because school had started again- teachers would notice if he had bruises on his arms or legs.

Chasing his thoughts away for the time-being with the easiness only children seem to have, Harry finished up his work and piled the last weed into the bucket beside him. It was hardly filled, with barely enough weeds to reach the top. His constant work paid off in some ways, at least. Setting that aside, he stood up and stretched a bit. He had been hunched over that garden for hours, and it made him sore like nothing else. But if it weren't for him, the garden would look less than the perfection it had been groomed to; and as much as Harry didn't like the work, the flowers were always very pretty. Sighing, he glanced towards the front door. Maybe if he went inside and asked as nice as he could, Aunt Petunia would give him something to eat and let him wash up before starting the rest of his work. If not, he could always swipe something when she wasn't looking and use the hose; he had done that before when she completely forgot he was out there... But before he had time to trudge into the house and ask, Aunt Petunia popped her head out herself. Peering around the yard, she quickly spotted Harry and gave him the usual horsey glare.

"Boy!" She hissed, "Get in here and wash yourself up! Mrs. Figg can't take you on account of her cats being sick, so you're coming with us to London!" Now, this in itself was one of the weirdest things to happen to Harry. Whenever the Dursleys had to go anywhere, they left him with Mrs. Figg, an old woman across the street with far too many cats, and a house that smelled of mildly-off cabbage. She would show him dozens of pictures of her cats and feed him mildly-off cake that he enjoyed anyway for the sake of sustenance. If she wasn't available, they left him with the neighbor Mr. Lawrence, a short man with a greying widow's peak, but after the police were seen at his house a week ago, no one went near him anymore.

So, with a fair amount of both trepidation and excitement, Harry went inside in preparation to go to London for the day.

After a ride composed of Dudley knocking Harry in the head, Harry wishing he could give Dudley an uppercut, and Vernon cursing and swearing at the other drivers on the road, they finally parked the car near some shops. Unlike Little Whinging, where everything was uniform and clear-cut, London seemed to twist and tangle into different shapes and colours, not bothering to conform. It
delighted Harry to no end. Where they had situated themselves, there seemed to be a great many clothing shops, ranging from women's clothes and children's, to even what was a store for "maternity clothes", whatever those were.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see what looked like a bookstore, or maybe even an antique store. It looked old, much older than the buildings surrounding it, and was very out of place next to buildings like "Dory's Dressings". Even with the mix-and-match of London, it stood out, appearing to belong in an illustration of Victorian stores than on the street of modern London. It even seemed to shimmer a bit, with a sort of... a glow. It made him curious, but he had little time to ponder if it was a trick of his mind before Vernon tugged him by the shirt and shoved his fat, red face into his. He flinched, but knew nothing would happen in public; too many people to watch and whisper. Vernon's face was slowly turning a plum colour that reminded Harry of the ugly shirt his teacher had worn the other day. He guessed he missed Uncle Vernon saying something to him while he was looking around.

"Listen here, boy. You stay here, outside the store while we shop for new clothes for your Aunt, and do not move. If we find you somewhere else, I promise your last month will look like a picnic."

Harry flinched, remembering the incident. In the middle of class, Ms. Carrie's wig had suddenly turned a bright blue. Although no one in class could figure out what happened and no one confessed to doing something, the Dursleys had insisted it was Harry's fault. His back still smarted at the memory. Uncle Vernon shook him suddenly, his face turning an even deeper shade of plum. "DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Harry flinched again. "Yes, sir." He whispered. Vernon let go of his shirt, a faint sneer on his face, and walked- hobbled- into the nearest clothes store with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. He was almost sure he heard Dudley whining about being bored already as the door swung closed. Harry himself settled in for a long wait, knowing it could take hours with how his Aunt could be. The streets were crowded, but he managed to find a slight ledge on one of the store windows that he could perch on, and watched the various passersby.

One woman he saw was round, and seemed to have a warm air around herself. Her ginger hair stood out, and she was dragging what must have been her children across the street. They all looked wary of it, for some reason. Looking closer, Harry could see they had a strange glow as well, and he could even nearly make out- colours, of all things! I must be imagining it, he thought, or light-headed from not getting lunch. He watched as they finally reached the other side and hurried to the book-antique-store he noticed earlier. What were they getting, he wondered? Turning his attention away, he also spotted a man with curly, black hair stalking into a nearby cafe with a phone in his hands. No one bothered him as he watched from his makeshift seat.

He passed time in this fashion, watching the streets, seeing the people. Tall, short, dark, light, they all blended into the streets. Some had the imaginary glow Harry was steadfastly ignoring, while others were as dull as can be. Some were rushing, while others were taking their leisure when walking. But he always felt his eyes pulled back to that mysterious store. Questions popped into his head, some sensible and some as crazy as any 6-year old can make them. What did they sell? Why did the store look so old? Why did no one else go in but the red-heads? Was it invisible? Could only he and the family see it? The thought of going into the store himself and seeing what was in it passed his mind a few times, but he always banished the thought. As curious as he was, he knew it was a bad idea, even at his age.

So he watched the street some more, trying to name the different cars from what Uncle Vernon mentioned at dinner and what the other children in class jabbered excitedly about. He could see what he thought was a Hummer, if the description Laura had given was right. A police car. A handful of taxis. Even a Cadillac passed by at one point. By the point an Oldsmobile, Thunderbird, and SUV
passed, he was again bored with the road and started staring at the sky.

People can only hold out so long when curious and even shorter when bored, Harry slowly concluded. All he could do was sit out here and watch people, and that admittedly was tedious after an hour. If he moved, he'd be punished, and if he tried to talk to someone, they'd start asking questions he couldn't answer. It was a dismal experience. Sure, the curly-haired man before had started to run down the street yelling a while ago, with some poor blond man with a cane following him, and that was exciting, but once they disappeared, it was back to sitting there. But that store, that was something interesting, something he could explore instead of just sitting here... Maybe he could briefly, just briefly, pop in and see what they sold to satiate his curiosity and then rush back before the Dursleys noticed he had moved. Pop in, say hello to anyone who noticed, rush out. Awesome plan.

Biting his lip, Harry glanced back into the store. His cousin and Uncle were at the back, barely visible, near what might have been the changing rooms. From the pile next to his Uncle, Harry bet it'd be another hour or so before they even approached the cashier. Glancing between them and the bookstore-yet-maybe-not, Harry made his decision. Jumping up, he rushed over to the crosswalk, where the light was just turning red. The crowd of other people bustled around him; it intimidated him a bit, but he knew none of them would notice him. No one really did unless he came up to them.

In just two minutes, he was across the street and in front of the store. It was one of the biggest, most dangerous things he had done. He was thrilled over it- he just hoped Uncle Vernon never found out. Looking up at the store sign, he could squint and make out that it said "The Warlock's Athenaeum" in faded yellow letters. They seemed to empower him, make this all feel like it was truly real, truly happening. Drawing in a big breath, he pushed the door open, and stepped in.

He wasn't expecting this. He wasn't expecting this at all. The store, for all purposes and appearances, looked like a tiny and desolate corner shop from the outside. On the inside, though, it was HUGE. The walls stretched back until he couldn't see them anymore, and the shelves lining them were like monoliths. Thick books, small books, glowing books, they all lined the shelves. And in between the shelves, Harry could see people walking and browsing. Some sat in between the shelves, some climbed up to grab something too high, some even- even seemed to float! But that was impossible! And there were tiny things, floating in the air- they had wings and faces and flitted around, and one even smacked into his cheek before whirling off in another direction. It was more than overwhelming, and he was starting to feel a bit dizzy.

It probably would have continued to be overwhelming (but unfortunately still dizzy) if it weren't for someone shoving him out of the doorway. "You are in the way." A light, cross voice said behind him- or to the side of him? He couldn't really tell after hurrying to the side. The voice was shortly followed by another, saying something in a foreign language with a scolding tone. Glancing to the side, he could see the person who -presumably- had shoved him. He had dark skin, with darker hair and eyes. He had that imaginary glow too, and if Harry squinted a little, like he did when he couldn't read something very well, he could see it was a faint bluish-purple. Behind him was a tall woman who must have been his mother, with curly hair tied into a loose ponytail on her head. When he squinted at her, she was a nice blue. They were both wearing strange clothes- sort of like bathrobes, except pimped out in every possible way. The boy looked him up and down, sneering and opened his mouth as if to say something before his mother(?) scolded him again. He sighed through his nose, before extending his hand to Harry with a glare.

"I apologise for shoving you. My name is Blaise Zabini." Harry stared at the hand, wondering what to say. He should probably give his name, but which one? The Dursleys just called him Boy or Freak, but the teachers at school usually called him Harry, or Mr. Potter. He personally preferred
Harry, if only because it was less insulting. And the Dursleys always told him to keep shut of anything in the house. Deciding to take the public route, he hesitantly took "Blaise Zabini"'s hand.

"I'm Harry Potter. I-it's alright, it's my fault anyways, I should have moved." He said, smiling deprecatively. Blaise seemed to have a double-take at that, and gaped at him. His mother whispered something that almost sounded like "Merlin"- but that doesn't make sense at all because who would say Merlin like he was God?- before ushering them further into the store so they didn't make the same mistake Harry did. She said something to Blaise again, and glanced at Harry - or more specifically, his head-, before going deeper into the store. As she guided them by the shoulders, Harry whipped his head to and fro, trying to catch titles of books. There was one called *Runes of the Egyptians*, and *The Beedle and the Bard*, and even one that he was fairly sure said *Tae-Ha's Guide to South Korean Entities*.

Blaise was staring at his head too, but he had much more of a reaction than his mother. His eyes looked like they were near about to bug out of his head, and his mouth was even open a bit! "If you are really Harry Potter, why are you dressed in muggle clothes?" Blaise asked, sneaking another glance down at Harry's hand-me-downs. *What's a muggle?* Harry wondered. Maybe it was a fashion line he didn't know that had all their clothes look like giant rags? Harry asked as much, and Blaise boggled at him some more. "You-you do not know what a muggle is?" He asked, astonished. When Harry shook his head, he stared even more at Harry, almost analysing him, or having some internal breakdown. Harry couldn't tell if it was one or the other, but it was sure making him nervous. Blaise's mother finally stopped pushing them about, dropping her hands from their shoulders. She bent down and muttered something in the other boy's ear, but he didn't care, or didn't hear. She gave out a sigh, and walked back the way they came, hands skimming the shelves. Harry watched her go.

But, when the darker boy was done with his strange staring, he huffed and grabbed Harry's attention back, asking, "Do you even know you are?" Confused, Harry shook his head once more and watched as Blaise Zabini made frustrated noises and threw his hands up over his answers. And then he explained it.

And that's how it all started.

It's short, but this is sorta my first shot at writing serious fanfiction, so I'm trying my best. ono Id also like to say that after editing this three times just to put in breaks, Im about to strangle something. Please review!
After Blaise had glared at Harry (without heat) for a moment, he tugged the smaller boy down the
aisles to a small, unoccupied table in the back corner with chairs. They both settled down-
awkwardly on Harry's part and impatiently on Blaise's-, the young pureblood started to talk.

Blaise's explanation (which was more like a string of ramblings that barely connected) of the magic
world and magic itself was choppy, confusing in the way only children under ten years old can
achieve, and soaked in an accent that wasn't quite gone. Harry tried to his best to keep up with him,
but he was already lost when Blaise first said magic was real.

"But magic isn't real," He said, "My aunt and uncle say magic is nothing but bad stories full of nasty
freaks." Blaise crinkled his nose, and looked at Harry as if he smelled something wholly unpleasant.

"Your aunt and uncle are muggles. They don't have magic, so they don't understand how good it is.
They're worse than blood-traitors and mudbloods anyways, so you shouldn't listen to them." Blaise
chided. Privately, Harry wondered just what sort of school was named "Hog Warts", but didn't say anything.

"You're a wizard, and so is anyone in this store. Only people with magic, magical creatures, and
squibs can see this place." Glancing around, he asked, "Besides, haven't you ever had anything
really weird happen to you, like something changing colours or floating or even getting bigger or
smaller when you were thinking about it?" Harry looked down at that, and thought about the
teacher's wig changing colours when he was thinking about the book in the library with the blue-
haired prince. He thought about whenever Aunt Petunia tried to cut his hair, it was the exact same
length it had been before she cut it by the next day. He thought about how whenever Uncle Vernon
was particularly angry, he never woke up the next day with more than bruises, no matter if anything
cracked or broke. Harry also thought of the weird colours, but didn't know what to think of that.

Looking up wide-eyed at Blaise, who was waiting for an answer, he slowly nodded. The other boy
smiled at this, satisfied, and went on.

"That's magic! My mama calls it accidental magic, and it happens sometimes when witches and
wizards are really young. It usually stops when we get wands. But that happens when we're 11, and
then we go to schools like Hogwarts, or Durmstrang, or Salem." Harry wondered just what sort of
school was named "Hog Warts", but didn't say anything. Blaise didn't seem to mind that he didn't
say much, either, since he was still going on with no stop.

"Like I said, muggles don't have magic, and mud-" He paused when a nearby woman narrowed her
eyes at them, and amended, "muggleborns come from muggles, and the muggle world. They can do
magic, but they don't know any traditions or spells or anything like that before they go to a magic
school. Sort of like you, I guess. But you're a half-blood because your mama was a muggle-born and

EDITED 21-1-15/18-6-15
your dad was a pure-blood, like I am. Pure-bloods are all wizard." Blaise puffed up a bit like this, similar to a bird preening. Harry blinked, taking it all in. There were many confusing things about blood in the magic world, it appeared. Why didn't they just use simple O's and A's and B's like the... muggle-world. Is that what he lived in?

"Why did you call the muggleborns mudbloods at first? And w-why are muggles so bad?" Harry asked. Blaise blinked at him, surprised. Had he already forgotten what he said?

"Well... muggles are bad because they don't have magic. They don't have magic and they use strange things to do things. And mud-muggleborns have muddy blood because they came from muggles." Blaise replied uneasily. "Half-bloods are better, but they still have some muggle blood in them."

Harry frowned at this. "But how are they bad for not having magic? They can do lots of things like fly, and go to the moon, and cure sick people with science. And muggleborns still have magic too, even if they're from muggles." Blaise was frowning by now as well, and looked even more uneasy. He shifted around in his seat some, opened his mouth to talk, and then closed it.

"... It's not important." He said, "You were raised with them, so you don't know any better." Harry was about to interrupt here with, well, something, but Blaise's eyes had widened, and he blurted out, "And- and you don't know who you actually are either, do you? You don't know what happened on Hallow's Eve, or about the Dark Lord since you didn't know about magic! Merlin!" This grabbed the attention of some of the people near them, but they quickly looked away.

"The Dark Lord?" Harry pressed, when the darker boy did not go on.

"He's um, this, dark lord. He has a name, but you aren't supposed to say it because it's cursed. And because it's safer to say 'The Dark Lord'. He had followers and everything, and he was trying to get rid of the muggles and mud-muggleborns and started a war, and people didn't like that, so he went after them. The papers and people say he went after your parents on Hallow's Eve five years ago, and they... got killed. But you survived and defeated him supposedly." Blaise tumbled out, acting as though he didn't want to talk of it. Harry could see why, what with how the man sounded. But with the way he was talking before, wouldn't he agree with the Dark Lord? And furthermore..

"My aunt told me my parents died in a drunken car crash, though." Harry protested.

"What? Why a car? No, I told you not to listen to your muggle relatives. Your parents got killed in the war. You... you really don't know anything. You don't know enough." The two of them sat in silence after that, not wanting to talk; Blaise was thinking, and Harry was too overwhelmed. His head was swirling with information he could hardly believe. Magic was real, his parents didn't die drunk in a car, he was a wizard... But it was believable, in a way. It explained all the weird incidents, the feeling of his relatives hiding something, even how people came up to him in the street sometimes! But, Harry thought with his good mood deflating, they would never let me get a wand or go to a magic school. They wouldn't want to waste money on me, or let me do "freakish" things.

"Boys." A voice suddenly said from behind Harry. He jumped, and whirled around in his seat to see the woman from before, who surely must have been Blaise's mother from how alike each other they were. She was smiling slightly, in a way that might have meant she was hiding a bigger one or putting them at ease. "I see you have been playing nice together." The two of them nodded, although not much of their conversation could be called more than confusing. Miss Zabini's (because Harry could only assume her last name was Zabini) smile seemed to sharpen, and she looked down at Harry from where she stood. "You know, Mr. Potter, my little bambino has tutoring sessions with a local wizard in a town near here. Maybe you two could, ah, meet sometime to talk again?"

Harry was stunned. This woman actually wanted him near her son? Usually people tried to shoo him
away because of what the Dursleys said. The one time he went against them, he might have actually made a friend! He nodded his head enthusiastically, beaming at her. He didn't see it, but behind him, Blaise was nodding as well, a determined look on his face. Nicola Zabini, who was standing in front of both of them, saw both and internally cheered. Maybe if these two grew close, her son would stop listening to every little word Malfoy's boy spewed. And maybe the Potter boy would shape up. It was obvious to anyone who looked close that there was something off about him.

Harry would have said something more, but as he was looking up at Miss Zabini, he saw there was a clock on the wall. Normally, this wouldn't have alarmed him, but the clock itself read that it was ten past 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It had to have been an almost an hour since he had come in here—what if the Dursleys had left the store and found he wasn't there? He jumped to his feet, panicking, but stopped and turned to the Zabinis before he did anything.

"I'm sorry Miss Zabini and Blaise, but I have to go my relatives are expecting me and I'd love to see you again but I've really got to go I'm sorry!" He rushed out. After that, he rushed out of the store itself, leaving the two Zabinis to stare after him.

"Well. Polite boy." Nicola murmured blandly.

It turns out, when he crossed the street and reached the store panting, the Dursleys had just made it to the cash register. Too bad Dudley was watching him run back.

Harry was punished long for not obeying Uncle Vernon's orders. When he wasn't at school, doing chores, or managing to hide from Dudley's gang of tiny riff-raff, he was locked in his cupboard until he had more school or chores. The first few days after the outing, he couldn't even sit right with how hard Uncle Vernon had gotten him with the belt. Usually, Harry would have taken this with the endurance and resignation of a man going to his execution, but this time he was angry. He had lived with them for five years, and they had lied to him the whole time—hadn't told him he had magic, or that his parents were war veterans, or anything of that ilk. He had a right to know these sort of things, especially when they could affect his life!

What right had they to call him a freak when he just had magic? And he knew by now that was the only reason why they called him that. After the day in the bookstore and the subsequent lock-ins in the cupboard, he had turned over again and again the ways the Dursleys treated him and what they said. When he thought of it, the only differences between them and him was that he had magic, did work around the house, and didn't look like a horse, walrus, or giant pig. All the other children in school were like him too, if just a bit louder and rounder. So how was he a freak?

These thoughts went through his mind multiple times during the punishments. Going over them fueled his anger, and let him focus on something more than the pain or the darkness. It was a new way for him to cope.

Of course, that didn't change his behavior in school or at home. He knew that if he started talking about any of the things he had learned in either place, he'd be called crazy or get the thrashing of his life. And if he acted different than how he usually did, the teachers would wonder if something was wrong, and call the Dursleys. So he laid low and let his mood stew in his head, not noticing the effect of it. Around his school, things would randomly fall down, and food would start to rot. At the house, the weeds would shrivel when he touched them. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

And then the stewing broke like a bad fever around the end of June.

Aunt Petunia had dragged Harry out of the house and into the town for birthday shopping, as she seemed to think he would burn it down if he was alone. So he was once again standing outside a
store (which was quite stupid of her considering last time, no?) as she shopped for toys that would ultimately break in pudgy, pink hands. He was once again people watching, but it was much more boring in Little Whinging than it was in London. Everyone here was the same shade of person; normal, perfect-on-the-surface housewives and children and businessmen. He probably would have started dozing if it weren't for someone suddenly shouting his name and running into his bruised shoulder.

He nearly yelped, but simply flinched and kept it in. no need to draw more attention to him, or it. Whoever had run into him was now running their mouth faster than a race car, and clutching his arm tightly, as if to keep him there. He could hear the thick there-but-not-there accent in the voice, one that he recognised, and quickly looked over to them. To his all-encompassing surprise, it was Blaise; he was frowning, and staring at Harry like a kicked puppy. Paying attention to the other boy, he finally realised what he was saying.

"-nd I tried to catch you but you disappeared and my mum was actually worried and you- you never even owled me! I don't know if you have one, but you could have done something!" Blaise finished. Harry blinked, not really believing the boy was here- because how many towns really surround London?- and slowly responded.

"My relatives wouldn't have let me if I could. Your tutor's in Little Whinging?" Glancing behind Blaise, he could actually see what must have been his tutor. He was a short man, no taller than 5'5, who had brown hair slicked back messily. He was staring at the him with a bemused look on his face, and was lighting a pipe.

"Upper Whinging, but that's not important! You must live around here which means I can come and see you and teach you about the wizarding world and make sure you're not a complete idiot by the time we go to Hogwarts! Right Mr. Smith?" The now named Mr. Smith nodded his head, grinning and waving a hand.

"Your ma paid me ta teach you, kid. And this will certainly be a... learning experience. Tell me Mr. Potter, what are you doing out here in the street? You trying ta rack up a few coins?" His eyes looked him up and down as he said this, but Harry shook his head, now more wary than shocked. Did everyone know his name? First Blaise and Ms. Zabini, and now this man? He jabbed a finger towards the store, and the two other wizards peered inside and saw the sight of Aunt Petunia arguing with another woman over something near the front. Probably an action figure or video game, considering "Little Diddydums" tastes. Mr. Smith cackled at the sight, making a few passersby stare, while Blaise looked slightly disgusted.

"Is that your aunt? She looks like a HORSE, Harry!" At that, Harry giggled and Mr. Smith cackled even louder, bending over from how hard he was laughing. "What?" Blaise huffed, "She does! Besides, that's not important! Where are we going to meet up?" Harry's giggling slowed to a stop as he started to think of it. There was no way they could meet up at his house like Piers and Dudley did, and he there was no way he could go over to wherever Blaise had his lessons. Maybe the playground? He wondered. No, that wouldn't be good. Dudley and the others might spot us and chase Blaise off. But Dudley would be everywhere, he thought gloomily. During the summer, Dudley and his gang wandered everywhere around the neighborhood, taking kids' ice cream money or chasing them down. He was a delinquent in the making.

So the only place they could really meet was the playground. Harry both wanted to risk it and not, simply because this was his first maybe-friend. Was it worth the chance he may not want to be maybe-friends with Harry anymore if they met Dudley?

...Yes.
"There's a playground near my house. It's down Magnolia Road, and no one really goes there." He said hesitantly. There was no telling what would happen if Dudley, or Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon found out about any of this. And right now, he can't say he particularly cared about that. Blaise grinned himself, an unrestrained one full of excitement.

"Wicked! We can meet up in the afternoons- that is when my lessons end, and my mum won't mind me staying a bit longer to meet up with you." Harry gave him a grin in return, the excitement contagious. "Maybe I can show you some of the cool stuff I've got, like a broom and one of my books! I know muggle books do not having moving pictures or even talking paintings, which is really weird, Harry, I do not get." Mr. Smith cleared his throat at this point, interrupting Blaise and catching their attention. When they both looked at him, he pointed at the store window with the bemused look still on his face. Looking in, Harry could see that his aunt was just finishing her purchases- and by purchases, he meant veritable mountain of things that would very soon be broken. He would have panicked if it weren't for the tingles of excitement still in him.

"You two want to go, she won't be happy if she sees me talking to someone and hears what we're talking about." Harry sighed, grimacing. Blaise blinked at him in confusion, and looked like he was about to ask something if it weren't for Mr. Smith placing a hand on his shoulder. Mr. Smith was smiling again, but this time it seemed different, tightly-wound somehow.

"C'mon now little Mr. Zabini, I'm sure Harry's aunt is just very, very protective. Let's go before she thinks I'mma child-snatcher, hmm?" Blaise looked put-out, but didn't put up a fight. The two of them said their goodbyes, and with another glance at the window, Mr. Smith started guiding him down the street. Aunt Petunia came out not a minute later, thrusting her bags into Harry's arms for him to carry back to the house. He sighed, but started his trek.

It had gone -very surprisingly- well the first time they met up on the playground. Mr. Smith had spent the time swinging on one of the swings while Blaise had shoved knick-knack after magical knick-knack in Harry's face. That day he learned what a remembrall was, the going rate and looks of galleons, sickles, and knuts, and how to activate a two-way mirror. Blaise told him that if he had a second pair he would have given him one, but that this was the one his mother gave him for less urgent emergencies. For the more urgent ones, he was to use a portkey, which transports the people to a determined location. According to Blaise, of course. Blaise had also asked that day why Harry always wore the same clothes (a word which he said with such hesitancy that when Harry looked back on it he was sure Blaise doubted they were). Harry had just told him they were the only ones he had to avoid explaining that all his hand-me-downs looked the same by the time Dudley was done with them.

Mr. Smith had ambled on over after about two hours and told them that Blaise had to head home before his mother pitched a fit. So they said their goodbyes and agreed to meet up every other weekday. And they in fact did, even when Harry went back to primary school in the fall. Over these meetings, he learned more about the wizarding world, more about the war- although any information on that was limited due to their age- and argued with Blaise over certain aspects of what he said. That always seemed to make Mr. Smith cackle particularly loud.

One afternoon, near the end of October, Harry was heading back home to Number 4, which was only a few blocks away. He would say the Dursleys had noticed he was gone, but no one was even home. Uncle Vernon was at work, Dudley with his friends as usual after school, and Aunt Petunia at some neighbor's house. It seemed Aunt Petunia had thought he'd take the whole 3 1/2 hours to clean the windows. The thought of that filled him with something, but he couldn't tell if it was irritation or relief.
So until about the time he had to start putting the roast into the oven, Harry had the house to himself. He didn't watch TV and read, since the TV reminded him of Dudley, and the only books in the living room were too wordy. He did, however, try something he had been doing for weeks.

He had thought again over what Blaise had told him the first day, of how children accidentally perform magic when they were younger, and wondered why it couldn't be purposeful. If they could do it with an absent thought, why not with a focused one? So for the past two weeks and so, he had been trying very, very hard to try and make the toaster in the kitchen levitate. Every morning when he was making the Dursleys breakfast, if he wasn't using it that day, he'd sit while the bacon or eggs or something else was cooking and would stare at the toaster and yell in his mind FLOAT, TOASTER!

It hadn't worked yet, but he thought he just wasn't putting enough power into it. Or maybe he should try a different method? He had enough time today to try out some of the other methods he had been thinking of. Going into the kitchen, he settled in front of the toaster and pondered for a bit. If the mind shouting wouldn't work, maybe he needed to actually say it?

Looking determinedly at the toaster (which is indeed a strange sentence), Harry yelled "Float!" Predictably, the toaster didn't move a damn inch. So he tried again. And again. And again. Each time, his frustration with it and his theory grew, and finally he threw up his arms in anger and screeched, "FLOAT!" at the top of his lungs. At that outburst, a strange feeling went through Harry, almost as though water were going across his arm. A second later, the toaster zipped up, crashing into the ceiling and nearly making a dent. Harry gaped at where it had hit the ceiling, almost not believing it finally worked! After weeks of sitting there and thinking, it finally worked! But, that made him pause. Just why had it worked? It hadn't moved when he had been saying it. So...

Trembling with excitement, Harry raised his arm and willed for it to levitate. And slowly, almost jerkily, as though it didn't want to obey, the toaster raised to where his arm was held. A grin spread itself across Harry's face, and an empty feeling in his chest.

By the time Blaise and Harry were nine, they had moved on from the impromptu lessons Harry had been given (along with Blaise's actual ones- Mr. Smith simply brought Blaise there now instead of teaching him). They had been meeting for around three years, and had managed to develop a system. Whenever Dudley or one of his gang came nearby, they would hide in the bushes and wait for them to leave. If one of the neighbors came near, Mr. Smith would do something to make himself invisible until they passed. Nowadays, they simply talked about what had been happening at Harry's school, or what Draco Malfoy was whining about now, or how bad the Dursleys were getting.

But then the social worker had come by.

It was a Friday, and would have been a damn fine Friday if it weren't for Dudley pushing Harry hard enough to send him toppling from his swing onto the ground. The hard-packed, dirt ground that felt harder than cement sometimes to the young boy. Face first.

He ended up with a broken nose, which ended up making him have to go to the nurse's' office and Dudley getting a very harsh slap on the wrist for "rough-housing". Which ended up with the nurse asking Harry just why he was so small and why he wouldn't relax against the chair at all during his examination of the break and look-over of the young boy. About several smooth excuses involving sheepish expressions later for his various injuries, the nurse let it go with a suspicious stare and a crack! from his reset nose.

He thought it was all fine and dandy, since the nurse had apparently dropped the topic and released him. He went about his normal Friday business, finishing classes and then going to have a emotions-
jam session with Blaise (and technically Mr. Smith, who seemed to delight in randomly breaking into their conversations to say an off-putting remark). Harry complained and raged about his nose, and Mr. Smith graciously fixed the rest of it up, vanishing any remaining aches. Blaise whined about the other pureblooded brats, who were apparently getting on his nerves more often due to their clinginess and questions. He went home around 4 o’clock to give himself enough time to check over the garden and start dinner. None of the Dursleys actually cared, and they didn’t care when he did much the same thing the next two days, as was the modus operandi by now. It was until the next Tuesday that he got the slightest inkling that something might have gone down.

His teacher, a Mr. Delwyn Bowman who was an excitable and child-loving man, would not stop watching him during class. And lunch. And recess. Like, creepy let-me-into-your-broken-soul staring. It unnerved Harry to no end, but when he glared at him, the teacher just frowned and stopped. For a few minutes. At the end of the day, he saw Mr. Bowman talking to various other teachers from around the primary school—ones he remembered being his.

Was he going to be kidnapped or something? He actually posed that question to Smith and Blaise, and while Blaise had laughed it off, Mr. Smith had gotten the most peculiar expression and then gave an off-sounding laugh. It wasn't very reassuring.

By the end of the week, it wasn't his old teachers, but rather a tall and tan woman. She actually came in and sat in their class watching the students with a small smile after Mister Bowman explained her name was Mrs. Nikita and that she was here to make sure they were all doing okay. Harry decided to ignore the unsettling amount of focus she put on him, instead drawing a picture of a crup that he was going to convince his teacher was a magic dog that (didn't) exist. He also decided to try and make a shield command that might also camouflage him.

At the end of the day, a Thursday by now, Mr. Bowman pulled him aside and bent down to him. "Harry, could you take this note home to your Aunt and Uncle? It's nothing bad, I promise." He asked, keeping his tone calm. Harry knew he was probably right, but everything was bad with his extended family, so. He took the folded paper hesitantly, knowing Blaise and Mr. Smith were waiting for him today, but also knowing he shouldn't ignore this with all the suspicious things that had been going on.

When he got home, only Aunt Petunia was there by that point, and he handed her the note with a touch of weariness and resignation. As she read it—whatever it was, her face grew paler and paler, and she stared down at him silently when she was done.

"Aunt Petunia?" He asked, keeping his voice small. "Am I in trouble?" That seemed to snap her out of it, and she tore the note to pieces in a frantic movement, shoving the debris into the garbage.

"Go to your cupboard and stay there until I tell you to come out." She snapped, face white as bone. He hurried to comply, and wasn’t let out until late at night, after what had sounded like arguing and maybe even a slap. Aunt Petunia wordlessly handed him some bread and turned back to her place at the table, not watching to see if he went back into his cupboard or not.

He did, out of a sense of fear.

He found out later that the note had been a request for a meeting between the family and his teacher, because of some issues that had arose in class. He had a sinking feeling in his gut and a certainty in his mind that it was in fact not about his A* grades, but rather about his current maid status in the house. Especially since Aunt Petunia’s face hadn’t changed from white for at least an hour. He caught a glimpse of both Mrs. Nikita and Mr. Bowman before he was told to wait outside for a bit. From outside, he could barely hear the conversation, but its volume rose and ebbed at points, and he
knew that Vernon was furious and had expressed such at least three times.

When they left the room about an hour later, well past evening, the sinking feeling turned into a black hole, and he clenched his hands in an attempt to stay calm.

Vernon was going to destroy him.

Harry preferred not to think of the night, or the morning afterwards. He wasn't-wasn't violated or anything, but... Hopelessness was not a thing to be remembered.

He could hardly stand the next day. Vernon still made him cook, hovering over his whole shoulder the whole time and barking at him when he did something slightly wrong. He almost went at him with the cane again when he sliced through his ring finger right over the chicken for the night because he was so dizzy from the mixture of pain and exhaustion. But Petunia swept in, and shoved him in the bathroom where she sat him on the tub and pulled out the first-aid kit. Harry watched her through a haze of pain and teared eyes as she examined his finger. She hadn't stopped shaking, and had taken to muttering since this afternoon. He faintly noticed a fading bruise on her arm, and chose not to think about it with a sickly determination.

By the end, when she was snipping off the dying appendage and clumsily trying to cauterize the stump left behind because of how useless it would be to try and save it without expertise, he thought he could make out what she said.

"This has all gone too far." He also thought she ignored his hysterical giggle that followed that.

Blaise and Mr. Smith had heartily tackled and questioned him the following Saturday, because he hadn't shown up in over a week and wasn't that worrying? When he held up his bandaged hand in a silent response, Blaise had stared blankly, his mind not processing it.

"Holy shit." Mr. Smith muttered, his fully processing it and fully enraged at the implications. "Kid-P-Harry-just- what happened?"

Harry weakly shrugged, refusing to meet either of their gazes. "The school thought the Dursleys weren't treating me well or something. Uncle Vernon wasn't happy when they set up a meeting with my teacher and what I'm pretty sure was a social worker."

"Il mio Dio- so that son of a bitch cut off your finger!?" Blaise yelled, catching up. Mr. Smith smacked him across the back of the head with a scowl, and Harry gave him a look of horror.

"N-no! My hand was shaking when I was making d-dinner and I slipped. Badly. Aunt Petunia was scared to take me to the hospital and couldn't save it." Harry frantically corrected, backing away a bit. Mr. Smith still gave him a flat look.

"Kid, that still raises questions. And reasons for bodily harm, in fact. One, why was a munchkin like you makin' dinner? Two, would would yer aunt not take you ta the hospital when your finger's just been cut off, and three, why were you shakin' so bad you cut your finger off?" Harry gave him a hopeless look, trying to think of what to say. Blaise had taken hold of his hand and was inspecting the bandages on it, too scared to really prod or examine it.

"I..." He trailed off, looking between their faces.

"C'mon kiddo," Mr. Smith said, grabbing hold of his shoulders, "You gotta tell us. Or me, since I am the adult. Losing a finger and doing dinner at nine ain't a good thing- looking how you do isn't a
good thing at any age. Please. Do ya really want this to happen again?" The normally immature man was dead-serious now, frowning with every wrinkle creased in worry. Harry was speechless.

"I... it... started with making breakfast." Harry mumbled helplessly, shaking. He went from there, talking about how he had to cook and clean, and how Dudley constantly chased him down to hurt him. How they would make him tend the garden. How Marge would have her bulldogs rip after him when she visited. How Vernon loved his belt and cane, and how Petunia would ignore it all as if she was above it or act like she deserved a trophy for helping him. How it was an honest miracle he met them, and that he had gotten beaten bad the day Blaise and Harry had first met. How he was pretty sure the only one in the house who liked his uncle was Dudley.

When he finished up recounting a less messy version of last Friday and the following Saturday, Blaise was shaking and Mr. Smith had his hand over his eyes.

"God... Fuck... I knew I was right listening ta Nicola. Cause of this shit. This sort of shit and the shit the ministry puts you through to fix it. God, why do I teach?" Smith muttered under his breath, clenching his free hand. Harry chose to not try and figure out what he meant as Blaise clutched at him and buried his head in his shoulder. Harry silently tried to calm the other boy down, commanding a weak relax from time to time. It seemed to have worked, as the other boy pulled back from shoulder, frowning with folded arms.

"Smith." He said suddenly, glancing to the man beside him. "We've got to do something. We can't just leave Harry with those muggles." Mr. Smith barked out a harsh laugh, and peered at Blaise from under his hand.

"Kid, ya can't do shit. You're just some minor who likes to have little playdates with all his tiny friends. But... I'll discuss it with yer mom, and we'll see if we can't get someone sent out. I'm sorry Harry," He said, turning unusually-somber eyes towards Harry, "But it's gonna take a while to get you. The ministry's about as useful and cooperative as a red cap on cocaine. And those things are damn useless sober. Y-you do want to get out don't ya?" He asked, taking on a tense expression. Harry hesitated, but vigorously nodded his head.

"But- is it- is it safe to tell anyone? I don't want to end up splashed across papers or-or harassed. And I don't want to end up in a worse situation- do we really have to tell anyone?" Mr. Smith gave him a tired smile, and didn't answer. They sat in silence for the rest of the time.

Mr. Smith didn't report anything of his attempts to rally the ministry into action. When Harry hinted at it, the short man had gotten a peculiar expression on his face, and muttered something that may have been "muggles" or "whumper". Harry honestly had no idea how those were related, but was a bit scared to ask.

The school hadn't contacted the Dursleys again either, and when Harry asked Mr. Bowman about Mrs. Nikita and the meeting, his teacher had given him a strange look and told him that Mr. Dumbledore- his grandfather, apparently, who had risen from the dead- had talked to her about everything. Harry didn't mention it again. He had long decided his situation was an unsalvageable one, and wasn't as disappointed as he should have been at two failures. He simply went on with life because it was that or drown. He chose the option that meant survival, even if it wa paired with a simmering hate and multiple injuries.

Currently, he was talking to Blaise about a recurring problem the Italian boy seemed to have nowadays.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to tell them, Harry. I can't exactly say to them 'Oh, it's Harry Potter
the-boy-who-lived I've been making friendly with for three years'! They're still under the delusion that you're either horrid or someone to use because of their parents! Hell, they still think that anyone below pureblood is trash- don't give me that look, I had to cave in after three years of your moral rants- and I don't want them near you, they might spoil you or take you away! You'll talk to me less!" Blaise complained, tugging on the other boy's arm. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. They had argued about this a dozen times over; Harry hardly saw a problem with it, and Blaise refused to not see it. It was enough to grate on a person's nerves. But then, Harry had been entertaining an idea, one that probably could have been used at the start.

"Well, why don't you give them a fake name? They won't be able to connect the "boy-who-lived" to a false name. You could even make it something pompous, I know they eat that up." He said, sliding his arm out of the boy's grip. Blaise looked thoughtful at that, and they could both hear Mr. Smith snickering in the background. Sometimes, Harry swore the man was drunk. Or insane; both would work.

"But what do we call you though? If we go with star names, they might connect you to the Blacks, and if we go with common names, they'll assume you're muggleborn or half-blood. No offense." He said, glancing over to Harry. Harry waved it away and thought it over himself. He didn't want something that would sound stupid, but he didn't want to go with something utterly common either. The three of them sat in silence, two of them searching for names.

"...What about Augustus?" Harry finally said. "I read about him in one of the history books at the library- he was the first emperor of the Roman Empire, and he brought about the Pax Romana, The Roman Peace. I think you've actually mentioned a statue of him or something that used to be near your house?" It had been a thick book on Roman history that Harry read, and had talked about famous emperors of the Empire such as Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Caligula. The thought of Caligula made Harry shiver a little in disgust. No man should be having children with his sister of all people.

"That's a little arrogant, don't you think?" Blaise asked, smirking. Harry shrugged, and sent him a tiny smirk of his own.

"I think I can be afford to be a little arrogant when you want to just trick some kids. If they want a last name, you can just give them Evans. Say I was adopted or something." The other boy nodded in agreement, and they moved on to arguing over whether or not gobstones or exploding snap was better.

On the morning of July 31st, 1991, Harry was forced to go get the mail by a lazy Vernon and bratty Dudley. When he searched the pile of envelopes to see if there was anything interesting, he found a thick, textured envelope with To Harry Potter, Cupboard Under the Stairs, Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging written on it in green ink. After stuffing it into his oversized trousers, he quickly walked back into the kitchen and handed the mail to Vernon as though it had never appeared.

Chapter End Notes

for those reading, this should be as bad as it gets? this story is about three years old, so i cant remember everything, but the child abuse should peter off in the plot a this point
In Which the Well Overflows

Harry didn't know what to do.

Blaise wasn't here to help him with this, and he wasn't able to even speak to him until the 1st of September at the earliest. Being the pucker head that past Harry was, he had refused to talk about Hogwarts due to the inevitable, resounding hell no the Dursleys would give in response to it. Harry didn't even have an owl to tell one of his wizarding buddies (AKA a sarcastic Italian boy and suspicious yankee from Dutch County). Of course, before he got ahead of himself, he should probably open the letter first like a sensible person.

Harry was currently sitting in his cupboard where he was sentenced to stay until Aunt Petunia deemed it hot enough to make him go tend to the garden. Or at least, that's what he thought. For all he knew, he could be stuck in here until dinner; wouldn't that be delightful?

He was sitting on his dingy excuse for a bed, and in his hands was the fated letter from Hogwarts. Blaise had told him about it and the school in the beginning, talking about the classes and lake. His parents had supposedly gone there, and been sorted into Gryffindor. He would have wondered where he would end up, but he was more absorbed in ogling the letter and not caring about extremely biased groups of children. The envelope was made out of thick parchment (as was the its contents, he soon discovered), and written on with green ink. That made him a wonder a bit, since it certainly didn't look like it was written with a pen. Maybe they used some special tool? He couldn't remember specifics.

Opening it with shaking hands, Harry pulled out two pieces of parchment. One of them seemed to be a list, while the other was an actual letter. Reading it, Harry felt a bit skeptical. At the very top of the letter was a list of titles the headmaster had -some man named Albus Dumbledore, hadn't he heard that name before?- , which seemed superfluous more than anything. What child needed to know the titles of a man who wasn't even going to be teaching them? He didn't even know what a "Supreme Mugwump" was! The letter itself read as follows:

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on September 1st. We await your owl no later than July 31st.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,
Deputy Headmistress

Absentmindedly, Harry paid a few thoughts to the name's Roman counterpart because wow it's such a more sensible name than Dumbledore or Wulfric, then moved on to the bigger problem. The school indeed needed a response, and he was certain there were no post owls around Privet Drive. Not with how spick-and-span the neighborhood was- no wizard or witch would willingly live here. So how the bloody hell was he going to send a response by the end of the day? And who's bright idea was it to send this off the day a response is due? He was disgruntled, but probably would have started to read the supplies list if not for a loud rapping against the cupboard's door.

"Boy! Get out of there and go trim the garden! You can be lazy on your own time!" Ah yes, the call
of the horse. It seems it was sufficiently blazing to send him out now. He shoved the letter under the mattress (although the Dursleys would never come in here) and opened the tiny door. Aunt Petunia was standing on the other side as expected, staring at him as though he were a small dog she was torn between kicking or feeling sorry for. He glared at her, but quickly trudged to the front door, as dawdling wouldn't help his back later on. He was about to slip on the hand-me-down sneakers he had, but a quick glance out the window made him freeze. A barn owl, big and beautiful, was sitting on the stop sign across the pavement. That particular stop sign had been put there by vandals playing a prank on Hallow's Eve, and for some reason, the city council had yet to move it. It was staring at the house and seemed almost... patient?

Harry was certain it was the one who delivered his letter.

Harry waited a while before he wrote a response. He knew from experience that no one would be watching him while he worked, not really, but it still helped to be cautious. You can never know when a neighbor decides to peek over at the "Delinquent Orphan" of Privet Drive, and sees him scribbling a message for an owl of all things. He didn't want to even think of what would happen when the Dursleys heard that sort of thing in gossip. Or about the fact he was known as a delinquent orphan- why did he have to live in a neighborhood of such horrible people? The only decent one around there was Mrs. Figg, and that was mostly because she knew who he really was and had nice animals. Her cats and kneazles, while annoying when mobbing you all at once, were nothing like Marge's bulldogs.

But that wasn't important. What was important was weeding this garden and trimming its bushes as quick as he could, and penning his response letter. Walking to the back of the house, Harry rummaged through the tool shack nestled in the corner of the yard. He quickly grabbed two pairs of gloves, hedge trimmers, and a bucket. He always enjoyed this part, even if it made him exhausted.

Running back to the garden, he sat the bucket down and grabbed the pairs of gloves, one in each hand. Concentrating, he listened to his heartbeat and the movement of his blood. He focused on them, flicking both hands and commanding listen. A feeling close to sparks drifting across skin went down his arms, and he dropped the gloves. He started to feel drained, but he ignored it and stared down at the gloves in wait.

Slowly, near unnoticeable at first, the fingers of them started to twitch, and then twist, until they stiffly lifted themselves from the ground and turned towards Harry. He smiled, and kindly whispered, "Pull out the weeds and put them in the bucket, and then water the flowers with a hose. Stop if anyone comes near." to them. One pair started immediately on the weeds, racing towards the garden bed and looking much like Thing from the Addams Family. The other shoved the bucket closer, and more in front of Harry. How dutiful they are, Harry thought fondly. He had been doing this since he was around seven, and it had helped him much in the long run. Instead of sitting under the blazing sun for three or four hours, he could do random exercises- magical and physical- or go down to the library and read. Petunia never actually checked up on him during chores unless it was nearing mealtime, so he was free to peruse for hours whatever he wanted.
Lately, he had been focusing again on Roman history, along with the basics of chemistry. A book was lying out one day when he went in, and he discovered that it was on the different experiments and combinations that could be made with certain chemicals. It had interested him to no end, and he delved more into it the next time he went.

Looking towards the trimmers, Harry bit his lip. While he could simply tell them to listen as he had the gloves, the last time he did that, they had fallen to the ground when finished, crushing some of the tulips. It was always thinking of commands to make for specific things that was the hard part. Nothing was ever as simple as his first float, Harry grumbled.

Picking them up, he did the same ritual as he did with the gloves, using the command listen after a moment of hesitation. When they started to twitch and finally float (as they had no fingers to walk on), Harry ordered them to trim the hedges, starting with the sides next to the flowers and moving out. This way, they'll stop when they're nowhere near over the flowers, he thought, satisfied. Harry was even more tired after doing that, but he knew it would fade after sitting on the lawn for a bit. No one ever seemed to notice the tools moving on his own, so he made no real effort to hide them beyond that one command. Pulling the pencil and paper from his waistband, Harry glanced behind him to make sure the owl was still there. It was, and was staring at him with a slightly unnerving look. Shivering, he turned back to the paper and debated what to write. He was going to say "yes" obviously, despite what the Dursleys did. The way he saw it, if they found out and forbid him from going in their especially wondrous way, the school would be suspicious and investigate when he didn't show up the first day. Evening. Whatever.

The biggest problem was, as usual, supplies; there was no feasible way for him to reach one of the hidden magical communities to buy them, and the Dursleys were, of course, useless obstacles. Blaise couldn't let him hitch since he was away on little pureblood business or something for the month. The last Harry had seen of him was when they celebrated his birthday early the previous Monday. The school was an option- but should he ask them about supplies?

He was going to mention it, he decided. There was no way he was going to Hogwarts completely unprepared. Picking up the pencil, he wrote:

*Dear Professor McGonagall,*

*I will be coming to Hogwarts in the fall. Is it possible that someone could come help me retrieve my supplies? I'm afraid my relatives would be opposed to taking me to shop for them.*

*From,*

*Harry J. Potter*

Folding it into fourths, Harry glanced behind him once more. The owl was still there. Good, but undeniably creepy. Standing on wobbly feet, he risked a look around to make sure no one was watching. The only person outside besides him was Mr. Lawrence, who must have decided it was a safe enough time to come outside without any whispers following him. The poor man was still shunned after all these years, even if it was for a simple accusation of streaking through local parks at night.

Sucking in a huge breath, Harry hobbled across the street, and would have banged into the stop sign itself if it weren't for him swerving at the last second. He jumped when he felt a weight settle on his shoulder a few seconds later, and tilted his head a bit just to see the owl staring at him still. Just what was wrong with this thing? He warily held up his note, ready to move to avoid nipped fingers, and the large bird snatched it out of his hands in an instant. It made a strange clicking sound- because God it wasn't freaky enough- and flew off. Harry stared after it, just a tiny bit terrified.
He had done what he needed to, and from across the street, he could see that the gloves had worked overtime today to finish up early. The trimmers were only done with one hedge, but that was fine with him. He could relax and watch the sky until they were finished. It's not like he had anything else to do today.

A day later, if you were walking the halls of Hogwarts near the headmaster's office, you would hear a certain staff member cursing both Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry J. Potter and demanding a house elf get him the vodka. It was enough to put any sailor to shame.

It had been two days, and there had still been no sign of any reply from Hogwarts. Harry didn't actually think he'd get a response, but it would have been nice. Maybe he could try swiping some money from Petunia's purse and hike over to- well, wherever the nearest magical community was. He had been nursing a suspicion for quite a while that there was one in Upper Whinging because of Mr. Smith's flat up there- normally, magic-born wizards and witches didn't live amidst muggles because of the difficulty that came with it. Blaise had told him once to raise his wand arm if he ever needed to get anywhere magical, but that hardly made sense. Was he supposed to be calling a cab? Flagging down some hidden ride? Signalling to the magical spirits *Ey yo can you give me a lift to go spree shopping?*

Harry was, once again, turning these thoughts over in the dim light of his cupboard, and playing with one of the presents he had gotten for his birthday. Well, not necessarily playing. More of... examining. For his birthday, Mr. Smith had given him a ring that was supposed to layer what he called a "glamour" over Harry. He had said it would help cover up anything untoward Harry didn't want people seeing. When he had first put it on and looked in the mirror, his scar had disappeared, along with a nasty scar he had gotten on his upper lip. When he looked down at it in amazement, he saw ten fingers.

Sometimes, the man was so thoughtful it was scary.

But while Harry was grateful for it, he was also inquisitive. How did a glamour layer itself, and how did the enchantment stay on the ring? While he was thinking, he was poking and prodding it, trying to see what made it tick. Sometimes, when he poked a certain spot or overlap, the colours wrapped around it would shift.

That was another thing altogether.

Harry had seen colours like this, wrapped around people and objects for years. He had thought them imaginary, hallucinations, because who thinks that's actually normal? But then they hadn't gone away, only gotten stronger. They were alway dim, never rising above the light you could get from a candle, but many of the things Blaise had showed him were wrapped in some sort of colour, although most had a sort of colourless glow; even his tools had a glow when he was "using" them- always green. Blaise himself was wrapped in a sort of indigo, and Mr. Smith in a strange dark pink. Harry never really questioned it to be honest, and had just dismissed it as something dealing with magic. But that was the big question wasn't- what sort of magic was it? Oh, Blaise had told him about charms and transfigurations and even runes, but this didn't seem like any of it. And the colours were constant as well, even if they dimmed more and brightened sometimes. It was a mystery he had yet to figure out. He hadn't asked Mr. Smith or Blaise about it because... it just seemed to be something he shouldn't talk about. Something he should keep to himself.

The ring Mr. Smith had given him had a sort of gold-and-pink sheen to it, despite being just an iron ring, and was streaked with red. Whenever his finger bumped into a streak of red, it would move, or twist and curl. It was very strange.
So here he was, an 11-year old boy sitting in a boot cupboard fondling a ring and pondering over a note he handed to a terrifying owl. This would be sad if it weren't for the fact it was better and more interesting than most days. After all, nothing of his was hurting, and hadn't been since the first week of July- the Dursleys were almost... waiting for something. Probably the letter, considering how Petunia had to have at least some inkling about Hogwarts. He was mildly content, with a decent birthday and a Hogwarts letter, even if there were some issues with its specifics. All in all, it was one of the best weeks in months.

Severus Snape could only note with disgust that every house here seemed perfect, clean, and most of all, cookie-cutter exact. It was bad enough he had to take Potter shopping for his supplies, but now he had to see how pampered he was because the damnable Headmaster seemed to think they would "bond" over Severus having known his mother! The old man was barmy if he thought he was going to be any sort of familiar with the boy of the man who had taken Lily.

Going up the driveway to the house marked as Number 4, Severus rung the doorbell and waited. Unlike many other wizards (most of which were wizard-raised), he had dressed sensibly for this outing, although he would be transfiguring his muggle blazer into a robe as soon as they were in the Leaky Cauldron.

When the door opened, he wasn't surprised to see that it was Petunia Evans- or Dursley now, since she married that pig some years ago. She took one look at him and screamed before shutting the door in his face. Well.

Harry could tell something was dangerously wrong when Petunia screamed. It wasn't her "There's vermin near me", or her "I'm angry and think you're worthless scream". It almost sounded like she was scared. Ha.

Of course, her screaming seemed to alert Vernon, who stood from the poor couch and went to her. You could always tell when him or Dudley were sitting on it, as its springs always squeaked in agony. It was amusing, yet saddening at the same time. That poor, poor couch. They started talking in low voices, and try as he might, Harry couldn't pick up any words. It turns out he didn't need to, as the door to his cupboard flew open and Vernon grabbed him by the collar. Just about the same time the front door slammed open as well, revealing an irate man.

Harry reacted instinctively to the chaos, shoving his hands in front of him and blowing Vernon into the kitchen. He crashed into the dining table, and one of its legs snapped at the force of it. Harry was pretty sure his face was white, and that his eyes were blown wide, and that he was dead. It did not matter what happened afterwards, he was dead.

Slowly shutting the door to his cupboard, Harry slid down the wall and tried to calm his breathing. He wasn't succeeding, but the irate man before had apparently come into the house and shoved something under his nose. It smelled like old sock, but Harry didn't really mind and just took it. It wouldn't matter soon since he just gone off and thrown Vernon into the table again and this time he was dead he wasn't getting off with just a few things missing or a few broken-for-days ribs, and he could hear talking above his head faintly, and could see the feet of the stranger from where his head was tilted. He was wearing black, shined boots oddly enough, and his feet were wrapped in a deep red. Was he a wizard too? Maybe the wizard could help them understand that he didn't mind losing a few fingers or getting a permanent limp if it meant staying alive. The talking cut off above him, and the thing in his hands was shoved to his mouth. Oh, he was supposed to drink it? He swallowed it, and the taste reminded him of socks and off lemons. It was nasty beyond belief, but his mind finally cleared and he started thinking calmly.
He was near furious with himself for going off into a panic. Where was the boy who had managed to cut his work in half and work around the Dursley's starvation stretches? Where was the boy who had managed to unsettle even Petunia? It was disgusting, his immediate loss of control, but there were more important things to do as of now other than berate himself. Looking up, he could see the stranger and Petunia, who was standing off to the side worriedly, wringing her hands and glancing between him and the man.

"If you are done with your theatrics, Mr. Potter, then perhaps we can move on." The stranger said biting. Harry blinked and narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything as he got up. He could just feel the man eyeing his clothes, but he ignored it- it was a familiar and now ignored feeling. Brushing himself off, he turned to the man once again, and had to look up to see his face properly. The man had to be at least six feet tall, and was indeed wrapped in red as Harry had noticed in his panic-induced haze.

"Are you a professor from Hogwarts, sir?" Harry asked, ignoring Petunia's gasp of indignation. She really should have expected this when you get stuck with a magical child honestly, and he wasn't stupid.

The man sneered. "Indeed. Since you deemed your relatives unworthy of helping you, I was... sent by the Headmaster to take you to get your supplies. And I will be doing so." He said, looking pointedly at Petunia. Harry raised an eyebrow at the wording, but didn't say anything. It was probably for the best, seeing as the man seemed to dislike him from the start. Maybe he was one of the Dark wizards Mr. Smith and Blaise talked about? Harry could notice something strange in the colours wrapping the man, but he couldn't tell what it exactly was.

"When do we go, sir?" Harry asked.

"Now. I do not want to waste any time because of dawdling around." The man- teacher apparently-answered. He seemed to pause for a moment, and told Harry, "You may call me Professor Snape. I am going to be your Potions professor when the time comes." At that moment, Vernon decided to stumble in- probably with a few thousand splinters in his ass- and decided to put up a fight.

"NO! I WON'T HAVE HIM LEARNING THOSE- THOSE- THINGS. HE. STAYS. HERE!"

Vernon roared, his face turning an ugly shade of puce. Harry nearly cowered at a sight like that, but stood his ground, and looked towards the Professor to see what he would do. Professor Snape smiled coldly, and it was as though the gates of Hell themselves chilled to an arid cool. It was amazing.

"I am afraid you have no power over this Dursley. It was written in his parents' will that he is to attend Hogwarts, and he will. Goodbye, 'Tuney." With that, he started to quickly stalk over to the door, and Harry followed after a moment of jaw-dropped surprise.

They took the train to London, which was the strangest part of it all, somehow. When Harry asked why, Professor Snape had sneered and said they certainly couldn't apparate or call the Knight Bus in the middle of a muggle neighborhood. Harry vaguely knew the terms, and concluded that Blaise must have mentioned it once or twice. Perhaps the Knight Bus was what he meant about transportation?

After a little under an hour, they reached the heart of London. Professor Snape had started walking without much of an indication of where they were going, and Harry didn't have a clue until they stopped in front of a dirty pub on Charing Cross Road. It had a sign calling it "The Leaky Cauldron", and a slight glow wrapped around it. Harry felt a bit nauseous going near it, for some reason he couldn't discern.
"Professor, I don't think children are allowed in pubs." Harry said, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to relieve the feeling. It didn't work, sadly. The tall man simply let out a put-upon sigh and dragged Harry in. No one on the street seemed to notice a tall man dragging a practical waif into a run-down bar. What a wonderful moment, no?

As they went farther into the bar, Harry's nausea only grew, and even his chest was starting to feel strange, with an almost stuffed feeling. It was getting hard to walk, even with Professor Snape's firm hand on his shoulder, and he couldn't stop his stumbling every few steps. He could hear the potions master greeting some people, and possibly saying a spell of some kind; and while it wasn't like when he was panicking, it was still hard to hear- everything sounded muffled to an extreme extent. By the time they reached the alley behind the pub, it was a proven miracle that that far was managed. Harry could barely hear, and his head was starting to pound by now. He didn't notice when his vision fogged over or when he collapsed, although Professor Snape certainly did.

"Potter? Potter!" Severus shouted, going from annoyed to alarmed. The boy had been acting strange since they arrived, but he didn't think there was anything actually wrong with the boy! Had Dursley done something before he opened the door? He was about to cast a diagnostic charm, but the young Potter awoke before he had the chance to.

Oh. was all Harry really thought when he came to. The nauseous feeling and stuffiness were gone, but in their place, everything was... clear? Sharper in a way, and even energising. He felt better than he had in... well, years, to be honest. Adjusting his glasses and sitting up, Harry blinked. Well, almost everything was sharper. Slowly taking off his glasses, Harry looked around, and could see without them. In fact, he could see better, which might prove that Aunt Petunia never bought him decent ones. And everything was glowing. Unlike before, where everything was as bright as a candle, the buildings were shining and Professor Snape was practically a lamp! A very red lamp, at that, with a very obvious bruise hovering over his left arm that Harry could now spot. The man in question was staring at Harry as though he were a confusing and unpleasant puzzle, but gave him a hand to help him up anyways. Harry took it, stumbling a bit when standing, but was otherwise fine. He put his now-useless glasses into his pocket, and him and the professor went into what was apparently Diagon Alley, commerce central of British wizards.

It was amazing in the alley, but endlessly grating. With the new edge that had entered Harry's awareness, everything was bright and strong; smells were pungent, people loud, and colours glaring. Not to mention the stereotypes. He knew what he was jumping into because of all those times he hanged out with Blaise, but dear lord, he wasn't prepared for robes, pointy hats, flying brooms, and familiars all at once. It was almost too much. But he had to hold out long enough to get through this as best he could. Currently, they were walking down the main road at a sedate pace.

"Mr. Potter, I trust you have your supplies list?" Professor Snape asked. Harry nodded, pulling it from the waistband of his trousers, where he had hidden it. Reading over it, Harry frowned as he realised something.

"Si- Professor Snape, how will I get anything? My relatives would never lend me money for any of this, and I can't access any vaults I have without a key." Harry asked. The Dursleys certainly wouldn't give him money to buy such "freakish" things, and would sooner steal his from the vaults left to him. And he couldn't even open those without having a vault key, or one of those sigil rings Mr. Smith had mentioned. He'd have to see about the requirements to those sometimes...

Snape let out another put-upon sigh. "Headmaster Dumbledore has temporarily given me the key to your trust vault. After today, I am to give it to you, and then you can waste money to your heart's content." Oh. That made sense. Well, not much.
"Why does the Headmaster have my key, sir? Shouldn't the Dursleys have it, since they're my guardians?"

The Professor seemed almost surprised at this question, and then snorted under his breath. "Do you really think they could be trusted with heaps of money? Knowing Petunia, she would probably spend it all on frivolous things. In addition, the Headmaster is your magical guardian, and as such has access to such things." By the time they were done walking, they had reached an enormous, white-stoned building at the very end of the main street. It had "GRINGOTTS BANK" carved into its front, and what Harry could only assume was a goblin was standing by its large doors, watching and bowing to those who walked in. As they entered themselves, Harry bowed in return to the goblin, who almost seemed surprised for a moment. Passing those doors, they came to a slightly smaller pair of silver doors, engraved with words.

"Enter, stranger, but take heed of what awaits the sin of greed. For those who take, but do not earn, must pay most dearly in their turn. So if you seek beneath our floors a treasure that was never yours, Thief, you have been warned. Beware of finding more than treasure there. Ominous." Harry murmured, reading the words. Professor Snape snorted beside him, but didn't say anything. As they walked inside, Harry could see it certainly did look like a bank, despite the strange clients and tellers.

Counters lined the sides of the doors, with a goblin perched at each one; some were talking to customers, while others seemed to be counting things or going over paperwork- parchmentwork? Hm. Harry would never understand why wizards used PARCHMENT of all things instead of a sensible thing such as paper. Walking to one of the free tellers, Snape cleared his throat. The teller looked up from whatever they were filling out -with a quill of all things- and seemed to curl their lip a bit. "Can I help you?" He? She? asked. Professor Snape rummaged in his pockets for a moment, and then pulled out a large brass key and set it on the desk.

"I need to withdraw an amount of 250 galleons from Harry Potter's trust vault. I also have a package I need to retrieve in Vault 713." The goblin picked the key up, inspecting it and turning it this way and that. After they seemed satisfied, they slid the key back to Snape and- barked? Harry assumed they had said something in a different language, as another goblin came rushing towards them, hurtling to a stop and bowing.

"This is Griphook. He will take you down to the appropriate vaults. Have a good day." With that, it seemed the transaction had ended, and Snape started to follow Griphook. Harry bowed to the teller, and thanked him for his help, rushing off before he saw the look on their face.

Griphook took them off to the side, and through a door that seemed to lead to a huge cavern. It had a good-sized ledge, and large carts perched on tracks lining it. Beyond that was darkness broken by light from sconces and water reflecting. The three of them clambered into the nearest one, although Harry was very hesitant, seeing how those tracks twisted and turned in the distance. It turns out he that while he shouldn't have worried about being hurt, he was right on the mark about it very, very unpleasant. Every time they went around a sharp turn, he felt his stomach lurch into his side, and every time they went down, he could feel it fly into his throat. By the time they reached his trust vault, Harry was very sure that this was payback for something the wizards had done, or a very cruel, unavoidable joke between them.

Griphook, the devious goblin, smoothly got out and waited for the two of them to step out. The professor seemed a bit shaky on his feet, and Harry was just barely fighting back the wave of sick-up threatening his dignity. After miraculously avoiding an incident, he finally got out and stepped up to the door where the others were waiting.

It was an intricate door, with locks, gears, and other bits and pieces decorating its surface. Harry
didn't know how one key could open this much- it looked like you would need 20! But Griphook simply took the key from the professor and inserted it in a lock about waist-high on a human. With a sonorous *CLICK*, the locks and gears started to turn one by one. When they were finished, the door parted in two to reveal mounds of galleons, sickles, and knuts. Harry probably would have gone and touched one of them to see if they were even real because holy god that is a lot of money, but Griphook pulled out a pouch before he could do anything, and snapped his fingers. Dozens of galleons flew up in the air and into the bag, filling and filling it but never stretching it, it seemed. When he was done, Griphook gave the sack and key back to the professor, and they all clambered back into the cart for another sickening ride.

The next stop passed quickly, and while Harry was curious as to just what the "package" was, the only details he got from it were that it was wrapped in brown paper, small, and most likely important. From the glance he got of the vault itself, it was actually empty, save for the package itself. Very suspicious. And interesting.

After disturbing yet another goblin, Harry and Professor Snape left the bank, laden with one bag of gold and one less mystery. They went from place to place in the alley, first getting Harry's telescope and class books. *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* and *Magical Drafts and Potions* both seemed interesting, and Harry predicted that he would enjoy both potions and herbology. That is, he would enjoy herbology and might enjoy potions, if Professor Snape was more... stoic in the class. Harry had a feeling he wasn't, but kept his hopes up out of spite.

The next place they went after this was the apothecary. Snape had yet to say more than a few words and snide comments, and didn't look ready to say anything more when they went here. The Professor stopped to ogle the things in the store window, and Harry absent-mindedly listened to the background. Some mother was scolding her sons. A woman was talking to her brother about someone named Sunny. A store bell was jingling, and someone was running up- Harry moved to side, narrowly missing an arm that was about to slam itself onto his shoulders.

"You know, you could have told me you were going to be in the Alley today. Without your glasses as well- did you finally go to an oculist?" A annoyed voice said above his ear. Harry grinned. Reaching a hand out, he silently commanded *pull* and tugged Blaise towards him, wrapping an arm around his neck and giving him a noogie. Blaise grunted, and tried to escape the inescapable. It didn't occur to Harry at that time that there was barely any drain or thought to the command, but later he would ponder it for nights to come while looking at the door of his cupboard.

"I would have to be psychic to know, dear Blaise! And wouldn't you like to know?" Harry sing-songed, letting him go. He heard a chuckling voice behind him, and looked to see Mrs. Zabini. The woman hadn't changed a bit from when Harry had first met her. Beautiful, tall, and dangerous. She was smiling and gazing at the two of them. Blaise straightened up beside him and smoothed out his robes.

"Ah, hello Harrison! You have certainly grown from the first time since I saw you. I trust dear Severus has been treating you well this day?" Harry would have answered, but there was a glint in her eye. He couldn't tell what it was, but he didn't trust it completely. It was that of a person waiting for the order to kill. So, he simply nodded his head and smiled. Her's widened. Harry wouldn't be surprised if even Professor Snape was nervous of that, and he hadn't even reacted to Vernon...

"That is good! I must say, Severus, the boys have not had a chance to be together like this in such a long time. What do you say in my Blaise and I joining you two? We have already gone to Flourish & Blotts." Both boys looked to Snape for his answer, Harry giving him his best kicked-small-animal eyes. The man himself looked like he was just put upon a cliff with only sour lemons to eat, and stiffly answered her.
"I would be amiable with you joining us, Nicola. We have been to Flourish & Blotts as well, along with Arthur's Astronomer Emporium." Harry drowned out their small talk at that point, covertly slipping the money pouch from Professor Snape's pocket and getting Blaise's attention. The two of them sneaked into the apothecary, the two adults none the wiser.

The two of them didn't really talk, not with people in there, but they both peered about at the ingredients while walking to the counter. It smelled disgusting in the building, a mix of not-there decay, fluids, and something Harry didn't want to think about. He didn't know potion ingredients could be this... unpleasant. He should have expected it though, even without his newly-clear senses. The cashier there was an old man with a scraggly beard. He looked friendly enough.

"Excuse me, sir, I need the-" He paused here, discreetly glancing at Blaise, who was making a wavy motion with his hand. Was that really supposed to be a snake? He really needed the improve that boy's gestures. "Slytherin's potion set, for first years." The man leaned over the counter and stared hard at the two of them. It was unnerving, but after half a minute he leaned back, grunting. He turned, rummaging through something, before handing Harry a box of something with spells over it, coloured a dark grey. Preservation spells, probably. Merlin, that was disconcerting to actually see. Well, brighter, at least.

"That'll be 10 galleons." Harry counted out the money and gave it to the man, plucking the box off the counter. It smelled horrible, as expected. They both quickly exited the store, not wanting the adults to notice they had been gone. It seemed that during their mini-excursion, Mrs. Zabini and the professor had gotten into an argument, and were hissing words at each other to the side in Italian. Of course, the boys didn't exactly know this, and sneaked back up to the two of them before making a loud entrance.

"Mother, we still have to go to Ollivander's and Madame Malkin's, and I wanted to show Harry the Magical Menagerie." Blaise uttered loudly. The two adults jumped, and Harry took that opportunity to slip the money pouch back into Professor Snape's pocket. Mission success.

"A-ah, yes we do, thank you for reminding me, bambino. Do not run off again, yes? I do not want to lose you two in the crowds." Mrs. Zabini replied. Professor Snape still seemed startled, and even a bit confused, but quickly masked it. Together, the four of them trundled over to Madame Malkin's where the boys would be fitted for their school uniforms and robes. Harry wondered if he could convince Professor Snape to let him get a few pair of fitting trousers and shirts, but decided against it. The man was too caustic to risk it; Harry would have to acquire his measurements and order himself.

When they went in the store, Harry could see that it was a warm, welcoming place. The floors were paneled with shined wood, and the walls were a cheery blue. "Come in, darlings! Hogwarts, I'm guessing? I can only fit one of you first, as I've already got another up here." Someone called. It was a plump woman off to the side, wearing a low dress and cheery expression. Blaise and Harry looked between each other, and silently decided it would be quicker if Harry went first. Stepping up onto the platform, Harry found himself next to a blond boy, staring down at the others. Mrs. Zabini and Professor Snape had seated themselves in front of the window, once again arguing. Blaise was sitting closest to Harry, and grinning slightly. Bastard. Maybe literally.

"Blaise? What are you doing here? And who is this?" Jumping slightly, Harry turned towards the blond boy, who had just spoken. Looking closely at him, Harry felt a creeping sense of dread. Flaxen hair slicked back with far too much product, grey eyes, and a face that spoke of many silver spoons in a mouth, he was certain. This was Draco Malfoy. He needed to interrupt Blaise before he did anything drastic.

And interrupt he did. As Blaise was about to reply, Harry smiled sweetly and replied, "My name is
Augustus Evans. I suppose you're Draco Malfoy? Blaise has told me so much about you." Malfoy's jaw near dropped, and his eyes bugged out. Harry could have laughed, but kept it in. No need to antagonise such a... potential figure. At that thought he really did nearly burst out laughing.

"YOU'RE AUGUSTUS!? Y-you're seriously the one that Blaise never shuts up about? B-but you're-"

"He's what?" Blaise cut in sharply. His eyes were narrowed by this point, and he was scowling. Amazing, how it took Malfoy for him to show more than disgust or annoyance in public.

Malfoy immediately balked, apologising and nearly raising his arms in defense. "I-I didn't mean it like that, it's just that his clothes are a bit- strange? You can't blame me Blaise, look at them!" From the sidelines, the adults' attention had been caught, and both were sighing at the bluntness of the pale boy. It appears one can't have money and subtlety.

"Your godson." Nicola murmured, jabbing Snape with her finger.

"Shut it, not my problem today." He bit back, slapping away the offending appendage.

"It's alright Draco, my family just buys me these sort of things. I suppose it must look strange to a magic-exclusively raised wizard." Harry said gently, keeping up the sweet smile. He was sure Blaise was staring at him now; he was also sure that Mr. Smith was a godsend, since he was sure his bangs had slipped at least twice since coming in here... Draco looked as though he were about to say something more, but Madame Malkin declared that she was finished with his measurements. The blond boy hopped down from the stool, and hesitated.

"I trust you're going to Hogwarts?" He said, building back up some of the pomp he had before. Not pointing out he was obviously getting measured for a Hogwarts uniform, Harry nodded. "I'll find you and Blaise on the train then. You can meet the others." With that, he left, presumably to hunt down his parents.

"Seven years." Harry hissed as Blaise stepped onto the now-vacant stool. The taller boy snickered and shrugged. "I am not dealing with that for seven years. His snob was as obvious as a flying car. It'd be worse dealing with a younger you for seven years."

The rest of the visit passed uneventfully, until Harry was finished. Mrs. Zabini stopped him from stepping off the stool, and the others stared at her inquisitively. "Ah, Signora Malkin, is it possible that you could create a full wardrobe for Harrison as well? I am afraid he is quite unprepared, and his relatives did not have such cross their mind." She asked, shooting a glare at Professor Snape. The man glared back, holding back a scowl. Madame Malkin seemed unnerved at the... exchange, but nodded in assent. Mrs. Zabini smiled at Harry, and his eyes were about to bug out or well up. He couldn't tell which. "Think of it as a birthday present from me, Harrison. This way, you can present yourself as a proper wizard, si?" Harry slowly nodded, still not really believing it.

Well, it seems as though I won't need to ask Professor Snape, Harry thought blankly.

It shouldn't be a surprise that even more of a brouhaha started when they went to buy the boys' wands. They had finished the rest of the shopping (which included purchasing cauldrons, trunks, phials, scales, hitting up the Magical Menagerie to marvel at everything not mundane, and a lovely snowy owl for Harry to use as a mailing owl), and creeped into Ollivander's around 2.00 in the afternoon. By now, Snape seemed resigned to it all, Mrs. Zabini was telling the boys about her own visit to Ollivander's, and Blaise and Harry were eager to finish the trip.
When walking into the store, one is usually greeted by a site that will entice them into coming in and purchasing the products sold. However, with Ollivander's, there was no need for such tactics to be used, and there was no possible way for the man to ever have a need to advertise his business. When you entered Ollivander's Wands, you were greeted by racks and racks of boxes that could be vaguely taken as shoeboxes, mismatched and random furniture, and a sense of stuffiness that never seemed to end until you left. There is a dusty desk to the side piled with more boxes, and a distinct "old-paper" odor can be smelled. It was a pleasant smell to Harry, but he could have dealt without the sight currently plaguing his eyes. Hundreds of colours were swirling around the place, blending and pushing together, invading his space, making him dizzy.

"Fir, 11 inches, dragon heartstring. Good for healing and powerful spells. Birch, 11 1/2 inches, unicorn hair. Excellent for charms and hexes. I trust you two are using them well after all these years?" A voice suddenly called. Startled, Harry twisted to see an old man coming from behind a rack to the far right. He had a shock of white hair, going in all directions from his head. For some reason, Harry couldn't quite focus on him, as though his eyes were just sliding over the man. "Ah, I see you have brought two new wielders. It is a pleasure to meet you, messers. Potter and Zabini. My name is Mr. Ollivander. I am sure we can find you wands in all this mess. Now, who goes first?"

After another silent decision, Blaise nervously stepped up to the old man. "Raise your wand-arm for me if you will- yes, just like that." With a flick of his wand, Ollivander sent a tape measure zooming over Blaise's body, measuring absurd places. When it finished, it rolled up and clacked down onto the table, with Ollivander muttering and going back to the racks. He peered along the strange boxes, until his hand shot out and plucked one from the bunch.

Bringing the box back and opening it, he said, "Oak, 10 inches, dragon heartstring. Good for strong spells and charms. Give it a flick." After passing the wand inside to Blaise, he immediately snatched it back, muttering under his breath. The next ten minutes passed in this fashion, with a wand being snatched from Blaise's hand or a horrible reaction occurring when the young wizard actually waved one. Finally, Ollivander brought back another box. It was as dusty indigo to Harry's strange eyes, and as Mr. Ollivander said, "Rowan wood, 12 inches, with a dragon heartstring core. Good for wards and mind-magics- why don't you try it on for size, Mr. Zabini?" Harry knew before even Blaise did that this was the one. There was simply no doubting it, and as Blaise waved it, Harry was proven right when olive and yellow sparks shot out of the wand to form a running wolf. Blaise grinned, a grin of unsoiled joy, and even the adults seemed charmed by it. Ollivander clapped his hands in delight, and waved up Harry as the wolf disappeared.

"Now Mr. Potter, what is your wand arm?" Harry silently held out his right arm, and much the same process began. Ollivander measured him, and then shoved wand after wand towards him, only to pull it away at the last second. A pile was steadily growing on one of the chairs near the desk, and bigger it became, the more nervous Harry was. What if none of the wands fit him? What if he just had to use his commands, and stand out even more than he would? He tried to shake off such thoughts, but they seemed to slink back with each rejected wand.

After about the 30th one, Ollivander stopped and peered at Harry. It was the same peering Harry had seen him do to the boxes, and was quite a bit unnerving. "I fear I have been going about this the wrong way... Perhaps, with such a well... Just maybe." Ollivander murmured, before rushing back to the boxes. After a minute or so of rummaging, he brought back a very dusty box, with a dim yellow-green colour wrapped to it. Harry doubted it had been touched in ages. "Try this one, Mr. Potter. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches. Good for neutral spells and offensive spells. Give it a wave." Grabbing it, Harry felt a surge of electricity go through him. The end of the wand lit up like a star, and bright green and red sparks shot out faster than a jet of water. It was as though he had just regained a missing limb. "Ah, there we go. Should have expected a tricky combination with such a well. Very curious, however..."
"Curious, sir?" Harry asked, staring down at his wand.

".. Mr. Potter, the phoenix that gave the feather for that wand has only given one other. To a brother wand if you will. I'm saddened to say it's the one that gave you that scar you're covering. Thirteen and a half inches, yew wood." He finished. Harry blinked, shocked, and stared closer at his wand. Its brother had been the Dark Lord's? That was certainly... unsettling. But, Harry considered, the wand isn't the one casting the spell. The wizard is; the wand is just a tool.

"The Dark Lord gave me this scar sir," He finally said, "Not the wand. The wand, and the magic, they were tools, not the perpetrator." Ollivander hummed at that, but didn't give an answer. The others were strangely silent.

"We can expect great things from you Mr. Potter, with a wand like that. Terrible or good, no one can say. That will be seven galleons for Mr. Potter's and six for Mr. Zabini's."

Blaise had unsurprisingly blown up when they left the shop. Something about connections and power, and advantages. Harry wasn't really listening, more focused on shrinking everything so the Dursleys couldn't take them. He left the owl (who he had yet to name) and its cage unshrunk, along with his wand (obviously). Perhaps the Dursleys would be more... docile with it visible. Professor Snape hadn't stopped staring at him for quite a while and eyed him as he shrunk everything down, but seemed to have decided talking wasn't worth Mrs. Zabini's quips. By the time they reached The Leaky Cauldron, everyone was tired, and the Zabinis bid their goodbyes as they flooed from the pub's fireplace. The ride back on the train was silent as well, and Harry couldn't say he minded it. It was nice to have some peace after the chaos that was Diagon Alley.

When they reached Number 4, Professor Snape turned to him before leaving. "To reach the Hogwarts Express, you will need to go to King's Cross on September 1st. Go between Platforms 9 and 10, where the entrance is hidden. Here is your ticket, Mr. Potter, along with your vault key and... change." Snape handed Harry the items stiffly. He hesitated once more. "If your relatives act... unfavorably towards you and the subject of magic, do not hesitate to owl the school. I know your aunt can be.. caustic when it comes to such matters." The man fled after that, his robe billowing behind him as he walked away. Looking down at his ticket, Harry couldn't help the feeling of dread he had over the outcome of the next month.
In Which Character is Debated

The past month was disturbing, to say the absolute least. While Harry had been left untouched ever since the beginning of July and even ignored some, now he was seen less than a ghost. Every morning, he'd make breakfast as usual, and the Dursleys wouldn't even look at him. Vernon and Petunia seemed to sweat bullets whenever he went near them, and only shoved lists of chores and meals for the day with a few muttered comments. They hardly tried to trap him in the cupboard, only ever locking it after dinner now. And where he went after his chores were finished was never demanded, even when it became blatantly obvious that he was slipping off somewhere; he had seen no point hiding his comings and goings once the "secret" of magic was out. After all, him going to the library for information-cramming certainly had to be better in their eyes. Better than turning them into toads, at least. He had fancied that before remembering he didn't exactly have anywhere to go, and no way to support himself as a minor. One can only rely on dead family's funds for so long, after all. But even Dudley had let up, only glaring at him and running off whenever he saw him outside of the house. It was a merciful relief not to deal with "Harry Hunting", but made Harry more nervous than ever. It reminded him of that blurry time when he was still in the roots of primary school, and the nurse had talked to his teacher, who decided a social worker should visit. After a bout of pretending Harry didn't live in a 2x3 cupboard and didn't do all the work around the house on a diet of bread and water, Vernon had tried to do...well, his worst. Harry didn't like to think about it, but it still gave him some satisfaction to remember Vernon's head connecting with the fireplace in the days after, even if the memory was tangled with fear, pain, and hospital bills that sadly didn't pertain to him. They had refused to acknowledge him for weeks after that, and just locked him in the cupboard whenever he came home from school. Those were hard weeks, with him having to constantly exhaust himself by unlocking the door to steal food and relieve himself.

Still, with what they were obviously waiting for (the ominous Hogwarts letter) have come and pass, it made no sense to him that they were quivering like dogs in the face of a vacuum. Unless they just... didn't know about the trace?

Blaise had mentioned it when Mr. Smith had first demonstrated the disillusionment charm, and how wizards and witches under 17 years of age couldn't perform magic without warning and eventual punishment because of a charm on their wands. The only places minors could perform magic were strips like Diagon Alley or muggle-free places. The only exception was when the magic was performed in cases of self-defense. It seemed sensible to Harry when considering trying to keep magic from muggles, but also seemed to contradict. If they couldn't perform magic in places with muggles, then it was certain that muggleborns and even half-bloods would be stagnant over the summer; pureblood children however, with their parents surrounding them and their no-doubt warded houses, would most likely be able to use it when they wanted. It was far too stilted in the pure-bloods’ favor.

Harry had nonetheless carried his wand, because he certainly could claim self-defense in the extreme cases he would actually use it. Not that he would; it was more of a deterrent than anything- he had his commands to hide himself. And in spite of all the wondrous "freak things" Harry now owned and had access to, the Dursleys hadn't seen any need to move him from his cupboard. Keeping it unlocked seemed to be their only compromise, on the part. With all the supplies Harry had bought in Diagon Alley, he would have no room unless everything was shrunk down and unusable. So, Harry had simply foregone shrinking and unshrinking things constantly and put his supplies and trunk in Dudley's spare room. They never went in there save for within a week of gift-giving holidays anyways. With him shading them with ahide every time he came and went, nothing would seem out of place beyond his copious trips upstairs. Vernon always twitched at that from his spot on the couch, but didn't say anything Harry could actually make out.
His snowy owl, who he had decided to name Hedwig, after a German witch mentioned in his History of Magic book, had decided to roost in the branches of the oak tree in the Dursley's backyard. He went out and fed her the mice he had bought every day, and stroked her feathers and talked about his latest activities. It didn’t matter to him that she was an owl- she had to be some sort of intelligent to know where to bring letters, right?

When he ran out and told her he didn't have anymore, she had hooted at him with some- some owl look and flown off. Later, he had spotted her tearing open a squirrel before he went inside for the evening. Oh yeah, he had thought, predator. Perfectly capable of hunting food down. And that had been that.

So the month passed this way, with everyone on edge and ready to pounce or run. Harry read through a good chunk of his books, including his Herbology book, and examined his potions ingredients. Most were from strange plants, or were random parts from long-dead animals. They all smelled completely disgusting still, and were barely masked by the overbearing lemon smell permeating the house. None glowed beyond the preservation spell put on them. He did the chores given to him swiftly, and went to the library afterwards, or explored the neighborhood with his newfound senses. He could now clearly make out arguments in other houses, and see details he never noticed before. Instead of looking like a giant green blur, the trees’ leaves had finite lines skittering across them. Instead of feeling only slightly more stretched than other clothes, Dudley’s hand-me-downs felt as though they were barely held together by a thread. Instead of tasting of nothing, his daily bread slices actually tasted of wheat. It was nowhere near as bad as Diagon Alley, but it still pressed on him. He adapted though, and soon became used to it, after a number of insomnic nights. It was all he could do, to adapt. It was the best thing.

At the library, he read about history and chemistry and the Latin language, because looking through his spellbooks, he felt he was going to drill it into his head. Or maybe he wouldn’t- was wingardium a word in any language? With his chemistry studies, reading over experiments and combinations had become more than just entertainment. From what he had seen of his potions textbook, chemistry and potions were one and the same, with the magical counterpart being more volatile. If he could learn the scientific first and apply it to the magical, he was sure his experience in the class would go much smoother. If he knew how the elements and chemicals in the ingredients reacted together, there’d be a smaller chance of him doing something disastrous like blowing up or melting a cauldron. With history, there was a chance of picking up hints at ancient wizards and witches mentioned in the uncensored books. Now wouldn’t that be interesting?

The librarian, used to his habits, simply shook her head when she saw the pile he was amassing at the table each day. How a young boy could read those sort of things was beyond her.

When all this was done, uninteresting at the moment, or unavailable, Harry would practice magic. Nothing complicated such as transfiguring a pillow into a cat, of course. He’d make a ball of light, or turn his hair red, or make a piece of rubbish fly around in the air. He could feel the tug at his middle, something being drained each time, but it felt smaller than a prickle. Nothing like his old lock escapades, or even gardening modifications, which were easier than air nowadays. He wondered if it was related to his new... improvements. He decided not to think about it for the time being, if only for peace of mind. No way of knowing what this really was.

By September 1st, however, Harry was ready to go. The perpetual silence was grating on his nerves, continuous monotony that lay unbroken even by Blaise or Mr. Smith, both of who had begged off coming down to Little Whinging due to business (and some "Order" that Mr. Smith had gone off muttering about. It was the first time Harry heard him do more than cackle, giggle, or speak to them in an absent-minded voice. It was, in short words, unnerving as all God. Even Blaise had backed away a little at that). And while the library was filled with books to read and old newspapers to sleep
Right now, a little past ten, Harry was quietly riding the Knight Bus, seated near the door with his luggage and Hedwig and watching the buildings rush past. He was dressed in some of the clothes Mrs. Zabini had gifted him—a white button-up, and soft brown slacks—and he had to admit they were infinitely better than hand-me-downs. He had burnt the majority of those the moment the new wardrobe arrived. After raising his wand arm earlier that morning, he finally found out what Blaise meant. Seconds after he had done so a blue, a towering double-decker bus had zipped down the street and stopped in front of him; the driver saw his tiny self and immediately asked whether he was going to King’s Cross Station. So here he was, on a strange bus that no one on the road seemed to notice as it zipped by; he supposed the greyish glow inside and out had something to do with that. Hedwig was beside him, softly whistling in her sleep. It was adorable. The bus was warm on the inside, and beds and end tables lining its walls to the back instead of seats. The driver was an old man who didn’t seem to actually be able to see, and was going on to an older boy about some woman or another. Sighing, Harry fiddled with his ring and remembered the experience of finally talking to the Dursleys a few days ago.

"Uncle Vernon?" Harry asked from the hall. Vernon twitched and grunted, not turning from his spot on the couch. Harry took this as a sign to continue. "I was invited to Hogwarts this year, and I’m going," Harry breathed in deeply, and in a surge of bravery, burst out, "I’m going and you can’t stop me. If you try stop me or or make it so I can’t go, I’ll contact Professor Snape. And I’ll be back next summer until school starts again." Vernon was twisted around now, and turning a spectacular shade of puce as he was wont to do. He was eyeing Harry up and down, and often stopped on his wand, which was in the grip of Harry’s sweaty palm. He always carried it like this when he was in the house. He hysterically for a moment wondered if Vernon could see him shaking, and banished the foolish thought after a moment. Harry stared at him defiantly, still scared, until the rotund man finally backed down and turned back the television. He was silent, far more quieter than usual before he answered. Usually, the man would be breathing heavily, or making the furniture creak, or even snoring. It was unnatural, hearing nothing come from him.

"Don’t you dare start thinking you’re taking you to that freak school, boy. Or that we’ll let you back in my house in July." Vernon forced out. It sounded as though it physically pained him to say it, and Harry didn’t regret feeling more than just relief at that. Maybe a sense of satisfaction, at the man finally backing down for once. As he started walking to the front door, he could hear Petunia start hissing about hiding this from Dudley from her place on the stairs.

Blinking, Harry could feel the bus stopping, and glanced back to the road. They were in front of a train station that was obviously King’s Cross, as the driver announced a moment later. He and a few others stood and got off at this point, and walked into the station.

It was huge to him on the inside, with hundreds of people criss-crossing this way and that, and trains waiting or leaving or arriving. Smells mingled together, creating an indistinguishable cloud of scent, and voices mixed conversations, arguments, lives. But he didn’t have time to idle and ogle—the train was scheduled to leave at 11 o’clock according to his ticket, and it was already 10.20. Walking around, it took him a while to find just the right platform. When he did, he could see it was indeed as Professor Snape had said. Smack between the column that marked both platform 9 and 10, there was the glow Harry had come to associate with magic, and wizards and witches passing through to the unseen side. He noticed one family in particular, a smattering of red-heads who were passing through at the moment. Some of them looked vaguely familiar, but he could hardly remember where he had seen them. Probably in passing in the Alley, he thought. He waited while they all passed through the
barrier, and then sedately went through himself. Once he was through, he was just slightly amazed again. Slightly. The train in front of him was shiny, crimson, and couldn't have looked newer than if it just came off the production line, although it must have been decades old. People- *wizards and witches*—were milling about, dressed in robes and dresses that would have been terribly out of place in the muggle world. He could see children carrying toads, owls, cats, even some things he couldn't identify- and everything *thrummed*. It was Diagon Alley, but on a smaller, maybe even homier scale. He smiled, and walked towards the train. The people he passed were all in their own little worlds— one boy was talking about his lost toad, another about his new pet tarantula. He could even hear one kid whining about not being able to bring their broomstick. A little to his right in the corner of his eye, he could see a wide man speaking to his two daughters about upholding the family name—twins presumably, with how they looked. These were people he'd know at Hogwarts, and have classes with. People he might make friends with. People who might... might only care for the Boy-Who-Lived. Grimacing, he pushed the thought away and went back to his observing.

He thought he saw what could have been heads of platinum and black for a moment, but they disappeared before he could find them again. No matter, he was sure the others would find him by the end of the ride. If he wanted to find them.

When he found an empty compartment, near the end of the train, he silently commanded his things to *lift*, and gently pushed them into the carriage. Hedwig shuffled a bit in her sleep, but didn't wake.

"Oy Gred, look at the ickle firstie doing magic all on his own. You sure you don't need a hand kid?" Turning, Harry was faced with one of the children from the family of red-heads; another one of them—another twin, what a coincidence—was rushing up, grinning.

"It's quite all right, sirs. I can handle it on my own. May I ask what your names are?" Harry replied, smiling a bit. The boys did a double-take, and one of them (Gred?) mock-swooned in despair, the other catching him in his arms.

"OH, Feorge, did you hear that? SIRS! My poor soul aches at such language!" He cried.

"It's a travesty, a mockery!"

"A slander on our good record!"

"Who knows what would happen if someone heard us called *sir*? Ruining the toilets of Hogwarts would never feel the same!" They held that pose for a few seconds before breaking down into snickers as Harry watched on, smiling politely. "Seriously, firstie, I'm George and this is Fred. The Weasley twins are at your service! Who're you?" One of them got out between snickers.

"You can call me.. Augustus. Augustus Evans. It's a pleasure to meet you, Fred and George." Harry said, extending his hand. They both took it, pumping it up and down excitably. One of them was about to say something, but a voice called out, to his relief, from the crowd.

"Fred? George? Where did you two run off to?"

"Coming!" They chorused, and ran off after a quick wave to Harry. He sighed for the second time that day, and climbed up to where his things were hovering on the train.

Harry had picked a compartment at the very end of the carriage, and set his trunk on the shelf above. He let Hedwig out to fly with the train once they started moving, and now he was lightly dozing with her cage between his legs on the floor. He was jolted awake when the door to the compartment slid open, and a ginger popped his head in.
"Is anyone else sitting here? Everywhere else is full." Harry sleepily shook his head, and gestured to the seat opposite. The other boy trudged in gratefully, and put his bags next to Harry's. "My name's Ron Weasley. You were the boy Fred and George were talking to right? I caught a glimpse of you."

Rubbing his eyes, Harry got a clearer look at Ron. He was gangly, with freckles and long arms and legs. His hair was as red as his brothers', although he seemed younger than them. He had some dirt on his nose. Harry was unsurprised to see him wrapped in a dark green. Smiling, he offered his hand to the other boy.

"Friends call me Augustus Evans- you can too, since we're apparently going to be spending the ride together." They shook hands, and a slightly awkward silence fell over them. Ron was trying to find something to talk about, while Harry was weighing the options of going back to sleep or pulling out his potions book to study more.

"A-are you a muggleborn? It's just that I've never heard of your family, o-or seen you around, not that I care about that sort of thing!" Ron blurted out, face reddening. Harry blinked, not really expecting any sort of conversation. Thinking over the question, he cautiously gave an answer.

"Well, I was raised in the muggle world, but I'm a half-blood. You know, war and all, some kids are bound to get stuck somewhere else. The Weasley family is pureblood, right?"

Ron flushed once more. "Oh. Sorry. And yeah, but we're not purebloods in that sense, you know? Anyways, what's it like living with muggles?" Harry felt that no, he did not know that sense, and asked Ron just what he meant by that. "Well, we support muggles and muggleborns, and don't go by the old traditions, I guess. My brothers told me about one of them, where you'd sacrifice food and blood in the name of your ancestors. Sounds creepy, to me." Harry raised an eyebrow, but didn't agree or disagree. In his opinion, as long as no one was getting killed off or tortured for no discernable reason, it was generally alright. How could something honouring ancestors be bad? Hm.

"It's.. bad. Wish I had a two magical brothers to bother, or at least talk to."

"Five," Said Ron. He looked a bit down at this, but continued. "I'm the sixth to go to Hogwarts, and my sister Ginny is going next year. I've got a lot of stuff to live up to- my brother Percy was just made prefect, my brother Charlie was head of the Quidditch team, and my brother Bill was Head Boy. They've already left- Charlie and Bill. Fred and George are big pranksters, and everyone likes them. I've got a lot to live up to, I guess." He finished, gazing out the window at the countryside. Harry frowned, and straightened up.

"Well, no one says you have to be like them, or even be better than them. You're, well, a different person. You've got different- different strengths, a different personality, and different dreams. Some they may not have. You make your name, not them. Anyone who says different is putting too much into the concept of family." Ron stared at him, gaping, but quickly recovered with a grateful smile.

"Thanks, mate."

The two of them continued to talk, although the subjects moved to more mundane things, such as Ron's pet rat, or Harry's fat cousin. It was comfortable after that, and the mood was friendly.

"...And you wouldn't believe what he did next! He literally plucked the toffee out of the dirt and just ate it! Didn't brush it off or clean it or even think that it had been on the ground! It was nasty!" Harry said, finishing up a tale of many about Dudley. Ron was laughing, clutching his sides.

"Merlin Augustus, your family is bonkers. I don't even the twins have done that when they were younger!" He exclaimed. Harry grinned, and conversation quieted down after that. They simply
watched the land fly past, dotted with fields and lanes and lakes. Around half-past 12, Harry could hear a cart rolling up the corridor, and opened the door to peer out. A kindly-looking woman was pushing a cart laden with sweets up the aisle, stopping at each compartment and asking if anyone wanted some sweets. Harry looked towards Ron to see if he wanted anything, but the red-headed boy simply muttered something about sandwiches. Going into the corridor, Harry marveled at the cart. He had never been able to have any candy at the Dursleys that wasn't from school or a pitying teacher. And now, he was presented with magical, delicious, candy. His mouth watered at the thought, as will any person's who hasn't experienced the soul-crushing experience of acid-reflux yet. Harry was very, very glad that he still had money left over from his trip to Diagon Alley.

Buying a bit of everything, Harry paid the woman 10 sickles and 12 knuts from his leftover supply. Ron gaped at him as he carried it back in, dumping it on the seat. "Hungry, huh?" He asked, a bit dazed. Harry just grinned at him and offered him pumpkin pasty, which he gladly took. It felt nice, having something to share with someone else. They slowly went through the bought pastries and candies, with Harry trying things such as blood pops, and chocolate frogs. After catching and biting the head off of one, he examined the card that came with it. It had the face of an ancient man on it, with half-moon glasses and a long, silvery beard. Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

"So this is Dumbledore." Harry said, his eyes narrowing.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, don't tell me you haven't heard of him! You seem to know enough about everything else. Hey, can I have a frog? I'm trying for Agrippa- cool-" Harry turned over the card, reading. Essentially, his new headmaster had defeated a former dark lord and had a taste for the muggle. Turning it back over, Harry saw that the small figure that once sat there was gone. Shrugging his shoulders, he put it in his pocket to be forgotten.

As him and Ron- who had turned out unsuccessful in his hunt for Agrippa- went through the chocolate frogs, Harry collected more such as Morgana, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. A while later, when they were daring each other to eat suspicious looking beans from Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, the toad-boy from before knocked on the door and came in. He looked near tears, and Harry couldn't help but feel sympathetic. He was wrapped in a dirty brown the colour of loam.

"Sorry to bother," He started, "But have either of you seen a toad? I lost mine, Trevor..." When they shook their heads, the boy wailed, face scrunching up. "He keeps getting away from me! I don't know what to do!" Pursing his lips, Harry tried to think of ways to help the poor boy.

"Has he got any tracking charms on him? That could help." But the boy only miserably shook his head. Harry was about to suggest going to an upper-year for help before his mind sparked with an idea.

"I've got it!" He exclaimed. Pulling out his wand (for appearances of course), he waved it and mumbled some gibberish. In reality, he was commanding fiercely come Trevor, to which there seemed to be a response. He grinned at the drain in his chest, and at the sight of the toad now sailing through the air towards them. It was the same colour as the loam boy, strangely, and Harry watched its glow fly towards them through the wall. The boy was looking its way with a joyed expression on his face.

"Trevor!" He exclaimed, pulling the toad out of the air as it came close enough. "Thank you so much! What was that spell?" He said, turning back to Harry.

"Summoning spell. Really useful for locating things, huh?" The boy said his goodbye, and loam boy soon left with his dear toad.
"Don't know why he bothered. If I had a toad, I'd try to lose it. 'Course, I have Scabbers, so I can't really talk." Ron said.

"Scabbers?" Harry asked.

In reply, Ron pulled out an old rat from his pocket. It was skinny, and looked sickly. Harry saw it was missing a finger. It also had a glow, but not like Trevor's, who had the same as the loam boy. No, it glowed with a murky pink, nothing near Ron's dark green. Maybe it had to do with them being different species?
"This is Scabbers. He's useless, and doesn't wake up much except to eat and chew furniture. He was Percy's, but Percy's got his fancy new owl now for being made prefect, and they couldn't aff- I mean, so I got Scabbers." Ron blustered, his ears turning pink. Harry just smiled and waved it off.

"Ron, you don't have to worry about talking about that sort of thing. You see..." Harry looked towards the compartment door before leaning in towards him. "I've never had much. Despite how I might look with these fancy duds, I've probably been living about the same as a house-elf for a good portion of my life. I didn't even know I had any money- muggle and wizarding- until about a month ago." He, of course, did not mention the other house elf-like parts of his life.

Ron seemed to cheer up a bit at that, which probably wasn't a good sign, but Harry ignored it in favor of popping another blood pop in his mouth.

"You know, I tried to turn Scabbers yellow yesterday to make him a little interesting. Spell didn't work though, that's what I get for trusting Fred and George. Here, lemme show you..." He patted his pockets down and eventually pulled out a, quite honestly, ratty looking wand. It was chipped, scuffed, and had part of its core sticking out. "Unicorn hair's sticking out at the end. Anyways-" Ron had just raised his wand when the compartment door opened once again. Harry can't help but say he was a bit annoyed at yet another interruption. Standing at the door was a girl with bushy hair and braces, who was already wearing her school robes and uniform. She had a pompous air about her, similar to the one Draco Malfoy had put up in Madame Malkin's.

"Have you seen a toad? Neville's lost one." Ah, so that was the loamy boy's name. It fit him.

"I'm afraid we already sent him off with it. you don't need to keep searching." Harry replied. Unfortunately, the bushy-haired girl wasn't listening, and was instead staring at Ron's wand, which was still out.

"Are you going to do magic? Let's see it then." She was about to sit down, but Harry stopped her.

"I'm sorry miss, but I'm afraid you already missed it. My friend here just turned one of his old socks into a rat." He said, smiling once again. Everyone believed something with a smile in front of it. The bushy girl looked disappointed, but believed him; Scabbers looked ragged enough to have once been a sock, and he was barely moving. After she left, Harry spun to Ron and waved his hands, urging him to get on with the spell. The other boy looked startled, but continued.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow." The ginger waved his wand, but nothing happened except for Scabbers burrowing into the Bertie Bott's box. They both were disappointed this time.

"I guess it's not a real spell." Ron muttered.

"Most spells are in Latin or old Anglo-Saxon anyway," Harry said, trying to comfort his friend. "I'm sure your brothers were just pulling your leg." The two sat in silence after this, watching Scabbers gorge on jelly beans, no matter how disgusting.
"Hey, Ron," Harry said suddenly, "What house do you think you'll be in?"

"Gryffindor, probably. All my family's gone there. Don't know what will happen if I'm not. Imagine if they put me in Slytherin of all places!" Harry frowned.

"What's wrong with Slytherin? They're ambitious right?"

"And slimy. All of them end up as dark wizards, and they're just BAD." Ron said. Harry sighed, and reminded himself he should have expected this sort of thing when Blaise himself went off on Gryffindors. Damn prejudices.

"But all the houses have good qualities, even Slytherin," Harry argued. "Hufflepuffs are loyal and hard-working and dedicated, which means they're good friends and students. Gryffindors are brave and "chivalrous" and daring, which means they're likely to go into dangerous situations to help people. Ravenclaws are smart and well-read, which means they'll know lots of useful information. and Slytherins are cunning and ambitious and natural leaders, which means they'll try as hard as they can to reach their goal and can slide through problems. Every one has merits, and you can't stereotype a whole house on some who come out of it. Like your family! You were telling me Percy isn't all that great of a person, and he's in Gryffindor!" Harry finished, fired up. He wouldn't stand it when it was Blaise doing it, and he wouldn't stand it now!

Ron looked speechless, and opened his mouth to say something, but must have decided against it. Another silence fell over them, this one tense, and stayed until a group of boys entered some time later. Harry instantly recognised the middle one instantly-it was Draco Malfoy. The two surrounding him must have been Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, his self-proclaimed bodyguards. Off to the side, Harry could see Blaise with an annoyed look on his face. When he spotted Harry, it changed to one of relief, not that anyone else noticed.

"Augustus, there you are! We've been looking for you the whole ride! Why are you hanging here with this- riffraff?" Malfoy exclaimed, sneering at Ron. The Weasley reddened, and looked ready to pounce at the blond, but Harry held him back. "Weasley obviously- ginger hair, hand-me-down robes, and freckles. You really shouldn't hang around this sort, Augustus."

"Draco," Harry started, gritting his teeth, "You know how we met, and Blaise had told you all these things about me, and I looked nothing like what you probably expected? How about we treat this like that? Ron seems to be a genuinely good person, and I'm sure you two would have fun arguing over Quidditch. And I'm sure if this is some family feud, you two are smart enough not to let it cloud judgement over someone you just met. Especially since you two aren't your families." He enunciated each part, glaring at them both. Ron shrunk away, and Draco even paled-somehow.

"Augustus, you would probably be a wonderful marriage counselor." Blaise said idly, slipping into the compartment. "Draco, stop copying daddy and just sit down. There's nothing wrong with conversing with someone else, no matter how much money they don't have." Harry gave him a relieved smile, which he returned with a smirk. Harry sank back into his seat, Blaise settling in beside him. Ron uneasily sat as well, and Crabbe and Goyle bunched in next to him, barely leaving any space. Draco took the remaining seat.

"So," Harry said cheerfully, "Anyone want a blood pop?"

The rest of the ride was tense, but conversation did occur, no matter how strained. Draco and Ron did indeed argue over Quidditch, and at one point Harry managed to get them to talk about their upcoming professors without any blowouts. But, as the sky was darkening and they were coming nearer and nearer to their stop, voices withered away and they ended up changing in silence. All in
all, it had turned out very well. Harry could see mountains and trees out the window, which made a lovely site under the violet sky.

They put on their school robes and vests, both of which had the Hogwarts crest sewn onto them. Harry guessed they would change to their house crest once they were sorted. Looking around him, he could tell the differences in the boys were obvious. Ron's were too short for him, and his sneakers peeked out underneath. Draco's and Blaise's were obviously made of higher-end materials, although Blaise's seemed to be more on the practical side if their sheen said anything. Cra-Vincent and Gregory's both fit them well, and looked much like Harry's, which were probably made of cotton or some such. He supposed it showed how different their backgrounds were, in a way. Or their parents' preferences.

A voice echoed through the train, signalling they had reached their destination, and that it was now time to disembark from the train. Their luggage was to be left on the train, and will be picked up separately. The six of them glanced at each other, some nervous, some annoyed. It didn't take much for them to walk out into the fluctuating crowd. People were pushing themselves out the doors and onto a small, darkly lit platform. A lamp was bobbing in the air, although once Harry looked closer he could see it was held by a giant of a man.

"Firs' years!" "Firs' years here!" The man bellowed. Tripping and stumbling about, the group of first years followed the giant man down a steep and narrow path. Nothing could be seen on either side, not even with Harry's eyes, and he made sure the others stayed near him. He didn't know if it was Ron or Blaise clutching his right arm.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sighto' Hogwarts in a sec, kids." The man called in front. Harry could only pinpoint him by the swinging lantern he held. The path widened suddenly on the edge of a lake. Across the other side, clinging and dominating a mountain on the other side, Harry could see an enormous mountain, with sparkling windows and dozens of towers. It was beautiful, and shrouded in an amazing white Harry had never seen. It... wasn't pure, but it was something.

"Four to a boat!" The giant man called, jolting most everyone out of their trance. "No more than four to a boat!" Looking down from the castle, Harry could dimly see that the water in front of them was dotted with boats. Dragging Blaise and presumably Ron to the nearest boat, they sat down in wait. A few moments later, Draco near tumbled onto them, blushing lightly. And then, by some magic, they were off, across the lake.

---

Harry was nervous. No, not nervous. Anxious. They had finally reached the castle after some time cruising in the boats. Harry had made a few balls of light so they weren't in complete darkness, but that seemed to make it worse somehow. Draco and Ron had started glaring at each other again (Why do I do this to myself, he had groaned), and Harry swore he could see things moving under the water.

Things definitely not fish in nature.

When they had reached solid ground, the giant man took them up a hill to a monstrous oak door that opened. A stern-looking woman named McGonagall had taken them from the giant's (who happened to be named Hagrid, he found out) care and led them to the entrance hall. She had, instead of taking them where the other students obviously were, had led them to a smaller room off to the side. That was where they were now, and honestly, Harry was unnerved. Why couldn't they just get this over and be done with it? It didn't make sense to have all this ceremony for just putting people in their houses.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," The stern Professor McGonagall said, "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you must be sorted into your houses. While you are here, your house will be your family within Hogwarts, and will have classes with you,
sleep with you, and spend free time in your house common room. As such, the Sorting ceremony is highly important.

The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history-" Harry pointedly looked at Ron at this point, who huffed at that. "-and each has produced its own share of outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your victories will earn you house points, and breaking of the rules will lose you points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded with the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be an asset to the house that becomes yours." She looked out on their sea of faces, seeing many familiar traits in them. Longbottom needs to straighten up his cloak, and Weasley needs to clean up his face, she thought.

"The Sorting ceremony will take place in front of the school, so I suggest you tidy yourselves up until then. I shall return when everything is ready. Please wait quietly." She left the chamber, entering the door off to the side. Harry swallowed quietly, and tried to straighten his hair a bit. It was impossible; even with the extra length he had managed to grow, it was still as untidy as ever.

"Augustus, that ponytail looks pitiful. It's smaller than the tail on a goat." Blaise said.

"Oh shut it, you. You weren't born with perpetual nightmare hair. Ron, are you alright? You're looking a bit sick." Ron indeed did look sick, his skin paler than normal, making his freckles stand out.

"Fred said they sorted us with some sort of test. Said it hurt a lot, but I think he was joking. But what if they do test us?" He said, rubbing his arm a bit. Harry blinked.

"Ron, we're first years. I'm pretty if they tested us to put us in a house, half of us wouldn't even be able to do anything. They just put a raggedy old hat on our heads that talks to us. Yes, I'm serious stop staring at me." Ron gained some more colour to his face, and looked away at nothing. Everyone was whispering to themselves, and a few more people had sneaked into their misfit group. The loam boy from before, Neville, had joined them and was nervously discussing herbs with Vincent, who apparently loved herbology. The bushy girl from before was whispering spells very fast as Blaise amusedly corrected her from time to time. Harry himself was asking Draco about who the other children were. Then, something or the other happened that inexplicably made seven people behind him scream- and made him jump about a foot in the air.

"What-?" He started peeking around. He relaxed when he saw a handful of ghosts floating through the back wall. Silver-tinted and just a touch transparent, they almost put on a show with what they were doing. They talked to each other, practically ignoring the first-years. They appeared to be arguing of all things, about some other ghost, before they "noticed" the first-years.

"New students!" One exclaimed excitedly, smiling widely at them all. "About to be sorted, I surmise?" A few nodded silently. "Hope I see you in Hufflepuff! My old house, and a spectacular one."

"Move along now, Friar, the Sorting's about to start." Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts followed her order and drifted away through the opposite wall.

"Follow me, you all." His anxious feeling returning with a vengeance, Harry moved forward, his legs feeling heavier than steel. The others were still with him, and looked as nervous as he, which he
supposed was a cold comfort. They walked out of the chamber, back into the entrance hall, and finally through the double doors leading to the Great Hall.

It was as beautiful as the outside of Hogwarts. Thousands of candles hovered, bathed in glows of all colours, over four long tables. At the end of the room, he could see a fifth, where the staff were seated. Golden plates and goblets laid upon the tables, glittering in the light. In front of the staff table sat a small stool. Professor McGonagall led them up there as hundreds of faces stared at them in the eerie light. Harry looked upward and saw the night sky, unblocked by stone or glass. He could hear the bushy-haired girl whispering about it being bewitched to look like the sky outside.

He quickly turned back to the ceremony, however, when Professor McGonagall put a wizard's hat upon the stool. It was ancient, showing patches and frays. Like the castle, it was wrapped in a pure white colour, unique. It would have never been let into the Dursley household. Please tell me we don't have to put that on our heads, Harry internally groaned.

There were a few moments of silence, before what was seemingly a tear near the bottom of the hat opened wide- and from it, a voice started to sing.

It was a tedious song, in Harry's opinion, one sprinkled with worrisome things. "There's nothing hidden in your head the sorting hat can't see"- Did that mean that raggedy old thing was going to be reading his mind? He certainly didn't want it reading his mind, no matter what purpose it served, thank you very much. And why wouldn't anyone be afraid- this decided practically the next seven years of their life! How they were treated, who they associated most with, even their grades, since teachers were bound to have favorites! It was a travesty, this hat.

The hall burst into applause regardless of Harry's inner monologuing, and soon quieted down. Professor McGonagall stepped up wielding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted." She said. "Abbot, Hannah!"

A girl with blonde pigtails went up, and went through the ritual of putting on the hat. After a moment's pause-

"HUFFLEPUFF!" Shouted the travesty. A table on the right with a yellow and black banner hanging above it cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down.

"Bones, Susan!"

HUFFLEPUFF! again, and another new badger scurrying to the table to sit.

It continued in much this style, with people being sent to the various tables. Draco whispered to him occasionally about who this was or which family they came from. It helped Harry forget the nauseous feeling building up in his stomach a bit. When the E's were passed with no "Augustus Evans" called, both Ron and Draco stared at him confusedly. He simply murmured "Said my friends called me that, never said it was my name." and ignored any attempts they made at poking the answer out of him. Five Ravenclaws (including Bushy, whose name was Hermione Granger), two Hufflepuffs, three Gryffindors, and four Slytherins later, Draco went up to the stool. The hat had barely touched his head when it yelled out "SLYTHERIN!". The pale boy swaggered over the table on the far right, where Vincent and Gregory were sitting near the staff's table. Not many left 'till P's now. He was sorely regretting giving the others his alias, because he was just thinking of the consequences. They might understand, right? How he didn't want the stares and uncomfortable questions and things said that he had dealt with before. How he just wanted normal friends.
He didn't realise he was shivering until Blaise tugged his sleeve, hissing at him to calm down.

Moon, Nott, and Parkinson passed, all going to Slytherin. The Patil twins, the pair he had seen on the train platform, went to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw separately. Perks went to Hufflepuff. Then, the dreaded moment-

"Potter, Harry!" The hall went dead silent.

"Ron, remember what we've been talking about, family and legacies and all that." He whispered quickly. Then he stepped forward.

The hall broke out into little whispers that were as loud as normal tones in his ear. It was unbearable.

"Potter, she said!"

"He's a bit small, don't you think?"

"The Harry Potter?"

"I can't see his scar!"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped on his head and over his eyes was the craning eyes of hundreds of people and dumbstruck faces of Ron and quite a few Slytherin firsties. Damn Blaise. The next thing, the back of the hat. He sat, and waited for something to happen.

"My, you're going to be a difficult one." A voice said in his ear. Harry would have jumped if it weren't for him already wringing his hands. "Very difficult... You've got some courage, most definitely, though you've yet to put it to much, I can see. Although I can't blame you- Albus obviously wasn't very... wise with his choices," the voice continued, dipping into criticising tones. Ah, yes, Harry had forgot about the whole "mind-reading" part. He was still wholly Not Okay with that.

"Don't worry Mr. Potter. I won't go spilling any secrets you have, no matter how interesting, the voice said. You've got quite a good mind here, with a good bit of elasticity in it. A nice thirst here too, to prove yourself. Or maybe it's to change- who know what you're planning, hmmm? You certainly have the means to, with a well like that... Now, where shall I put you?"

Harry wringed his hands harder, and the only thought coming to his mind was that it just wasn't very polite to dive into little children's minds no matter what people said and that it was just invasive in every way and that maybe they should revise how they do this?

"Child, I'll have you know that I've examined thousands of minds that have gone through these halls and not spoken of any." The voice- Sorting Hat?- said irritably. "And for you to be in such a tizz over it is just unreasonable. Now calm down and-"

It is not unreasonable! Harry thought. Not wanting anyone or anything digging into your mind and wading through your memories for just a sorting is a perfectly reasonable opinion, and I'm sure others wouldn't like it if they actually took a moment to think about it! It's a complete violation of privacy, especially to those who don't want things known!

"And as you just said, it is just for the sorting, nothing else, so why be so bothered about it!? It hardly matters! It will be over as soon as you let me focus and sort you!" By now, the students were starting to shift in their seats, and the teachers were becoming more and more worried. About three minutes had passed.

"It always matters." Harry muttered, not even bothering with the strange think-talking anymore. The
Sorting Hat muttered some things in response that should probably not be said to children, no matter what language, and before Harry could respond, it yelled out "SLYTHERIN!" He took it off his head and passed it to Professor McGonagall.

McGonagall would later swear she heard it wishing mercy upon Snape.

The hall was deadly silent as Harry walked to the Slytherin table, until a few Slytherins started clapping. Soon, the whole table and a few unsorted people were clapping heartily, while the others were doing a half-ass job of it. He sat next to Draco, who had cleared a spot. Harry could have kissed him if that weren't completely gross. He was slightly scared to look towards the other students, so looked at the staff table instead. Professor Snape was next to an empty chair, and looked as though he'd been slapped with a damp fish. He was staring straight ahead, not even paying attention to the sorting anymore. A man next to him in an atrocious purple turban was looking at Harry as though he were an interesting bug under a microscope. Harry scowled, and fiercely thought unravel, making a wrapping from the man's turban slip out. The professor started panicking, trying to fix it, and diverted his stare from Harry. Thank God.

There were only a few people left. A dark boy named Dean Thomas was sorted into Gryffindor, and a mousy girl named Lisa Turpin was put into Ravenclaw. After that, it was Ron's turn. He was looking green by now, but there was something in his eyes Harry couldn't identify.

Professor McGonagall put the hat on his head, where it sat. Harry wondered if it was talking to Ron as it did to him. Ron sat there for a long moment, longer than expected, until the Sorting Hat opened its tear-mouth and Shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!" The Hall was once again stunned into silence, although their thawing took much less time than it did for Harry. Ron dazedly walked to the Hufflepuff table where a few other smiled and welcomed him. Across the hall, Harry could see the others of the Weasley clan gaping wider than fishes. Finally, Blaise was sorted into Slytherin, and all the first-years were patted and patched. Headmaster Dumbledore rose from his seat at the Staff table, and Professor McGonagall took away the stool and the Hat. The ancient wizard was beaming down at his students jovially, like he hadn't just sat there while many of them were having a panic attack over what a dingy old hat would say.

"Welcome!" He said, spreading his arms wide, "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!

He sat back down, and everyone clapped and cheered. Harry did it out of politeness, but was more focused on not looking at the man's eye-watering robes or colour. His robes were neon pink, with orange stars, and he was wrapped in a startling yellow colour.

"That worries me a bit," Harry commented. Many of the Slytherins around him nodded in agreement.

"Yes, I'd say so. You want some potatoes, Augustus?" Draco said beside him. The other boy was loading food onto his plate- food?

Glancing around, Harry finally noticed that the platters and bowls on the table had filled with delicious-smelling, enticing food. His mouth started watering.

"Indeed Augustus, some potatoes?" Blaise sniggered out beside him. Harry sighed, and elbowed him in the ribs. It was going to be a long night.
"Harry Potter! Of all people, it's you- the kid Blaise was teasing us with for years! He told us you were adopted- why did you tell us he was adopted? Why didn't you tell _me_?" Harry felt the need to sigh for about the 20th time today. They were heading to the common room, and Draco had yet to let up. The pale boy had stayed quiet during the feast about it, if only because the upper-years were watching them to avoid screw-ups. They had awkwardly passed the time talking about their family until Harry had accidentally flung some potatoes at Draco after a mudblood comment.

Dessert was spent in silence while the Malfoy attempted to clean his hair. A third-year took pity on him and cast _scourgify_ on him. When Dumbledore had made the food disappear and announced the end of the feast (along with a few alarming things- _corridor of death_?), they had been rounded up like sheep by the prefects, and were now being led into the dungeons. The minute the prefects had their backs turned, Draco had started hissing to Harry as though he were a bona-fide snake, and would not stop tugging on his robe. Blaise had decided that this was the most amusing thing to happen in the world, and refused to stop snickering no matter how much Harry elbowed him in the ribs. There was sure to be a bruise with his knobby elbows, which Harry took as a consolation revenge.

"For this exact reason, imbecile." He muttered under his breath. The Malfoy failed to hear him, off in his own little mutterings now. One of the other firsties- Theodore Nott, if he remembered right, a weedy boy with dark hair- was giving Harry a sympathetic look, but made no move to help from his place next to Pansy Parkinson. The girl in question was going on and on about how none of the boys had any fashion sense, and how their hair was atrocious. She peered especially hard at him and Greg when she said this. He didn't know how to break it to her that his hair was an untameable mane of frustration. He also didn't know how to break it to her that she probably shouldn't be talking with that atrocious bob of hers.

"You know, I suppose this explains why you defended Weasley on the train. Light morals, Boy-Who-Lived and all that." Draco said out loud, scrutinizing Harry. The prefect in front of them twitched, and Harry thought he heard her snort. Harry felt the need to as well. "It's a wonder you got into Slytherin, with you saying even a blood-traitor could be worth something.." Harry grit his teeth and had to use all his will not to turn the boy's hair red and completely ingrown right then.

This was Hell. Pure, unadulterated 11-year old Hell.

It was five more agonising minutes of, "Why didn't you tell us," and "Light little baby," before they were near the common room. When Draco started talking about how his parents had both been Gryffindor, so this was just such a surprise, Harry snapped at him. He pivoting in front of Draco and shoving his face as close to the other boy's as he could.

"Have you considered maybe I didn't tell you because of _this_? That maybe I didn't want you going on about the Dark Lord, or my parents, or bloody statuses or fame the whole time? Consider the _reasoning_ before questioning, Malfoy!" He growled. He gave him a small shock, enough to sting him, enough to feel; Draco jumped and rocked back, fixing his shirt and robe with an uneasy scowl.

"Sorry," He said, not sounding like he really meant it. The other Slytherins thankfully ignored this exchange.

Finally, they reached the common room. Or, what Harry assumed was the common room. Both the prefects had stopped at a dead-end, and didn't seem they would be turning around anytime soon. Were they... were they testing them or something? Thankfully, that wasn't the case as they turned around and began to speak to the first-years.
"This is the passageway to the Slytherin common room," The girl announced, looking at each of them sternly, "You are not to give out the password to any outside our house, and will need to remember the way. Passwords are changed every two weeks. Our current one is 'pureblood'". With that, the wall seemed to flicker, then fade, revealing a room behind it. The Prefects didn't even react as the first-years' eyes bugged out. They were shoved through it, the prefects stepping in last. Once they were all in, the wall seemed to solidify again.

Harry was constantly amazed at magic, even after all these years.

The upper-years were already there; some of them looked up when they entered, but most simply focused on their conversations. Harry supposed they took a shorter route to get here. The prefects must have taken a longer route so they would arrive last. Some people took to seats, while others stood or camped out on the floor. The first-year boys quickly claimed two of the loveseats, while the girls took over the chairs. Greg and Millicent were left to stand or settle on the floor, but they didn't seem to mind. The older students took up the majority of the table chairs, talking among themselves about various things. Most of them seemed to be discussing vacations or who-did-what. It was fairly uninteresting to a little boy like Harry, so he plopped down on top of Blaise's feet. The dark-skinned boy started to play with his hair, most likely trying to neaten it. Nobody seemed to care that they were just sitting there... waiting, for something. Maybe their Head-of-House was going to show up?

The others above him were talking about the sorting now. Apparently, there were some shockers this year, besides him and Ron... But, this left him with little to do, as he only knew the trimmings of the families they were discussing. Perhaps he could convince one of the, hm, neutral upper years to give him a proper crash-course in Wizarding Families? He'd have to file that option for later.

Scanning the room, it was obvious that the Slytherin House very much valued appearance. There were four stairways on the right wall, leading to who knows where. The common room was dotted with chairs, couches, and tables, giving most everyone a spot to sit or study. And taking up most of the back wall was a huge fireplace, roaring with warmth. Harry and the others were seated right near it. Everything had intricate designs, from the fireplace to the doors. Covering almost every surface were carved snakes. Some glowed, some had jewels for eyes, and some he could barely notice. A great many of the ones on the fireplace seemed to be a mixture of the three, and were gossiping between themselves. This being a magical school (and him being a wizardling with limited knowledge), Harry took it as a normal occurrence and said nothing. Speaking of paintings, various were ones scattered about the walls. One near a stairway depicted the depths of some body of water. Harry could see what might have been a tentacle at the edge of the frame. Another, this one closer to the entrance, had the castle looking as though it were just built yesterday. It looked like it might have been painted from the lake shore. Over the fireplace, there sat a strange man, with a bookshelf behind him and a snake around his neck. He had curly, dark hair and grey eyes.

Theo caught him staring at it, and leaned down from his seat. "They say that's Slytherin himself," He whispered. "No one can really say for sure since he doesn't talk, but it's a nice theory..." Harry nodded his head absenty, studying the man's face. He was watching them all, his expression blank. There were lines on his face, but even those gave away nothing. Just what is he thinking? Harry wondered to himself. But, he continued to look around, dragging his eyes from the portrait. A slight movement caught his attention, and he turned sharply, eyes narrowing. Blaise frowned down at him, but he didn't notice. There, in the dark corner- there was something, a person. He couldn't see them, but their silhouette was lit by the deep red glow surrounding them. The shade was familiar, but he couldn't remember from where. Maybe it was someone he had seen someone in the streets? Of course it didn't change the fact that they were hiding in the common room of a bunch of students. They weren't doing anything, but... It's a bit too suspicious to just stand in the corner watching a bunch of adolescents. And creepy. Very creepy.
He was about to say something when the person emerged from the shadows, revealing... Professor Snape? He was glowering severely at them, observing them all chatter and joke around. Many students took this moment to high-tail it to their dorms, and others who noticed him quickly followed. The first-years, left with nowhere to go, cowered (subtly, of course) in their spots. Even Draco, with his haughtiness, looked nervous. Professor Snape nodded at the two prefects who had stayed behind.

"Ms. Farley, Mr. Albret, thank you for your assistance. You may retire." The two of them quickly left, relieved looks on their faces. Farley had a passing thought that looking after these brats really wasn't worth the paranoia over the possibility of an impromptu duel before she closed the door to her room. Albret had a passing thought that he was just glad not to be near Snape anymore.

He turned back to the first-years, staring at each of them critically. Harry wanted to shift in his spot when the man looked at him, but kept his stance and stared back. Professor Snape narrowed his eyes and curled his lip a bit, but moved on. It was discouraging, in a way, a silent message to tell them to sit and stay.

"I am your Head of House, Severus Snape," Snape started, "I will be teaching you in the art of potions in the coming years. This being said, there are rules you must follow if your coming years are to be pleasant in any sense of the word." He said. Why is that everyone in Slytherin loved to focus on Harry? And here he thought he wasn't "Delinquent Boy of Number 4" anymore. "First, any and all personal arguments will be kept within this house. We cannot allow the other houses to see a weak spot, as any chink in the armor will be exploited. As thus, we are to keep up an external image— a blank slate, if you will. Do not let them see their effects or your anger- we are pariahs enough.

Second, if any of you are to go outside the common room, you must not be alone. There has been a record of... assaults whenever one of our own are alone, and not much has been done to prevent them. So personal measures must be instituted." He paused, staring out at their faces. All of them, Slytherins by family. They would know what he meant, from whatever Lucius and the others had told them. The stories of Narcissa being ambushed by those seventh-year boys. Goyle and Crabbe having to follow him and Lucius around just to discourage the Gryffindors.

Almost all of them.

"Along with this, I expect you all to adhere to the school rules," He said, finding his voice, "Any infractions, pranks, or fighting will be punished, most likely with a detention involving scrubbing potion cauldrons until 11. If any of you are having problems, please do not hesitate to come to me. Now," He said, turning towards the stairs. "Due to the extra space in the dungeon, you are able to have relatively separate rooms. There will be three boys or girls to each room. If any of you try to enter the other sex's rooms, I will know. First year's dormitories are down the stairs on the right. I will see you all in the morning when I hand you your schedules. Good night." With that, he dramatically turned, his robe flaring out behind him as he left through the passageway.

Harry blinked, and peered up at the others. Draco, Pansy, Vincent and Greg actually looked worried of all things. Harry could certainly understand why. After all, being harassed to the point of being assaulted pariahs wasn't... exactly ethical, really. Especially with kids who didn't even properly understand things like "assault" just yet. Was this school really this horrid?

He pushed that worrisome train of thought aside and rose with the others. They stretched, stiff from sitting for such a long time (again), and went down the stairwell that the Professor had pointed out. It was dimly lit by sconces that cast a blue light over everything. When they reached the bottom, they could see two hallways dotted with doors, about 4 on each side. They went down the one marked Year One. With a few glances among each other, the girls silently took the left, and the boys the right. Harry hesitated, before taking the room closest to the stairs. Blaise followed, along with Theodore, surprisingly. When he looked inquiringly at the Nott boy, he simply shrugged his
shoulders and said, "Crabbe and Goyle snore louder than trolls." Harry felt a fleeting sense of pity for Draco, before remembering the wish to make him an ingrown hair factory. Then the feeling turned to satisfaction.

The room was sparsely decorated, compared to the common room. Sure, there were some huge-ass snakes carved into the fireplace in the middle of the wall, and there was a door to what Harry assumed was a bathroom, but that was about it. Besides two desks on either side of the fireplace, there were just their beds and luggage. Harry's was closest to the fireplace, along with the empty owl cage. He hoped Hedwig was doing well in the Owlery.

They said their good-nights to the girls and the other boys, and closed the door. Blaise and Theo went to their respective trunks, making sure their things were still there and getting ready for the night. As Blaise was pulling out a pair of pajamas, he cheerfully said, "See! That wasn't so bad, was it? None of the doom and gloom you were moaning about, Harry." He grinned at the other boy, who rolled his eyes in return. They took their turns attending to themselves, and soon they were all in bed, saying their good-nights once more. Theo seemed to easily slip into dreams, but Harry was having trouble. From his spot in bed, Blaise sleepily glanced over at Harry and asked, "You have the packages my mother sent, right? I don't want you to still have to use those... things from before."

Harry nodded silently, and the rest of the night passed quietly, with him staring up at his canopy as the sounds of snores drifted through the wall.

Harry yawned behind his hand as he passed an upper-year the jug of milk. As an early riser, he was up before all his year-mates no matter how little sleep he got, and had taken the advantage to use the bathroom and get to the Great Hall earlier. Luckily for him, Millicent Bulstrode seemed to be the same, and they amiably walked to the Great Hall together. She was sitting next to him now, eating a bowl of oatmeal. The only ones in here were a few professors who were milking their cups of coffee and upper-year students used to the grind. Many of the Slytherin upper-years were up and about, although a good number looked ready to drop their heads on the table. He could spot a few that were possibly in the same boat as him, but he was honestly more focused on the pancakes he had swiped from a plate. They were fluffy, warm, and heaven in his mouth. He never had the chance to make some at the Dursleys without them being inhaled by Dudley, so this was a rare moment of delight. He slowly ate them, making sure he didn't give himself a stomach-ache, and went over his transfigurations text again. From what he could gather, most transfigurations, when applying to object-to-object, used the same base spell with variations in movements or pronunciation. But a lot of it was based in will. You needed to will the object to turn into a silver needle, or a feather duster, or a chair. You couldn't just expect it to turn into one with just a spell- you needed your mind to focus upon it.

Harry had a feeling he was going to ace transfiguration.

He was digging into his second pancake and a glass of orange juice when the hall started to actually fill up, people trudging in with mussed hair and irritated looks. Draco and Blaise walked in, sleep in their eyes. They spotted him, and propped themselves in front of him.

"Merlin, how are you two up this early? Everything's still blurry for me." Blaise complained. Draco mumbled something that might have been agreement and grabbed a few pieces of toast. Harry shrugged, and marked the page he had stopped at in his book. Commanding time, he could see it was around 8.30. Class wouldn't start for another hour, at least. Looking back towards the door, he spotted a group of 'Puffs walking in, all short and bubbly. Among them, he could see a red head of hair. Putting his fork down, he jumped up, waving off the other's questions and staring intensely at them. It was Ron.
Circling the table, he jogged over to where the other boy was. Ron had slowed to a stop near the end of the Ravenclaw when he saw Harry coming, a sour expression on his face.

"What do you want?" He asked, eyeing the other boy uneasily as he rushed up to him.

"I just- I wanted-" Harry stumbled, trying to think of what to say. He certainly wasn't going to apologise, but he didn't know what else to do in a situation like this. What was he supposed to say? Harry shifted uncomfortably, ears pinkening, and grabbed the cuff of Ron's robes. He pulled him out of the hall, and into a tributary corridor. "...I wanted to stay friends." He finished lamely, letting Ron go. "Even if we're in different houses." Ron's face scrunched up.

"And why should I be friends with you, when you didn't even tell me who you really were? How do I know I can trust you, especially since-" He cut himself off, scowling. Harry flinched, and his ire rose.

"W-well I wasn't about to just come out that I was Harry bloody Potter was I?" He snapped. "I wanted to make a friend who wasn't shiny-eyed at meeting the Boy-Who-Lived is all. And I'm still the person you met on the train Ron- I'm just wearing a lot more green and silver now. And- and you know how the Hat took so long sorting me?" He said with a burst of inspiration, "It's because it couldn't decide! Said my ambition was the biggest reason for me going there. So I'm not slimy or evil." He finished. Ron looked down, still frowning, but didn't argue.

"I still don't know how I can trust you, Harry. You-you lied about something pretty big. I wouldn't have gone insane at it."

"I know that now, it's just..." He trailed off. "I wanted a friend."

Ron sighed, and scratched at the back of his head. "Look Harry, I can't.. I can't forgive you so soon. I'll.. think about it. Talk to me later, yeah?" Harry nodded mutely, and they went back into the Great Hall. A few people were staring curiously at them, and he unconsciously straightened his back, the despondent expression on his face morphing to a calm one. He nodded once more to Ron, who headed to the Hufflepuff table. When he went back to the Slytherin table, everyone looked at him like he was insane. He just stared back until they averted their eyes. Everyone else kept at it.

"What was that?" Blaise asked, concerned. He just shook his head.

Professor Snape had handed them their schedule a bit before the end of breakfast, and it was of course only the basics. Herbology every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Charms every Tuesday and Thursday, Transfiguration Monday and Thursday. Astronomy, Wednesday night. History of magic and potions were his only single classes, and both were on Friday.

The classes were fairly easy, in a sense. Herbology dealt with the care and classifications of plants, which was fairly interesting to Harry. He had, unfortunately in a sense, been working with plants since a young age, and grew to like them despite their connotations. Professor Sprout, a dumpy woman with a cheery face, had praised and given him house points multiple times already for his caution with the plants and answered questions. He near blushed when she did. For the first few classes, they had handled Devil's Snare, a strange species of vine that was repulsed by bright light. It was difficult handling them in such a place like the greenhouses. They had the class with the Hufflepuffs, which made things a tad awkward for him, but he tried his best to be civil whenever he saw Ron. He was still waiting for an answer.

The first class of Charms, the teacher, a diminutive man named Flitwick, had squeaked and nearly fallen off his stool. It was highly embarrassing. Their first class had consisted mostly of theory, and
attempting the scouring charm. After that experience, Harry was infinitely grateful for the existence of simple showers and preferred to keep Theo at arms' length when his wand was out. Whenever he pointed it near Harry, he'd dive behind Blaise to avoid another "full-body cleanse".

History of Magic was easily the most boring class. The teacher, Professor Binns, was rumoured to have died at his desk, and had risen and just continued teaching. He spoke in a monotone, droning voice, and only talked about the Goblin Wars. Many of the others in the class, which was composed of Gryffindors and Slytherins, fooled around or slept. Harry would have taken notes, but declared it pointless after the first few minutes. Instead, he read various books he had picked out from the library or passed notes with Blaise. Speaking of such, Hogwarts had a magnificent library. Shelf after shelf filled with books and tomes, lining the walls and floor. You couldn't even see the back of it from the entrance. So far, Harry had found the specific sections for history, charms, and magical creatures. It was paradise for a bookworm like him. He constantly saw the girl from the train in there- Hermione Granger, he thinks- reading in the corner, alone.

Defense of the Dark Arts was... of mixed points. The classroom smelled of garlic, and the teacher- the turbaned man from the feast, whose name was Quirrell- constantly stuttered. He claimed his turban was from an African prince, but Harry greatly doubted him, as it simply stank of magic. The stuff swirled around it like a smog, flowing from a poisonous red to a lemon to black to even a weak green at some points. It made Harry sick looking at it, and even gave him a fierce headache. He was thinking of scrounging up some painkillers if it didn't stop.

The class itself was very strange. Quirrell would go on and on about this or that dark entity, and then switch topics. If someone asked a question, there was a 50% chance of his stutter getting even thicker and him refusing to answer, or it disappearing and him going into a "lecture mode". It was confusing to no end.

Transfigurations turned out to be like nothing Harry expected. His first lesson on Monday was startling, to say the least.

Harry walked in, Blaise and Draco behind him and arguing. Vincent and Greg were closely behind those two, with a few of the girls as well. Many of them had decided to come when they left breakfast early. He didn't ask what the tiff was about, and didn't try to involve them in a conversation of his own; after his blunder with Ron, he had no urge to talk. The classroom was down an offshoot hall from the Great Hall, and was very large. It was decorated sparsely, the walls bare and ceiling naked. It fit the Professor, he supposed; no-nonsense woman with a serious bearing. Windows took up much of the front wall, and a chalkboard the rest. There were lines of desks, with one large one that was obviously Professor McGonagall's. On top of it, besides some papers and quills, was a good-sized cat that was watching them as they entered. It was a tabby cat, although Harry noticed some strange markings on its face. While the others claimed some seats, he went up to it, curious. Did Professor McGonagall have a pet cat? Maybe it was a kneazle, or familiar, like some of Mrs. Figg's were. It certainly had the glow for it- a nice, soft orange-yellow that reminded him of tangerines. He smiled down at it, petting it a few times. It near-seemed to endure it, but did nudge his hand a little. He patted it on the head one last time before going to sit with the others.

"Harry! There you are! Which do you think is more useful, charms or transfiguration?" Draco demanded as soon as he sat down. With that, he was sucked into the conversation. Blaise, Pansy, and Milicent were arguing in favor for transfiguration, while Draco, the Moon girl, and surprisingly Vincent, were arguing in favor of Charms. Other students started trickling in, and by the time he was explaining how he couldn't really think either was "better", near all the class was seated. The class bell rang when Draco threw up his hands in frustration. Two Gryffindors rushed in minutes later, out of breath and buckled over. Thomas and Finnigan, if he was right. Or maybe it was Turner and
"MADE IT!" One of them yelled, relieved. The relief they must have felt soon evaporated as the cat on the desk in front rose, stretching. In one fluid movement, it jumped off and morphed into the professor, fully-robed and stern as ever...Did that mean he had pet the teacher?

"I'm afraid not, boys. 10 points for not being here on time, as you should have been. I will not have and tardiness from you." She said, spinning around as they took the veritable walk of disgrace to the last empty seats. "Transfiguration is one of the most dangerous and complex arts you will learn in Hogwarts. I will have no messing around or silliness in my class. Anyone who does so will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Pulling out her wand, she turned her desk into a rotund pig and back. The class was very impressed.

"Now, we must first begin with the theory of transfiguration..."

The professor had spent the majority of the lesson explaining the theory, which the students were supposed to write in complicated notes, and were then handed a match and told to turn it into a silver needle. By the end of the class, the only ones who had succeeded in doing anything to theirs were him and Millicent, who had managed to turn hers pointy. Harry's own was a bona-fide needle by the end as he went through his steps. He had done this before, making a new pencil or turning old papers into bandages. First, he would visualize what he wanted to make, and its characteristics. Was it soft, hard? Long, short? Wood, metal, cloth? He went through each one, changing it inch by inch. His technique even without the spell and movements was nowhere near perfect, of course. At one time, when he had been trying to turn an old toy of Dudley's into a pillow, he had succeeded in giving it a pillow shape and texture, but it was still as hard as the plastic it had been when he was done. The change they were working on was thankfully simple, so he had significantly less problems this time around.

She had praised the both of them, giving them a stiff smile and ten points to Slytherin. Harry was amazed, as he'd heard she was especially severe with Slytherins. They were all given homework- they were to work on their transfiguration, or in Harry's case, reverse it. She was not impressed with their work the following Thursday.

But, it was now the end of the week, and all his classes had passed except for one. It was after lunch, nearing dinner, and Potions class started in ten minutes. Harry couldn't say he wasn't nervous, but he wasn't completely panicking. The teacher acted like he despised Harry on some level, yeah, but some people are bound to. And Harry had studied the course book from front to back- along with a few others in the library that were put away incorrectly. He was prepared- so why was he so nervous?

Right now, the bunch of them were rushing to make it to the classroom on time. History of Magic had let out late since Binns had not heard the bell, and everyone didn't know whether to leave or stay. Eventually, a good chunk of them had decided Snape was worse than detention, and hightailed it out of there. Him, the Slytherins (excluding Vincent and Greg, who were probably bent over somewhere behind them panting), and many of the Gryffindors in the class were in a race against time, trying to go down four floors to where the entrance to the dungeons was.

Five minutes left, they reached the entrance after three moving staircases, one near-sprained ankle, Pansy bowling over a Gryff, and Harry constantly praying they didn't trip and go flying down the stairs.

Three minutes left, they reached the classroom and crowded in, people trying to get in before Snape showed up. Finally, every little child was in a seat and happier than a wino with $100. Harry pretended he didn't see the red splotch in the corner, and didn't say anything about the sad
improbability of them beating Snape. "This is the sort of reason they should evaluate teachers for! Binns near made us late with his rambling!" Theo panted out at the table behind Harry. Many others, including some Gryffindors in earshot, nodded vigorously in agreement. Commanding time, he was relieved to see that they could at least defend themselves if the professor said they were late. It was only 3.58- two minutes before the bell. Harry busied himself with getting out a pen and notebook- he may have bought quills and parchment, but there was no way he was using them unless he had to. Damn Wizarding World and their highly inconvenient cliches.

As the Professor predictably pretended to sweep in as though he just came in, he opened the notebook and waited patiently. various students gasped or jumped, and Neville Longbottom even whimpered a little. The dark man went to his desk, picking up a scroll of parchment. It was obviously the roll, as he began to call names, waiting for a reply. When he got to Harry's name, he paused, and read it slowly, but showed no other sign of reaction. He soon finished calling roll, and looked up at the lot of them. Adolescent, arrogant or rebellious faces stared back at him, and he remembered the reason why he drank.

"You are here to learn about the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," He began, slowly walking around their desks. His voice was barely above a whisper, but all of them could hear it clearly. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I do not 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... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death- if you are not as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." Silence followed his little speech, with some students glancing at each other with uncertain looks on their faces. Personally, Harry was even more pumped for learning how to brew potions.

"Potter!" Snape called suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

.Powdered root of asphodel and infusion of wormwood... Wormwood can make you drowsy when you overdose, and asphodel root.. that's only used for food, isn't it? Harry glanced at Draco, who shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Um, a potion that puts someone to sleep, sir?"

"Is that a question or an answer, Potter?" Snape said, raising a brow.

"A-answer, sir." He replied. Professor Snape narrowed his eye, searching Harry's face. Suddenly, he spun around, turning to glare at some other unfortunate soul.

"Thomas! Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?" Harry sighed in relief, no longer the center of attention. He turned and looked at Draco wildly, silently asking 'what the hell was that about?'. The boy simply shrugged his shoulders again, a bewildered expression on his face. He dimly heard Thomas answer that no, he did not know where to find a goat's stomach stone, and heard Snape answer that was simply pathetic.

"Parkinson! Where can you find me a bezoar?"

"In a goat's stomach sir. It cures most poisons."

"Excellent. Ten points to Slytherin." Ah. There was some of the favouritism he had heard about.

"Patil! What is the difference between wolfsbane and monkshood?" None, they're the same thing. The Patil girl stumbled around a bit, trying to remember what little she had read about them.
"Um, aren't they the same thing Professor? Just different sub-subspecies?" She said, staring at the ceiling in frantic thought.

Snape sneered at her. "Indeed. Well? Why are you not all copying this down?" There was a sudden, loud rummaging in bags and sacks for quills and parchment. Harry calmly wrote down the information the professor had managed to leak out of them as others frantically tried to write it all before they forgot.

Things didn't really improve throughout the lesson. Snape paired them up to work on a potion together; Harry was put with Neville, and Blaise managed to be paired with Millicent. They were brewing a simple potion to cure boils. Snape swept around them, watching them add this or that and barking at them when they were about to monumentally mess up. Even the Slytherins weren't exempt, with Snape yelling at Greg at one point for almost not adding the dried nettles.

Harry himself was constantly stopping Neville, and it was getting to be quite frustrating. The other boy wouldn't stop shaking, and it was messing things up.

"Look, Neville, you need to calm down. I know Professor Snape can give someone the shakes with how he acts, but he isn't the potion, and he can't yell at you if we do it right and good." He said, taking the knife from the Gryff's hand, which he was using to unevenly cut the pungous onion they were to use. Neville flushed.

"S-sorry Harry. I-I'm not much good at anything. I can't even do this right." He said, his eyes downcast. Harry frowned.

"Now, enough of that," He said, putting in the onions and heating the cauldron, "I'm sure you can do this, you just need to believe you can. It's like magic in a way; you need to believe you can do it, or else you'll just blunder through your spells." Neville sighed, but didn't say anything in return. They continued with their potion, Harry taking over the ingredients this time and Neville the stirring and heating. When the class was nearing an end, they were finishing up, and only had two steps left.

"Okay, turn off the heat Neville. Aand there go the porcupine quills. And we're finished!" Harry smiled at the other boy, glad to have avoided any unpleasant incidents. The potion was now a pleasant blue colour, with the texture of gel. Neville tentatively smiled back. Harry took a vial out of his bag, and scooped some of the potion into it. With his pen, he marked their names down on a piece of paper and tied it to the vial. Taking up to Professor Snape's desk, he could see the man glancing at him from where he was berating one of the girls for almost adding the porcupine quills before turning off the heat.

When they exited the class fifteen minutes later, Harry couldn't say the class wasn't at least interesting. The possible reactions between the ingredients, the ingredients they used themselves- it was all strange, new. Even better than chemistry, in a way. At least this subject people would actually know what he was talking about; absolutely no one in the common room had known what he was talking about when he started going on about just baking soda and vinegar, for Merlin's sake!

"Oi, Neville!" He called to the pudgy boy, who was walking by himself to the Great Hall. Blaise huffed in exasperation next to him, but Harry considerably ignored him. "Why don't you walk with us? Maybe I can give you a few pointers about the things you're having trouble with." Neville stared at him nervously, glancing between him and his house-mates. Harry smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, they won't bite." Neville hesitated some more, shifting from foot to foot, before slowly walking over to Harry's side. Harry beamed. "About getting through potions..."

They talked on the way to the Great Hall, and even dallied at the entrance a little to finish their conversation. Harry gave Neville a few tips on keeping calm when you were having the piss scared
out of you, and eventually got into a fiery talk about the different plants they were going to be looking at that year in Herbology. Vincent joined in at one point, mentioning dittany and saying it was good for healing potions. It was amazing what you learned about people once you got past the fact they looked like hulking idiots.

They finally parted, going to their respective tables with smiles on their faces. Harry could feel someone watching him, but refused to turn around to see who it was.

"Blimey, Harry, it's like you're building a menagerie of misfits." Blaise commented. Harry grinned as he loaded his plate with potatoes and string beans.

"Doesn't that mean you're one too? After all, you're the first one I met." Blaise huffed in response, and stole the biscuit the other boy was reaching for. Harry just laughed.

As with every evening, the evening post came, which consisted of newspapers, magazines, and letters that didn't reach them earlier that morning. A Daily Prophet dropped in front of Theo, who picked it up and scanned it while chewing on something Harry thought might be a root. "MERLIN!" He yelled after a second, eyes widening.

"What? What is it?" They crowded around him, trying to read whatever surprised him. Splayed across the first page was this article:

**GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST**

*Investigation continue into the recent break-in at Gringotts Bank on the 2nd of August. It is widely believed to have been carried out by Dark wizards or witches due to the magic residue left behind.*

*Gringotts goblins insist that nothing had been taken, as the vault that had been broken into was in fact emptied earlier that day.*

*"But we're not telling you what was in there of course, so keep your wands out if you know what's good for you," A Gringotts spokesgoblin said this afternoon. Gringotts Security Measures on page 8, Magic Residue and Investigation on page 9.*

*"Hey, that's the afternoon Professor Snape took me shopping for supplies. I wonder if we were there when it was taking place?"* Harry shivered at the thought, along with a few others. For someone to break into Gringotts and escape... They had to be powerful, and crafty.

The rest of dinner was spent in troubled silence as the upper-years discussed just what might have gone down.

Harry felt that the cliches couldn't get any worse after this. A notice had been pinned up in the Slytherin common room a couple of days ago that made him groan. Flying lessons (with a BROOM!) would be starting on Thursday with the Gryffindors. This was in no way going to be any kind of pleasant. Their potions classes were bad enough- everyone tried to sabotage each other's potions or help a clumsy housemate avoid an explosion. By the the end of the month, Harry had taken to silently shielding his and Neville's cauldron so nothing could fly into it, effects be damned.

"Typical," Draco sneered, "They stick us with the Gryffindorks."

"Gryffindors, Draco." Harry said absently. "You know, I can't say I really favor making a fool of myself in front of so many people."

"You don't know you'll make a fool of yourself," Blaise said, patting his back. "After all, your dad
was the Gryffindor Quidditch team leader. Maybe the skill passed over." Harry hummed in response.

Quite honestly, he saw the lessons as a waste of time. Sure, people may want to learn, but they could do that on their own time. And he would rather not have to listen to Draco anymore- ever since the notice had gone up, he'd been talking and whining nonstop about how they couldn't even join the team until next year and ugh why did they have to have the lesson with the Gryffindorks and Draco is just wonderful and perfect on a broom. Everyone was a hair away from hexing him to make him shut up. He wasn't the only one though- Seamus Finnigan had been going on about how he was a natural flyer since childhood, and how this would a piece of cake for him. Even Ron, when Harry could get a spot of conversation exiting the Hall, bragged about how he almost hit a hang-glider when he was younger. It made Harry roll his eyes, and sigh in disappointment. It had been two and a half weeks, and he still had no answer. He had caught the ginger's eye a few times, but Ron always looked away when it happened. He was about to give it up as a lost cause.

Neville had told him last potions lesson that he had never been on a broomstick in his life because he Gran had never let him near one. Harry felt she was making a right decision with that, but didn’t comment. Instead, he told Neville he had never been on one either, even when Blaise had offered when they were younger. He was terrified of falling, he said, and would rather just stay on the ground thank-you-very-much. It was a bonding moment between the two, a common mishap.

Many Ravenclaws were nervous as well, he learned. When he sat on the side near them, he could hear Boot and Granger discussing flying tips that one of them had gotten out of the library.

Today, the Gryffindors and Slytherins were most nervous, as it was their turn to have the lesson. It was early in the morning, only a little after breakfast had started. Harry had dragged down Theo and Blaise with him this time, and they were both now glaring at him over glasses of milk. Draco had followed them, claiming there was no point trying to get back to sleep with Greg and Vincent in the room. He himself was calmly buttering toast, watching the clouds above sedately move. The Hall filled in quickly today, and soon the mail owls flew in, bearing their usual guff. A large horned owl landed in front of Blaise today, laden with two envelopes.

"Is that your mum's?" Theo asked, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes once again and grabbing an apple. Blaise nodded, tearing open the letter with his name on it.

Many people at the table received letters- Draco periodically mailed his parents with an eagle hawk for some God-awful reason, Theo updated his older brothers on things going on with a Screech owl, it goes on. Harry didn't have anyone to mail to himself, but Hedwig swooped in from time to time for a visit. He'd feed her bacon and compliment her feathers when she did.

"Harry, here." Blaise suddenly said, handing him the second letter while continuing to read.

"What-

"It's yours, idiot, just read it." Harry blinked, and stared down at the letter. Carefully opening it, he pulled out the parchment within and slowly read:

Dear Harrison,

Blaise finally owled me about his first week at Hogwarts, and I would like to thank you and say congratulations! Somehow, you have apparently talked a bit of sense into Blaise's other companions, to which I am eternally grateful. I am sure you know by now why I am. And while I am sure the two of you would have been wonderful in any house, it gives me special pride to see you two in Slytherin. Yes, you as well.
With all Blaise has told me about you over the years, I feel like we have met more than just two times. I feel like I have seen you as much as young Draco or Theodore. And I must admit to have being worried when we parted ways last August- Blaise and Smith have said many... worrying things over the years. I trust the rest of your stay with your muggles was adequate? And that your first few weeks at Hogwarts have been pleasant? Please write me back, bambino.

From,

Nicola Zabini.

Harry put the letter on the table, staring at nothing.

"Your mother wants me to write to her." He said.

"I know," Blaise replied, "I'm fairly certain she thinks of you as a wayward nephew by now." Harry stared at him, gaping as the other boy grabbed a hard-boiled egg.

"But-" He started.

"Harry," Blaise said, putting down his egg, "Did you really expect someone not to start to worry about you when their son talks nonstop about every little detail of their little playdates? Or when they hang around you every other day for five years? I'm pretty sure she got attached to you when you almost tripped over yourself trying to say goodbye to us in Warlock’s." Harry stared at him some more, speechless. The darker boy gave him a rare, genuine smile.

Harry felt a grin come to his face, and ducked his head so no one could see.

Around half past 3 that afternoon, Harry, Blaise, Draco, and Neville were waiting near two rows of brooms. They had made sure to come early, and were currently watching the rest of the Gryffindors hurry down the steps to the lawn near the lake. There were twenty broomsticks lying on the ground, and they looked as dingy as actual ones used for cleaning. Marcus Flint, captain of the Quidditch team, had told them to be careful handling them, as they had a tendency to vibrate or shake if you went too high.

Their teacher, a woman with steel grey hair and hawkish eyes named Madam Hooch, arrived herself soon after.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" She barked. "Each of you stand next to a broomstick. Come on, come on, hurry up now." Harry glanced down at the nearest one. It was dull, and had snapped twigs at its end.

"Stick out your right hand, right over your broom children," Called Madam Hooch, and say 'UP!'"

"UP!" Everyone shouted. Harry's broom flew into his hand instantly, and he could see it had done so for Draco and Blaise as well. Pansy's was rolling uselessly on the ground as she yelled at it. Neville's wasn't even moving.

"Neville, like I've said before, you've got to mean it. Believe it'll bounce up for you." He said, smiling encouragingly. Neville gave a meek smile back, and tried once more. With a determined look on his face, he yelled,

"U-UP!" The broom stayed still for a moment, before it slowly floated up, as though pulled on strings. He grinned, joyed that it worked.
Madam Hooch then showed them how to properly mount their brooms, and Harry could admit to
smirking a little when she told Draco that he was gripping it wrong, and had done so for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, I want you to kick off from the ground. Hard. You need to keep
your brooms steady, and rise a few feet, then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly."
Madam Hooch said. "On my whistle- three- two-"

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Neville about to push off from the ground with a frightened
expression on his face. Reaching out, he shook the boy's arm a bit, startling him. Neville looked
over, and was distracted when Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Harry grinned. "NOW you go."

They both kicked off, joining the others hovering slightly. But where Harry stopped after a few feet,
Neville kept going up and up and up. Harry could see him looking down, pale-faced, and gasping-

And then he was falling, falling, falling, and WHAM- a thud and nasty-sounding crack later, Neville
lay face-down on the grass in a heap, robes splayed around him. His broom was still rising in the air,
and starting to slowly drift to the left, towards the lake and forbidden forest.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his and her eyes searching for any
serious injuries.

"Broken wrist, of all things," Harry could hear her mutter, "Up you go, Longbottom, let's get you to
the Hospital Wing. It's all right, Madam Pomfrey will patch you up quick." She turned to the rest of
class, many who had gone back down to the ground with pale faces.

"None of you are to move or go back in the air while I take this boy to the hospital wing. You put
those brooms down and leave them where they are or so help me you'll be out of Hogwarts before
you can say 'Bludger'. Come on dear."

She hobbled up the lawns with a teary-faced Neville, who was clutching his arm as though it were a
life-line.

No sooner were they gone that Draco burst into laughter. Harry scowled.

"Did you see his face, the big dud?"

A few others uneasily joined in, but most were edging away from the Malfoy and Harry, who was
holding his broom like a club by this point.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Snapped the Gryffindor Patil twin. "Not everyone can ride a broom. So sorry he
wasn't imperfect like you."

Draco flushed, but grinned a horrid grin as he looked down at the ground. "Look!" He cried, "It's
that stupid thing his Gran sent him! I could hear him blabbing on about it Thursday." The thing,
which was in fact a remembrall, glittered in the sun. It was supposed to tell you when you forgot
something, but didn't tell you what it was, rendering it completely useless. Draco picked it up,
smiling nastily, and Harry had enough.

"Malfoy, give it here," He said quietly. Draco looked over to him, and had a flash of uncertainty
cross his face at Harry and his broom-club, but it disappeared just as quick.

"Standing up for Longbottom again, Harry? Honestly, I'm not surprised you hang out with a lump
like him. I think I'll leave it somewhere for him, how about- up a tree?" Harry sneered, and started
advancing on Draco, who hopped on his broom and took off. Harry followed him, and soon they
were both in the air, Harry chasing after Draco with a thrill he didn't realise. As he rushed up through
the air, he felt something loosen in his chest, and a joy fill him at the feeling of the wind in his hair, of
his clothes billowing out. He eased out of his spike, and twisted sharply to see Draco with a stunned look.

"Give it here, Malfoy," He called to the other boy, nonchalant, "Or I'll make sure you pay for messing with a friend. A good one."

"Oh yeah?" He replied, trying to paste a sneer on his face. It didn't work. Harry could see that the Malfoy was starting to doubt his decisions, especially after realising he was dozens of feet in the air with the boy who hadn't hesitated to shock him for thoughtless comments on the first day. Harry tilted forward on his broom, and it shot forward, nearly hitting Draco if it weren't for him moving at the last second. He made a sharp turnabout and kept his broom steady, still keeping his nonchalant air around him as he gazed at Draco. A few people below were clapping.

"No daddy or guards to help you up here, Draco." He called. The same thought must have occurred to the other boy as well, because he suddenly shouted, "Catch it if you can then!" And tossed it as hard as he could. It arced through the air, and began to come back down to the ground, quick. Harry leaned forward, pointing his broom in a swan dive towards it. He went down, down, faster as he got closer. The wind whistled in his ears, and Theo and Blaise would later tell him in their room that he had a crazy grin on his face. When he was not two feet from the ground, he snatched it and pulled up as hard as he could. He toppled softly onto the grass, his body wrapped around the remembrall to keep it from shattering.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart jumped, and he flinched at the loud scream. It was Madam Hooch, racing down from the steps to him with an intent that was visible.

"Never- in all my time as an instructor-"

She was near speechless with shock, and her face was a red colour. "-how dare you, after I told you- could have broken your neck-"

"It wasn't his fault ma'am-" Started a few, but she raised her hand to silence them.

"But-"

"That is enough, you lot. Potter, follow me. Now."

Harry caught sight of Draco slowly lowering himself to the ground, a troubled look on his face, and scrunched his nose. *I'm getting punished, and the fool who started it is scot-free. Wonderful. He thought as he left, walking mutely in Madam Hooch's shadow. He was going to be suspended, or worse, who risked their legs and limbs for "no" reason didn't go off trundling without a sizable smack on the head. They walked through the castle, and down into the dungeons, and finally reached the potions class, where Professor Snape was teaching a handful of sixth years.

"Snape!" Madam Hooch called from the doorway, "I need to talk to you about something. I've found you a godsend." He looked up from where he was a berating a Ravenclaw for their improper use of bubotuber pus, and saw her and a frightened Harry. He sighed, and left the Ravenclaw with a few parting admonishments. After telling them all not to blow themselves up, he went out into the hallway.

"What is it, Koda?" He asked, glancing down at Harry skeptically.

"I was delivering the Longbottom boy to the infirmary after a nasty break, and came back to see
Potter pulling off a near-perfect wronske feint and grabbing that thing in his hand after a fifty to sixty-foot dive. She said, "Didn't even scratch himself."

Snape scowled, and looked down at Harry properly. "Mr. Potter, just why were you in a fifty-foot dive? And what is that in your hand?" Harry flushed.

"It's Neville's remembrall, sir. Draco decided to play toss-away with it, and I refused to put up with him." Professor Snape raised a brow, but didn't comment.

"Ten points for reckless self-endangerment, Mr. Potter. Do you really think we could use him, Koda? He is a first-year, not some second-year who can be instantly bumped on."

She waved his concerns away, mumbling something about bending the rules and Dumbledore. And Harry was put on the Slytherin Quidditch team by some magic twist of fate.
"So you're telling us that after nearly killing yourself, you got ten points taken away and were named the new Seeker of the Quidditch team." Blaise said flatly.

Harry meekly nodded, and Blaise covered his face with his hands, muttering a string of Italian. They were all sitting in the common room, occupying the loveseats near the fire. Harry could see that the mysterious painting man was watching them.

"But that's impossible!" Draco finally burst out. "First-years are never allowed to play Quidditch! No first-years have played in at least-"

"A century, yes. Flint talked to me during dinner. That's why I wasn't sitting with you all- so no, I wasn't expelled or suspended." Draco, so far, had been alternating between unnaturally quiet and annoyingly loud, and refused to look Harry in the eye. "I'll start training next week, although Flint's going to test me before then."

"...Oh." Draco muttered. The others ignored him.

"Well, are you going to buy a broom? The Cleensweeps the school has are way too slow, and there's no way a Seeker should be using them!" Theo exclaimed. Pansy, sitting beside him, nodded vigorously in agreement. Harry actually hadn't thought about that. Flint had said he would do something about it, but Harry honestly had no idea what, and hadn't bothered asking due to basking in the relief of not getting kicked out of school. He'd have to look into broom models, to see what would be best.

"I suppose," He said slowly, "I have enough money to buy one anyways. It'll be useful in the future." Theo grinned, whooping. He was the only one besides Pansy really excited about this- Blaise was... angry? Vincent and Greg didn't care for Quidditch, and Draco was still in a funk from his... unpleasantness this afternoon.

"You have to let us ride it sometimes! The teachers can't even say anything since it's yours, not ours!" Harry nodded distractedly, looking through his satchel. He was done with his homework, but the Herbology project was still an in-progress- they were only half-done with it. Moving on from Quidditch mentally, he stood, hanging his satchel over his shoulder and glancing at the others.

"Hey- do any of you want to go to the library with me before curfew? I need to find some books for the Herbology project." Blaise jumped up, along with Theo and Pansy. The three of them were in his project group; they were to identify different seeds they were given, and identify the uses of what they grew into. It was time-consuming, to be completely honest. Harry never thought it would be difficult scouring out what a plant was for.

They left the common room, leaving the others to talk of what they wanted. The library was on the fourth floor, so they walked quickly to avoid curfew. A few times when walking on the stairs, Harry had to stop them and himself from tripping a trap, of which there were suspiciously many. Hidden holes, disappearing steps, you name it.

"You would think in a school of students, they wouldn't booby-trap the only way to get up or down in it." Blaise groaned after getting his foot stuck in a hidden hole. Pansy and Harry tugged him out, nearly falling on their bums in the process.
"Maybe it's a way to train us, make us agile and dangerous." Harry joked. Blaise snorted, and shoved him a little.

They made it to the library in short order, managing to avoid the rest of the traps along the way. They followed Harry to the Potions section, avoiding the librarian, Miss Pince. Students had been saying that she was in a bad mood after having to end a fight in the library earlier that day. Two Ravenclaws had started a tiff over which theorist was right and gotten into blows over it. By the time she broke them up, there was a crowd and bets, according the gossip mill. Harry couldn't blame her for being testy.

"Harry, just what books are you looking for? This is the Potions section." Theo asked.

"I was asking one of the Ravenclaws for advice, and they suggested looking through Potions books because, y'know, uses. We already identified them, so we just to need to know what they're for. Look for books that go over basic potions." They scanned the titles on the shelves, sometimes pulling out one and flipping through it. Harry could see some weird ones, like *1001 Ways to Improve a Potion On the Way Down* and *Marina's Guide to Not Making Your Potion a Heartbreaker*. In a little while, they had a pile of books, and were ready to head back.

"You really think these will help?" Blaise asked. Harry nodded confidently, and they set to carrying them. Lucky for them, they had only plucked out about five or so, meaning they hardly had a load. Dashing past the librarian's desk again, Harry stopped short. Madam Pince was not only gone, but had put up a closed sign in front of the library's closed doors. He looked at the others worriedly.

"Just how long were we in here?" Commanding time, Harry could see that it was already 9.30. "BLOODY HELL! We've got to run- who knows what Snape'll do if he finds out?" He gasped. One of them- he wasn't certain who- unlocked the door, and they all ran back to the stairs. They were about halfway down when the stairway suddenly started shifting, nearly knocking them to the ground. Pansy gave out a near-shriek, and they clung to the banister as though their lives depended on it. And it actually might- moving stairs four flights up aren't exactly safe.

When they stopped shifting, the four of them shakily got off, gawking at the hallway they were now in.

"Oh Merlin... this is the forbidden corridor!" Pansy squeaked. "What are we going to do- who knows how long it'll take those stairs to shift back?" They all shivered at the thought of waiting all night for them to shift back, or being found by Filch here. Harry tentatively tried to force the staircase to move, but it refused to obey him.

"Maybe we should try to find another way down," He said, "There can't be only one way up and down third floor." The others reluctantly agreed, and they started off to the right. They clutched each other's sleeves in a strange conga line, no one wanting to lose each other in *the corridor of death* - which still bothered Harry greatly because good lord, this is supposed to be a great school and it has corridors of death and booby-trapped staircases. They walked past doors, which one of them would peek in and then quickly shut. So far, they had no luck even finding a sign of habitation in this hallway. Only dusty classrooms and one room that might have been someone's personal study.

About halfway down the hallway, Harry tugged on the doorknob of a door that looked like it might have been used recently. Peering in, he couldn't see anything, so he opened it wider. The others peeked in as well, crowding around him. And then they found out exactly why the forbidden corridor was forbidden. Standing in front of them in a spacious room was a very large, very ugly, three-headed dog. It looked like a bulldog, except huge and nightmare-inducing. It was staring at them, and Harry was sure it wasn't moving only because it was taken by surprise as well. But it was slowly getting over that, if its thunderous growls meant anything. Slowly, so as not to provoke it, he
pushed the other into the corridor and swiftly closed the door. A second later, something, namely the
dog, hit it with a great BANG, followed by a sonorous whimper.

Harry turned to look at the other three, and could see they were all in agreement on feeling the need
to throw up.

When they got back to the common room, they practically yelled the password- memento mori- at
the wall, tumbling in as it disappeared. The people left in the common room stared at them strangely,
and one of the prefects looked like they were about to reprimand them for being out past curfew, but
they rushed down to their dorms, near hysterical. They were lucky they hadn't dropped their books
along the way, but their death grip on them might have something to do with that.

They went to each door down the first year hall, dragging everyone out to congregate in the hallway.
Sitting in a cramped oval, a good majority glared at the four of them in sleepy annoyance.

"Is there a reason you four woke us up at 10 at night?" Moon asked irritably in her nightgown. They
babble about their story at once, running over each other's sentences in an effort to get it out quick
enough.

Moon raised her hands in a peace gesture, panicked. "Okay, not at once! Potter, you look the least
like you're going to run like a headless chicken, you start." The four of them flushed, and quieted
down. Harry started.

"Well, we were going to the library to get research like we said.-" They helped up their books to
affirm this fact. "And when we were walking back, the staircase moved on us! Switched us
completely to the forbidden corridor! And we didn't want to just wait around all night to be found by
Filch, so we started walking to find another way down. We were checking doors all the way, and at
one point I opened one and there was this huge-

"Drooling!"

"Three-headed!"

"FREAKY DOG! They finished together, fearful expressions on their faces. The others were
looking incredulously at them, and Daphne was even snickering in her too-expensive slippers and
and hair-curlers.

"You seriously expect us to believe you saw a cerberus in the school?" She asked sarcastically. Theo
pinkened, but someone else spoke up before he could defend them.

"I believe them." Draco said quietly. "There's no reason for them to lie, and like Moon said- they
look like they're headless chickens ready to run." Everyone looked towards him, and he shifted
uncomfortably but kept his straight face. "Besides, isn't the question just why that is in the school, not
if?"

Blaise, Pansy, Theo, and Harry paled, having not even thought of that in their dash to home-run.
Then everyone started panicking.

"Oh god, what if it's to eat us up if we enter the forbidden corridor?"

"What if it's some animal that Dumbledore lost control of, and they've only managed to isolate it in
that room?"

"What if it's supposed to be a test or something, for people who go sneaking in there?"
Harry frantically waved his hands in the air, trying to get them to quiet down. He kept glancing back at the stairs to make sure no one heard the commotion and came down to investigate.

"Be quiet!" He hissed, "We can't have the others hearing us! Who knows what will happen if more people know?" They quieted down, staring at him as he took a deep breath. "Okay. So there are a lot of reasons it could be there, but a lot don't make sense. The teachers wouldn't test us, because a lot of us would surely die from its foot-long teeth. And if Dumbledore really lost control of that thing, then there's even more of a reason that man shouldn't be in charge of children. The most plausible one right now is the eating up one which is absolutely horrible, but the best we got. Does anyone know a way we can repress this from our memories?" They looked uncertainly at each other, although a few did let loose a few uneasy chuckles.

"Wait, Harry," Blaise said, speaking up from his side, "There was—there was something in the room. The dog was standing on it, I think—did you guys get a look at it?"

"Yeah, yeah I think so," Theo said, eyes widening. "There was like a— a trapdoor under it! That means..."

That means it's guarding something." Harry said grimly. "Just what could be so important that they needed something that dangerous to guard it?" No one could answer that, and after a few minutes they slipped back into their rooms. Silence fell, and no one slept peacefully in the hours after.

Breakfast the next day was an unpleasant affair. All of the first-years were tired, snappish, and paranoid to noticeable extents. Well, noticeable to anyone who knew what to look for on blank slates. The prefects refused to let up on their watching of them, and even Professor Snape was eyeing them suspiciously, perhaps even with a bit of worry. When the owls flew in, no one was quite excited as they usually were, and no one reacted when letters were near-dropped in their food. They were simply shoved into their bags for a later read when they had more than three hours of sleep. Except for Harry. An unfamiliar owl had landed in front of him, and had a piece of parchment tied to its leg. Harry tiredly took it, feeding the small owl a piece of bacon in reward. It gulped it down, and preened itself, and then sat down in front of Harry, watching him.

"Who's that from, now?" Blaise asked, leaning over Harry's shoulder. He shrugged and unrolled it. It read as such in a messy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

You may not know me, but I knew your parents, and I'd love to tell you about them if you like. I've got a hut near the Forbidden Forest, if you want to visit this afternoon.

From,

Hagrid.

Harry tilted his head, eyes narrowing. "Hagrid is the.. groundskeeper, right? I'm not misremembering?"

"What, that huge oaf is mailing you?" Draco said, leaning over from his seat on the other side of the table. Harry glared at him and he paled, quickly leaning back. "Sorry." He muttered.

"He says he knew my parents- do you think I should go visit him?"

"Well, you could learn something about them, I suppose. You sure you'll feel safe going alone?" Blaise asked nonchalantly. Harry eyed him with a raised eyebrow, but only got an innocent look in
"You could come if he says-"

"Thanks Harry! Send off a reply before the owl goes away!" Blaise cut him off, beaming. Harry could feel an eye twitching. He wrote off a quick reply **Yes, could a friend come?** and handed it to the owl who sailed off to the High Table. Hagrid, sitting at the very end, took it, and the owl flew off. He quickly read it, and looked towards Harry with a smile and a nod. It seems Harry was going to be spending his afternoon talking about his parents with a groundskeeper today.

A little after three, Harry and Blaise walked down the school grounds towards the little hut near the edge of the forest. It was a ramshackle thing, looking more like someone had just stacked stones one on top each other and then piled a shingle roof on top of it. When they were nearing it, a great big dog leapt up from the doorway and bounded towards them. Still haunted by the events of last night, Harry and Blaise screamed like little girls and started running in the other direction. The door to the shack opened immediately, and Hagrid came out, yelling.

"Boys, come back, it's alright! That's jus' Fang, he's a big softie! Back, Fang, **back**!" The dog stopped chasing them, and trotted back to Hagrid with its tongue lolling out. The two of them were still prepared to run all the way back to the castle if they had to, but slowly approached the hut once more. Hagrid smiled reassuringly at them through his beard, holding "Fang" by his collar as they approached.

"Sorry abou' that boys, he loves kids. Come in!"

There was only room in the hut, and it had hams and pheasants hanging from the ceiling, a kettle bowling over a fire, and a massive bed in one corner. To Harry, it seemed very homey.

"Make yerself at home." Said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Blaise. Harry felt sympathy for the Italian boy who was currently getting his head thoroughly slobbered on. At least it wasn't trying to kill them. God, this school was making him as weird as the rest of them.

"This is Blaise." Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring three cups of tea and putting strange rocks on a plate.

"Blaise, eh? Yer mother's Zabini, ain't she? Met her a few times- nice enough woman." he said, glancing at the dark-skinned boy.

The rocks, which turned out to actually be what Hagrid called rock cakes, were hard lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth when they tried chewing them. Harry didn't mind much since Hagrid went on and on about James and Lily Potter.

"Yer parents were both wizards of course, and were both Gryffindors when they went here. Yeh wouldn't believe 'ow many people were surprised when yeh were sorted. I spent those years chasin' yer father around with all the pranks he pulled out here. At one point, he bewitched the Giant Squid to grab students and dance the tango. It'd be impressive if it didn't involve counseling afterwards." Harry winced at that, but didn't interrupt Hagrid.

"Heard he was a wiz at Transfiguration though- McGonagall woulda tried to get him to take up a apprenticeship if it weren't fer him immediately going into the Aurors academy."

"He was an Auror?" Harry asked.

"Aye, for a few months at least. He had just passed the exams when..." Hagrid trailed off, scratching
his beard. "Anyways, he was an Auror. A good one too. Yeh look exactly like him- if yer hair was shorter, and yeh had glasses, I'd mistake yeh for him. But yeh got yer mother's eyes. Green as grass. She was terrific at charms and potions. From what I've been hearing, yeh got the best of both worlds, eh? How are yer classes goin' anyways, you two?" Hagrid asked, smiling.

They went on about their classes for a bit, about how History of Magic was beyond boring and Transfiguration strict. Harry said Herbology was fun, while Blaise said it was boring. Blaise said Potions was interesting, while Harry said it was an endless challenge.

"I doubt I'll ever be good in potions with how Professor Snape is. It's like he hates me." He said miserably.

"Rubbish! Why should he?" Harry would have loved to believe him if it weren't for the fact Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

"Didn't Professor Snape have some rivalry with James Potter when they were younger?" Blaise broke in, interested. Harry blinked, and Hagrid sighed in resignation.

"Aye they did- a nasty one. It wouldn't have been so bad if someone had interfered, but the teachers just saw it as some house rivalry. Harry frowned, and looked down. Snape was treating him like dirt because of his father? That just seemed... dirty.

"Hey Hagrid," Blaise started. Harry glanced over to him, curious. "Do you know anything about cerberi?" He said, ignoring Harry's obvious signs to shut the hell up!

"Now why do yeh want to be knowing about something like that?" Hagrid said warily, definitely not meeting their eyes this time.

"Harry and I have been interested in Greek mythology lately, and since you're the groundskeeper and so close to the forest and must have some experience with animals, we thought you might know." Blaise said sweetly. Harry nearly groaned.

"Er- well, they're three-headed dogs, o' course. And they act and eat like dogs. Tha's about all there is to it."
"If they're like dogs, can they be used like dogs as well? Like, guard dogs or seeing eye dogs?" Blaise asked. Harry was seconds away from throttling him.

"Well, I guess so, if yeh train them. Listen, why don't yeh boys head up to the castle, it's near dinner and I don't want yeh missing it." Hagrid rushed, hustling them out the door. "Feel free to visit again when you two have a free period." He quickly closed the door, and Harry turned to glare at a smug Blaise.

"We just got solid proof that something's going on here." He said proudly. Harry shoved him hard and dragged him back to the castle as he whined.

They discussed Blaise's improperly-found findings during dinner in a whispered conversation with the other first-years, who seemed relieved that it wasn't meant to actually kill them, but rather protect something.

"What do you think it's protecting?" whispered Pansy.

"Maybe it's protecting something like the philosopher's stone, or the secret to immortality!" whispered Theo excitedly. Harry stared at him blankly, having no idea what the hell he was talking about. "It's a thing! It's a stone made by Nicolas Flamel." He said, defending himself. Things went
on this vein, with people suggesting something and it being shot down once the others considered.

"Well this is just pointless." Harry complained as dessert appeared. The others nodded their heads in agreement, frowning or scowling. As they were about to dig in to various treats, the post flew in. Now, this in itself wouldn't be entirely unusual if it weren't for the flock of owls carrying a package straight to the Slytherin table. The students watched as they struggled before finally dropping it across Harry, Blaise, and Theo's laps. At the High Table, Professor Snape took an especially long sip of his "water". It was a long box, and Harry couldn't tell what was inside even by shaking it a bit. It had To: Harry Potter scrawled on it and only that, so he could only imagine what it was. It was difficult getting up, and he asked if someone could help him carry this thing back to the dorm. Naturally, Blaise volunteered, and the two of them carried it over their shoulder out of the Great Hall, hundreds of eyes watching. Whispers broke out after they left.

It was a hardship getting down the stairs without bludgeoning each other in the neck, but they somehow managed to lug it all the way down to their room, where they dropped it on the floor in relief. Blaise flopped onto his bed and stared at it.

What do you think it is?" He asked.

"Why would I know? I certainly haven't ordered anything recently." Blaise shrugged in response, and reached down to rummage in his trunk. Finding what he was looking for, he pulled out a small switchblade, and tossed it to Harry. He yelped, and fumbled trying to catch it and avoid cutting something off. When he had a solid grip on it, he flipped it out.

"Blaise, why do you have this?" Harry asked bewilderedly.

"Protection, duh. You wouldn't believe the stories my mum told me of what can happen here, Harry..." Harry didn't, couldn't respond to that, and simply set to cutting open the box. He slit the sides, then tore at the cardboard, revealing packaging material that held- a broom? A Nimbus 2000, of all models! The two of them stared at it in awe, not believing what they were seeing. Harry touched it a little, making sure it was real. The handle was polished and smooth, just as it looked. The bristles, once he brushed his hand over them, were straight and stiff, much better than the school's.

"I guess this is what Flint meant by taking care of it." Harry murmured. Blaise sniggered in response.

Everyone (or the Quidditch fans at least) freaked when they saw what was in the box, and Theo wouldn't stop running his hands down the handle. It worried Harry a little. Pansy was just suggesting that he try it out (to which he was about to reply are you insane no) when Marcus Flint called from the top of the stairs.

"Potter! Get up here! And bring that broom!" Harry shared a glance with the others and shrugged, gripping the broom in one hand. Walking up, he could see Flint impatiently waiting with a trunk besides him. "Give me that and help me carry this thing." He groused. Harry handed it to him, and they hauled the chest out of the common room, up the stairs, and out to the front lawn. It was when they started heading towards the Quidditch pitch that Harry spoke up.

"Hey Flint, I thought you wanted to practice later in the week." Harry said, confused. Flint grunted and held open the gate to the pitch so they could hobble in. It closed with a bang once they were in, and Flint dropped his side of the trunk.

"That was the plan. But after the show at dinner and the rumours already going 'round, we're going to need you primped earlier. Everyone's going to be training to beat the so-called "flying prodigy". 
Harry sighed in exasperation at that, and switched the trunk handle for his broomstick as Flint tossed it at him.

"I don't know if you know the basics of Quidditch, and I'm not going to send you out without knowing them, so I brought this." Flint said, patting the trunk. He pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked it, revealing four different-sized balls.

"On each Quidditch team, you have seven players. Three Chasers, two Beaters, a Keeper, and a Seeker." Harry nodded in understanding, watching as Flint pulled out a bright red ball about the size of a football.

"This is a Quaffle." explained Flint, turning it over in his hands, "The Chasers throw it to each other and try to score past the other team's Keeper in those three rings there and there." He said, pointing to each end of the pitch. "Ten points if they score in one. Follow?" Harry nodded.

"Then, there's the Keeper- they guard the rings, trying to knock back any incoming Quaffles." He set the Quaffle back in its groove, and pointed to the next balls. They were jet black, and seemed to be vibrating in box. They were locked in by chains.

"Those are Bludgers. Here, take this and I'll give you a demonstration." Flint handed Harry a club, and undid the straps on one of them; the ball surged up, and then rocketed down at Harry's face. On instinct, he swung the bat to keep it from smashing his face in, and sent it zigzagging in the air. It pelted towards Flint next, who dodged and pinned it to the ground. He struggled with it before managing to shove it back in the box and lock it up.

Harry's eyes were wide as he said, grinning, "Those rocket around trying to knock players off their brooms. The Beaters' jobs are to keep it from doing that."

Harry stared at the two straining balls and muttered, "I don't think people who play this are thinking it through much. Flint snorted at that. Don't worry brat, we've only had a few broken jaws here. Now, the last member of the team is the Seeker, or you." Flint reached down and plucked the last ball out of the trunk. It was small, no larger than a golfball, and was bright gold with tiny, fluttering wings.

"This is the Golden Snitch," said Flint, peering down at Harry, "and the most important part of the game. You can be down 100 points, but if your Seeker grabs this thing, the game ends and you win 150 more points just for catching it. It's fast, difficult to find, and hidden among Chasers, Beaters, and Bludgers, so you've got your job cut out for you, Potter." Harry gulped, and clutched his broom a little tighter. Flint replaced the Snitch and closed the trunk, locking it.

"We won't start with the Snitch just yet- too dark to keep track of it," Flint said, "So let me see you try to catch these."

He pulled out a bag of ordinary golf balls, and soon him and Harry were in the air, Flint throwing them in random directions and Harry zooming after them to catch them. Harry caught everyone with ease, and was beaming as he handed them back to Flint. Flint was smirking, and signalled for them to lower down. When they touched the ground, the golf balls were put up and extra broom packed away in the shed once more.

"The Gryffindors have no chance this year," Flint said as they trudged up to the castle, "With you on the team, the Quidditch cup will practically fall in our laps." Harry nervously smiled, but couldn't say he was looking forward to the practice every other day of the week.
With Quidditch practice, projects, homework, and racing back and forth between trying to temper Draco's arrogance and Neville's anxiety, Harry didn't even realise it was Hallow's Eve until Theo had started going on about how his brother told him what muggles did every year.

"He says they dress up in these weird costumes, and some of them try to look like wizards and witches, which is just sad, and they go around their neighborhoods begging for sweets! Isn't that just bonkers?" He said, grinning. "That's what they do, right Harry?"

Harry absently nodded, pushing eggs around with his fork. He stood abruptly, abandoning his plate. "Gonna head to class." He rushed out, snatching his bag and dashing out of the Great Hall.

Theo blinked. "What's his problem?"

Harry sighed, walking down the hallway. Everyone was excited today, with the smell of pumpkin wafting through the castle and the teachers gearing up for more than the basics. The upper-years were planning some after-party for after the feast, and Mrs. Zabini—who he still didn't feel comfortable calling Nicola, much less "Aunt Nicky" as Blaise had been teasing—had even sent some pumpkin pastries her elves had made. But Harry couldn't even work up a good mood. It felt as though he were tossing trash on a grave if he did.

After all, his parents did die today.

It's not that he felt some monumental grief or loss from them being dead. He had lived without them for 11 years, only had a few blurry memories of them. And that wasn't going to change. But it felt disrespectful, in some way, to celebrate on the day they sacrificed themselves for him.

Walking into the Charms classroom, he sat down and pulled out the textbook, reading over the levitation spell. Only two other people were there already; Professor Flitwick was writing something at his desk, and smiled when Harry came in, and Hermione Granger had her head buried in a book two aisles up. He read over the mechanics of the spell as he waited, making sure he knew the correct incantation and wand movement. He'd have to do them correctly if he didn't want anyone wondering why he'd done it wrong and the feather still went up.

The class slowly filled up as per usual, people coming in in tiny groups or pairs. Blaise and the others soon showed up, and the four of them made a beeline for him.

"Harry, are you okay? You were acting a bit strange during breakfast." Blaise said worriedly.

He grimaced at them. "Yeah, I just... don't really want to celebrate today. Sorry if I spoiled the fun."

Understanding dawned on their faces, and Blaise patted him on the back, not saying anything.

Class started upbeat, with Professor Flitwick making some books zip around the classroom. He put them all in pairs to practice the spell, and Harry was stuck with Terry Boot as a partner. He was an amiable enough boy, not minding that he was paired with a Slytherin. Draco, in all his pureblood glory, had been stuck with Hermione Granger. Harry couldn't tell who was angrier about it, but he was pretty sure both were close to hitting the other over the head.

"Now students, don't forget the wrist movement we've been practicing! A small swish and flick! And saying the incantation correctly is vital as well- one syllable wrong and you could end up with a buffalo on you chest like Wizard Baruffio!"

It was difficult managing the movements. Harry would swish too long, or Terry would do more of a wave than a flick. Their feather lay still on the desk until Harry was so frustrated he jabbed it with his wand and accidentally set it on fire. That ended with him patting it out with robe sleeve, which was
thankfully element-resistant.

Draco wasn't having much luck either, by the sound of it.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" He shouted, waving his wand like a conductor.

"You're not saying it right." Harry heard Hermione snap, "It Levi-o-sa. you need to stress the O."

"You do it then, if you're so perfect Granger!" Draco yelled.

There was a ruffle of fabric, and then Hermione saying, "Wingardium Leviosa!" Harry turned around in time to see their feather rise and hover four feet above their heads.

"Excellent!" Professor Flitwick squeaked, Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it! Ten points to Ravenclaw!" Hermione was sitting primly, while Draco looked ready to throw something.

By the end of the class, he was unbearable.

"It's no wonder no one can stand that mudblood," he spat before Harry could shock him, "She's a horror, that girl."

Someone knocked into Theo, nearly pushing him to the ground. It was Hermione- Harry could see from the glimpse of her face that she was in tears. This time, he really did shock Draco as hard as he could, scowling.

"She heard you, you horse's arse. This is why I can't take you anywhere decent." Harry growled.

Hermione didn't show up to lunch, and wasn't in any of the Ravenclaw classes, if whispers were to be believed. Harry felt a pang of pity for the girl, ostracised for not knowing how to socialise. It was like watching a younger him try to make friends on the playground. Except with less chasing and terror. He later heard Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe saying she was hiding in the girls' bathroom. The others were quiet as they left for the feast. He was staying behind- he had no intention of doing much tonight besides reading.

Rummaging through his satchel, he found one of the library books- a book they had used for the Herbology project weeks ago. Harry frowned, turning it over, trying to remember why he still had it. After what everyone called "The Hell Beast" incident, they had just dropped them on the floor. He didn't think they actually even used them, in fact- just went through their Herbology and Potions textbook and matched things up. Of course, that meant he had had it for... about a month. Making a decision, Harry stood, book under his arm. He had to return it, and it was no good staying in his room all night.

He quietly closed the door behind him, and sedately walked out of the common room. No one was roaming the halls, all of them at the feast. Harry didn't doubt that even Filch was there, eating his fill. As he was walking towards the stairs to the ground floor, Harry could hear a strange noise. There was a thumping behind him, making the ground shudder each time it sounded. Looking behind himself, he couldn't see anything, and warily turned back. The thumping continued getting louder and louder, and he turned again as he was on the stairs to see a huge, hulking, smelly shape pass the corner nearest to him. His jaw dropped, and he scurried as quietly as he could down the stairs.

Peering about the corner, he could see the back of some horrid shape- just what was that? He watched it thump, thump, thump down the hall, and turn to-something. He would have run to the Great Hall for help if it weren't for the ear-splitting shriek that immediately followed.

Harry pivoted back and forth, torn on what to do and terrified. If he went down there to whatever that thing was, there was a good chance he'd get maimed just going by its size and the club. If he
didn't, whoever was there might die. Dragging his nails through his hair, he made a split-decision and raced down the corridor to the creature.

"If I die, I'm blaming that damned book." He groaned the creature getting bigger and bigger as he approached. Once he was close enough, he could see it was inside the girls' bathroom, and that someone was shrieking their heads off inside. At a closer look, he could see it was Hermione Granger. She was crouched in one of the stalls, hands over her head and in the fetal position. The thing was swinging at the stalls, breaking them more and more. It'd hit her soon.

"Hey, ugly!" Harry called, cupping his hands. The hulking creature turned towards him, club hand swinging dangerously. "Come get me!" He yelled running into the hallway. It followed on humongous feet, each stomp echoing down the hallway. "I'm so screwed, I'm so screwed, I'm so screwed..." He chanted. He made a sharp turn, bumbling up the stairs and only tripping a few times. Spinning around, he could see that the troll was having a hard time walking up them, too tall for the ceiling and its feet too large to correctly walk. Harry whipped out his wand and cast the first spell he could remember that was good for offense.

"CONFRINGO!" He screamed. It hit the thing dead on, but instead of exploding, only knocked it back. It seemed to get angry at that, and began to charge at the staircase to try and get to him.

He cast the spell again and again, and only managed to make it angrier, the spell having barely an effect. He pocketed his wand, knowing it was fruitless and watching the monster ram itself into the wall. The stone was slowly cracking. Soon, it'd break, and that thing would be able to get to him. That thought filled him with dread, terror, and adrenaline, and he threw his arms out in a last desperate attempt at doing something.

Strands of green shot out from them, reaching and wrapping around the creature and squeezing, squeezing, squeezing until it went limp within their grasp. When it was finished, they dissolved, leaving Harry exhausted, scared, confused, and letting the thing fall to the ground with a loud THUNK.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, and soon, Professors Quirrell, Snape, and McGonagall came across a teary-eyed Harry Potter crouched at the top of a crumbling staircase and an unconscious Hermione Granger in the girls' bathroom.

The next few hours were a flurry of movement and interrogation, with Professor Snape and McGonagall trying to sap every single detail out of them. The two of them surely would have bit his head off if it weren't for Hermione frantically telling them it wasn't his fault after waking up. "I was hiding in the bathroom," She said, "because I didn't want to have to face the others again. The others in my dorm have been... not that nice. Harry saw it coming down the hall, and must have heard me scream. He drew it away, professors." She had said, averting her red eyes with shuffled feet. Harry was eternally grateful she spoke up.

They hardly believed that Harry had thrown at least three confringos at the troll, until Quirrell had said it matched the burn patterns on the troll's chest. And he had only learned that it was a troll when they explained that it had gotten into the castle. The Headmaster had sent everyone back to their common rooms, which frankly made no sense since they were told it started in the dungeons where the Slytherin common room was. It was around 10 when they were let go to go back to their respective common rooms after being thoroughly inspected for injuries and- surprisingly- Harry given five points for protecting another student. Harry felt that was a bit much, seeing as he could have easily died too. He also felt that he wasn't going anywhere near the mountains for a very, very long time.
They walked to the stairways silently, both tired and drained. It was a short walk, and they soon reached their fork in the road.

Harry hesitated for a moment, trying to think of something to say, when Hermione pounced on him, hugging him fiercely. He stood there stiff for a moment before reciprocating, awkwardly patting her on the back. She eventually pulled away, teary-eyed and smiling.

"Thanks, Harry." she whispered, and raced up the stairs. He watched her go.
In Which Children Do Not Behave

Harry smiled as he walked down into the dungeon, and smiled when he reached the common room, and kept smiling when he entered. Everyone was clustered in the cavernous room, yelling about the troll or Dumbledore or even Quirrell for some reason. Some had sandwiches clutched in their hands, and others were completely ignoring everything and trying to eat. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could dazedly spot the other firsties talking with worried expressions.

When the wall disappeared, conversations fell silent as people turned towards it, surely expecting Professor Snape or another teacher. Many blinked in confusion, and going by their winces, Harry supposed he must look a bit... off, right now. He didn't say anything as they watched, and started to walk towards the dormitories. About three steps in he was barreled over by the other first-years, mostly the boys, who were jabbering so loudly and quickly that even he couldn't tell what they were saying. Blaise was the loudest, yelling in Italian in his ear and squeezing the air out of him with the force of his grip. Some of the older students looked like they wanted to try and help, but as soon as the impromptu dog-pile had started, it ended. Vincent and Greg pulled him up, practically carrying him down the stairs as the others followed. Harry could hear the shuffling of feet and whispers as they left, and the slow tread of someone coming through the wall. Professor Snape must have finished the business with the other staff.

He was still smiling, smiling away as the others dumped him on the floor, one of the girls casting a surprisingly-advanced privacy ward around them. As soon as that was done, they settled around him in their customary meeting position, scowling or scanning him for injuries.

"...Harry, why are you grimacing? You look like you're in pain or something." Blaise asked, peering as his face worriedly and poking his cheek. The not-smile slid off his face in response. Harry opened his mouth to respond, paused, and closed it again. He couldn't answer that. He didn't know where to start.

"I-" He tried, cutting himself off quick. A shudder racked him, and he raised his hands to run them through his hair before stopping halfway, remembering it was still in a ponytail. A hand placed itself on his shoulder, and he looked over, startled. Pansy was staring back, eyebrows deeply furrowed.

"Potter, what happened? You weren't here when we got in, and you sure weren't in the Great Hall. Don't go flimsy on us." Harry blinked, and brushed off her hand.

"It was- it was the troll. I was rushing to the library when it passed down the hall. I was going to head to the Great Hall, but it started to attack- attack Granger so I distracted it and knocked it out."

They were still staring at him, he was sure, and Blaise was a choked noise next to him.

"Just- Harry? What do you mean, distracted and knocked it out?" Blaise said in a strained voice. Harry shrugged his shoulders and made a half-hearted gesture with his hands. Blaise put his hands on his shoulders and just left them there, gripping them hard.

"Did you- did you throw stuff at it, burn it, suffocate it, what, Potter?" Moon said impatiently.

"Um, I threw a few confringos at it. It knocked into the wall opposite and passed out." He lied, looking down at his hands.

"Are you serious?" Moon burst out, "You're telling us that you, a first-year, managed to knock out a fifteen-foot troll using a few confringos and got away with no scrapes whatsoever!" She yelled,
throwing her hands up in the air. Harry could hear a quiet "ow", and someone shifting.

"I-I did what I did, okay?" He burst out, glaring at her. "All I know is that I blasted it with confringos from the stairs, and when it started to crumble the roof I put all I had into the last one and sent it flying. You try describing nearly dying in detail." He hissed. Moon looked sufficiently cowed, although all of them had curious expressions on their faces.

"You must be really strong to do that, Harry."

"That's a third-year spell, and an unstable one at that. You were really pushing it, using that!" Blaise whacked him upside the head for that comment, but Harry didn't really mind it. He was lucky. He was lucky he heard it behind him, and lucky he left the dungeons before it could find him, and lucky that those weird... strings had appeared. It was like he had a seven-leaf clover stuffed somewhere on his person.

"...Well, I think we should all just be thankful we didn't have to have a vigil the next day. I don't think I'd be able to take that." Blaise murmured, glancing around at the others. They shifted uncomfortably, and muttered assents.

"Honestly, I think it'd be a bit gloomy without you, Potter. You brighten up the day in the morning with your mother-henning."

"I think we should all be thankful we didn't have to have a vigil the next day. I don't think I'd be able to take that."

"Well, I don't know about you guys, but I feel exhausted enough to fall into a coma. I'm going to head to bed- see you in the morning." He gave them a wave and headed towards his room. The privacy ward dissipated as he walked through the edge of it, and some of the exhaustion he actually had faded. It made him feel less like an inferius. He could hear the others behind him getting up as well, saying good-nights, and breathed a sigh of relief. Doors opened and shut, people's sounds and scents became muffled, and soon he was swinging his own door shut behind him, leaving it to the others boys to open it. He didn't particularly care for waiting for them at the moment. He stumbled and collapsed head-first onto his bed, groaning.

There was some shuffling around and whispers he ignored, and he could distinctly feel someone tiptoeing up to his side. It was a bit eerie to know exactly where they were standing, but he was damned if he was going to acknowledge it. He would have continued in his stubborn avoidance, but something prodded into his side repeatedly, calling for his attention and possibly jabbing-elbow. Pushing himself up on said elbow, he glared at the perpetrator, who turned out to be Draco. He had a double-take, not really believing the blond was there, before his glare intensified.

"Why are you bothering me- why are you even in here? You know Professor Snape is adamant on no one entering the other's rooms." He hissed. Draco just stared steadfastly at him, although there was a twitch in his eye.

"He meant girls aren't allowed in the boys and vice versa, but okay, I can understand why you wouldn't want me in here. But that's besides the point. What the point is, is that you were completely lying out in the hall, and we refuse to let that sit." Harry narrowed his eyes at him, and glanced past to see Theo and Blaise standing awkwardly by the door with determined looks on their faces.

"I was elected since they didn't want you to elbow them, by the way." Draco added, plopping himself down beside Harry on his canopied bed. The other two boys sat in front of them with faces worse than those you see at an intervention. Harry pushed himself up, feeling more and more like he should just go beg a patch of floor to sleep on from an upper-year. He tugged his hair out of its ponytail, running his fingers through it. It was shaggy and in need of a trim. Glancing at the others, he asked,

"Well?"
"Well, what really happened?" Draco asked exasperatedly. Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Like I said, I threw a few *confringos* at it."

"And? *Confringos* can't knock out a mountain troll, Potter. They have magic-resistant skin." Harry stiffened. He hadn't known that. He hadn't known that at all. He raced through his thoughts, trying to make an excuse, and coming up with none.

"I... I freaked out at the end." He said, vaguely his arms. Draco was not impressed, and looked ready to poke him again. "I don't know what it was, okay? I was pretty much beyond me tether at that point and about to scream my lungs out."

"Describe it." Draco was just not giving this up. Theo had leaned in by this point, interested, and Blaise looked dubious of all things. Harry supposed he was regretting doing this as some group-style confrontation now. Good.

"It was... green string. Wrapped around the troll and squeezed it until it passed out." The three of them gave him blank stares.

"String."

"From how I saw it. It was like green string shot out from my arms. They disappeared when the troll went under. Can I go to bed yet? I really am exhausted." Draco rolled his eyes, and was about to say something, but Theo cut him off.

"From your arms? Not from your wand or the ground?" He asked, staring intently at Harry. He nodded uncertainly. Theo hummed, furrowing his brows.

"What is it?" Blaise asked, finally speaking up.

"Nothing, I think. Let me just look a few things up." Theo said absently. Harry decided that was the end of the conversation and began to push Draco of the room. The Malfoy protested at first, but quieted down when he saw the aggravated expression on Harry's face.

With Malfoy out, Harry promptly booted the others away from his bed and proceeded to hog the shower for the next half hour, letting the hot spray flow over his head as he tried to clear his mind.

The next morning, the Great Hall was more quiet than ever. Most everyone was trying to figure out how the troll got into the dungeon, or whispering about the rumours started in Ravenclaw that morning, or staring at the Slytherin table.

Now, about the first week of school, no one would stop glancing to the Slytherin table, obviously whispering about the shocker this year. Harry made sure to glare at anyone who did, but it just wasn't enough, and people had gone on. It had quickly ended, thankfully, and there hadn't been many recurrences besides the broom delivery and the accidental food fight that started because of Flint and Greg. Greg had been eating messily as always and accidentally let his spoon whip around along with his hand. Ten seconds and one irate sixth year later, mashed potatoes and chicken was being flung in their direction, and all hell broke loose. Flint still didn't know who had flung the peas at him, poor sod.

Today, however, there was a bit of an abnormality. Just a bit. Almost everyone was in their normal seats near the Staff's Table, and the same food as usual was put in front of them. Harry stole his usual cinnamon pancakes with sausage, and Draco got his usual bacon and eggs, and Theo his oatmeal. The only difference was that Harry and *Neville* were sweating bullets wedged between an irate
Blaise and talkative trio of boys had met outside the Great Hall, Blaise profusely apologising for last night and Neville frantically asking if they were okay- he seemed to have more common sense than Dumbledore when it came to safety, it seems. Walking through the door, Harry had instantly spotted Hermione next to his usual spot, reading a book. Harry had stopped the others in their tracks, gripping Neville's arm so hard he whimpered.

"If I have to do this, I am not doing this alone. If I do this, I'm taking the ship down with me."

This had led to him shoving Neville down next to him, Blaise taking the next seat in line, while Hermione sat on his left. She smiled brightly when he sat down, and started going on about the new potion they were to brew in Potions. Harry bewilderingly went along, not really expecting absolutely any of this, and ignored the looks of vast disapproval he got from the present upper-years. He pinched Neville from time to time to get him to speak up, which prompted a lead into Herbology, which Hermione viciously disliked and only saw as useful due to its applications. Which led to a fierce debate over his shoulders between the two, and Harry looking to Blaise for salvation. His salvation plea was readily denied in favor of bananas and oatmeal. Traitor.

The first-years sitting with them barely talked, murmuring to themselves and giving Harry's "mixed bag-o-nuts" unpleasant looks. He gave them helpless looks in return, trying to tell them he had no idea what was going on anymore and could you please not act mad it's not his fault he saved her. To avoid getting the reality of being stuck between two people fully ready to attack each other, he watched the Great Hall, trying to put names to the faces that came in. He could see Boot and Edgecombe staring at their table as though it was a three-headed ape. The Weasley twins were discussing something with their cohort Lee Jordan, grinning from time to time. Cedric Diggory looked like he was reevaluating his life choices surrounded by the first-year 'Puffs.

His eyes nearly slid over him when he saw Ron.

The other boy was standing in the giant doorway of the Hall, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot with a pink-tinged face. Harry wondered what was wrong with him, and startled when Ron glanced over to him. Their eyes met, and Ron jerked his head, silently asking. Harry considered not getting up, but then had Hermione shriek say particularly loud that devil's snare was just a nuisance in his ear and decided that anything was better than this right now.

Standing, he told the others he was popping to the wash closet and slowly walked out of the Great Hall. A few people watched him, but his nonchalant act bored them quick. Except for two pairs of eyes at Gryffindor, suspicious and untrusting. He walked out and glanced around, seeing Ron standing off to the side in a small dead-end. Trotting over, he raised an eyebrow at the other boy.

"What is it?" He asked. Ron jolted, as though not expecting him to talk, and fumbled around a bit, rubbing his arm.

"Eh-uh-well... I wanted to see if you still wanted to be. You know. friends." He said lamely. Harry tilted his head, both eyebrows rising.

"It's been two months, Ron. I pretty much gave up four weeks ago." Ron flinched at that, and stared steadfastly at the floor.

"I know, I know I just.. everyone's talking about how you saved Granger and-"

"And you thought I wasn't such a slimy Slytherin." Harry finished flatly. Ron flinched again. "I don't mind that Ron, I expected that sort of thing with all the discrimination. But you didn't come to me until I did something stupid and obvious. I'd rather not have that hanging over my head the whole time we hang out, you know?" He said, smiling sadly.
Ron opened and closed his mouth a few times, and slowly nodded with a frown on his face. Harry patted him on the back, a parting slap in the face, and walked back to the Slytherin table. The others ignored him as he sat down, and he was relieved to find that Hermione and Neville had calmed down from their fierce debate. Or tiff. whichever you preferred.

"Har-" Blaise started, but Harry quickly glared at him, shutting the Italian boy up. He raised his hands in peace, smiling. "I was just going to ask a hypothetical question. Nothing related to your growing or shrinking Band of Misfits." He said in a soothing tone.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Wеееееlll, we all know about your alias here at the table, but something occurred to me a bit ago. If you-" he pointed at Harry- "are Augustus, what does that make the Dark Lord and Dumbledore?"

Some of the others had turned towards their row, interested. A few of them looked irritated, but Harry tell why. He didn't really care either.

"Gaius Germanicus and Nerva." Harry answered immediately, violently spearing a sausage. Blaise boggled at him, and he shrugged. "What? No one said they had to follow chronological order. The Dark Lord was insane enough at the end to be Gaius or Caligula, whichever you prefer, although I did hear he was particularly good-looking before his slip-" At this point, Gemma Farley three seats over began choking on her toast- "-and Dumbledore is liked enough to be Nerva. And I'm Augustus because things in this backwards world have supposedly been more peaceful than they have in years." He finished, chewing his sausage. The Slytherins were mulling this over, while Neville and Hermione had curious expressions.

"Good-looking?" Blaise asked, sporting a wry grin.

"Your mother talks about many a thing, Blaise, now eat your food. "

"You call yourself Augustus? Isn't that a bit arrogant?" Hermione asked, eyebrows furrowed in disapproval. Neville glanced between him and her, looking more and more confused. Harry doubted Neville even knew who the emperor was.

"Well, I was nine when I suggested it. Blaise didn't want his pure-blooded posse to know who he was talking to, and I made the name up on the top of my head. It was useful for keeping people from the whole fame thing up until the point it made Draco and Ron go into tizzies after sorting." He argued, frowning. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Draco and Theo gaping like offended fish. They were stoutly ignored. Hermione hummed, and left it at that, surprisingly.

They spent the rest of the time enthusiastically talking about Roman emperors with confused pure-bloods asking constant questions.

That afternoon, the Slytherin first-years headed to potions as usual to learn how to brew burn-healing paste. They had taken to their usual spots, and were waiting for Snape to appear. Oddly enough, the man was not in his usual spot, hiding in the dark corner of the room, and was actually nowhere to be seen. Harry briefly wondered where he was before realising that the teachers were probably sorting out the mess from last night still.

"Potter- are you even listening?" Draco said impatiently, waving a hand in front of his face. Harry had no qualms shocking it and grinning when Malfoy pulled it back, cursing.

"I still haven't figured out how you do that..." The blond muttered under his breath. "Anyways, why did you have to bring Granger to our table? Longbottom I can stand, I was actually expecting him
long before this, but that mud-muggleborn is too much.” He said, correcting himself. It seems Harry's constant shocks were working in his favour. *Oh Pavlov, how we must thank you.* He thought vindictively.

"I keep *telling* you Draco, she was there when we went in. I dragged Neville and Blaise with me because I refused to talk to her alone. She must feel indebted or something because of last night." Talk went quiet around them, but Harry ignored it. Draco winced of all things, and their argument ended. *Why is everyone acting like I'm suddenly fine porcelain?*

"Now that you two are done, Harry, did they look like actual string or was it more of just lines last night?" Theo asked behind them, not looking up from the parchment he was writing on.

"Uh... just lines I suppose. They were really thin, which is why I called them string." Harry said dubiously. Theo nodded, writing some more on the parchment. Peering closer, Harry could see that it was a letter. He was about to ask Theo just what this was all about when Professor Snape burst in, limping to the front.

Limping?

Looking closely, Harry could see he had a distinct limp he was trying to hide on the left side, and he smelled strongly of wet fur and potions, more so than usual. He had gone to the Hospital Wing then, or was an obsessive clean freak with a dog.

The man wasn't in any sort of good mood today, and barked at them to go get ingredients as the potion recipe appeared on the board. Everyone rushed to their supplies, and Harry told Neville as kindly as he could to stay-the-hell-put-we-cannot-risk-this-today. The Gryffindor didn't seem to mind his thinly-veiled demand plea at all as he was already shaking. Wondrous.

Harry wrangled up their ingredients and headed back to the desk, going through the usual Potions routine he had with Neville. He would take care of preparation of the items while Neville would do the stirring and such. He'd keep the other calm by talking about the latest lesson in Herbology or some muggle thing Harry thought would interest him. Whenever Professor Snape stalked over, they would halt the conversation and act like diligent little dunderheads. Of course, Snape rarely come over, nearly avoiding them. Today, he decided they deserved a punishment for being in his class and came over, giving their potion and them a critical eye. When he must have found nothing wrong (And thank all the gods for that), he sneered and whipped around to yell at Dean and Thomas for already messing up their monstrous concoction. On that day, the class remembered not to grow complacent in the presence of Severus Snape.

---

The weather turned very cold after that dreadful Hallow's Eve. The mountains surrounding the loch and school turned a steely grey, and the ground was periodically covered with frost in the mornings. More and more days saw the little firsties bundled up in their scarves and gloves along with the occasional hat. If you looked out an upstairs window, you could sometimes see Hagrid banging the broomsticks in the Quidditch field to rid them of frost.

Quidditch season had just begun. For the Slytherins, their first match was on Saturday with the Gryffindors. To say Harry was nervous was like saying kittens were just "energetic". Flint was having them practice every night, pushing them to their limits before yelling at them to drop down. It made Harry happy that he grasped spells quickly, or else he would surely be failing Transfiguration and Charms. Herbology thankfully didn't require much consciousness to function.

Hermione continued to sit with or by him, often interrupting conversations to put her two cents in. Harry didn't quite mind it as much as he used to in Charms, since she seemed to mellow out with her
toadying and attitude. She was also more open to discussion than the other first-years, who mostly groaned when he started going off about something (went into one of his moods, they said).

"I've been reading up on Quidditch since you told me you were going to be playing, Harry, and you wouldn't believe some of the rules to the game! There are seven hundred ways to foul, and the game has to keep going until the snitch is caught. It says in here that one game in Belgium went on for four months before someone caught it! They had to constantly switch out players so they could sleep!" She exclaimed the day before the match. Her, Blaise, Harry, and Neville were sitting under a tree in the courtyard. It was tall, and almost looked pretty with the frost hanging from it. Hermione was reading from a book she had picked up in the library called Quidditch Through the Ages. She had embarrassedly told them that she didn't actually like Quidditch, but that it would help Harry so she checked it out. Blaise refused to stop making kissy noises whenever they were near each other from that point on.

Glancing up, Harry could see Professor Snape limping across the courtyard. His limp had yet to get better, it seems, and the man was rancorous every day it continued. He spotted them, and seemed to have an internal conflict before brusquely walking over.

"Granger, what have you got there? A library book?" Hermione nodded reluctantly, and Snape smiled unpleasantly. "It is against school rules to have library books outside of the school. Hand it here- 5 points from Ravenclaw." She looked ready to argue with him, but a well-placed jab from Harry's weapon-elbow stopped her. So she handed the book over scowling the whole time. Snape took it and went off to wherever his business was.

"He so made that up." Harry muttered.

"I wonder why he's limping?" Blaise said, ignoring Harry. The others glanced at him, and then to where Snape had disappeared to. None of them could answer that.

Later that evening, during a reprieve of Flint's monstrous practice, Harry sneaked off from the Slytherin common room. Dinner had passed and everything was going about their nightly business. He was going heading down to the staffroom to see if he couldn't ask the man to give him Hermione's book. The professor really was an arse today- taking out his pains on innocent students. Tsk, tsk Bat, not a good idea at all.

Walking down to the staffroom, he could hear someone talking through the door, and saw a blob of red glimmering through the wall. He paused before knocking, curious.

"... supposed to keep your eyes on three heads at once? It's like Albus has gone mad." Was that Snape? That had to be- and there was no possibility he was talking about something other than The Beast they had seen in the Corridor of Child Death. Just why did he know about it? There was some shuffling, and Harry could hear- fabric? Cotton? He strained his ears to hear more, but whatever it was, it was quiet. Sighing, he decided to just get on with it.

When he knocked on the door, he could hear cursing on the other side before it swung open to reveal Professor Snape's irate face. Filch was behind him, holding a roll of bandages and what might have been Essence of Murtlap. The smell that had hung around Snape for the past few days had intensified, and now had an underlayer of blood, thick and sluggish. Professor Snape glowered down at him, not wanting to deal with this at all.

"What do you want, Potter?"

"I was wondering if I could get Hermione's book, sir. She really wants to return it." Snape made a
few unintelligible noises, gritting his teeth. To Harry, it sounded like the times Vernon had cut himself off in public so people didn't disapprove. It made him shrink back a bit, but Snape turned before he noticed. He limped over to some area outside of Harry's vision, and came back with the book in his hands. The tall man shoved it into his hands and slammed the door shut, not even dignifying Harry with a parting scathing remark. Harry decided it was best to take his luck when it came by and just rushed back to the common room to tell the others what he had heard.

The others looked on curiously as he rushed in, momentarily saying the password- Pluto, which was at least better than "pureblood" and a show of how begging for something less stupid worked in Harry's favour- and he simply waved his hands frantically at the other first-years before rushing down the stairs. Soon he could hear the clamour of them following, damn the stares, and smiled.

Spinning around, he signaled for Millicent to put up a privacy ward and plopped down on the ground with an excited expression on his face. They had had about five of these "firstie meetings" as the others had started coining them. The prefects thought it was decidedly strange and a bit worrisome, but made no move to stop them due to the fact one of the prefects, Albbert, had tried to follow them down once and had gotten shocked and turned fire-engine red for two weeks. After that, no one even tried to peer down there as they held them.

They congregated in their usual imperfect oval, with Harry at the very end and Blaise and Theo squatted next to him.

"Well, Harry?" Pansy asked, "What is it this time? Snape whisper the secrets of the castle when you went to get the m-muggleborn's book?"

"Sort of!" Harry said, not letting her mocking dampen his mood. "I was going down to the staffroom and I could hear someone talking inside before I knocked so I stopped and listened in- Blaise stop giving me that look I was curious- and Professor Snape was talking about keeping his eyes on all three heads at once." He grinned as the others stared at him in mute, disbelieving silence. "So the Professor must have tried to get past it to that door underneath! It must be why he's been limping for so long, and why he smells like the Hospital Wing half the time now!"

"...Potter, that's not quite a good thing to be excited about." Millicent said, giving him an odd look. He pouted.

"But this is a lead! To the thing or whatever that is under The Beast! Whatever it is, it's important enough that Snape wants it!" He argued.

"He might not want it, though." Daphne said, timidly speaking up. "Maybe he just doesn't like The Beast, or is guarding it, or wants to destroy it. There are multiple possibilities." They all paused at that, considering. Would Snape really try to get past The Beast just to protect something, or destroy it? Would it really be worth it?

"...Whatever it is, it definitely is important." Draco finally said, breaking the silence. "Professor Snape wouldn't waste time on something unless it was important, or unless he had to. And Potter, who said we were even looking into it? I thought we had all agreed to never speak of anything related to that again."

"Well, yeah, but don't you think it's a bit suspicious? First Dumbledore decides to tell the whole school they'll die horribly if they go into a certain corridor, then Blaise, Pansy, Theo, and I find a giant three-headed dog that's guarding something in said Corridor of Violent Death, and the next day we find out the gamekeeper knows what it is and that it's in the school. On Hallow's Eve, everyone's practically given a heart attack over the troll, and we find out barely a week later that Professor Snape tried to get past the three-headed dog for some reason or the other. Something's going on, and
spells bad in every way for me.” Harry explained, frowning. The others had uneasy expressions, and even Draco was uncertain on how to rebuke that. Only Theo seemed to be unaffected.

“Well, we just have to research then, don't we? Obviously, Hagrid, Snape, and Dumbledore are all in on it, so we should look in on them. Maybe they could give us a clue to what's going on. I say in our free time, when we aren’t busy, we split up. Two of us watch Snape, two watch Hagrid, and four of us go the library. The other two will monitor the Corridor from time to time and report if anyone is going through it. We should probably brush up on spells as well, since things are getting so hectic.” He suggested, reading over something in his hands. Harry blinked.

"Theo, I think that's the first time in a meeting you haven't suggested something completely stupid. But you do realise it's going to be difficult following around two staff members without being noticed, right?" Theo giggled at that.

"Harry, you're a wizard, what do you think we'll do, just dart from corner to corner? There are disillusionment and muffling spells we can use." Harry flushed, and crossed his arms when some of the others snickered at that.

"Oh shut up, you lot! Now, who should do what..."

The ten of them talked about it through the night, arguing and insisting that they should do that or that it wasn't a good idea to be looking up that. Around 11, they decided to put the topic to rest and retire for the night. So far, they had decided that Millicent, Theo, Blaise, and Daphne would research in the library, Draco and Harry would follow Snape, Pansy and Greg would follow Hagrid, and Vincent and Moon would watch the library. Any chances they had to interfere were to be taken, no matter what position they were assigned. Harry had vehemently opposed being put with Draco, but Theo had shut him down immediately on the basis of them needing someone who personally knew Snape to watch him.

"Personally knows him?" He had asked, confused.

"He's my godfather." Draco replied.

They still didn't know exactly what to research, or look out for, or what to use to hide themselves, but it was a start.

Harry groaned as he woke up the morning, and turned over before his eyes snapped open. He bolted up, commanding time only to see he had accidentally slept in, and that it was Saturday. Groaning again, he fell back onto his pillow. Today was the day of the match.

It was bright and cold that morning, and everyone at the table was excited. The members of the Quidditch team were excited and ready to pummel Gryffindor into the ground, but Harry really just wanted to disappear. He picked at his pancakes as Hermione and Blaise tried to cheer him up.

"Come on Harry, I'm sure you'll do fine! You were a natural on the broom during lessons, and that was just the dingy school one!” Blaise exclaimed, rubbing his back. Harry muttered something unintelligible in response, more focused on the letter he had gotten this morning. Mrs. Zabini was still mailing him—although he had finally caved in and had started calling her Nicola in the letters—and had gave him the best of wishes for his match. He had bemoaned of it to her in his last letter, along with a few choice phrases about the school and its security that he probably shouldn't have written down. She had waved off her concerns and laughed at his curses, but was concerned. "A troll?" She wrote, "Please tell me you have miswrote, Harrison. How did they incapacitate it, much less let it in? Is Dumbledore really that incompetent? Are the two of you alright?"
Her concern made him warm. Of course, he didn't know how to tell her he was the one who knocked it out, but she would probably find out when Blaise's letter reached her.

"You've got to eat Harry," Hermione piped up, staring disapprovingly at his still-filled plate. "You're skinny enough, and you'll need your strength today." Harry twitched, and could hear Moon muttering about having another mother-hen at the table. He kicked her ankle in retaliation, relishing in her yelp.

"Yeah, Harry, Seekers are the ones that get knocked around the most, so you'll need your strength!" Theo said brightly across from him.

"Thank you for the advice, Theo." Harry replied as he watched the other boy drown his fruit in sugar.

By 11 the Quidditch pitch was filled to the brim with students and teachers, all cheering and yelling in excitement. Blaise, Neville, and Hermione had crowded at the top of the Slytherin Stand, and had painted an old sheet from one of the abandoned rooms with different shades of green, blue, and yellow. They had written Go Go Potter on it, and one of them had tried to draw a snake, which had turned out looking closer to a squiggle than anything, but it was the thought that counted. It was to be a surprise for Harry when he and the team flew out.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry was changing into his forest green robes; Gryffindor would be playing in scarlet. Flint cleared his throat to catch their attention, and they all turned to him.

"Alright men and women, we are going up against Gryffindor again. If we play by our straights, we'll beat them into the ground like every other year." Flint smirked at them. "Now get out there and show some house pride."

Harry followed the six of them out of the locker room and walked out into the field, hoping he wouldn't throw up with how many people were looking and cheering.

Madame Hooch was refereeing, and was standing in the middle of the field, waiting for the two teams to emerge. She held her own broom in hand.

"I want a fair game from all of you," She said as they gathered around her. She seemed to speak particularly to Flint and the Weasley twins, giving the three of them a baleful eye. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see the fluttering banner high above in the stands, and something loosened in his chest. He felt less ready to sick up.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry swung onto his Nimbus 2000 and clutched the handle hard. Madame Hooch gave a shrieking blast of her whistle, and they were off. The fifteen of them rose high into the air, the chasers and beaters and keepers all racing off in different directions. The Gryffindor Seeker, a small, mousy girl, started to search the sky, swiveling this way and that as she flew off. Harry could hear the announcer, Lee Jordan, already reading off plays.

"And the Quaffle is taken instantly by Angelina Johnson, Gryffindor, excellent Chaser that girl is, not that bad of a looker either."

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."
It appeared he was being watched by Professor McGonagall, with good reason.

"She's really belting along up there, making a neat pass to Spinnet, former reserve now official- now back to Johnson and- no, Slytherins now have the Quaffle. Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes- flying like an eagle up there, way high- he's almost- no, stopped by an excellent move from Gryff Keeper and Captain Oliver Wood and the Quaffle is back to the lions- Katie Bell's got it, nice dive there, off the field and- OUCH, that's gotta be a bad one, Bludger to the back of the head, Farley's playing dirty this game- Quaffle is taken by the Slytherins, with Adrian Pucey speeding back to the goals- almost hit by that Bludger, good hit anyways by one of the Weasley twins- he's near the goals now- Keeper Wood dives to catch- misses- SLYTHERIN SCORES!"

Slytherin cheers filled the air, with spotted whoops from other stands and massive howls from the Gryffindors. Theo and Blaise were practically screaming their heads off, and even Hermione was cheering.

"You know, you think Harry'd have done something yet!" She yelled over the clamour.

"There's not much to do! Seekers only do one thing- catch the Snitch!" Theo yelled back.

Up above their heads, Harry was circling the pitch, peering this way and that for the blasted ball. Flint had told him to stay well out of the way beforehand, and to only focus on finding the Snitch. Harry thought it was a good plan, especially since it lowered his chances of breaking a jaw or getting a heavy metal ball to the back of his skull like the girl from Gryffindor.

When Pucey scored, he zigzagged around a bit, but tried to keep his eye out. He had seen flashes of gold occasionally, but they would turn out to be watches or something of the ilk.

"Slytherin in possession again," Lee Jordan was narrating now, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, Chaser Bell, and speeds towards- wait a tic- was that the Snitch?"

Murmurs ran through the crowd as Pucey dropped the Quaffle, startled at the flash of gold that had zipped over his shoulder. Harry could see Flint yelling at him from his spot near the goalposts.

But Harry had seen the flash, and dived downwards towards it. The Gryffindor Seeker had seen it too, or saw him racing towards it, and dived as well, bringing them neck and neck in their pursuit of it. The Chasers around the pitch seemed to have forgotten their jobs and watched as they hurtled towards it, only Pucey scrambling to get out of the way so they didn't bowl into him.

Harry was faster than the girl, and was so close he could see its tiny wings fluttering- he put on an extra burst of speed, and would have gotten the Snitch if it weren't for a very well-timed Bludger aimed to knock him off his broom.

WHAM! into his side it went, sending him spinning and almost knocking him off his broom. He locked his legs around it tight, refusing to fall and terrified at the prospect, and frantically glanced to where the Snitch was supposed to be. It had disappeared, and the mousy girl looked as disappointed as he was relieved.

"FOUL! FOUL!" Blaise shouted, jumping up and down, "THAT COULD HAVE KNOCKED HIM OFF HIS BROOM AND SENT HIM DIVING!"

"No rules against it Zabini, now shut up and sit down! Harry will be alright!" Theo yelled, tugging the other boy back into his seat. Hermione was worriedly biting her nails next to him.

"He really could have fallen off- shouldn't this game be safer, being played by teenagers?" She asked.
Lee Jordan didn't seem to mind taking a side on this.

So after a brilliant play from Gryffindor the Snitch has disappeared and Seeker Harry Potter was sent spinning like a top- hilarious-

"Jordan!" Growled Professor McGonagall at his side.

"Sorry ma'am, we continue to play, Gryffindor in possession."

Harry dodged another Bludger, much more wary now, when something very odd happened. Hid broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a second he thought he was going to fall, and tightened his grip even more from its white-knuckled state. *That certainly never happened during practice*, he thought, panicked.

It gave another lurch seconds later, almost like it was trying to buck him off. But non-sentient brooms did not just up and decide to buck off their riders. Harry was trying to turn it, to at least find Flint and have him call a timeout, but the damned thing wouldn't even budge. It was completely out of his control. It started to jag in the air, going this way and that and nearly knocking him off with some movements.

Jordan was still commentating through it all.

"Slytherin in possession- Farley has the Quaffle- passes Spinnet- passes Bell- hit hard with a Bludger, that's gonna sting in the morning, hope it broke her nose- only joking, Professor- Slytherins miraculously score- oh no..."

The Slytherins were cheering, and no one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was trying to go on its own jaunt. It was slowly drifting higher, forcing him to go up and up and up. Harry was slowly descending into panic, and was very, very close to just letting himself drop with a *float*.

"Hey, what's Potter doing?" Draco called from the stands, catching Blaise's attention. The Italian boy glanced up, expecting Harry to be doing something silly, and saw him rising into the sky.

"Oi Theo, give me your binoculars!" He called, narrowing his eyes. Theo tossed them, and Blaise peered up at Harry. The young Seeker had a terrified look on his face, and was saying something. Blaise frowned.

Suddenly, people all over the stands were pointing up at Harry, alarmed. His broom had started to roll over, with him trying to hold onto it more tightly than a monkey. If you were close enough, you would have heard him repeating every curse he had managed to hear come out from Vernon's mouth over his lifetime with vitriol. Then the whole crowd gasped and gaped as the broom gave another wild jerk and sent Harry swinging off of it. He was dangling from it now from one hand, and anyone paying attention could tell this was not something he ever wanted to happen.

"Did something happen to his broom when the Bludger knocked into him?" Blaise shakily whispered.

"It's not possible." Hermione replied, horrified. "The charms and spells on the broom wouldn't be affected. Only magic could do that."

At those words, Blaise made a choked noise and began searching through the crowd. If only magic could do this, then someone had to be casting the spell.

"What are you doing? Is it going to help?" Theo moaned, tugging at his hair.
"Merlin's saggy- look- opposite of us-" Blaise practically threw the binoculars at the two of them, his eyes darting between something.

The teachers were seated in the stand opposite of them. Snape was besides Quirrell and McGonagall, who was watching the scene with a gaping mouth and wide eyes. Lee Jordan was in front of her, now narrating the unwanted diversion. But the crux of it all was that Snape and Quirrell were both focused intently on Harry, Snape muttering under his breath and Quirrell with an expression that would send any child screaming for a police officer.

"You think it's one of them?" Theo hissed. Blaise flailed his arms and made a choked noise.

"It has to be! One of them has to be doing something- jinxing his broom! Maybe Quirrell can do wordless magic! We just need to do something!"

"But what!?" Theo yelled frustratedly.

"Leave it to me." Hermione said, racing from the stand and disappearing. The two boys watched after her, stunned.

"Is she going to set them on fire or something?" Theo asked. Blaise shrugged his shoulders and prayed for the best. Turning his binoculars back on Harry, Theo could see that he didn't have much longer. Harry's broom was vibrating so hard it was almost dislodging his grip. The whole crowd was watching, terrified and panicked in some places, while Farley and Flint tried to help him. It was fruitless, however; every time they got near, the broom would jump higher and higher, rattling Harry's grip each time. He yelled at them after the third time to give it up for now. They circled around him underneath, discussing what to do with the other teammates, who had stopped bothering with the game. No one tried to sneak points.

"Oh, where the hell is Granger?" Blaise muttered worriedly, scanning the stands for a glimpse of her. "How's he looking Nott?"

"Well, he's still imitating a monkey, if that's what you're asking."

Hermione had fought her way through the crowd to the staff's area by now, and was racing under the rows. Reaching the space where Quirrell's and Snape's feet were visible, she crouched down and pulled out her wand. Whispering a few well-chosen words, blue flames shot from her wand and onto the hems of the two teachers' robes.

It took about thirty seconds before the flames hit skin and the two of them realised they were on fire. Yelps and curses told her that she had succeeded, and she scooped the fires off of them into a spare jar she hid in her pocket. Dashing out from underneath the rows, she breathed a sigh of relief- Harry would be okay, and Snape would never know she had purposely set him on fire. Hopefully.

Up in the air, Harry's broom had stopped bucking and vibrating, and he was able to tug it back down and clamber on. When he was firmly seated on the handle, he nearly cried with relief.

"Blaise, he's up! He's up! HE'S ALRIGHT YES!" Theo yelled, tugging on the other boy's robe and throwing his arms around him. Blaise, who had been watching Snape and Quirrell dance around in panic for the past minute, whooped and returned the excitement-hug.

Harry was speeding towards the ground to land when the crowd saw him abruptly stop, a bewildered and annoyed expression on his face. Feeling around the back of his robes, he pulled the Golden Snitch from his collar with a disbelieving expression. He blankly stared at it a bit, not really wanting to believe it, before holding it up and waving it over his head.
"I've got the Snitch!" He hollered, and the game pretty much ended in utter confusion.

Wood was still yelling that his "catch" wasn't a catch in any sense of the word and that it wasn't fair 20 minutes later, but it didn't matter. Slytherin had won, and no rules were broken, technically. Lee Jordan was disgruntledly shouting the results- Slytherin won 210 points to 40. Harry heard none of this of course, sitting by the front door with his head in his hands. Blaise refused to let go of him, and Hermione was shaking against his shoulder.

"I don't- what happened? One moment my broom is a broom and then it's acting like it wants to be an honorary Gryffin." He asked dazedly.

"Someone was cursing it. Snape or Quirrell." Theo replied from his spot in front of Hermione. Harry shook his head in disbelief.

"See, this sort of thing is why I didn't want to be hundreds of feet in the air." He said bitterly.

Steps coming towards them caught their attention. Looking up through his eyelashes, Harry could see a giant figure approaching them, and almost had a flashback before realising it was just Hagrid. He had a worried expression, and approached them with PURPOSE.

"Are yeh doin' alright there Harry?" Hagrid asked, looming over them. Harry gave him a shrug and grimace, not really knowing how to answer. Hagrid awkwardly shuffled his feet and asked,

"Well, why don' yeh all come down to my hut for some tea, calm your nerves?" He asked tentatively. The four of them exchanged looks, Harry's begging please I don't want to be near people and Blaise's gleaming with we can get information this is perfect chance come on. They came to a unanimous decision, and Harry nodded his head, smiling at Hagrid.

They could be found half an hour later sipping green tea in Hagrid's hut, clustered around his table. It was good tea, surprising considering Hagrid's track record with food. Harry was delightedly sipping his, glad to be out of the cold and with something pleasant.

"It was Snape or Quirrell," Blaise was explaining, "I looked through the crowd and saw Snape muttering under his breath and focused on you, and Quirrell was too. They wouldn't take their eyes off you."

"Now tha's just rubbish," said Hagrid, "Why would they do something like that?"

"There's the hating me thing." Harry helpfully supplied, "And maybe Professor Snape knows that we found out he's trying to get past the Beast on the third corridor."

Hagrid dropped his teapot.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" He demanded.

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah, he's mine- bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year- and I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the-" He stumbled and stopped, seeing the group's curious and/or eager faces. "No, none a' that, I can't be goin' off tellin' yeh. Top secret, it is."

"But it might be in danger. Fluffy might be in danger."

"Rubbish." Hagrid said again, "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, and he'd never do nothin' of the sort to
"So why is there a 50% chance he killed Harry at the moment?" Hermione cried. "I know a jinx when I've seen one Hagrid, we all do! We've been studying them-" Harry and Blaise traded glances, knowing exactly it wasn't just studying they were doing- "and you've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all! Quirrell either! I saw both of them!"

"I'm tellin' yeh yer wrong!" Hagrid protested hotly. "I don't know why Harry's broom acted like that, but they wouldn't try an' kill a student! Now, listen to me, all four of yeh- yer meddlin' isn't helpin' anybody. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Headmaster Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel-"

"Wait, Nicolas Flamel?" Theo asked sharply, leaning in. "Nicolas Flamel is involved?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

After their impromptu questioning, they were rushed out of the hut again to go about their own devices. As they walked through the halls, the boys were arguing over whether or not they should call another meeting.

"This is a breakthrough- we've got to tell them!" Theo argued. He was insisting they should call an emergency meeting and talk about Nicolas Flamel and the fact it was indeed guarding something, but Blaise and Harry were reluctant to do so.

"Theo, who knows how they'll react? They've gone along with it so far- which is great since it's meant more hands to help, but this isn't the sort of thing to mix them in with. What are we going to do if one of them suddenly gets it in their head to take the thing for themselves? I know Moon's greedy enough to do something like that!" Harry argued. "We should keep this to ourselves for now, look into it alone but keep going with the patrols-"

"Excuse me, but what are you three talking about?" Hermione asked loudly. They jumped, having forgotten she was there, and guiltily turned to see her irately tapping a foot. Harry glanced around, and had them duck into an empty classroom to avoid eavesdropping. Slamming up a command of quiet, he started to explain.

"so about the time we had our first project in Herbology Blaise, Pansy, Theo, and I had headed down to the library and were heading back, but the stairs moved on us and put us in the Corridor of Chi- err, the third corridor's right side. We tried to find a way out, and ended up stumbling on this, well, giant Cerberus that was hidden away in a room. Later, when we were having one of our first firstie meetings, we realised it had been sitting on a trapdoor."

"And then I found out for us that it was guarding something." Blaise piped up.

"Yeah, and we sort of ignored it at that point due to trauma until Hallow's Eve, where Snape, going by inference, tried to get past it and got a mangled leg in return. He'd been limping for the past week or so, and I overheard him talking about the Cerberus when I went to get your book back, which by the way I can give to you if you're willing to swing by the common room with us." Harry said. Hermione blinked in bewilderment, but nodded in agreement.

"And so we got the other first-year Snakes to agree to spying on Snape and Hagrid, watch the third corridor when we could, and find research in the library." Hermione mulled this over in silence, looking down at her shoes.

"You all are idiots," She finally decided. The trio blinked. "If you needed research, you could have
just asked me. I've been researching offensive and defensive spells since... since Halloween. And you could have told me- I wouldn't have gone and spilled it." She said, glaring at them. Harry winced, and scratched the back of his neck.

"Sorry Hermione."

"Yeah, sorry Granger."

Her glare softened, and she finally smiled. "Why don't we go get my book before heading to dinner? It's getting pretty late."

Cancelling the spell, they headed down to the common room, Hermione politely shielding her ears when they said the password. When they walked in, they were hit by a wall of noise and people partying. Harry watched in amazement as the usually restrained Slytherins ran around yelling and laughing.

"Whoa," Theo said, and they all agreed with the sentiment. Tiptoeing in, they stayed on the fringes of the common room, trying to sneak to the staircase. But alas, their efforts were in vain, for Marcus Flint spotted them before they could make it all the way.

"POTTER, there you are!" He hollered, grinning. The large teen scooped up Harry, ruffling his hair and ruining Harry's ponytail. "We wiped the floor with those Gryffs today thanks to you! And Wood's face- it was sublime! Three cheers to our Seeker!" He yelled, and the common rose in a not-so-harmonious cheer. Harry despaired as it happened, staring desolately around the room from his noogying position in Flint's arms and praying the older boy would stop touching him soon. He could see the portrait man watching in amusement, the bastard. What Harry would give to just slip into the wall right now.

Waiting for the right moment, Harry slipped out of Flint's arms as he was joking around with a fifth year and dashed back to the group. Blaise was snickering like crazy, and even Hermione looked like she was holding back a laugh. He scowled at them as they trotted down the steps to the dorms.

They paused when they reached the bottom.

The other first-years were sitting in the accustomed oval, with a privacy ward around them. None of them noticed the four of them appearing in the archway, nor when Harry walked through the privacy ward, dispelling it.

"-that spell's useless Greengrass, how many times do I have to tell you, even Potter wouldn't be able to-" Harry cleared his throat, startling them. Pansy shot up first, turning around and relaxing when she saw it was only him.

"Oh Merlin, don't scare us like that Potter. I thought you were Snape or something. How did you dispel the privacy ward? Only the caster should be able to do that." Harry shrugged, and peered at the 7 of them.

"What are you all even doing? I don't know if you noticed, but there's a huge party going on upstairs I'd think you'd join in to." He asked. Pansy's face pinkened, and she fumbled for an answer.

"Uh-well- we were... we were talking about spells." She finally admitted. "We thought it'd probably be better to start practicing some real quick because of earlier. I mean that was- that was a jinx on your broom right? It had to be." She said, wide-eyed. Harry grimaced and nodded. The worry lines on her forehead grew.

"You're.. you're alright, right, Potter? No new dents or scratches?" She asked. Harry shook his head,
and Pansy left it at that, sitting back down. Harry rushed to his room, not wanting to stay in the hall anymore, and plucked the book from where he had perched it on his nightstand. He hurried back out, and him, Blaise, Hermione, and Theo left the others to go about their own devices. The common room was slowly emptying as they walked up, and Gemma Farley spotted them from her spot near the wall.

"Hey Potter, what is she doing here? I told you not to let anyone from another house in." She demanded disapprovingly.

"You said we weren't to give out the password. She covered her ears when we said it- we made sure." He replied, the others nodding in fervent agreement. The older prefect narrowed her eyes, but didn't say anything more, only jerking her head to the door. They gladly left, ready to sit down to a wonderful meal after the chaos of the day.
"You know what, this is pointless. Potter, I'm leaving."

Harry scowled as Moon jumped up and tossed down her book, an ugly look on her face. "What now Moon, the spells too simple for you again? How many times do I have to tell you it doesn't matter whether or not they're simple, only if they're effective?" She sneered at him.

"OH shut it, Potter, I'm tired of it. I'm not going to waste my time anymore for your little spy game. Now, if you don't mind, I'm heading back to the common room to do my actual schoolwork, unlike you all. Anyone want to come?" She stared out at the group expectantly, but Harry only gave it a cursory glance.

At the moment, they were sitting in a far corner of the library, perusing the various books they had scrounged from the defense and hex sections of the shelves. Blaise had even brought out some of the ones his mother had sent- although they were all in Italian. The boy reassured them that he would be able to correctly translate any spells he thought would be useful.

Over their study periods, Moon had grown steadily more irate, complaining or mocking the others for certain spells they pointed out. At one point, she had made Daphne almost run off alone because of how hard she was grilling the smaller girl. Now, it seemed she had reached her breaking point.

Harry resignedly closed his eyes as chairs scraped behind him, and flinched when a hand landed on his shoulder. Glancing up through his lashes, he could see Gregory giving him a regretful grimace, his hand feeling awkward on its perch. The boy quickly dropped it at his expression, but didn't leave just yet.

"Sorry Harry, it's just- this seems big, yeah? A bit too big for us to be comfortable with, you know? I mean, you- you could have died on your broom, during the game. We don't want something like that to happen to us." Harry bowed his head, grunting. He could understand their reasoning- they were Slytherins. They helped allies, but protected themselves above all. Helping him was a danger. With his track record of already almost-dying and finding a hell-beast in the middle of the school, he was like a red-painted target. He didn't watch them leave, but he could hear, feel the five of them leave. The only ones left were him, Hermione, Pansy, and the rest of the boys. It was unsurprisingly awkward.

"Don't worry Harry- we won't leave. This isn't just about helping you now- it's about beefing up our arsenal. Morgana knows I could learn some spells." Pansy chirped, trailing off at the end. Harry blinked at her in surprise. He honestly expected her to have left, with the Parkinson heiress always seeming more focused on fashion or getting back at the latest outcast. But now, she had a determined, if not nervous cast to her face, and had earnestly written out information she found, if her ink-covered parchment meant anything.

"..Thanks Pansy. I'm sort of surprised you stuck around- you too Malfoy. I'd have thought you'd leave the moment someone else said bugger this." Harry replied, peering at them respectively. Draco snorted, and turned his head up in disdain.

"Do you really think I'm about to abandon you, Potter? I'm not some mouse who drops a fellow Snake at the drop of a hat, no matter how frustrating they are. Besides, I doubt you'd make any
"Pompous brat."

"Annoying busybody."

"Pu-"

"Boys, the other people here would appreciate if you would quiet down. Especially since one person is writing down the details of a particularly useful spell." Hermione called loudly, interrupting their argument. The two boys flushed.

"Okay, passing that... what has everyone found?" Harry asked the group, gathering his own paper.

"I found the leg-locker curse, and the freezing charm, and bombarda." Pansy piped up, skimming her paper. Harry hummed, and Theo leaned over to glance at her paper, eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Deprimo- I'm surprised a book in the library has that. There's been cases where people instantly die because of that one." He commented mildly. Harry gave him a queasy glare, which was spitefully returned with a cheery grin.

"Well, I was mostly looking through the defense books." Blaise cut in, not wanting a fight to break out in the middle of the library (again). "There's the revulsion jinx- recuso superat- and that could be pretty useful. There's also servo maximus, which is some huge shield. I think. The book just lists it as a protection spell with powerful results. And expecto patronum, but that's only useful against dark creatures and dementors."

"I suppose it will be useful if any of us ever go to Azkaban." Harry replied drily. Blaise gave him a lopsided grin, and they went on with their magical show-and-tell.

"I found salvio hexia, which magnifies spells, and Cave Inimicum, an enemy repellant." Harry said, picking out certain ones from his list. Honestly, most of the book was focused on healing or avoidance magic, which was all and good, but not entirely encouraged by some of the trigger-happy individuals of the group. Magic-happy? They all turned towards Hermione, expectant as she was next 'round the table, but she seemed entirely absorbed in her book. Harry gently tapped her on the shoulder, startling her out from her information trance. She glanced confusedly between them before realising they were waiting, and let out a quiet "oh". Draco sighed beside Harry.

"Gr-" Harry quickly covered Draco's mouth and asked his own question, watching Hermione shuffle her parchment. "What did you find? I know that you're looking into charms mostly, so it has to be really weird r-OH MY GOD, MALFOY-" Harry snatched his now wet hand back from its place, disgustedly wiping it on the side of his robes as Draco glared at him; from Madam Pince's place at the reception desk, she gave them a suspicious glance, but left them alone. Days of sucking up to her and asking after certain books seemed to have earned Hermione and Harry special places in her books. Harry still fondly remembered when the elderly woman had launched into a discussion of how to order the books with him. He still needed to convince her of the benefits of a digit system...

"Here!" Suddenly, Hermione was shoving a paper in his face and he was jumping back and trying to hold back the instinct to attack and yell later. The others gave him strange looks, but he ignored them as he huffed and snatched the paper from her hands. Reading it over, his eyebrows slowly climbed up to his head as he went through the description.

"Servavit Tacite- Quietly protected? This is... pretty simple Latin- is this actually a spell? Speaking of most of the ones we found in fact. Most of the ones we get taught are like... dog Latin. Or mangled Anglo-Saxon." He said slowly, considering her uncertainly. She nodded enthusiastically, taking the
"Yes! It's from this really old book- I found it at the very bottom in fact, wedged between some old textbooks, and it's just fascinating with how many of these are in Latin or Greek I mean nowadays you use simplified things, not even ritualistic anymore and-" Hermione stuttered to a stop, blushing and clearing her throat. "Anyways, that's really besides the point, but yes. Most of a spell depends on intent, not the words, although the words can benefit the spell depending on how... old they are? I've read that spells spoken in the ancient languages tend to be very powerful-" Ha, theory proven, "-Celtic, Latin, Greek, even Hebrew or Ancient Chinese. This is supposed to be a powerful protection spell- if cast correctly and with enough power, it shadows the target with a magical shield that lies dormant until an attack. It lasts for about a week by Julian calendars, although it could have been longer or shorter for others. But don't you see? This is a perfect defense!" Hermione cried, nearly jumping up and down in excitement.

It certainly was exciting, and Harry could see the others warming up the idea- and possibly to more ventures into the book; however, he could also see Draco shaking his head out of the corner of his eye.

"You're forgetting one thing, Granger. We're all first-years. As powerful as we may be at journeyman's age, we won't have nearly enough magic for anything as powerful as that. Not only that, if we overextend ourselves, we run the risk of damaging our wells. I can't see you wanting to experiment at the cost of your magic." The blond boy said severely, pinning Hermione with a hard stare.

She was bewildered. "What- a well?" Draco pinched his nose, muttering something or the other about muggles that Harry didn't particularly care about at the moment. Well- he had heard that term before, hadn't he? From Ollivander first, and the Sorting Hat. Both of them had mentioned "a well like that" when trying to figure him out, in a way that had seemed far from good. Perhaps his well was... damaged? A shiver ran through him at the thought of something a part of his magic being defective, and he unconsciously leaned closer to Draco, a frown marring his face.

"Wells, Granger- and you Harry, I doubt Blaise has told you this, much less really knows- are the essence of your magic. Your well is the entirety of your magic, often shaping or affecting its complexity, depth, and growth. The deeper the well, the more magic at disposal. The more complex of one, the more powerful and intricate of spells can be cast. The more growth of one, the more of everything. It's often said the powerful and influential have deep, complex wells, and that people like Longbottom have ones that can hardly claim merit. Hardly able to cast a spell. Without a well of any kind, you're just a squib or a muggle. I guess it's better than not having a core- then you're just an imitation of some dementor's leftovers." He explained blandly, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling. Hermione had a horrified expression on her face, and Harry wasn't better off. Theo and Pansy had queasy looks, and even Blaise looked shaken. To end up like the victim of a dementor- that was unthinkable. Dementors destroyed people, turned them into mindless husks that ate, slept, then died.

When a dementor captured you, the best thing your family could do was take mercy and end it quickly. The best hope was that it set souls at rest and let them successfully pass. The worst, it would let the family breathe easily without a reminder of their dead loved one lurching around.

"Il mio Dio, do you have to so morbid, Draco? I think we could all do without that thought in mind." Blaise muttered. The other boy simple rolled his eyes.

It seemed that after that, no one was up to going through the books, the threat of permanent damage hanging over their head with each spell found. They didn't last half an hour before the decision to
leave was reluctantly breached and agreed on. They gathered whatever papers and quills- or pencils, in the cases of the only two muggle-raised- and trudged up to the front desk to sign out whatever books they had decided held merit. Harry could see that Hermione had kept the Latin book, but made no comment and didn't point it out to the others. He'd know if she did anything dangerous.

They walked the halls quietly, conversation sometimes chipping in over a painting or strange spell they had found. It had been decided when Hermione joined them weeks ago that when they were grouped outside of lunch or classes, they’d take her to the Ravenclaw Tower, and then scuttle down to the dungeons before anyone saw them and decided they were suspicious. This, admittedly, wasn't the greatest nor smartest arrangement, but no one had the courage to cross Harry when he had announced it with a decidedly... *sharp* look. This of course, could lead to them being found by upper-years, Filch, getting lost, and many other things considering how the castle seemed to enjoy random traps and turnabouts. But it also had its benefits, as the portraits nearing the Ravenclaw dormitories were infinitely more resourceful than those outside Slytherins'.

"I just don't see it to be wise to practice out on the grounds." Theo argued as they were walking, "Someone might think it's more than class practice, especially with some of the ones we dug up. I mean, I don't see a prefect looking at a group of first-years casting *deprimo* at random trees and rocks and going, 'Oh, what wonderful students, honing their skills.'"

"Well, where are we going to, the common rooms? Farley's going to throw a fit if we sneak Hermione in any more times, and I don't think even the Ravens will be pleased with a gaggle of Snakes in their common room." Harry replied, frowning. There weren't many places one could even *consider* practicing magic in the school, much less without restrictions. Classrooms were a no-go just on principle, and the hallways and courtyard were decided as Bad Ideas because of Filch and Snape’s tendencies to skulk around them both, respectively, to catch students doing things "against the rules". Yes, like reading a book or hexing someone's hair blue was against school rules.

"Well, maybe-" Hermione started, before she was cut off by the polite clearing of a throat. Looking up and over, the firsties searched for whoever had done it. The only other person in the hallway was a large portrait of a stocky, soft-looking woman done in hues of brown and cream. She was dressed in clothes far too old to be even a century or two old, and had an elaborate plait in her hair. Smiling kindly down at them, and spoke.

"If you are looking for somewhere to practice magic, there is a certain place on the seventh floor. Cross the space in front of Barnabas the Barmy's painting three times with that thought in mind, and you will be provided such." The six of them blinked and traded glances uneasily. While the paintings of the castle could be helpful, everyone knew the story of Morrigan Tracy who had ended up teleported to the middle of the Black Lake due to a supposed banishing spell given by one of the paintings’ inhabitants. The poor former Gryffindor had a high fever for a week afterward, and ended up avoiding the decorated hallways like the plague until graduation.

"...Thank you for the advice, ma'am, but we'll have to respectfully decline. I think we'll take the risk of our teachers." Harry carefully said with a grimace. Someone grunted in agreement behind him, but the woman simply inclined her head, still smiling.

"Alright then, young one. Just make sure to thank old Helga when you find it." Harry gave her an odd look, but ultimately decided that this was less important than getting Hermione to her dorms. They started walking again, just a few turns from the dormitories.

"Okay, that was sort of creepy." Pansy commented, rubbing her arm. The others nodded in agreement, but Harry and Hermione had expressions on their faces that only spelled trouble for everyone else.
"That certainly was but... what if she really meant to help? What if there is somewhere on the seventh floor we can practice?" Hermione murmured, brow furrowed in thought.

"It certainly would clear up problems, especially with hiding the notes and damage." Harry agreed, rubbing his chin and staring off into the distance.

"Oh no. No, no, no, you two. We are not going off on some-some adventure just because you want to risk dropping into the lake or being cursed!" Draco exclaimed, backing away with his hands up. "I refuse! No!"

"I hate all of you." Draco grumbled from his place in front of Barnabas the Barmy's portrait. Blaise shushed him, while Hermione and Harry resolutely avoided looking in his direction due to the trolls in the painting.

Harry was examining the wall, poking and prodding it with his wand, which was occasionally sending off sparks. For all intents and purposes, the wall was the same grey with a layer of white as the rest of the castle, and acted like you would expect a wall to. Or not to, considering it was a lifeless wall. But it gave off a... feeling. It made Harry uneasy, in a way he hadn't felt since entering the Leaky Cauldron.

"So... I guess we should try what she told us? I mean, you've been poking it and it hasn't attacked or killed us, so it may not be dangerous." Pansy ventured nervously, wringing her hands off to the side. Her, Theo, and Blaise were watching with varied emotions as Hermione and him examined the wall, although Hermione was more of just staring bemusedly at Harry at this point.

"Her instructions may activate it for all we know, Parkinson." Draco said cooly, "And then we're doomed, seeing as the only one who might have a hint to where we are is the one who told us." Pansy eeped at that, and glared at him hotly.

"Well excuse me for trying to do more than stand there, Draco, like you!" She huffed, crossing her arms. Before Draco could break in with something that would most likely sting everyone present, Harry cleared his throat and began to walk back and forth. He made sure to keep in mind that they needed somewhere to do train as the woman- Helga, he supposed?- had said. On his third turn, he heard the others gasp, and turned to see that a large, wooden door had appeared where there had once been blank wall.

"Doom." Draco muttered, even as he and the rest of the group slowly approached the door, ready to bolt at the last second. Blaise was the one to reach the handles first, and he tugged them cautiously, opening them outward to reveal what was inside.

They could only stare in awe as the doors revealed a spacious room. The walls were a dark grey, and there were no windows in sight, but it was somehow as light as the corridor. There was an abundance of objects lining the edges, and the middle of the room had a clear space with what almost seemed to be an... arena, to be simple. To the far left, there were lines of targets and dummies, which Harry could guess were magic-resistant from their sheen. Soft, purple couches occupied the far left corner, and as they wandered in, Harry could also see that there were desks and bookshelves lining the rooms, scattered haphazardly. Peering at one of them, he could see it was covered with writing utensils ranging from quills to even markers, and had parchment neatly stacked next to them. Glancing at another, he could see bandages and various medical potions. Another had a whiteboard with a stick to prop it up. Another, weapons magical and mundane.

"Holy Merlin." Blaise breathed off somewhere in the room. Harry could hear him as though he were standing right next to him, and knew it wasn't just because of his super-ears. "This is heaven. These books- there's ones I've seen in the library, and I swear I have a copy of this at home- look, there's
even a copy of *The Baudelaire Guide to Diversions, Escaping, and Generally Surviving*- do you know how hard it is to get a copy of this? They went out of print a decade ago!” Hermione sighed in what was probably exaltation.

"Guys, these dummies are- come look at this!” Theo called excitedly. Rushing over, Harry could see that there certainly was something to be excited over with them- each one wasn't a generic copy as he expected; rather, they were a menagerie of shapes and features. One had golden eyes painted on and comical wolf ears and a tail. Another had a long hooded cloak, and dark holes for facial features. Actually, looking at all of them, they all resembled a magical creature or specialised wizard of some sort. Some had come out very comical, such as the obvious potions master who had grenade-shaped potions flasks on its chest, while others were very close to the real thing, like the troll that had a place at the very end of the row.

Blaise slowly placed his hand on one covered in ivy in the corner of Harry's eye, only to snatch it back when the vines crawled up his arm and made to ensnare him. They watched with wide eyes as the vines crawled back onto the dummy.

"Well." Harry said in the silence, "I suppose we can do more than just practice magic in here, huh?"

It was only a small stretch before they hurried back to their previous task, safely delivering Hermione to the Ravenclaw entrance and then heading downstairs. They covered their ears as the riddle was said and as Hermione solved it, Harry and Theo waving to her as she disappeared behind the bust. They passed Helga's portrait again along the way, and Harry gave her a nod of thanks for her intervening. She returned with a beaming smile.

It was a stretch, reaching the common room before curfew, but they somehow managed, despite having to duck to avoid Ms. Norris, Filch's cat, and Professor Quirrell multiple times. They almost ran straight into the man at one point, but he thankfully veered off onto a moving stairway. Theo grimly noted after he disappeared that it was the one that led to the Corridor of Child Death. Harry felt a shiver go down his spine watching the man, and hurried them along quicker.

At only two minutes to 9, they rushed into the common room as the wall reappeared behind them, glancing around to make sure no one noticed. The common room was thankfully crowded that evening, and students were more focused on their conversations and games than a few kids that dropped in just minutes from being on the receiving end of Snape's wrath. Harry motioned for them to follow him down to the rooms as usual, where they propped open the door to Blaise, Harry, and Theo's room for some heat and gathered their bounty from the day.

"Okay, give me your notes I'll try and sort them- Theo, why did you write in pink ink?- Well I doubt someone's going to be inclined to go through my bag, considering the hexes and charms on it, Malfoy.” Harry said, harrying **[HAHAHAHAHAHAH]** them to pass him the papers. Hermione had refused to give hers up before she went in, but Harry could at least hold fast to the belief that anyone who touched them would get a hand bitten off. Metaphorically...Maybe. Sorting through them, he quickly skimmed them for what wasn't said and organised them by bulk. Pansy's came first, with Blaise, Harry, Draco, and Theo following. That done, he gazed speculatively at their pile of books.

"You know, I just realised we never got the information from the others." He exclaimed, eyes widening.

"Don't worry about it, I'm sure Draco and Pansy can get the things.” Blaise said soothingly, patting him on the back and arranging the books by spell type. Most of them were protection and hexes, although there were a few on healing and curses. Harry watched him stack them as Draco and Pansy rushed off (and had subsequent arguments with Moon, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were unwilling and
"Your fingers are too long." Harry murmured. Blaise snorted at him.

"Pianist's fingers, Potter. wonderful for handling things."

The two retrievers eventually wandered back to the doorway, Pansy scowling and Draco with only a small scrap of parchment. With their pickings sorted into the pile, everything was now spick, and the only question left was where it would go.

"Definitely not in my room. Moon might try to shred the parchments out of spite." Pansy bit out, glaring at the closed door to her room. Moon must have heard her, because there was a loud bang on it, as though someone threw something at the door and hit it. Harry could only twitched at the behavior of his house-mates.

"And I don't trust Crabbe and Goyle not to destroy anything, no matter how well-intentioned they may be." Draco added, grimacing. In fact, they all grimaced. They all remembered full-well what had happened when they just trusted Gregory with a book that Theo wanted to show Hermione. Somehow, in the course of 12 hours, it had gotten soaked, splattered with what could only be described as mystery meat, and dropped in a toilet. The poor thing didn't survive it, and Harry was forced to scarf up 5 galleons to pay Madame Pince for a replacement.

"So we just keep it all in our room!" Theo said, smiling. "It'll be easy to keep track of, since Harry's such a neat freak that he'd never let anything get lost in there." Both Harry and Blaise flinched at that, and Harry sent a not-so-subtle at the other boy, making him yelp and edge away. A quick glower killed any complaints the Nott might have had.

"If we're done here, let's head to bed. No need to make Snape eviscerate for dozing in class tomorrow." Harry said tiredly, feeling drained all of a sudden. Theo laughed, but they all slipped into their rooms and into the arms of Morpheus. Harry spent his night dreaming of large arms and a black dog running around him.

Harry was certainly right about one point of tomorrow. Snape was ready and gearing to tear someone a new one in class, criticising every little mistake or deviation from the required viscosity, colour, even how it smelled. It made Harry want to toss the "Aural Stabiliser" in his face. He had to resist the urge the third time the man approached his and Millicent's potion- who was for some reason paired with him today due to Snape's sudden love for assigned partners- and insisted that it was completely the wrong colour despite the fact that the two of them had followed the instructions to the letter, even improving it a bit with some of the adjustments Millicent suggested making in preparation.

Harry's eyes seemed to wander to the man constantly while they were waiting for parts of the potion to simmer or blend or whatever it called for. From what he had scrounged in a very roundabout and possibly unscrupulous way, Professor Snape and his father had been rivals in school. Well, more and less than that. It was more of a Harry-Dudley situation, which Harry could safely say was completely horrible. James Potter would bully Snape, stealing his things and hexing or pranking him in ways that couldn't be called more than dirty and cruel. Snape hardly retaliating for six years straight. It made his stomach turn. He didn't even want to think of how much begging it had taken to get McGonagall to even tell him why Snape treated him like dirt, much less how her face twisted when she spoke of James Potter. If the woman couldn't abide by what one of her lions had done, one of her little favourites, then the situation had to be infinitely worse than what she had spelled out. And that made Harry... guilty. If only because he was the legacy of a horrible man that acted no better than the muggle child Harry had been forced to endure for 11 years. If only because he was so deeply hated by Snape that the man couldn't even treat a dead man's orphan decently after 14 years.
It made him sick, and angry, and he couldn't even tell at who.

By the end of the class, all the Gryffindors were near growling, and even the Slytherins were ready to toss something. But as they were about to bottle their potions and set them on the acrimonious man's desk, he stopped the class from moving with a particularly nasty smile.

"Today, I have decided to allow a selected number of you to test your potions beforehand. We will be able to see if you have properly listened, or if your craniums are so thick you cannot brew a simple draft. If brewed correctly, you should be able to see the external projection of another's magic, or their aura. If not, well..." He trailed off here, his smile turning into a smirk. A few students gulped, and Harry resignedly heard Neville whimper across the room. It seems no matter how much he did, that boy would still be afraid of the Bat of the Dungeons. Speaking of him, Harry knew there was no shot in hell that he wouldn't be picked to test, because Snape was just that spiteful and didn't seem to like the idea of looking past parentage even though he knew from stories and pictures that he was nothing like-

"-Malfoy, Zabini, Patil, and Brown to test their potions. Potter! Will you pay attention for once? You and Bulstrode test yours. We can see just how much of a blunder you did." Harry internally groaned, but was silent as he and Millicent scooped up some of their potion in a flask and downed it. He could feel the unpleasant feeling of something cold slithering down into his stomach, and grimaced at the feeling. Millicent seemed to be experiencing the same, if her expression was any indicator. But, as he gazed around at his other students, he couldn't see any difference, any change of them. They still had the same features, the clothes, the same glo-...

Oh.

That's not good.

Harry paled even as the test students and Millicent looked around in awe and at herself and at Harry, amazed at the colours she had never been able to see.

"Oh! I'm... turquoise? You're a lovely green, Harry. Harry?" She leaned closer to him, peering close with a worried frown and silently asking Are you okay? in the way that the Snakes had learned early on when something serious came up in front of others. He instantly put a smile on his face and waved her off.

"Ah, it's nothing, just a bit surprising." I'm completely out of my depth and sort of terrified. Do you know that feeling? "Is that satisfactory, Professor Snape?" Harry asked, turning towards the man who was watching them with a sharp eye. Snape sneered in answer.

"I am afraid not Potter- what shade am I?"

"A very deep red, sir, with a splotch on your arm." Harry replied, simultaneously reveling and feeling guilt when the older man flickered with shock before setting on a blank mask.

"I assume that is what all of you see?" He said tersely, scrutinizing each of them who had taken the potion. The rest of them hurriedly nodded, some of them staring curiously at his arms for whatever Harry was seeing and some of them looking ready to shit their pants. Snape nodded once, and spun towards his desk, taking to his seat in a way most of the Slytherins could identify as quietly furious. Harry could see Daphne wincing in the corner of his eye, and sympathized with the small girl; out of the Slytherins, she was the one most nervous around Snape, if only for his manner. Luckily, she handled it better than Neville.

"Turn in samples of your potions for grading." Snape said, sending the class into a flurry. People rushed to put the flasks on his desk, thankful for the distraction. Harry was just thankful the flasks had an unbreakable charm on them. The class bell rang soon after, and people were gearing up and
in the process of hightailing it out of there. But Harry hung back, uncertain about what he was going
to do and not enjoying the thought of it all. When Blaise saw that he wasn't coming with them, he
sent him a questioning look, but Harry just gave him a tense shake of his head and motioned for him
to go. The young Zabini frowned, but followed the order nonetheless. He could tell this was
important.

Once the class was emptied of everyone but Harry and Snape, he slowly walked up to the Potions
Master's desk, careful not to startle him with his steps. When the man finally looked up, a deep scowl
was marring his face and he looked about as happy as a cat in a closet at the sight of Harry.

"What do you want, Potter? Why aren't you off gallivanting with your little friends, ready to create
another commotion in the Great Hall?" He barked out, his eyes like cold coals. Harry flinched at the
tone, but braced himself, telling himself No, I have to stay and solve this. End the conflict.

"I-" Harry swallowed, stuttering, "I wanted to apologise sir." Snape had somehow adopted an even
angrier face, and looked like he just might be capable of breathing fire if he tried hard enough, but
Harry made sure to rush forward before he could do anything. "For my father, sir. I don't know all of
what he did, and I doubt I will, but I know enough to know it was unforgivable. For him to act like-
like some superior person and to do cruel things without reason because he thinks it's fun, or right.
And I know he wouldn't have apologised, and can't now, so I'm doing it in his stead. And I'm sorry,
Professor, for whatever he did for you, I truly am. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But I am not him.
He died two years before my first memory, five years before I even knew his name. I am not him."
Harry breathed out at the end, letting loose a breath he didn't know he was holding in. Snape was
looking at him with a purely stunned expression, silent. Harry wondered for a moment if he was
breathing, and dismissed the thought as stupid. When the silence stretched on for far too long than
Harry was comfortable, Harry sighed and hiked his satchel higher onto his shoulder, and turned to
walk out. As he reached the doorway, he turned back and added,

"And I'm sorry for mentioning the blotch, sir. I don't know what it is, or what it means, but I didn't
mean to reveal something you didn't want known." before slipping out completely.

When he sat down at the Slytherin table between Blaise and Neville, who had been persuaded into
joining them that evening, he felt lighter. It wasn't some oh-I-feel-so-at-peace-now feeling, but it was
enough to calm him down, and coax a smile out of him.

"What did you need to talk to Snape about?" Blaise asked, passing him a vegetable roll. Harry took
it, and shrugged as he took a bite out of it.

"Needed to discuss the problem with the Gryffindors. I don't want it escalating, you know?" Blaise
grimaced, but understood. For the past two weeks or so, the upper-year Gryffindors had taken to
taunting- and laying some mean-spirited pranks, in some cases- the younger Slytherins. It was mostly
the second-years, but they had also started focusing on Harry's little Group o' Misfits. In all honesty,
he had threatened them with painful, potion-caused bodily harm the second time one of them ended
up with orange boils and pink hair. They had backed down when his wand started sparking and
smoking in his hand.

"Honestly, I don't know why you didn't just go ahead and report them." Hermione huffed across
from Harry, dissecting a chicken leg with her fork and knife. He gave her a blank stare.

"Hermione, the first time it happened, I reported it to McGonagall. Everyone knows they got a
week's worth of detention. And it didn't do anything." She rolled her eyes in exasperation, but didn't
argue further. That girl's faith in authority was more deeply rooted than her teeth, Harry thought
sometimes.
Conversation passed quite easily around the table for once, no one arguing and only a few glares sent to each other; they were mostly from Moon or some upper-year who didn't want them to cause another food-fight. Theo mentioned the upcoming game between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, which some people cheered over and some groaned over. It was perfectly nice, until Theo seemed to realise it was a week from Yule holidays.

"Hey hey hey guys, so who's are we having it at this year?" He blurted out suddenly, interrupting a discussion over the merits of magic-adapted electricity. Harry, Hermione, and Neville blinked at him in confusion, while the others Slytherins face-palmed or gave out lengthy sighs.

"I told you, Nott, it's going to be at the Manor this time. When are you going to listen to me for once?" Draco said irritably.

"Never!" Theo replied sunnily, giving a purely spiteful smile. Harry felt the need to cut in before anyone started pulling out hair or throwing baked potatoes.

"Uh, what's it?" He hesitantly asked, twitching when everyone turned to him.

"Oh yeah, you've never been since you're first generation." Blaise said, staring at him. Harry gave him a clear look that said THAT DOESN'T HELP IS THIS SOME SACRIFICE OR SOMETHING SHOULD I BE WORRIED but Blaise ignored it in favour of jabbing Draco with a pointed expression.

"Will you- don't do that!" Draco yelled, smacking the other boy's hand away and rubbing the targeted spot. "Essentially, one of our families holds a ball each year for the Family on the day before Christmas and we all attend. Sometimes, the children all just stay at the house until the ball and leave for their houses afterwards." He explained. "This year, it's at my house."

"I sense a capital in there," Harry asked with a raised brow. Draco shrugged.

"When you get sorted, you're part of the family. Since you're a Slytherin, you're already invited." Harry's mind seemed to stutter to a stop for a moment, before restarting and allowing him to act like a normal human being.

"I-I wouldn't be able to go." He muttered, hearing the noises of surprise and upset around him.

"Why not?" Theo exclaimed, "I'm sure you'd be able to at least pop in for the ball!" Harry felt his face go blank, and let it. He really did not want to discuss this now. At all. Or ever, really.

"My family wouldn't let me." He said shortly. "And I'm staying at Hogwarts, anyways. I wouldn't be able to pop out and pop back into the school. I thought you had seen that I hadn't signed up to leave." Theo had a dismayed expression at such an admission, and was about to say something before Blaise glared at him from his place, face drawn into fierce lines. That shut him up as quick as a zipper, but didn't stop him from signalling the others.

"Do you know what he's talking about?"

There were only negatives, and a resounding suspicion now floating around as they watched Blaise nag Harry about him picking at his food. As much as Blaise was a sour ninny sometimes, it was usually Harry or Hermione who gave people the orders, told them to be quiet, told them to cast this or that. Hermione had a knowing look on her face, hidden in her soup. Neville seemed very intent on denying, well, something it seemed, and had started fumbling through his bag.

"Just what is your family like, Harry? You never really talk about them." Millicent put forward cautiously. He shrugged, a nonchalant expression on his face.

"They're okay. A bit annoying at times, and a bit close-minded, but you get used to it. They don't
very much like me hopping around random places though, so they wouldn't want me going out
during the hols."

"That doesn't explain why you're staying here."

Harry gave her a cynical smile. "Sorry, I'd rather be somewhere that doesn't have me waking up at
ridiculous times for things that don't matter two days later." Or has me working to the bone with no
food, he added in his mind. The sadly honest thing was that he was hardly lying. He was just
withholding some facts. Sure, it could be said the Dursleys were close-minded. They despised magic,
and Harry had heard Vernon go off multiple times whenever pride parades or rights adverts came on
the news. They just hated it more than you would think, wanting to try and beat it out than ignore it.
Sure, they didn't like him being somewhere they didn't know. But they were too scared to force him
to stay in the house before dark. And sure, they had him wake up at ridiculous times for things that
didn't matter a few days later. He just didn't mention that he had to get up at dawn for labour and
cooking.

"...Like I said Potter, sometimes the other children stay over for the holidays. You could always come
home with me." Draco started slowly, with his eyes narrowed at the two of them. Blaise turned his
glare to the Malfoy, but it didn't have any effect, as the other boy just tilted his head in challenge. Just
what is going on here? But Harry wasn't focused, or even noticing any of that, and was instead
considering what Draco had said.

"Malfőy, you do know it's going to be difficult, yeah? I mean, we don't exactly get along, and I
doubt your parents would want me in your house. I'd rather not be a burden." Draco gave him a
disbelieving stare, and then shook his head with a sigh.

"Potter, my family is one of the richest in the country. You couldn't be a burden even if you ate all of
our food and shredded every piece of furniture you see. Although, if you do that, I'm going to
tear you to shreds. And my mother always said family should stick together."

"Yes, you and your Slytherin family, that's wonderful." Harry muttered with a touch of bitterness.
The thought of them all sticking together like glue made him just a bit sour on the inside, considering
he couldn't even get blood family to treat him like a human.

"No, blood family, Potter. My mother's maiden name is Black, and your grandmother was Dorea
Black. We have updating family trees ending with our generation right now, and you're on it." Harry
stared blankly at him as his mind processed that, before it finally caught up and his face went blank.
"You can't be serious. You're not. You're not, you're lying-" Blaise clapped him on the back, trying
to get him to calm down, but it just seemed to compound his panic, and the two surrounding could
hear his breathing quietly speeding up to what was decidedly not healthy.

"Guys, we have to get him out of here, now." Blaise whispered, grabbing Harry's arm, and smiling at
the prefect who was now eyeing them and most likely considering the idea of stalking over and
seeing what the hell was going on. Blaise dragged Harry up and motioned Neville to follow, already
towing Harry along. Draco soon followed, the others not wanting to make a scene any more than
they were. Giving anyone who stared a withering glance, they made it out of the Great Hall and
tumbled into an empty classroom, where Harry was quickly sat onto a desk with the others
crowding. Blaise hissed at them to back off when they got too close, and they were forced to watch
as the Italian boy attempted to calm down their classmate, who was most definitely shutting down
now and didn't seem to notice any of them. Blaise was getting desperate, Harry not even responding,
when he heard a small fumble of movement and had someone stick something over his shoulder.
Glancing, he could see it was Longbottom, who was holding out a small flask full of... something.
Taking a leap of faith, he grabbed it and coaxed it down his throat, breathing a sigh of relief when
the other boy's breathing slowly calmed down.

"Longbottom, what was in that?" He whispered.

"Calming draught. My Gran has them specially made since I... I have lots of problems." The timid boy whispered back, refusing to meet Blaise's eyes. It made him sigh again, this time at the hopelessness of their group, but he focused his attention on Harry, finally coherent enough to talk. Harry stared at them, nearly begging with his eyes to not talk about it, but their worried, stubborn expressions didn't fade.

"Potter," Draco, said, uncharacteristically serious, "What was that?"

Harry opened and closed his mouth, desperate, helpless, coming up with nothing. "...Dumbledore stuck me with my Aunt and Uncle because they're blood relations." He finally said in a small, weak voice. "I always went on the assumption that all my other relations were dead, because I was stuck with them." Draco made a choked noise in the back of his throat, as Blaise put his face in his hands.

The prefects pulled them aside when they entered the common room half an hour later; the four of them had completely forgone going back to dinner and simply slumped down onto the plush couches of Slytherin. Draco had tried to overload Harry with questions, but was shut down by a eerily calm Blaise. Neville had taken a spot next to Harry and was discussing the paintings in the common room, giving the Potter heir something to focus on rather than the toss-up that was that evening.

"Everyone says he's Slytherin, and I guess they can be right. I just wish he wouldn't stare so much." Harry whispered to Neville. The pudgy boy nodded in agreement, giving the portrait a slightly fearful eye. The Man in the Painting had decided his activity for the evening was going to be watching them, and had yet to look away from them.

"He's a bit scary. But I suppose they all are. I've heard rumours that the Founders hid their portraits around the school, and since no one really knows what they look like, they completely blend in." Harry hummed.

"We met a woman yesterday, who called herself Helga and gave us some advice. She really was kind, compared to the other portraits."

But when the prefects and everyone else had slowly filtered in from dinner, they had instantly strode over and mobbed their tiny group, their other friends not even able to approach them. Dragging them into the hallway down the stairs, Farley held a grim expression, but Albret still had his characteristic air of apathy. Not even the glint in his eyes could dispel it.

"Alright," Farley started, "One of you, I don't particularly care, is going to explain. You're going to explain well, and then you're going to explain why the whole school saw you going against one of the Snake guidelines. I don't care that the Chick or the Cub are here. Just tell me."

"Harry just found out a relative died." Draco helpfully- or maybe unhelpfully?- supplied, "He didn't take it well." Farley gave him a flat stare, unimpressed.

"Harry just found out a relative died." Draco helpfully- or maybe unhelpfully?- supplied, "He didn't take it well." Farley gave him a flat stare, unimpressed.

"It was the middle of dinner. And I know not one of you received letters."

"It didn't really sink in until then." Harry broke in, grimacing. "I didn't really believe it, and I didn't want to. They were... close." Farley narrowed her eyes, and peered hard at him and the others. But the quartet had remnants of worry or regret on their faces, even if it was for things not actually said. Even if it was for things not done. Farley eventually relented, pinching the bridge of her nose and muttering under her breath.
"Listen, Potter. The next time something like this happens, don't come to dinner. Snape will understand, and we don't need to be making scenes like it's a damn play." She growled. She made to leave, before stopping and awkwardly shuffling. "I'm... sorry for your loss, Potter. A lot of us know how it is to lose someone." With that, she turned and left, leaving them to shake in their boots for that near hit-and-KO.

"Harry, it's horrible you can, but thank Merlin you've got perfect acting skills." Blaise said as the prefects left their sight. "And good job with the improvising, Draco- I don't think I've ever been more thankful for that." They murmured their agreement, drained and tired.
Harry gleefully watched as the others raced around the magically-conjured track, panting and sweating and glaring at him and Blaise.

"P-Potter!" Draco huffed out, pausing in his mad dash to beat Theo, "Why in the name of Merlin are we doing this? This isn't even related to magic!"

"It's to build up stamina," Blaise replied, "Which you need in duels and casting. Honestly, if you English wizards looked past your own noses, you'd know about all the studies proving physical health correlates with magical ability." The Italian boy was curled up next to Harry, reading from a random book and occasionally glancing at a stopwatch at his side. Harry himself was reading a book he had pulled from the various shelves, *The Baudelaire Guide to Diversions, Escaping, and Generally Surviving*. The chapter he was on now detailed how to optimally make use of the resources around you, no matter how small.

"Well then why doesn't POTTER have to do it!? He's the smallest of us!" The blond yelled, throwing up his hands. Blaise let out an aggravated sigh, but Harry patted him on the arm before he could say anything too poisonous to the other boy.

"I've been exercising for years, Mal-Draco. Push-ups, jogging, you know. By now, I can run a mile in 12 minutes." Draco sent him another glare, but Theo raced past him cackling like a maniac, making him ultimately decide to bug them about it later and beat Theo to 10 laps first.

Hermione was the closest to being done, most likely due to the physical education classes every poor muggle-raised child goes through. She was on her ninth lap, and looked ready to give it up and just sit down. Pansy was on her sixth, while Theo and Draco were going through their seventh.

Harry honestly hadn't expected Blaise to suggest this last night, or for the "Needs Room", as they called it, to even supply it. But he had paced back and forth, and when they opened the doors, there was a huge race-track instead of a dueling arena. They were lucky they had the forethought to bring a change of clothes, only wearing their civilian ones at the moment- not that slacks and button-ups really helped when you were running, though. Blaise had shoved the four of them on there with a nasty grin on his face, saying whoever got to their tenth lap first would get something. Harry didn't know what, but he suspected the acid pops he had in his pocket had something to do with it. If he gave them to Hermione without telling her what they did, he'd rip him a new one.

"You know, you really would expect them to be in better shape." Blaised murmured disapprovingly next to him, watching Pansy bend down to catch her breath. Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, no one really needs to keep their little heirs in top shape- don't most purebloods just go into politics anyways? I mean your mama was a one-off thing, to be honest. Thinking things through." Blaise grunted, and started to rise when Hermione jogged over to them, a triumphant expression on her face despite the sweat. He let her take his seat, simply moving to the other side as she flopped down. Harry covertly commanded *scurrilum supero*, smiling when Hermione sighed in relief and the sweat and smell disappeared from her. It seemed that Latin really was useful.

"I don't know which one of you did that, and I don't care, but thank you." She declared, stretching her arms. Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to the track, watching as Theo and Draco yelled at each other, trying to nudge each other off-kilter.

"You know, I wonder if the room can create obstacles." He said thoughtfully. When the room
helpfully supplied hurdles and random bumps on their tracks, all of them laughed as Draco went down screeching.

"How am I going to explain these bruises to my mother?" Draco grumbled, packing his bag a few nights later, "She'll think we're being attacked or something." Theo helpfully threw one of his shirts to him, snickering when it hit the other boy straight in the face. Harry could only sigh at their antics as Draco started on another one of his screeching tirades.

They were all packing for the trip to the station in two days, beginning the Yule holidays. Draco was the only one left, as Theo, Harry, and Blaise had finished theirs hours ago (if only because Harry wouldn't stop badgering them to be prepared). Harry could say with a great certainty that he was terrified out of his wits, even if he didn't show it.

After the horrible evening involving Harry's meltdown and Farley questioning them and the probing questions later on in the dead of the night, he'd felt off about absolutely all of this. The fact that anyone outside of the Zabinis and Mr. Smith knew made him feel tight inside, scared of what might happen. He knew damn well his life would be better without the Dursleys in any part of it, but afterwards... He knew he would never be able to stand the ensuing looks of pity or doubt or even resentment and amusement, because he just knew that everyone was going to have to have an opinion on the whole thing. He'd knew that the news would be liable to go insane, throwing out prospects and rumours and all sorts of tripe about the poor, poor boy-who-lived who couldn't defend himself from a widdle muggle. He wouldn't take the questions chasing after the things he'd try to forget for four months.

He wouldn't take the looks of his peers once they knew the whole truth.

A hand landed on his shoulder, startling him and nearly making him lash out before he realised it was just Blaise. The taller boy gave him a concerned look, but Harry waved it off with a jerk of his head. He turned back to their two idiots.

"M-Draco, your suitcase is about to fall off the bed." He called, interrupting an insult about Theo's charms. He personally agreed with Malfoy- because dear lord no one needs to have something like that Scourgify happen again- but it wouldn't be quite good to have a fight break out in a room with so many breakable things in it. Draco whipped around in time to see it topple onto the floor, tugging at his hair in distress as everything fell together in a messy heap.

"NO! IT TOOK ME AN HOUR TO PACK EVERYTHING THAT TIGHTLY!" He yelled in despair. Harry sighed again, and waved his wand. The suitcase and brick-a-brack neatly flew onto the bed, everything piling into the suitcase within seconds. The three boys blinked, and glanced over to Harry. He only raised a brow.

"Draco, is everything alright? We could hear your screeching from upstairs." Pansy said, popping her head into the doorway. The Malfoy heir turned a bright shade of red, and looked ready to start at it again.

"Draco, is everything alright? We could hear your screeching from upstairs." Pansy said, popping her head into the doorway. The Malfoy heir turned a bright shade of red, and looked ready to start at it again.

"Packing difficulties," Harry cut in smoothly, waving vaguely towards the bed. "It's solved now. Do you four have your things sorted? All of us but Gregory and Vincent do, but I'm starting to think not to bother with their things until tomorrow." Pansy smirked at that and nodded.

"Yeah, it's never a good idea to try and get them to pack early. I think the last time we did, one of them ended up accidentally packing his wand in too." She left, leaving the four boys alone in the spacious room.
"...Potter. Was that wordless magic?" Draco asked, putting his suitcase on the floor by the sounds of it. Harry waved his hand again, making a noise that neither agreed or denied. "Potter."

"I guess? does it matter?" He bit out, pulling his hair out of its tie.

"Wordless or wandless magic is generally only done by very powerful or very high mental discipline, Harry." Theo said carefully; the Nott had a giddy gleam in his eye, as though he'd just found the a lost piece of a damned 500-piece puzzle. "Do you have high mental discipline, Harry?" Harry gave him a helpless shrug. What was he supposed to say? "Oh, this is normal, I just forgot to say an incantation because you all were annoying the piss out of me."

"I suppose to deal with you all day in and day out, I need to. Maybe the repression of my aggravation has gone so far that my magic is reacting." He sarcastically replied instead. It made Blaise snort, and Draco whine about not being annoying. He near slumped in relief when they turned from him to argue over their levels of annoyance. But Theo was still staring at him, that gleam in his eyes and a small smirk on his face.

"Good play, Harry. I'm afraid you can't brush me off so easily though. Don't be worried- I won't go spilling anything. In fact, you might have just helped yourself." He whispered. Harry gave him an uneasy glower, but the other boy only chuckled. With that said, he left the room to go bother one of the girls. Harry stared after him, his thoughts roiling.

The next two days passed uneventfully, and soon it was the morning of their departure, and many students were practically vibrating in their seats in excitement. Homesick first-years were chattering to each other, relieved fifth and sixth years were moaning about their joy at getting a break from work, and those staying at the castle were glaring at them for stirring up uproars at 9 in the morning. Harry's band of misfits was all here today, with Neville in front of him and Hermione beside him. Blaise had immediately claimed the space to his left, thankfully putting a buffer between him and Draco. Both Blaise and Hermione had taken to poking him whenever he stopped shoving what was on his plate into his mouth; he would have begged Neville for help, but the timid boy was the one who had loaded his plate. It was endearing, if not completely annoying and overbearing.

The topic of the morning seemed to be the ball at Malfoy Manor that was coming up, and other ones that had gone down notoriously.

"Well it's not my fault none of you could eat," Blaise was huffing out, "It's tradition to eat on recliners in Italy, and if you don't follow it you're basically knocking yourself down to peasant status."

"Magical Italy has peasants?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Peasants, poor people, whatever you want to call them. Most of the standing families in Italy follow the old patrician traditions, so if someone doesn't they're seen as such." He replied, waving his fork around. "My own family still has a lararium, even if my mother doesn't believe in the house god anymore."

"You could have told us!" Pansy said, "A heads up would at least have been nice- 'Hey, lie down and use your right hand or get banned from all the food there!'" Blaise rolled his eyes at her and didn't reply. Harry thoughtfully scratched his chin.

"So," He started, "Magical Italy kept all the weird old stuff like magical Britain? Except hopefully less backwards?" He thought about the pointed hats and robes and shuddered.
"How are we backwards?" Someone muttered, which was promptly ignored.

"Oh, very modern," Blaise promised, "Wizards and witches in Italy, especially in cities such as Roma and Napoli, try to keep up with the times. We use regular paper and electricity, and I've even heard of some people getting those televisions, or tolovisions or whatever they're called. Most people, if they're going for formal or staying somewhere deeply magical, wear suits or slacks and suspenders with cloaks, though I've heard of some of the really old geezers going as far as wearing togas and stolas."

Hermione's eyes shined at that, and she launched into a flow of questions the Zabini heir could only hope to answer. Harry chose to let the sound fade into the background, and absently gazed around the halls.

There were the Weasley twins, plotting something no doubt annoying and destructive again. They'd better pray none of the Snakes or his misfits were caught in the crossfire. Cedric Diggory was sitting at the Hufflepuff table surrounded by girls- if Harry remembered right, he had just won the last game of the semester against the Gryffins. Good for him, he thought as the prefect smile sheepishly. Ron was near him, not really talking or eating. Going by the expression on his face, it seemed he either didn't want to go home, or was stuck here the whole break. The Ravenclaw firstie girls were laughing to themselves, and glancing in their direction. Harry narrowed his eyes, and when they glanced over again, silently charmed their hair into purple dreads. Their screams of outrage were music to his ears, and when Professor McGonagall instantly blamed the Weasleys and gave them a week's worth of detention when they got back, he may have giggled. Just a bit.

The Staff Table was a whole different story. Quirrell looked ready to cry in happiness, although Snape had that air around him that he'd probably try to make him cry for another reason. Or make anyone cry, really. Had the man tried anger management? McGonagall was hissing at Dumbledore for some reason or another, and Sprout was in some avid discussion with Flitwick. Even Hagrid and the batty woman with the glasses were involved, talking with the Astronomy teacher about something or the other. Everyone seemed more lively today, in one way or another.

Ah, the power of hundreds of brats vacating a castle.

"-Arry! Fratello*, when are you ever going to pay attention?" Blaise suddenly said, squeezing Harry's arm. He confusedly blinked and turned to the other boy, raising a brow. Blaise silently gestured to the Staff Table, to where Snape had started spontaneously glaring at them.

"I-why is he even glaring at us? Vincent, Crabbe, did you get food on your robes again?" The two boys shook their heads in negative, quickly glancing at each other as if to reassure themselves.

"Malfoy? Pansy? Someone shooting off spells because they can't reign in their fangs?" Another negative came, making them even more confused.

"Maybe he's constipated or something." Theo suggested. Harry snorted at that, and adult-worshipping Hermione even giggled.

"N-no, I doubt that, Theo. You also probably don't want to say that when we're so close to the Staff Table. One of them could hear you."

"Mr. Potter." A voice suddenly spoke behind them, making Harry shriek and dig his fork into the table. The group silently stared at it for a few seconds before twisting to see Professor Snape, who
was staring down at the new holes as if they were the cause of evil and a drop in his paycheck themselves.

"Uh, y-yes sir?" He said, trying to tug the fork out of the table and cursing his reflexes. It finally popped out, and he set it on his plate. Snape passively watched, his expression and *gl-aura-* giving away nothing.

"I would like to speak to you before you board the train. Please come to my office before noon." The dark man said before stalking off with a flare of his cloak. Harry watched as the last of him disappeared into the shadow of the hallway.

"...Draco. Malfoy. Whatever. He wouldn't trap a student would he? Those rosy cheeks don't really give anything away." He murmured, nudging the other boy to get his attention.

"He does have *morals, you know. And a sense of decency." The boy responded dryly, pushing away the offending foot. "At most, he'll lower your self-esteem or give you nightmares."

"How is that reassuring in any way?" Hermione demanded before Harry himself could get a word in edgewise. "We still don't know if it was him or Quirrell cursing Harry's broom during the Quidditch match. For all we know, he could be walking to his doom."

"Oh, look at this, Granger growing a backbone," Draco sneered, "Believe me, woman, that man is more likely to hurt himself before he truly hurts a student. No matter how he acts, he *does* care about keeping all of us safe." Hermione flushed, but Harry batted her leg before she could say anything more. She deflated and sighed, shooting a glare at Draco and maybe even a piece of toast. Which started *another* food fight.

---

Well. Here he was. Standing in front of Snape's office and shifting from foot to foot like a buffoon while debating knocking. Should he really do this? The man hadn't exactly been Mr. Sugar and Spice for the past few months, even with Harry offering an olive branch. And there was the Broom Incident of course, but no one was actually certain who was at fault for that. Harry was pretty sure he didn't *want* to know, since that would mean him knowing which teacher felt the need to end his little child life.

Before he could make a decision to knock or run, a voice called from within.

"Potter, will you just come in here?" Professor Snape irately called. Harry hurriedly pulled the handle and toddled in, observing the room. He had never personally been in here, although many a student had spread rumours of it being a torture room, or full of dead animals in jars, or even a BDSM haven, whatever that meant. When he had asked Flint, the older boy had spluttered and muttered about hexing someone for ruining a firstie's ears.

But it was far from any of that; the room had been done in warm, earthy tones, and was full of light. The fireplace to the side of it was lit and crackling brightly, and it even had a painting hanging over it. It was of a brunet man with bountiful curls and beard, who had a sword and wine cup by hand. When Harry entered, he grinned mischievously at the boy, and said something. Harry couldn't hear it, most likely because of a spell if the magic around the painting was anything to go by. Snape was watching him look around, an odd expression in his eyes.

"What did you want to speak to me about, sir?" Harry asked, fidgeting in the spot he had stopped at. Snape sighed, and gestured for him to sit in the chair set in front of the man's desk. He did so, awkwardly trying to appear as though he were comfortable with this. He failed spectacularly.
"Mr. Potter..." Professor Snape started, before shaking his head and going back. "Harry. I wished to speak about your... declaration earlier this month." Harry winced, and raised his hands up in supplication.

"I-I'm sorry sir, I know I overstepped my bounds by saying so-" Professor Snape cut him off with a jerk of his hand, frustrated.

"That is not the problem, Harry. The problem is that you felt the need to do so... Where did you learn of such things? Harry winced again.

"Uh... I sorta interrogated Professor McGonagall and Hagrid because you freaked me out." He rushed, blushing to no end. Snape raised an impressed brow once he deciphered what the boy had said.

"And just how did you manage that?" He asked.
"Well... Hagrid's really easy to get information out of if you lead him into it and don't tell him." Harry said sheepishly, "And Professor McGonagall really liked my parents apparently, so I just played up the 'Hapless Scared Orphan' act." Snape snorted- Professor Snape snorting, dear lord someone get a sound bite- and leaned back, putting a hand over his eyes.

"Of course Minnie would fall for that..." He muttered. "I 'freaked you out', Harry?"

He hesitantly nodded his head. Snape grunted, and a silence fell over them. Since Harry wasn't up to talking, he let his eyes wander back to the man in the painting. Peering closer at his painting, he could tell it was old. The paints were in odd colours, as though they had used something rougher and darker than what's usually mixed, and the edges of it were frayed. The man himself was dressed in strange clothing, which Harry would have sworn were leggings and a tunic. He had a large face and nose, and his beard reached down to his collarbone. When he saw Harry's attention on him, he cheerfully grinned and waved, dancing a little when the small Snake waved back. He excitedly said something, but Harry still couldn't hear him, and gestured towards his ear in a helpless sort of way. The man frowned, and started to tap at his frame. Harry could only watch bemusedly until Snape caught his focus again.

"James Potter was an atrocity of a man." He suddenly said, startling Harry. "He targeted younger students and other Houses for his entertainment, and thought himself in the right, even when it went so far that one almost died." Professor Snape's voice went acidic at the end, and Harry felt there was a story behind that, but he was currently too enthralled to interrupt the man and sentence himself to multiple detentions. "When we graduated, it was a welcome relief to be out of his presence constantly.

Lily Evans... was a kind woman." He went on, stunning Harry. "She was brave, smart, compassionate. Despite her hag of a sister. She did not put any faith towards the House rivalries, and would stand up to anyone if it meant protecting another. You are the son of both of them, and somehow I ignored that in favor of focusing on you being the spawn of Potter. I apologise for that, Harry." Snape glanced down at him, eyes serious. Harry was pretty sure he was gaping at this point.

"You... you knew my mother?" He asked. A pained expression flickered on Snape's face, but it passed quickly as it came.

"Indeed. She... her family lived on the same street. We were close... I believe you should go, Harry, no reason for you to be late getting on the train." The man ushered him out of the room, making sure he went up the stairs before shutting the door and slumping into his chair. The Man in the Painting Part 2 said something comforting, but he didn't hear him due to the age-old silencing spell.

"Snape?" Blaise asked when Harry hopped down the steps in front of the castle.
"Snape." He confirmed. The two of them sedately walked down to Hogsmeade Station, other students walking around them or rushing to get good seats. It was lightly snowing that day, and Harry was glad that he had the forethought to put on his cloak before walking out. Without it, he probably would have had to beg Hermione or Blaise to conjure a thick one so he didn't get a cold.

"There you two are! I was wondering where you had gotten off to." A voice called from behind. Hermione rushed up beside them, cheeks red with cold. "Did you know our things are automatically loaded onto the train? I wonder how they do that."

"They probably use house elves. Too much luggage to actually move themselves." Blaise replied, scratching his head. Hermione gave him a confused look.

"House elves?"

"Ah, right muggleborn, keep forgetting that... They're basically these big-eyed, big-eared creatures that do housework or run errands for wizards. They're pretty useful are around a house." But that point seemed to slip by Hermione, who immediately took on a horrified and outraged expression.

"So, so what, they're basically slaves!? How can you condone that?" She yelled, causing some people to glance their way.

"Hermione, you have to understand, it's not that much of a deal. I mean, Blaise has told me some stories of house elves getting abused, but that's generally seen as bad conduct since the things can snap you into an ocean or over a cliff. No matter what people say or teach about master-servant contracts, house elves can always defend themselves. And a lot of them actually like it, too." Harry argued, frowning. "I'd say as long as you treat them as actual sentient beings and respect them, it's okay."

"That's still horrible! They shouldn't have to serve wizards and witches!" Hermione yelled again. Blaise made a noise of annoyance, and Harry just shook his head. Sometimes, the girl was just too stubborn.

They reached the train and clambered on, quickly finding the rest of their friends with a well-placed point me spell. Draco, Neville, Theo, and Pansy had claimed a booth near the end of the train, and all greeted them when they settled in. Harry had to take a seat on the floor as there were too many of them, but he didn't mind as Blaise carded his hands through his hair and Neville started discussing the benefits of mixing herbology ingredients into food.

The train had ridden on into the evening, and they reached King's Cross a little before 6. They were all snappish at having to stay on the train so long- despite the fact they had already done this, perhaps it was the anticipation?- and hurried out when it finally stopped. With their luggage in hand, they said their goodbyes.

"Remember to mail me, you all. I want to know just how great this "Ball" is." Hermione said jokingly, giving Harry and Blaise quick hugs. They returned them, and promised to write her every so often. Pansy was given an unsure goodbye, and Draco was simply ignored outright. He didn't seem to upset about that. With a parting wave at the 6 of them, she ran off to the side of a brunet couple near the muggle entrance.

"Well, I suppose I'll see you guys before Christmas," Theo said, moving to leave, "Don't blow up anyone, you don't have two mother-hens to reign you in."

"Oh shut it Nott," Draco returned good-naturedly.
"Stuff it Malfoy! Have a good hols, Longbottom!" he called behind his shoulder as he disappeared into the crowd. Harry snickered at the enraged expression hidden on Draco's face before patting Neville on the back and wishing him a good holiday himself, as the boy's grandmother had appeared out of the ruckus, customary dead vulture on her head. The timid boy gave him a small smile and wished him good results, whatever that whammy of omnisity meant. It sort of made him edge away for a moment before he remembered that this was the boy who cried when he smashed a sapling by accident. Then he just patted him on the back again and pushed him off to Augusta Longbottom.

The last four of them dispersed accordingly, and Harry was infinitely surprised when, instead of fading into the crowd like some tiny shadow, Blaise dutifully followed him and Draco.

"I didn't know you were coming along," He commented to the taller boy.

"Mama thought it would be a good idea for some reason, although I have yet to see her reasoning." The boy replied, shrugging. "At least now I can make sure you don't hurt yourself, fratello."

"That- what does that mean? I know you've called me that before." Harry asked as Draco huffed a laugh in front of him. He shot a glare at the blond boy.

"Good friend."

"Oh."

As it was, Draco was not actually leading them in circles or around nilly-willy. The Malfoy family had all agreed to meet by a certain column, and there the two adults were, standing primly as if they were higher than everything there. When the woman- Narcissa Malfoy, obviously- saw the three of them, her expression softened slightly, but that was the only indication of anything warm on their faces. Lord Malfoy had a speculative gleam in his eyes, watching the three of them toddle over.

"Ah, boys, there you are. It's wonderful to see you, and a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr. Potter."

"P-Please, call me Harrison, Lady Malfoy. It has less connotations, at the very least." Harry replied, sending her a charming smile and bowing slightly. She raised a brow at that, but acquiesced easily enough.

"Then I must insist you call me Narcissa, Harrison."

"And I, Lucius." Lord Malfoy said, cutting in. Narcissa huffed out a small breath at the interruption before continuing.

"Now, why don't we head off? Dobby and Tippy should have a meal made for us at the Manor."

Harry blinked as Draco and Blaise took her one of her arms in hand. Lord Malfoy noticed his confusion and thankfully didn't mention it, only holding out one of his own. When Harry grasped it, he felt a tug at his navel, then the feeling of going through a very thin straw, and then they were in the parlor of a very decorated household. They separated, and Harry marveled at the intricate details in the walls and furniture. The Malfoys were rich, and made no attempt to hide it, that was for sure.

"Tick! Tock! Please take the boys' bags and place them in their rooms." Lord Malfoy called. Two small house elves appeared and took the luggage, bowing and disappearing without a word. "You three go along and freshen up before dinner- I know that you must want to get out of those robes."

He said, giving them a small smile before heading off to who knows where. Narcissa gave them a smile before following his lead.

"...You know, I would have expected something... different." Harry said. "Not smiles."
"Why's that?" Blaise asked as they started to walk down a hallway. It had multiple portraits hanging in it, some of them bickering among themselves and others watching the three youngsters move about.

"Boy who lived and all. Accidental pusher of light magic." Harry reminded.

"Oh. Do your parents actually have a problem with him, Draco? I don't think Harry's ever come up in their weird politic conversations." Draco hummed, and tried to think back.

"I suppose on principle they could. But I think after my multiple letters complaining about you waking us up at ungodly times or about you cursing my hair blue, they stopped really seeing you as that, Potter. I know my mother asked after you when news got out about Hollow's Eve."

"She did?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Oh yeah, she asked after all of us, even Granger. Was enraged when she heard two students could have died because of lax wards. I'm pretty sure she would have thrashed Dumbledore if he weren't so important." They reached what was apparently to be their rooms, and Harry hesitantly opened the door Draco directed him to. Inside, it was a cool green, the colour of grass in the evening. There was a canopy bed in the corner, along with a wardrobe and a door that he assumed led to a bathroom or closet. At the foot of the bed, his suitcase was neatly sat and he hurried to open it and get out of these god-awful robes.

Once he was dressed in a comfortable pair of slacks and a grey button-up, he left the room to where Blaise and Draco were waiting in the hallway. They were dressed similarly, although Draco had decided to switch his robes rather than completely forgo them. They trotted back down the halls, Draco mentioning a detail about this or that as they did. He seemed far more relaxed than he ever did at Hogwarts, his face lax and his posture not ramrod straight for once. when Harry commented on it, the blond had just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Appearances."

They were about to enter the dining room when a voice called out from above. "You! Who are you?" It said. They turned to see a woman with a harsh, narrow face staring down at them, focused on Harry. When he tilted his head in question, she waved her hand impatiently. "Well, answer!"

"Uh, oh, my apologies ma'am. My name is Harry Potter."

"Are you related to James Potter?" She asked, her eyes narrowing. Harry gulped quietly and hoped a painting wouldn't shout him down the first day of his hols. "Er, yes ma'am. He was my father. May I inquire as to why you're asking?" The woman closed her eyes, cursing softly under her breath before turning her attention back to him.

"No particular reason, Mr. Potter. You simply looked a great deal like him, although your face seems a tad longer. You may go." They had no hesitation as they rushed into the dining room, Harry glad to be away from the woman's piercing stare.

"Who was that?" He whispered to Draco.

"Dorea Black. She was an aunt of my mum, I think." He whispered back, straightening when Narcissa and Lucius saw them. They quickly sat down, and Harry wasn't surprised when the food appeared in a way much like Hogwarts. He tried his best with the silverware, and attempted to at least hold up ends of conversation, but it just seemed awkward to him trying to hold up a conversation about what they were learning when he was sure it was all just cannon fodder to pass the time.

"To be honest, sir, the spells they teach us don't really help." He admitted at one point when Lucius asked after such. "We've had more progress learning and practicing spells in our own small study
group than in classes. And with all the trouble recently, it makes everything seem even more useless." He picked at his food despondently at that, because really, how would a tickling charm or the transfiguration movement for rat-to-cup ever help in a battle?

"Trouble?" Narcissa asked sharply, eyes narrowing. Unfortunately for Harry, he didn't notice the warning signs from Draco and Blaise, who were kicking him under the table and poking him respectively.

"Well, yeah, with the t-troll and the broom during the Quidditch match. Someone tried to knock me off mine with a curse or something." He replied. "I'm sort of surprised M-Draco didn't tell you about that one, since he was glued to the game the whole time." By now, he could certainly feel the blond viciously attacking his shins, and kicked him back in retaliation.

"See this is why I keep telling you to push the Board!" Narcissa yelled, jabbing her knife in an alarmed Lucius' direction. "Children nearly falling to their deaths during small games or getting crushed by a troll! A Headmaster who allows this shouldn't be in charge!"

"Narcissa, there's not much to be done," Her husband said wearily, keeping an eye on her knife, "Most of them believe him to be more than fully capable. It would take a scandal to uproot him."

"And he's still going to be able to control the school at least a little since he's the Supreme Mugwump, ma'am." Blaise added, spearing a poor piece of chicken. Hadn't Harry heard that somewhere before?

"Curse that man and his reach, then," Narcissa spat, "And burn his beard to ash. It's bad enough having to see you three sent to that wretched school. To think it's the only one in the Isles..." Lucius sighed at that, obviously having run through this many times, and rubbed her shoulder comfortingly.

The rest of the meal passed silently, and any attempts at conversation were squashed down by the violent attacking of food by Narcissa. When it was done, the boys parted hurriedly, hoping to avoid the woman's wrath of justice. Draco lead them down the halls again, although it was more Harry being led and Blaise following at a sedate pace, and eventually brought them to a large set of doors. He pushed them open slowly, and smirked triumphantly at Harry's gasp of wonder.

It was a library, a huge, sprawling one with shelves reaching to the ceiling and out to the other wall. Small, large, old, new, all sorts of books were held on them. Chairs and sofas were scattered around, along with a table or two to place a large amount of tomes. Harry dazedly stumbled into the wonderland of knowledge.

"Draco, you are officially my favourite." He declared, racing to the nearest shelf and skimming his fingers over the spines. Blaise made a noise of mock-offense behind him.

"But what about me, Harry? I thought I was your favourite!" He whined, dramatically slumping into an armchair. Harry gave him a blank look.

"You're exempt from ranking. It wouldn't be fair to have you on it." He gave the other boy a bemused glance when he whooped and nearly fell from his perch. Skimming once more, he pulled a book off the shelves and flipped through it. It was an old one, writing about the effects of certain spells during times of pregnancy. Picking up the one that was next to it, he saw that it was filled with instructions on how to amplify grey spells to something not so grey.

"How do you even organise these?" He wondered as he replaced them. Books about cleaning were next to ones about healing and ones about dueling. It had little organisation as far as he could tell.

"I think we do it by author, but I can't be sure. I usually just use point me to find what I need." Draco
said from behind him, grabbing a book himself. "There's not much point showing you around or
going out on the yard, so we should probably just stay in here until sleep." Harry nodded in
agreement. He plucked a random book off the shelf, which turned out to be on the various
subspecies of vampires and their warring history, and settled in for a good reading.

They spent the night like that, sitting together in a small triangle, with Blaise making random
comments from time to time as the two of them read. The room was warm, and the mood
comfortable. Harry didn't notice when he fell asleep, or when Draco calmly took their books and set
them on the table for later. He didn't stir when Blaise took him to his room and slipped him into the
bed with a quick clothes charm many parents used on their tired children. He simply dreamt of a
large dog, and a yard scattered with people he thought-he-knew-but-couldn't-remember.

It was light out when Harry woke, and he slowly stretched on the bed, feeling more well-rested than
he had in weeks. As he lazily stared out the window, the fact it was sunny and bright finally hit him
and he jumped out of bed, cursing. He changed out of his nightclothes- which, weird, he
couldn't remember putting them on, or even coming back here for that matter- and into a casual shirt
and slacks, rushing out the door. He dashed past the portraits, panting by the time he reached the
dining room, and nearly groaned in irritation as he saw no one but Narcissa was inside. When the
woman saw him in the doorway, she gave him a smile and waved him in, holding out a muffin he
gratefully took.

"I'm not horribly late, am I?" He asked between bites of delicious cranberry-stuffed bread.

"The other haven't even risen yet." Narcissa said with an amused grin, "Lucius was never one for
mornings, and Draco is impossible to wake on holidays. I'm afraid I don't know about Blaise though.
Knowing Nicola, she probably hexed him red every time he didn't wake up on time." Harry
snickered at the thought of a half-asleep, red Blaise looking in the mirror to see that. Ah, he'd have to
ask Nicola if she actually did that, and if she had any pictures.

They quietly ate their dinner, discussing the books in the library, which was far less awkward than
having to dance around their group's school shenanigans. Blaise stumbled in shortly after Harry, and
Draco and Lucius appeared around half an hour later, bedheads raging and eyes dull. Harry didn't
think he heard Lucius say a word until the man had downed a cup and a half of coffee.

"What were you three planning to do today?" The man asked when he was coherent, spreading
butter on a slice of toast.

"Well, I wanted to show P-Harry around the Manor, since he hasn't been here before, and then we
were going to go out and fly on the brooms." Draco said. Narcissa frowned at his slip, but didn't say
anything. Was it strange? It had been pretty commonplace for many Snakes to just use last names,
especially since some tried to distance themselves.

"You should show the two of them to the new sunroom we added," She suggested, "It would be a
wonderful place to read or practice some of those spells you talked about." Blaise and Harry shared
curious glances over that, and Draco and excited grin, giddy at the prospect.

The mail arrived then, owls swooping in and dropping letters or newspapers onto the table and
waiting for payment or food. Lucius immediately swept up the paper, going over whatever tripe was
published that day. Harry fondly gave Hedwig, who had been delivering a package, a piece of bacon
that she gobbled up instantly. With a soft hoot and rub against his hand, she was off again, sailing
back through the window.

"What's that?" Draco asked, peering at his package as though it would unravel and reveal itself.
Coincidentally, when Harry got into the air on his Nimbus later that day, he realised why his schedule was off-kilter this morning. When he looked across the grounds, it became obvious that the Malfoy Manor was something of a magical behemoth, with how many wards it had around it. When he poked one of the silver things, it had shocked his finger and somehow given him a distinct air of "no touchy". Draco and Blaise had stared at him weird for poking thin air but dammit he was on vacation he was gonna poke what he wanted. After lunch they wandered into the sunroom Narcissa mentioned, which was similarly coloured as the wards.

It had two glass walls, letting you look out onto the gardened grounds. Flowers, trees, strange moving hedges, and much more were visible in the beautiful. Harry was a bit worried when he thought he saw a white peacock, but he wrote it off as having slept too long. The three of them had brought books they pilfered from the Hogwarts' and Malfoy’s libraries, ranging from hexes to charms and even curses with some of the ones from the Malfoy's. Right now, they were sitting around and figuring out how to actually practice without destroying anything.

"I don't know any strengthening or shield charms to protect the lamps and windows." Draco muttered, flipping through some random housework manual. Harry doubted any of the Malfoys had touched it in years, as it was covered in dust.

"I think they're already there, Draco." He said, taking the book from the boy and spelling away the dust.

"And just how do you know that? Can you see it, woven everywhere?" The blond demanded, crossing his arms.

Harry raised a brow. If only he knew. "Your mother told me right before we went out so we didn't end up sitting here like we have been. I didn't mention it because of the novelty of you reading a book about working." He lied, carefully setting said book on the table. Draco's jaw was dropped in incredulity, but he ignored it in favour of sending a bombarda at one of the glass walls. The other two could only let out screeches when the light hit and disappeared, fading from green to the silver Harry saw. He turned back to them, satisfied, and said, "See? Perfectly fine."

"HARRY, that was a big, big no-no. Never do that again. Non puoi*." Blaise growled, pale. "I would rather not have us all become porcupines because you wanted to prove a point." Harry shrugged at that, and pulled out one of the books, flipping randomly to a page and reading its details before attempting.

The rest of the day was... calm. And so were the days after, surprisingly to Harry. He would wake up and find Narcissa in the dining room with breakfast, with Blaise sometimes with her, and they would chat. When the last two members of the house were up, they’d take care of the mail (which reminded him- he had asked Nicola about that name Blaise had kept calling him, and she just laughed. Somehow. In a letter. Should he be worried?) and torment Draco and Lucius with bright light. The rest of the day was spent racing n brooms, practicing spells, or generally annoying each other until lunch, and then dinner. Harry had been slowly getting the presents he ordered for his friends, and he was relieved to see they were all intact- who knew what could happen while an owl was flying?

But of course, all good things must come to an end.

Namely a Ball involving stuffy robes and uptight spines.
Which explained Harry's attitude now, as he watched Narcissa order the house elves to put this up, or move that, or watch out for Harry because dropping a swan ice sculpture on their head is probably not good for one's health.

"Harrison darling, are you alright? Where are Draco and Blaise?" Narcissa asked, barking at a house elf for dropping a vase seconds later. Harry would have been shocked by the woman's manner if she hadn't made Lucius nearly whimper the first night they were there. The matter of the fact was, he had no idea where the two were. They had rushed off after breakfast, Blaise hurriedly hugging him and telling Harry to wander in the library for the day because of "pureblood business". He nearly shocked him for saying that, but the two of them ran off before he had the chance.

"Probably off setting a trap for the others, Ms. Narcissa. They left me to fend for myself this morning." He replied, falling into a chair near them with a sigh. Narcissa sen a frown his way, and snapped her fingers. A small elf wearing a tea cozy appeared at her side, wringing its hands.

"Yes mistress, what can Copper be doings for you?"

"Copper, find my son and his friend, Blaise. I'm afraid they have some explaining to do, leaving Harrison out." She commanded, ignoring Harry's babbles that no that wasn't needed I'm sorry they don't need to come. The elf disappeared to who knows where, reappearing a few minutes later, a regretful expression on their face.

"I's be sorry ma'am, but master Draco and Blaise bes doing something very important. They can't be disturbed." Narcissa narrowed her eyes, and Harry was afraid she'd suddenly strike the poor thing, before she snapped her fingers again, making it poof away silently.

"Well, I suppose that leaves you with me for the day, Harrison." She said remorsefully, tsking her tongue at the boys' behavior. But her face suddenly brightened, and she looked over at Harry with a shine in her eyes.

"Tell me Harrison, do you think navy or sky blue streamers would better complement the walls?"

The other boys may not believe him, and may like to entertain the idea that it was torture helping the older woman decorate, but Harry actually found it fun. Narcissa had told him various things while they were choosing what to use; she had explained the meaning of camellias (graciousness), and the significance of certain colours in highly political events (green and orange were generally seen as aggressive, red and grey passive, and blue and purple neutral, which made no sense to him), and how to hide the fact you really don't want to touch someone's sweaty hand. By the time they were finished, the ballroom was decorated with shades of blue, hints of grey and green hidden here and there for fun. The tables were covered with fine tablecloths, a bouquet in the corner of each, and the swan sculpture stood proud in the middle of the room.

"You run along to put your formal clothes on," Narcissa said, turning to him after admiring their choices, "I can guess what it is, knowing Nicola." He ran to his rooms, briefly wondering how Narcissa knew Nicola had gotten clothes for him before shaking it off with annoyance. Did it really matter? He had to brace himself right now, for hours of horrid socialising and people talking to him.

When he actually looked hard and well at what Nicola had made for him, he understood what Narcissa meant.

It was a suit that looked to be his measurements, coloured a sleek grey with a forest green tie and black undershirt. He stared at it a bit before even considering picking it up, marveling at the craftsmanship. He had to hand it to Madame Malkin, she could weave up some fine clothes.
It took him a while getting it on, not used to such outfits and scared to rip it. When he went into the bathroom to check himself, he was amazed out how... different it made him look. His sharp edges were hidden in the firm fabric, and his eyes stood out more than ever. Standing a bit straights, he thought he looked.. confident.

"You look darling sweetie. If only you could do something about that hair." A voice lamented, startling him out of his thoughts. He glanced around frantically, slipping his wand into his hand, before the voice chuckled. "Look in front of you, Hun." With a bewildered glance, he flicked his eyes to the mirror, only to stop and nearly hit himself in anger. The mirror was covered in magic. It must have been one of those-those talking ones Blaise told him households got.

"Well, whatever I do doesn't calm it down, so I'm up to suggestions." He tiredly replied, tugging on a few strands of his long bird nest.

"Try Supero Pelo*. One of the girls that used to live in here constantly used it, and it worked like a charm." The mirror cheerfully said. He blinked, feeling a little off-kilter at a mirror giving him hair advice, but did what it said, casting the spell. His hair tamed at once, going from its tangled curls and painful knots that never came out to a messy waviness that was manageable. He wove his fingers through it, amazed, and immediately braided it, happy to be able to do so without ten minutes of pain and anger at having to fix it.

"Any reason the spell is mixed up with its languages?" He idly asked, tying up the last knock in his braid.

"The girl wasn't very smart, I'm afraid. Great with resources though- worked with what she had, which turned out to be remedial knowledge of Latin and a Spanish dictionary." The mirror said bemusedly. It had a nostalgic tone to its voice, and Harry wondered if it had been close to the girl.

"Well, thank you for the help. I'm afraid I have to go now." He waved goodbye to the mirror who gave an enthusiastic parting, telling him not to pick any girls up. As if.

When he stepped out of his room, he was flanked by Draco and Blaise on both sides, each of them taking an arm. He glared at the two of them, Blaise grinning and Draco smirking. They were dressed in formal wear as well, Draco with something even more medieval than usual, and Blaise with a smart, black suit.

"We spent all day making something for him, and he glares at us so, Draco! What ungratefulness!" Blaise exclaimed in mock woe, tipping to the side as if to faint. Harry squeezed when he nearly went with.

"Oh, cut it, you chit. Everyone knows you enjoyed every minute." The other boy said, smirking playfully.

"I'm sorry, could one of you buffoons explain this? I'd rather know why I'm being carried like a sow." Harry finally snapped, the air crackling. Not that he actually noticed that, as focused as he was on the other's faces. Draco's shock was amusing, though, as the boy quickly made to drop him, wanting no repeat of the incident with the ring. Harry never would forgive him for trying to take that.

Blaise chuckled, and gently shifted his grip, sliding his arm around Harry's instead. "Us and the others pitched in a little to find a way to get away from the crowds. We all know you hate dealing with people, and Pansy and Draco both agree that inter-family relationships aren't worth the sweaty palms right now."

"...Oh. What was with the secrecy, then?" Harry asked.
"Parents." Draco said gravely.

"Parents." Blaise echoed. Harry could only give them an odd stare as they hauled him downstairs to the ballroom, where everyone was gathering. People flitted in and out, apparating in or leaving to greet someone who had appeared. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could swear that he had seen someone that looked similar to Snape, but he doubted the man would ever want to come to a social function.

When they went inside, the three of them covertly snuck to a corner in the back, shadowed slightly by a giant flower Narcissa had insisted on putting there. As they got closer, Harry could see a slight, shiny bubble surrounding it, and realised the others must have done something. They went headfirst into the bubble, a slightly muffled feeling covering Harry before disappearing. It was then the others, in their formal robes and complex dresses, became visible. Pansy smirked at his dumbfounded expression, and Theo snickered behind a gloved hand. The others were there as well, Gregory and Vincent smiling at him and Daphne sipping from a cup. Millicent was fiddling with a button on the cuff of her shirt. Draco moved away, although Blaise had yet to unhook his arm.

"See? Everything works out!" Pansy piped up, giving Draco a smirk, which he promptly ignored. "How has your visit been at the Manor been so far, Harry? We have to make sure Dracy-poo here isn't mistreating you~." She cooed, giggling when Draco growled and swiped at her. "Locking him up in his room, or feeding him blood, or leaving him alone for a whole day~.

"I'll have you know I've been treating Harry fine!" Draco shouted, face red. "He's been having muffins with my mother about every morning, and we argue over spells in the sunroom. I'm sure he's happy. Are you happy here, Harry?" The boy pleaded, turning to the other boy.

"Oh, so it's Harry now? What happened to Potter?"

"Draco, please don't look at me like that, it's disturbing. And I've been fine, Pansy. Draco is the perfect rude gentleman." Harry assured, grinning. Draco whined something unintelligible at that, and everyone had a laugh. They settled into the chairs that surrounded the table here, and someone- he couldn't pinpoint who- handed him a cup full of fruit punch. He sipped it as the others rambled on about their holidays so far.

"-and Granger got on my case about it! Which one of you mentioned house elves to her?" Theo was demanding, leaning over his plate of... something. It was meat in origin, at least.

"That's Blaise's fault," Harry cut in, ignoring the boy's wounded stare at the betrayal, "She asked how all our luggage was transported onto the train, and it came out without thinking. You can't blame him for not knowing how she would react."

Theo deflated, mumbling something and poking his mystery-probably-duck-meat. Pansy poked him, and hissed when he brandished his fork in her direction.

"You dare challenge me, cowardly knight? I will defeat you easily!" She boasted, raising her fork in challenge. The two of them met eyes, and began to try to jab each other with the forks with barely any hesitation. The other 6 of them watched on bemusedly as the duo added sound effects, fake wounds, and threats into their mock battle, ending it when Pansy "pierced" Theo in the heart.

"NOOOOO! I have been felled! Someone tell my love that I cherish... them." He fell dramatically over his plate, and made everyone burst out laughing when he made no attempt to hide his sneaking of food to his "dead" body.

"You all are insane." Draco said primly, before charming Theo into full knight armor. Then no one
kept it together.

Harry yawned as he helped the others clean up. It wasn't like the party had been wild, nothing remotely near it, but there were still cups and plates lying about, and no matter what the house elves said, he could at least gather everything up for easy pick-up. The others had already gone to bed or headed home through the floo, Blaise incorrectly assuming that Harry had followed them. The other boy probably wouldn't realise until he knocked on Harry's door to make sure he wasn't staying up to read. Harry tiredly stacked the cups into high towers in his hands, holding them steady so they didn't all come crashing down. Lucius, Narcissa, and a few others were talking by the doorway, but he doubted they noticed him. A well-placed notice-me-not made sure no one really did. He dumped the cups onto the assigned table, sighing in relief as he gazed around and saw that was the last of them. The plates had already been gathered, and were quickly disappearing as the elves took them up themselves. He slumped into a chair, happy to be able to relax. He wasn't exactly the strongest trooper around, and all those plate added up sooner or later...

He jumped when a hand tapped him on his shoulder, and gazed up to see, indeed, Professor Snape staring down at him with a raised brow. 

"Mr.P-Harry, is there any reason you are still up at this hour?" The man asked, helping the boy out of the chair. Harry stretched, hoping to leak some of the sleepiness from his bones. It actually seemed to work, although Professor Snape stiffened.

"I was helping clean up a bit, sir. I know the house elves can do it themselves, but it didn't seem polite to leave everything out like this." He replied sleepily, rubbing at his eyes to wake himself up. Professor Snape sighed in front of him, and began to guide him out of the room, a hand on his back. Harry heard him say something, and another person reply, but he was too tired to really try to figure out what they were actually talking about. The hand stayed on his back, pushing him up the stairs and making sure he didn't trip and crack his head open. He didn't realise they were outside his room until the hand poked him aware, making him realise that Professor Snape had nudged him up to his room while he was barely awake. He would have blushed if it weren't for the fact the man didn't seem to really care.

"Er, thank you for the help, sir." He mumbled, scratching the back of his head, frowning at the mess his braid now was. The man simply inclined his head.

"Make sure you do not fall asleep in the ballroom again, Harry." He said with a hint of a smirk before turning and stalking back down the stairs. Harry blinked after him for a bit before deciding he really just did not care right now and going into his room. He was lucky he remembered to take his suit off before he passed out on his bed.

The next morning, when Blaise jumped onto the bed, Harry had no qualms conjuring a bucket and hurling it at the other boy. Said boy yelped and ducked, glancing back at the bucket when it hit the wall.

"Harry, where were you last night? You weren't in your room when I checked." Blaise demanded, poking Harry. He groaned, and turned over, burrowing himself into the blankets. Conversation was about the farthest thing from what Harry was in the mood for, which was sleeping in until noon and eating a late lunch of pancakes and blueberries. But, fate was a cruel, assy mistress it seems, because Blaise ripped the warm blankets away from him, ignoring his whines at the sudden cold.

"Uh-uh, no going back to sleep, you. Not until you answer me. Besides, everyone else is already up, so there's no point." Harry shot up out of the bed, blinking at Blaise dazedly.
"What do you mean everyone's up? It takes Draco and Lucius hours just to say more than a grunt."

Blaise shrugged his shoulders. "It's Christmas." Harry sighed and patted down his hair. Guess there really was no point going back to sleep. He waved Blaise away with his hands, and gathered up the comforter, throwing it over his shoulders and bundling up in it. He may have to get up, but there was no way he was sitting there in that cold dining room again without something that didn't border on cold itself. The two of them trudged down the hall, slowly making their way since Harry refused to go any faster.

"Well?" Blaise asked impatiently, poking Harry again. "Where were you? You weren't exploring on your own, were you? Because despite what Draco and Lucius might say, Harry, Malfoy Manor isn't the safest place."

"I was helping clean up downstairs," Harry replied, "Stayed longer than I meant to. I think Professor Snape pushed me back to my rooms." Blaise gave him an odd look (very odd, because what), but dropped the subject, satisfied that the other boy had at least slept at some point.

They finally reached the dining room, where Draco was impatiently waiting with crossed arms and the adults were watching with amused stares. "It took you long enough!" Draco called hotly, looking more like a puffed-up puppy than anything that could make them feel scared or guilty.

"Draco, calm down, or else your hair-gel will mess up." Harry absently said, snatching a scone from the table and taking a seat to his left. Blaise decided to switch it up this morning, and took the opposite seat, stealing a sausage from Draco's plate. The blond boy sputtered, but quickly calmed down when Harry passed him the strawberry jam. For some reason none of the other Snakes had been able to pry out of him, the boy was obsessed with the stuff. It made for good bargaining chips.

They ate amiably, and the mail soon came, letters from friends and family swooped in by owls. The newspaper was among them, and Harry was surprised when Blaise plucked it out of the pile first, perusing it absentmindedly. He was more surprised and slightly worried when the Zabini promptly choked on his sausage and had to have Draco whack it out of him. When he finally regained some of his breathing, Draco tilted the paper to see what sent him into a damn choking fit, just enough for them all to get a view.

You can't really blame Harry for accidentally making the windows explode when he saw the header.

"HOGWARTS: SAFE FOR YOUR CHILDREN? HIDDEN SCANDALS OF ABUSE, DANGER, AND DARK ARTS COME TO LIGHT!"

&&&&&&&&

Asterisks: *t togas and stolas were worn by male and female citizens of rome.

*Fratello = brother.

*Non puoi = you cannot

*Supero Pelo- I overcome hair, in butchered latin and spanish
The Truth 1

HOGWARTS: SAFE FOR YOUR CHILDREN? HIDDEN SCANDALS OF ABUSE, DANGER, AND DARK ARTS COME TO LIGHT!

Written by Rita Skeeter

In an unprecedented move, multiple heads of house in Magical Britain have come forward to shed light on the horrible happening going on in Hogwarts that the public was deemed unfit to know of. Family heads, along with various other testifiers, have told me of hidden abuse, misuse of power, and the neglect of a certain headmaster to prevent children from slipping into the Dark. Due to their want for privacy, all names mentioned have been censored.

RS: Madame ******, could you explain why you all felt the need to come forward?

Madame ******: I am afraid that we felt it necessary beyond all now that I was made aware to certain... pieces of information recently. The Headmaster, even if he is oblivious, has failed in his duties to protect students far too many times. I know that I, and many others of my house, were harassed to the point of terror simply because of our stereotypes, with no regard to the consequences, mental or physical.

RS: Harassed?

Madame ******: Spells randomly shot at us, physically attacked, verbally beaten down, take your pick. It constantly amazes me how awful it was, and how it managed to knit us so close together. But this is not to be about the past, it is to be about protecting students in the future, yes?

RS: Oh! Yes, yes, my apologies, ma'am. Please, tell us what's been going on; I have no doubt it's terrible, if you felt the need to contact someone.

Madame ******: I suppose you could coin it such. From what I have heard from my child, there has been attacks on students and an invasion of the school, at least once for each. He told me days after Hollow's Eve, to my astonishment, that a troll had entered the castle, and nearly killed two students. Later, during a game of sport, another child nearly fell of his broom 50 feet in the air because of what they suspect was a curse. Can you imagine how outraged we felt, how scared we were for our children when we heard that? And that is not even considering the poor souls who were abandoned to their homes each summer or holiday, forced to be near those that hurt them because it was necessary.

-Here Madame ****** was forced to calm herself, and I even spotted sparks coming out of the tip of her wand.-

Madame ******: Three children I know of for certain have been left in the shadows. Two have grown, but they were affected, scarred. I grew up with one of them, tried to help him each time we arrived back at the castle, tried to make sure no one found out. I knew he would want it to stay hidden. The other... he fell. The idiot, he fell because the Headmaster would not shelter him for a mere three months, and now he is no better than the Death Eaters that used to terrorise the county. Worse. I can only hope this interview can help the last. They are.. a sweet child. I think that without them, my own would still be in the social rut I unfortunately doomed him to. I do not want to them fall so.

The full interview and more details on pages 2B, 3B, and 4B
Narcissa had screeched when the windows broke, and Lucius threw up a silver wall of protection over the lot of them. The three boys hadn't reacted at all to it, Blaise still pale beyond belief and Harry staring blankly at the paper in Draco's hands. Later, Harry couldn't even recall them smashing, only the adults snatching them up and dashing out of the room. When the shards of glass had stopped raining down on them, Lucius and Narcissa immediately scooped them up, Lucius taking Blaise and Draco while Narcissa grabbed Harry. He flinched when she grabbed him, and tried to scramble out of her grip, but the woman's thin arms belied hidden strength, and she carried him easily—or maybe it was just because he was underweight? The adults rushed into one of the sitting rooms off the main hall and gently put the boys on the rug, Narcissa warding the door and Lucius checking them for injuries. A quick overview revealed that, somehow, they hadn't actually been attacked, and that the windows had broken on their own.

"Perchè? Perchè è..*?" Blaise was mumbling, brow furrowed and staring at nothing. His hands were gesturing, as though he were talking to someone, but neither Narcissa nor Lucius could get an inkling of what he meant. Narcissa gently shook him, not wanting to startle him. Blaise snapped out of his daze, blinking at her before scooting over to Harry and tugging on his hair to try and get a reaction. He snapped his hand back as if burned when the smaller boy turned his glaring eyes on him, his irises practically glowing. Narcissa took Lucius towards the door, hissing furiously.

"That shouldn't have been possible, Lucius, I saw you place the unbreakable charms on those windows not last week, strong ones that should have held for months! How could they have all shattered at once?"

"I don't know, Cissa. The only actual possibility is that something drained it. Seeing as we weren't being attacked, that's not my priority. Right now, we need to focus on making sure one of them isn't traumatised.." Narcissa sighed, shooting an uncertain glance at the wards, before giving the boys a once-over herself. She frowned when she saw Draco still clutching the newspaper—and white-knuckled, she noticed—and Harry staring at nothing, looking particularly queasy. Blaise was wringing his hands, and a scowl was firmly set on his face. She waved her hands over their faces, earning no response. Grimacing, she pried the newspaper from her son's hands, lying it on a table for now, and tapped the boys' shoulders, catching their attention and checking their heads when they actually acted alive. Lucius, meanwhile, skimmed over the paper's contents, eyes widening as he recognised the very familiar speech pattern.

"I can't believe you all are unharmed, as happy as I am about it... Why did you all freeze like that? Who knows what would have happened if Lucius hadn't thrown up a shield! It was something in the paper, correct?" Draco gave her a helpless look, glancing between the other two as if unsure he could say anything. Blaise gave him a shrug, and Harry refused to turn their way, focused on nothing.

"Cissa, She's up to something." Lucius called, running his fingers over the words speculatively. "But this isn't her normal procedure. She usually wraps everyone around her finger and then bites down with venom, doesn't she?"

"Oh, stop with your bratty feud, Lucius," Narcissa snapped, angry. "Nicola's choices are hardly your problem, and it's not her fault you decided she wasn't worth the time." Harry let out a pained noise at the mention of the name, burying his head in his hands; Draco tried to comfort him, but he sorely doubted anything beyond burning everyone's memory would help at this point. Lucius scowled at his wife and tossed the paper towards her, flicking his eyes to the boys that were still huddled on the
"Blaise, do you know who your mother is talking about?"

"No!" Blaise answered quickly, eyes far too wide and hands far too shaky to be telling the truth. He winced and pulled his hands apart, folding them neatly in his lap. The blond man raised a brow and switched his gaze to his son, who eeped and hid slightly behind his mother.

"I'm afraid we really don't know father. This is the first I've heard of it." He said shakily, shooting a glare at the paper in his mother's hands.

"Draco, I feel the need to remind you that you're a horrible liar." Narcissa said absently, taking a seat on a recliner. "Do you suppose that he let her mention this, Lucius? I don't think he'd want her spreading this around like it was gossip."

"Maybe. He did warn us last night about something happening." The man replied wearily.

"Then who else is she talking about?"

"The Dark Lord." Harry suddenly said, raising his head. He didn't meet anyone's gaze, and kept to his hands, picking at the nails. "She told me once that the Dark Lord had problems when he grew up. That's the only person I can think of, with what she said." The four of them gave him disbelieving stares because why was he discussing the Dark Lord's past with her?

"Okay, that is mildly worrying, that you're discussing that with Mama." Blaise muttered. He spoke up louder with the next line, brows furrowed again. "Harry, maybe-"

"No." The Potter harshly cut him off, giving an even look that spoke volumes of how unsettled this had made him. Blaise flinched at it, averting his eyes back to the paper.

The adults narrowed their eyes, and Lucius sent Narcissa a furtive glance. She caught it, and nodded slightly. Never mind the suspicious flinches and long sleeves, or the small portions of food and guarded body language the boy constantly had. Never mind the fact that Blaise hovered more than a hawk, or the fact their son was actually being gentle with someone. After the morning, there'd be no doubt.

"Blaise, Harrison, I don't think you need to hide anything." Narcissa said softly, concerned eyes watching as both jumped. Blaise had a distinctly guilty cast, and Harry- holy hell were those sparks? Draco let out a shriek as green sparks started flying from Harry's hands freaking them all the fuck out, and the small boy waved his hands, trying to make them stop, but it only seemed to agitate whatever was happening more, sending out larger and hotter sparks until Harry was pretty sure it constituted as a fire. Lucius was about to send an Aguamenti his way when they suddenly extinguished, Harry slumping over more tired than he'd been in years.

"Oh my Gods." Blaise breathed, panickedly running his fingers over the previously blazing skin. "How- what the bloody hell, Harry? As far as I knew you weren't the Torch."

"Stop making mundane references." He mumbled back, eyeing his hands as well.

"You-"

"Boys." Narcissa ground out in front of them. "Can you please stop joking around? Are you alright, Harrison?" The boy numbly nodded his head, and the woman raked a hand through his hair, carefully sliding the blanket back up his shoulders from where it had fallen. "Now. Lucius, go get the floor.
"Box of potions". You know which. Draco, Blaise, Harry, go to the sunroom. We will... put this aside for now, if only for the sake of celebrating the day, and then we will discuss this. Understand?"
The trio hurriedly nodded their head, and soon the four males were running off in their assigned directions, not wanting to disobey the mother dragon.

Harry was awkwardly perched on the sofa in the gathering room when a large box poofed into existence next to him. Used to this because of the house elves, he barely reacted, giving off no more than a twitch.

The room was warm as ever, and finally decorated for the season. A large Christmas tree was in the corner, covered in colourful baubles and lights captured in jars. There was a mound of packages underneath it, obviously the presents. The walls were draped with tinsel, something that was a bother in both Muggle and Magical worlds it seemed, and the house elves had spared no corner of the room from holly vines. A fire crackled in front of them, and Harry really would have enjoyed it if it weren't for the whole day before they entered. Draco and Blaise were arguing over him, apparently forgetting he was right there.

"Malfoy, if you tell them, I won't hesitate to hex your mouth shut and stick your damn eyes where the sun doesn't shine." Blaise hissed, wand jabbing into the pale boy's neck. Draco was reciprocating in kind, eyes cold in a way Harry hadn't seen before Hallow's Eve.

"You try it, Zabini, and I'll make sure you're stuck as a rat for a year and a night. Why can't you except the simple fact that some things need to be known is beyond me."

"Because it won't help!" Blaise exploded, grabbing Draco's collar in both hands with a red face, "It won't help, because we tried this Malfoy, we tried years ago before everything was so much worse, and you know what happened? My Mama was laughed at, because how could anyone abuse a child so badly, especially a famous one? Now shut up before I slap you with your own cintura*, tu idioto*." Blaise seethed, Draco flinching with a scowl. Silence fell as Blaise let go of him and leaned back into his seat, glaring at the fireplace rather ferociously. Harry sighed, stuck between the two of them and not knowing what to do. He helped Draco straighten his collar, and patted Blaise's hand, and was eternally grateful when the adults strode in, tense smiles on their faces.

"Now, why don't we open the presents? I'll call an elf to get us scones, too." Narcissa said, taking a seat in one of the armchairs. An elf instantly appeared with a tray, no doubt waiting for the signal, and set it down on the end table between them; the tray was laden with scones and toast, small things no one could really cause damage with. Lucius took a piece of toast for himself before sitting down as well, peering at the pile in interest. Many owls had come recently bearing gifts sent early, which were taken by the elves until Christmas day. It was an old trick that kept small children from tearing into theirs prematurely.

The boys awkwardly picked at their food, Blaise giving Draco a silent apology with a particularly large scone. Harry nibbled at his toast, feeling more queasy than anything resembling wanting food.

"Now, who wants to go first?" Narcissa asked cheerily, clapping her hands. They looked between each other before Harry not-so-discreetly kicked Draco in the shin, dragging a hiss and glare out of him. He sighed, and resignedly raised his hand. The two adults snickered at the boys' behavior. Narcissa waved her wand, and four packages went flying about the room into the laps of her, Blaise, Harry, and Lucius. The males stared at her confusedly until she broke down and chuckled behind her hand.

"I never said what I was going to do, you four. I only asked who was going to go first. Now go on, open them! Let's see what my dear Dragon's gotten us." Lucius sighed at his wife's antics and patted
his blushing son's head, long used to the woman's moods. They carefully removed the wrapping on
the packages, Harry not wanting to possibly break it and Lucius and Blaise not wanting to create a
mess. Harry was honestly astonished by what was inside.

Draco, through some breakthrough of insight, had gotten him a set of books; he knew he hadn't
talked about them around the other boy, much less even mentioned them to the others. It was a three-
book set, written by a Greek harpy that discussed the details in muggle history that led into magical.
The books were incredibly in-depth, and he'd been pining after them like a sitcom teenaged-girl.

"Draco, just how did you know I wanted these?" He whispered to the other boy, leaning into his
side.

"Well, you're always going on about history, and they seemed like the sort of thing you'd read." The
boy replied uncomfortably, still blushing. Harry gave him a hard stare. "...I may have prodded
Longbottom for some of the things you'd read." Harry snorted, and gave the other boy a quick hug,
ignoring his grunt of indignation.

"Thanks, you blockhead." Glancing around, he could see that Draco had certainly put thought into
what he had gifted them; Blaise had received a pair of steel reading glasses that, presumably,
wouldn't break when he sat on them again. The boy seemed to have the unbreakable habit of putting
them right where he was going to sit. He had given Narcissa a lovely shawl that he had probably
asked Pansy after, and Lucius a set of quills and ink. It was rather... considerate, for a boy who
tossed people's feelings out the window faster than a manic god tossing billionaires.

"Oh, thank you, Draco. This looks beautiful." Narcissa murmured, fingering some of the outer
designing of her shawl. Lucius nodded in agreement, giving his son that strange look all fathers had
of you done good.

"Hey, why don't we move past me and see what Harry got us? I'm sure they're great." Draco
hurriedly said, waving his hands frantically at him mother. The woman gave him an indulgent smile
even as Harry squawked, and waved her hand to send three packages flying. They were hastily
wrapped with brown paper and twine, and hardly indicative of what was inside due to a lucky charm
he had found.

"U-um, we don't have to do me next, Blaise can go-" Harry rushed out, reaching out to do, well,
something before Draco smacked his hand lightly, smirking.

"No, you can't get out of this, Potter. Now, just what has you so-..." Draco stared down at what was
inside, speechless. Harry buried his head in his hands with a groan. With cautious hands, Draco
slowly turned it this way and that, marveling at it. At last he picked it up, revealing it to the others.

"It" was a glass-cut, blue-tinted dragon figure, about 5 inches tall and 2 wide. It had a long, spanning
tail and narrow head, ending in a sharp snout.

"Merlin, Harry where did you get this?" Draco breathed, examining the small details, "This is-this is
amazing!"

"I made it."

Everyone paused, staring at the small boy again, who flushed to his roots and ran a hand through his
hair. "I like making stuff. I didn't know exactly what to get you, so I decided to go with the craft
route."

"Harry, you can't be serious." Draco said incredulously, giving him a wide eye, "This is- this is
"I transfigured it from a block. It takes a while to get all the small details, but once I finish, I just anchor the effects." Lucius made a small noise, and Narcissa quietly opened the package that had landed in her lap addressed to *Mister and Madame Malfoy*. She was delighted and slightly unsurprised to find a swan with spread wings inside, tinted a light green.

"You always told me you bought them from an antique shop." Blaise mused, peering down at the dragon, "I should have expected this from you. Not like you'd have enough for something like this anyways."

"Wait, he's done this before?" Draco demanded, leaning over Harry and towards the Zabini.

"Oh yeah, for the past three years. First he did a meerkat of all things, then a raven and panther." Blaise said amiably. "I still have them sitting on my shelf at home."

"That's very nice of you, Blaise." Harry cut in, smiling. The taller boy just slung an arm around his shoulders.

"Well you're excellent at it, Harrison. Thank you for the gifts." Narcissa murmured, gently placing the swan in the middle of the table. Harry reddened again, and ducked his head.

"Hey, wait," Draco said suddenly, "What'd you get Blaise? I don't think you showed." Blaise rolled his eyes and sighed, pulling out a small mirror from his own bundle. Draco stared at it confusedly until Narcissa let out a small "oh", covering her mouth with her hand.

"A two-way mirror?"

"We always talked about it, and it'd still be useful when we're not at school." Harry started uncomfortably, squirming in his seat. Blaise snickered at his behavior.

"Fratello*, don't start, you know I love it. Now, why don't we move on, yeah?" The others murmured their agreement, and the next "round" plopped into their laps. Harry's was particularly light, and small in his hands. Opening it revealed a chain with a small locket. He turned it over in his hands curiously, watching the colours shift on its surface. It was unlocked, and he opened it to see an unfamiliar man and woman staring back at him, grinning. Looking closer, he was stunned to recognise the woman's eyes and nose, and the man's hair and chin. He'd seen them on himself for the past 11 years.

"Blaise, is this.." He trailed off, glancing at the other boy under his lashes. Blaise hummed, tightening his arm around Harry's shoulders, and slightly nodded, pretending to be more focused on Draco crooning over the recent addition of *The Afterlife as told by May Bird*. Harry huffed out a half-laugh, and snuggled into the larger boy's side. He put the necklace on, and that was that.

There were other presents from their other friends, and some occasionally for Narcissa and Lucius. Neville had mailed him a small flower that shone in the sunlight, and Hermione had predictably sent him a book on defensive spells. Pansy took a stab at his pride and sent hair-straightening shampoo (which he would begrudgingly use later), and the others had sent assorted candies. There was a brown, unobtrusive package as well, but seeing as there was no indication as to who it was from, he had decided not to touch it for the time being. At one point, Lucius picked up a small box that stank and opened it only to nearly drop it. From his and Narcissa's chuckles, and how they hurried out of the room afterwards, Harry had a feeling he didn't want to know.

But then there was Theo's.
The boy had been giving him strange vibes since Hallow's Eve, and the weekend before winter holidays had set Harry on edge. But, peering at what the mousy boy had gotten him, he... couldn't really tell what the build-up was. They were books, four in fact. Not part of a series, one not even labelled. *Magic Theorem, Physical Manifestations of Energy and the Astringent Relationships*, a small, leather-bound book that, when he opened it, turned out to detail meditative techniques and mental shielding, and *Atronaches*. He was holding the last one now, trying to figure out just what was up with it. There was no summary, no note, no indication to what it was about, much less whether or not it was actually anything useful.

"Hey, Draco, Blaise," He said, interrupting a argument over the last scone, "What's an Atronach?"

The two boys froze, staring at him with strange expressions. "Why do you ask, Harry?" Draco asked carefully, relinquishing his grip on the fabled scone. Blaise instantly took a bite out of it to lay claim, but still kept that odd expression.

"Theo sent me this book with that as its title, and I can't figure out what it means. The first few pages are just citations and history."

"It's...sort of a complicated thing, Harry." Blaise said hesitantly, laying his scone on the plate. "People still debate over what can be defined as an Atronach and what can't. Why did he send you that book?"

"Well, what do you two see it as?" Harry pushed, ignoring the question.

"Harry, it's not that simple." Blaise said frustratedly. "It's generally agreed that you don't talk about them. Atronaches are-are dangerous. I hate to say it, but they get so powerful that they go unstable and raze a city or something. I mean, there's the fire of Rome everyone knows about. Theories say that was started by one."

"Not to mention that they tend to get turned into weapons." Draco murmured, squinting at the book in Harry's hands. "Harry, let me see that. I think I've seen it before." Harry warily handed it over, watching as the blond boy inspected it, flipping a few pages. "Yeah, I know I've seen this. I think Theo's older brother used to have this- remember that crisis where the whole family thought he was one?" Blaise nodded his head next to him, but Harry was completely lost.

"Though he was- what? An Atronach?"

"Yeah. Were terrified someone else would find out, so they found some books that wou-" Draco cut himself off, his horrified eyes jerking up to meet Harry's. He lunged towards Harry's books, glancing over the titles and skimming the first few pages. The dread on his face grew and grew.

"Oh Merlin, Harry."

It was uncomfortable on the floor. But Draco and Blaise refused to let him up until they had checked the books for any pranks or hexes. Draco was muttering under his breath, and Blaise had a pensive air about him.

"Harry." Blaise spoke abruptly, "What colour am I?"

"Indigo." Harry murmured without thinking, poking at the flower Neville sent. He didn't react when his mind caught up with his mouth, and didn't react to Blaise's sigh.

"Draco?"
"Orange-red."

"You?"

"Green."

"... The strings. That's what tipped him off." Blaise said, eyes narrowing. "Gods, how are we this stupid to not notice? I'm so sorry Harry."

"Sorry?" He asked, sitting up. "Why are you sorry? It's not exactly your fault I was born strange."

Blaise gave him a sharp look.

"Don't call yourself that." He bit out, softening when Harry flinched at his tone. "Fratello, look at me. it is a matter of how we could have helped you with this if we had figured it out sooner. There were sure signs we should have spotted- the strings, your talent with magic, even you not having to wear your glasses anymore. You didn't go to an optometrist, right? I overheard Snape telling Mama about the visit to Diagon. He said you just stopped wearing them after you suddenly collapsed."

Harry bowed his head in embarrassment, at what he didn't know, and shuffle a bit in his seat. A hand landed on his shoulder, squeezing comfortingly, and Blaise gave him a small smile.

"You aren't strange Harry, you're just... powerful."

"That doesn't change the fact we need to figure out how to hide this." Draco broke in, closing a book with a snap. "If someone breaks into his mind, or he accidentally goes off the deep end, then we're all in hot water for not telling anyone."

"Then he can learn Occlumency, and I can bribe Smith or Mama into teaching him how to suppress his magic." Blaise argued, frowning. Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Harry cut him off, not wanting another fight ending in threats.

"You know, I doubt anyone will really notice. I've managed the past five years without anyone noticing." He said, "And not much really happens. I wake up tired sometimes, and I can see weird colours, but that's about it, besides some wandless and wordless." The two boys gave him disbelieving looks.

"Harry, that's a big deal. External effects and magical effects are the cornerstones of the development; it's always said that when an Atronach develops wand and wordless, then it's all uphill from there." Harry furrowed his brow and glanced down, not quite sure that was true. Magic normally started to grow and change around 11, hence why children were taught at that age. It made no sense to base a group on a school they may gain.

"You know what, it doesn't matter." The Zabini sighed, running a hand over his face. "Merlin, this day is so messed up..."

"Yes, I'd say so. Now that everything is through, why don't one of you explain this morning?" A voice called from behind them. Harry jumped and twisted around, managing to almost fall down, and Blaise let out a small eep.

Behind them were the imposing figures of Lucius, Narcissa, and Professor Snape, a satchel resting against his side and a stony expression on his face. Harry faintly gulped, and cursed every deity in the sky that he couldn't just disappear into nothing to avoid this.

TRANSLATIONS
Fratello - brother
perché è...- Why is...
cintura - belt
tu idiota - you idiot
Snape somehow surprised everyone by ordering the two elder Malfoys out of the room.

"It's a breach of confidentiality and the boys’ privacy, Narcissa," He said curtly, cutting off a protest from the pale woman, "And I refuse to have you two hovering over my shoulder the entire time and shooting off comments. Now out." He shooed them out, shutting the door and turning back to the trio of boys. He gave them a piercing stare, switching between each of them as if he were trying to read their mind, and Harry shifted uncomfortably, wary due to their earlier conversation. The books behind him dug uncomfortably into his back.

He knew he was cornered.

"...Draco. Mr. Zabini. I have magical and life-binding oaths from both your parents- who insisted on each- that you have never been abused or neglected in any way save proper disciplining. The other families in Slytherin are being investigated as well, by trusted healers who know not to omit anything and to use persuasion when necessary. However, seeing as Harry’s guardians cannot vouch in such restrictive ways, I am afraid we must go on examination alone. If you would please excuse yourselves for a time..."

"No!" Harry blurted, leaning forward before catching himself. "I-I mean, do they really have to leave? If it's a matter of my privacy, I have no problem with them being here." He added hurriedly, glancing over to the fellow snakes.

"Actually, it might be better if I leave." Draco slowly admitted, a guilty cast to his eyes, "I'd rather not make you uncomfortable Harry, and knowing mother, she may badger me into letting something loose." Harry made a noise of displeasure, and his hands clenched. But he understood what the other boy was worried about. From what he had seen of Narcissa Malfoy, the woman would hound someone to the ends of the earth if it meant getting her way. Not that such a attribute was negative all the time, but, well.

Harry watched the other boy stand and slowly trudge out of the room, no small amount of anxiety resting in his heart. Blaise stayed resolutely next to him, blank expression on his face and arm around his.

"Mama's too polite to say anything." He declared when Snape sent him a questioning glance, which got him a raised eyebrow in return- because when was Nicola Zabini polite unless she wanted something?- but simply shook his head and set down his satchel.

"How your mother is does not matter Mr. Zabini seeing as you are not family, and as such cannot stay in the room." He replied, opening the bag and taking out vials of various sizes. Harry stared dubiously at one that was a murky, brown colour. It was darker than mud on a stormy day.

"Everyone is related in the pureblood lines, sir, and it would be better for someone he is more familiar with to be there, to ensure he does not feel uncomfortable or boxed in." The boy argued back, a gleam entering his eyes and a lilt in his voice. "Would you rather he panic because he does not want you to do something? Or allow someone to be there that will calm him down?"

"Oh my God, Blaise, I can handle myself, you patronizing tomato ass." Harry hissed, unintentionally sending sparks up the other boy's arm, making him wince. But Blaise held steady, and his gaze didn't waver from Professor Snape's, who was scowling.
"..Over on the couch, Mr. Zabini. If you move or say anything untoward again, I will send you out and alert your mother to your behaviour." The man finally growled, clenching his wand. Blaise obliged easily enough, scooting away from Harry and hopping onto the couch. Snape waved his wand at the door, muttering something under his breath. Deep red flowed out of his wand and spanned the room, coating the walls and windows. Harry supposed he was putting up a ward, or something of that ilk. Blaise watched like a hawk as Snape waved his wand over Harry a few times, frowning in thought when nothing happened. Snape leaned down to Harry's height, glancing down to his lap where the book - oh shite - was resting before flicking his eyes back to Harry's, far too calm for how he had thought the man would react. The man swiftly cast a silent spell, and Harry felt a tingling come over him, followed by a strange sense of being covered in a layer of wax, almost. He shuddered in disgust at the feeling.

"My apologies for how it must feel, Harry. It is necessary to perform the preliminary spells." He said smoothly, waving his wand much slower now, repeating the movements he had done earlier. A piece of parchment appeared next to him, growing and growing as he grabbed and looked it over. As it slowed and reached the to his knees, the creases in his faces were deep, and his expression grim.

"Please take off any glamours you may have on, Harry." He spoke softly, fingers tracing some of the words that must have been traced onto the parchment. Harry sent a questioning peek at Blaise, who was stiff in his seat. The Italian gave him a shrug, as if to say nothing to do about it, and continued to watch the interaction. So Harry sighed and shivered a bit, slowly sliding off the ring that hadn't left his finger in 5 months. The skin underneath was paler, and he could immediately see the difference. There was no way he wouldn't.

The fake finger disappeared, and the tiny scars reappeared, and his famed curse scar that he had refused to glimpse at for years was back for all the world to see. He felt naked with all his pains from the years bared for the world to see, and shifted his eyes when Snape peered down at him.

The man slowly kneeled, still switching his eyes between and the parchment, all the while searching for things Harry did and didn't know. He murmured something when he saw the one crossing his lips, and growled when he took his damaged hand in his, turning it over and carefully observing the scars. The man muttered at this scar, and tsked at that discolouration. Soon, with slow movements, he reached into the satchel again, this time taking out small pieces of paper, surprising the boys.

"What-what's that for, Professor?" Harry asked cautiously, edging away slightly.

"To properly record visible injuries." The man replied shortly, waving his wand. Harry quickly pulled back, eyes wide.

"What? Why do you need to record them? They're just old injuries- accidents from stupid decisions!" The boy exclaimed, holding the earlier-grasped hand close to his chest. His eyes were shifty, and a flush crept up his face. "Just stupid accidents made by a stupid kid..."

"You are far from 'stupid', Mr. Potter, and I would like you to refrain from calling yourself such." Snape growled, gently tugging the young boy's hand away. Harry pulled it back and scooted backwards, confused as Snape let him. The dour man scowled and pulled on a piece of his hair, closing his eyes when Harry's bewildered stare didn't let up.

"I am not going to force you to let me examine you, Harry. I am not going to force you to show me anything, tell me anything, or even let me see anything. I only want to make sure what is written on this," He paused, holding up the roll of parchment, "is accurate. Or inaccurate, as magic is not all-powerful. Will you let me do so?"

Harry's mouth twisted, and he gave Blaise a desperate glance again, flickering his eyes between his
friend and his teacher. But Blaise gave nothing away, no encouragement or discouragement. His expression his blank, his eyes barely creased in what might have been irritation or worry or sleepiness or watchfulness. Both wore calm expressions, giving nothing away and leaving him in the dark.

This was his choice, for once. His to decide, his to make.

With creaky movements, ever-so-slightly and mightly jerky, he held out his hand to Professor Snape, flinching when the Potions master took it in his own and probed around the scarred tissue. It didn't hurt, not anymore, but he still expected pain. Some kind of pain.

"Improperly healed, lucky you didn't catch an infection or gangrene." The man muttered darkly, his eyes narrowing. He waved his wand over the stump and then a piece of paper; Harry was startled when a near-photographic copy of the scar appeared on it. "I remember Smith getting into a frenzy over protection laws a few years back. Something about protecting our children from neglect and mutilation, and raising awareness to those in mundane families. I assume this is the cause?"

Harry slowly nodded his head, brows creasing. "He, um... he said he would do something. That they-" a quick glance to Blaise showed him squeezed-shut eyes- "were going to do something to help. But he showed up about a month afterward muttering about muggles and whumpers, or something. I couldn't really catch it." Snape tilted his head in thought, pursing his lips.

"Mugwump?" The man asked, setting the boy's hand down. He turned his attention to Harry's curse scar, prodding at it through the waxy film Harry felt.

"That might have been it. Really wasn't listening."

"If it was what he said, then this is far more a problem than we thought, Harry, and far more truthful than I thought Nicola was being." The man murmured, poking Harry's scar with the tip of his wand. Sparks flew out, and he hurriedly drew back. "There's no telling the amount of uproar this will cause."

"U-uproar? Sir, I don't want this to go, go bloody public! The last thing I've ever wanted is for my personal life to be splattered across the front pages as some political soapbox! It's bad enough that so many people know already!" The Potter yelped, "The last thing I need is that!"

"As much I despise saying this Harry, the public isn't blind." Blaise finally spoke up, voice quiet. "Many of our classmates have noticed the strange ticks our group has, or how skinny you are, or that nothing quite adds up. There's no doubt that they have mailed their parents about how strangely the 'Great Harry Potter' is acting, and how the Snakes might be hurting him, or worse. If they do not target us, they will turn to the next thing in line. Those cani you live with." Harry gave him a disbelieving stare, the words not quite sinking in, and startled when Professor Snape put a hand on his shoulder. The man looked deep into his eyes, understanding, but not sympathetic.

"Nothing is hidden from the masses, Harry. All comes to light, or is woven into untruths they eat and thrive one." Harry stared at him silently, knowing the man was right, before averting his eyes to the floor.

"Please take off your shirt so I can check for the rest, Harry." Professor Snape asked softly, not moving. Harry obeyed, wordless, not reacting when the Potions master tsked again and again, waving his wand over the pieces of paper multiple times. He watched as old cuts from where a belt buckle had cut in too deep appeared, and as burns from when he was too young to really use the stove dug themselves into the white paper, leaving ugly marks. He absently supposed his body was an ugly sight, with all the dents and nicks that were covered when he wore his ring. A catalogue of
his screw-ups.

He wondered if he could destroy the papers before the Professor could show them to anyone.

But the Professor seemed to know what he was thinking of and slid each paper into his satchel as soon as it was finished forming. The bag was no doubt fire-proof and built to resist destruction, and magic-resistant. There were at least a dozen papers covered when he was done, all with the worst injuries the boy had accumulated over the years. There were, of course, ones not visible, such as old broken bones or concussions or even dangerous fevers that most likely would have done him off if not for magic. Snape read over the list again, trying to figure out the best way to broach the next topic.

"Harry... would you feel comfortable telling me just how you received these? It would help clarify certain matters." He tentatively put forth, watching the Potter's face for any change. There was none, besides a slight twitch in the corner of his eye and the clenching of his lips.

"I cut off my own finger, and caused the burns. Too clumsy. Any concussions were because I slipped running from Dudley, and any broken bones are because he caught me. The-" he paused here, taking a breath before rushing forward again, "The scars on my back are from what they look like they're from." Snape frowned.

"Harry, as clumsy as you were, you cannot have possibly been so much so that you cut off your own finger and caused severe burns to your person. And would you please explain what 'they look like they're from' means? I would rather you say it then go on assumption." A scowl flickered across Harry's face and he nearly snapped at the mean, but he reeled in his frustration. Instead, he merely grit his teeth, green racing across his fingertips. The wax feeling built, covering and covering him.

"I got beaten by- with a belt because I couldn't cook a roast in an hour and ruined a dinner party that would have gotten him a promotion." He bit out, hands fisting, "And the only reason he stopped was because of the fact that when he went near me again, the tellie started vibrating and almost flew off the stand into him. I cut off my own finger because I was trying to handle a butcher's knife with head trauma and missed the meat, and I burned myself because I couldn't properly use the stove at the age of four."

Professor Snape said nothing, only jotted something down on another piece of paper. He mutely turned back to Harry and prodded him in the chest with his wand before jumping away. A burst of light went through the room and when the spots cleared from Harry's eyes, he saw that just about everything in the room was on fire, including the Professor and Blaise. He yelped and quickly put them out with an extinguish before running around and trying to stomp out some of the worst fires.

Professor Snape was saying something behind him, and he jumped when the man grabbed him and forced him to sit down on the couch. The man put out the particularly bad blaze Harry had been attempting to control before turning back to the two boys, who were huddled on the couch.

"What just happened?" Harry squeaked, peering around in confusion and slight fear at all the scorch marks now adorning the furniture and walls. Professor Snape sighed, and bent down to pick something up. Looking closer, Harry saw that it was the book Theo had sent. The one he had been holding when the three adults had walked in.

"As I said Mr. Potter, I believe this is far more of a problem than we thought."

Harry walked around in a slight daze, left to his own devices after the Professor had left. The moment the man was out the floo, Blaise had run off in the other direction claiming he had something he needed to do, and Draco was still skulking in his room. So Harry was left to wander
around and try to avoid Narcissa, who had given him worried glances when they came out. Lucius was more busy trying to figure out how the three of them had managed to burn the whole room.

The Manor really was quite beautiful. Portraits hanged among landscapes, and wide windows opened out to the grounds, showing trees and plains that stretched to the wards. The walls were a gentle blue colour, and the floor speckled marble. It was a sight to behold.

He gazed at the portraits, seeing small angles and colours and traits that were in Lucius and Draco. He could see the progressive bleaching of hair, the sharpening of features as the centuries progressed. It was fascinating, being able to view the change of a whole family. Did the Potters have something like this? Lines of portraits of the ancestors, going back decades or centuries and showcasing the changes of the line? Did the Blacks?

He paused at one, something in his memory niggling. It was the woman who had stopped them before, asking after his parents. She had a range of colours, he could now see, not the plain dark he had thought of her before. There were accents of blue in her eyes, red around her cheekbones. It provided much more than a drab portraiture - brought to her life, as the others in the hall had been. She gazed down at him, solemn, waiting for him to do something.

"Um.. what did you say your name was, ma'am?" He asked hesitantly, turning to fully stand in front of her. "We were in a bit of a hurry when you caught our attention, and I believe I was a bit rude."

"And I caught you at an inopportune time." She replied, bowing her head, "I know you three were hurrying to dine with Lucius and Narcissa. I should have waited until a later time. My name is Dorea Black, Harrison. I don't believe I was alive when you were born." Harry tilted his head in thought. That name was familiar, but just where had he heard it? It was important, obviously, if it was bothering him this much.

"Why would it matter, ma'am? I know that I have Black blood, but I doubt that the family considers each and every baby important." Dorea chuckled and covered her mouth, eyes shining with amusement.

"The Blacks treasure each new child in the family, no matter where they came, boy. And my maiden name may be Black, but it was 'Potter' for 40 years." Harry's jaw dropped, the memory finally clicking into place, and he scrambled back to get a better view of her. Of course. Dorea Black was the woman Draco had mentioned who had married in - just how did he forget that? Now that he was actually aware of it, he could see where he had gotten her nose, and how her hair was as dark as his. It cast her in a new light, and he swallowed around a hard lump in his throat, staring up at his grandmother.

"I-I did not remember that." He squeaked, scowling when his voice came out high. He cleared his throat. "M-my apologies, ma'am-" Dorea waved it off, now making no effort to cover her smirk.

"I cannot expect you to know if you have not been exposed much, young one. Knowing James, he most likely cursed our names and declared us dark wizards?" Harry cleared his throat again, this time with an air of discomfort, and averted his eyes.

"Uh, James and Lily Potter are dead, ma'am. Died around 1991. I-I'm sorry." He said timidly, flinching at the sharp intake of breath following it.

"How did they die? Tell me." She demanded, leaning forward in her portrait. Her nose was almost touching the invisible barrier that separated paint and reality.

"V-the Dark Lord killed them. From what I've been told, he'd been hunting them for months. They'd
gone into hiding, but he found them and invaded our house in Godric's Hollow. Killed Dad before coming after Mum. She—she died trying to protect me."

"And how did you survive? No one escapes the Dark Lord's clutches, especially a babe!"

"I don't know," He honestly answered with a shrug, "Everyone just says I defeated him— which doesn't really make sense since I was a baby—and when they found me, the house was wrecked and the Dark Lord gone. Dumbledore said he was dead." Dorea disappeared from view, tramping around her portrait and cursing up a storm. Harry pinkened at some of them and covered his ears, waiting until she calmed. It took some time.

"You'd think with how those two gossip I'd have been informed of this a decade ago." Dorea snarled, her lips drawn back. "Thank you for finally telling me this, Harrison. There is little chance I would have learned it without you." She gruffly wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, still muttering.

"...Well, I think they were happy up until then," He ventured, "They at least had that. And the war's stopped, except for a few laws that get proposed every once in a while." Dorea scoffed, shifting in her seat.

"Happy... What a concept with that boy. He never seemed happy with us. I was alive until 1977, and I can remember James chasing after that girl—Lily Potter nee Evans, I'm guessing?—constantly. I suppose she finally gave in. But they were not there for the past ten years, no? You've grown without your parents, a saddening tragedy. How have you fared, Harrison?" Harry faltered, and struggled to say something, nothing positive coming up.

"..I've been alright. I mean, it could be better, but I at least have Blaise and the other Snakes. It could be better, yeah, but everything could be better, it's been..." He muttered, trailing off at the end. He hugged his arms as if to ward off the memories, and shivered when Dorea gave him a piercing eye.

"Well? Tolerable? Horrible? What has been happening, young one?" She murmured, placing a hand against the barrier. A bitter chuckle escaped him, and when they started, he couldn't stop. Harry curled into himself, his body shaking with the force of the laughter. He had to force himself to stop, and spread his arms in dark amusement.

"This, all of this—the magic, Draco Blaise everyone and everything, it's like a dream. Some, some miracle happened when I was young that let me meet Blaise, made me realise 'oh, I'm a damn servant' and I was content with knowing that and having a safety net of my group, knowing I could escape when I was older or threaten them with compliance to ensure my safety and just tolerate it all but now someone, probably Nicola with how Blaise and Lucius and everyone else is acting, decided to splatter everyone's private business on the front page of the Prophet, like it was their choice to make, their allowance to completely ruin the life of someone else!"

"Did—did she even consider how I would feel? How—how whoever else she had gutted would feel? I thought she actually considered me, actually took into thought what I was always saying in our letters. I don't want to be some martyr, didn't want to be, and now I'm stuck with this and the boys breathing down my neck because oh the Ministry's labeled me as some incredible danger! What am I supposed to do, supposed to say? I'm not the great person the others seem to delude themselves into thinking I am, I'm just a freak!" He shouted, falling to the floor. Dorea watched on with pursed lips as he silently shook, refusing to cry. She put her hand against the barrier again, cursing the limitations of magic.

"It may be bad now, little one, and there is no guarantee it will grow better. But there is no guarantee it will grow worse, either. You must not give up because you feel cornered, or because your secrets
have been laundered. Utilize what has been written, twist it to your advantage. Analyse what is happening, and mold it to your liking. You are not a freak, or stupid, or in a dream. You are here, and you are a **Black**. Use what you have been given to win, as we have done for generations upon generations."

"But I can't *do that* if there's nothing to work with! I-I'm in deep waters, in the middle of the ocean with no sense of direction! I don't know who exactly came forward, or what might happen next, or even what to do about my magic!" He hissed, raising his head from his knees.

"You are not." Dorea said firmly, "You have a suspicion of who did it, yes? And you know what you are, whatever that is. You have your Blaise and Draco, and the others who are with you. Ask for their help- no Snake is too proud or too arrogant not to offer it. If they are, they are not true Snakes. You have made it this far, with less help. And others may help with your magic... tell me, what is the problem? Why has the Ministry labeled you?"

Harry mutely raised his hand, willing for tendrils of the green, green energy to rise and twist together, eventually forming a chrysanthemum. He then crushed it, letting the particles float in the air until they gravitated back to his hand, fading into the skin. Dorea watched with wide eyes, and only let out a breath when all the pieces had disappeared.

"Circe's child," She whispered, still staring at his hand, "For one of them to be in our line.. in mine.. Merlin and Morgana.." He glanced at her before turning back, creating another shape, this time a dog.

"We just found out. Or rather, Theo decided to send me a set of books and Draco and Blaise subsequently panicked because they realised what he was getting at. I-they told me I was something dangerous. Something that couldn't turn out well- I'd go unstable, or that I'd be turned into a weapon. And then Professor Snape said that it was all propaganda and that there's not much actual information on Atronaches besides the dynamics.. I don't know what to believe." He crushed the dog in his palm, the green oozing out between his fingers before slipping back up and fading. "What did you call it? Circe's children?"

"There- there are many terms." Dorea said shakily, gathering herself, "I have heard them named Amaterasu's Rays, Circe's Children, Atronaches, Mantrik. They have many names, spanning cultures and history. They are, however, always figures of immense power and infinite abilities. Do you know you are truly one?"

Harry hummed. "I've been able to do wandless and wordless magic since I was seven, can see magic around people and objects, and am somehow doing this. I managed to incapacitate a troll last Hallow's Eve. I've also started suspecting that I've been absorbing magic somehow. It'd explain what happened in Diagon Alley."

"Then there is substantial evidence." Dorea mumbled to herself. She cupped her chin in thought, a troubled expression adorning her face. "And you say the Ministry is spreading negative propaganda? What a travesty. In my time, to have a child of Circe in your line was the highest honour. It was thought that the First Witch was smiling down upon your family."

"Well, that's changed," Harry said crossly, "Now I amount to some dangerous, ticking time-bomb that needs to be locked up. I'm going to have to learn mind arts and dozens of protection and binding spells just to keep myself in check, since just the upstart of today's set me off more than twice. Add that to the abuse scandal gearing up and wonderful school, and I'm just a bundle of roses right now."

The two fell silent, dancing in their own thoughts. Harry kept forming shapes with his magic, trying to make them bigger and bigger. So far, he'd managed to create a life-sized meerkat and crup along...
with the dog and flower. It distracted him, and kept away the things lurking at the edges of his mind. Dorea was thinking as well, but on a far darker path than her grandson.

Finally, as Harry began to stand and stretch, Dorea called down to him once more.

"I knew someone like you, Harrison. He was not a kind child, and he did not grow to be a kind man. But," She paused, and sighed here, "But he came out on top each and every time he was faced with challenge. It is a crying shame that he turned out as he did, and that you could not meet him as he was. He was far dangerous than anything you will hopefully encounter. I daresay I should not have even mentioned him." She said solemnly, hands crossed in her lap.

"N-no, tell me about him! If he managed to best this, then he could help me! And I know I need all of it that I can reach, especially from someone more experienced than a first-year!" He demanded, giving her desperate eyes. Dorea shook her head and turned to leave, and in a fit of panic Harry grabbed the edges of her frame. Cracks danced up it and he drew back in horror, covering his mouth with his hands. A long, stagnant pause hanged in the air, Harry refusing to even glance at the older woman while she creeped around the edges in shock. Dorea covered her eyes with a hand after a time, as if to shield herself from what she was about to say.

"In Lucius' study, there should be a bookshelf hidden behind spells and a wall. The buffoon walked by me one day bragging of it with his 'acquaintances'. There, you'll need to find a small alcove..."

This had been unbelievably easy. Harry was slightly worried with how quickly he had slipped past the defenses on Lucius' office.

(Then again, he supposed the whole probable "magic absorbing" thing had something to do with it).

All it had taken was a small touch to the door, and the magic rushed to his fingers, disappearing with a chill on his fingertips that went up his arm. He had to pull it back quickly, or else the whole ward would have gone instead of just the small hole he had somehow made. Honestly, he still didn't get the dynamics of that. Didn't think he wanted to.

He quietly opened the door, knowing from a quick portrait reconnaissance that the elder Malfoys were in their bedchambers, sleeping. That was understandable, since it was well past midnight and he honestly shouldn't be up either. But he had to do this, and he hadn't been able to even doze off. His mind was too active, too uneased tonight. The room inside was well-kept, with a fireplace off to the side and a landscape of the sea hanging over it. A desk sat at the far end, covered in parchments. There were bookshelves to the right, as Dorea had said, and he could see the faint outline of silver behind one, along with foreboding, darker outlines. It seemed Lucius was hiding more than one would guess.

He trotted over to the bookshelf and pondered how he would move it. Should he levitate it with a spell, or make it lightweight? Maybe he could try to-oh. He paused, staring blankly at the overt and garish, red book on the bottom shelf. Surely... no. He couldn't have. Wizards can't be that stupid.

Stepping forward, he tugged on the bright book. There was a loud click, and the bookshelf began to shift, slowly sinking into the floor. After about a minute, only enough to make a step was poking out. He stared at it a bit, more than a little disappointed. First the Wizarding world had stereotypes abound, and then there's a villain-esque bookshelf that apparently no one noticed? Morgana save me, he thought exasperatedly.

There indeed was a bookshelf, the silver outline around it much more prominent, and he stepped forward, searching for the alcove Dorea had mentioned. From what she said, it would be at the
top.. Ah! There it is! He grinned victoriously and commanded a silent rise, hands reaching up as his body floated to the ceiling.

A small, nearly hidden alcove was hidden at the top, nearly invisible to anyone standing on the ground. It was layered and layered in both silver and a sickly red. He curiously touched some of the foreign magic, snatching his hand back when it shocked his finger. His eyes narrowed, and he suddenly darted his hand forward through the shield, flinching from the sudden shock and pain racing up his arm. But he stayed still, and waited for them to crawl up his arm, glowing fainter and fainter the higher they reached. He only moved when the layers of web had crept fully into his arm and faded. Letting out a shaky breath, he reached further and picked up what lay in the alcove.

It was lightweight, and almost familiar to his senses, like seeing the face of a relative who you haven't been in contact with for years. A shiver went down his spine, and he quickly pocketed it and reversed his work, throwing up his own wards and illusions that would hopefully fool Lucius if he ever checked before floating back down. He stood around for a few moments, trying to figure out how to get the bookshelf back into position before experimentally tapping it with his foot. He shook his head when it slowly moved back up with a grating sound.

He left the room and returned to his room in less than ten minutes, no one in the manor noticing his nightly theft.

It was awkward the next morning. Whatever Snape had said to Lucius and Narcissa obviously wasn't enough for them, but one of them must have made a move and demanded the other stay silent, since they refused to even look at each other during breakfast. Blaise was doing the same to him, and Harry was already growing tired of it, wishing the other would just pretend like everything was alright and babble on about wine or cats or something. Draco was the only one acting any semblance of normal, complaining about Hermione's lengthy letter thanking him for whatever he had sent her. It had Harry rolling his eyes, but at least it was waters he knew.

He was spreading some strawberry jam on a slice of toast when Lucius cleared his throat, uneasily shifting in his seat. All three boys immediately looked to him, differing expression on their faces. Harry's was expectant, Draco's warning, and Blaise's dangerous; but the man ignored them and cleared his throat again, opening his mouth to speak.

"I apologise for the commotion yesterday boys. We could have handled that better than we did." He said quietly, wincing when Narcissa made some motion under the table. He shot a quick glare at her and continued. "We know you go back to Hogwarts in two days, and I was wondering if you wanted to go somewhere, as a sendoff of sorts." Harry blinked, and looked between the others, wondering what they should say. Anywhere magical was automatically ruled out, seeing as they had no desire to go into the chaos that'd be there. But there was very little chance the Malfoys would willingly set foot in anywhere mundane, putting them in a tight set of choices. Harry bit his lip in thought before perking up, glancing towards Draco.

"Hey, why don't we go to that park you're always raving about? I could finally see what you're talking about when you mean 'beautiful as a veela'." He teased, a small smile growing on his face when the blond gave him an excited gape.

"Yes! Could we go there, Father?" Draco asked, dancing a little in his seat before catching himself. Lucius hid a chuckle behind his hand at his son's behavior and nodded.

"We'll leave around noon."

"I apologize for the commotion yesterday boys. We could have handled that better than we did." He said quietly, wincing when Narcissa made some motion under the table. He shot a quick glare at her and continued. "We know you go back to Hogwarts in two days, and I was wondering if you wanted to go somewhere, as a sendoff of sorts." Harry blinked, and looked between the others, wondering what they should say. Anywhere magical was automatically ruled out, seeing as they had no desire to go into the chaos that'd be there. But there was very little chance the Malfoys would willingly set foot in anywhere mundane, putting them in a tight set of choices. Harry bit his lip in thought before perking up, glancing towards Draco.

"Hey, why don't we go to that park you're always raving about? I could finally see what you're talking about when you mean 'beautiful as a veela'." He teased, a small smile growing on his face when the blond gave him an excited gape.

"Yes! Could we go there, Father?" Draco asked, dancing a little in his seat before catching himself. Lucius hid a chuckle behind his hand at his son's behavior and nodded.

"We'll leave around noon."
It was a large, open-air glade that they arrived in when they apparated, a process that made Harry almost hurl on Draco's 20-galleon shoes. There were trees surrounding and swallowing the area, and bushes planted in a ring in front of those; large, blue flowers bloomed on them, despite the fact it was the end of December. Harry gazed around in delight, shifting a bit when a small child ran past.

"This is amazing." He murmured, bending to pick a small sprig from the ground. "Do they sustain this all on magic? Who does?"

"The Ministry." Answered Lucius, who was taking a seat on a nearby bench, "Two decades ago they arranged to have it created so those afraid to go into the muggle world could relax outside of markets like Diagon Alley." Narcissa sat next to him, giving the boys a gentle smile.

They went off in their own directions, Draco shouting something about getting flowers to show them and Blaise darting off as he had yesterday afternoon. Harry ambled around the opening, marveling at how well-tended to the plants were, and how bright the colours of everything were. A few children were running around, parents watching or chasing after them. Sometimes, one would shoot of a spell, turning hair green or making them bounce. It was peaceful.

When he reached the edge of the treeline, Harry sat down, leaning against a large bush. He could see everything from here, and the sun was so warm against his skin.

He didn't realise he had dozed off until Blaise sat next to him, hesitantly shaking his shoulder. He rubbed sleep-filled eyes and sent a questioning glance to his friend, who was looking quite uncomfortable.

"Hey Blaise, what is it? Finally going to tell me why you've been avoiding me like Patil and Lavender?" He joked. Blaise didn't respond, only frowning. Harry furrowed his brow, worried. "Hey, what is it? Did something happen while I was gone or something? You know I didn't mean the avoiding thing, right?" Blaise jerkily nodded his head before suddenly spinning to Harry and taking the smaller boy's hands in his own.

"Spiacente, spiacente fratellino e Io non posso dire esso abstanza." He whispered, lower lip clenched tight between his teeth. Harry gave him a bewildered look and tugged his hands away, replacing them on top of Blaise's.

"I still don't know Italian, but I do know some of that at least. Why are you apologising, Blaise? You didn't do anything." Harry asked, confused.

"But I have! Misguided words said out of worry, that, that sired this horrid mess!" The boy cried, eyes scrunching up, "I did not mean for this to explode, I swear! I only expressed my concern to Mama, I did not expect her to do this! I just-just-"

"Oy, calm down Blaise, it isn't the end of the world," Harry said sternly, rubbing the boy's back, "Listen, she probably would have done it at some point anyways, yeah? And there were multiple people who came forward, not just your Mama. On that point I should probably hunt down Theo and Neville when we get back to school... but that's besides the point. As upset I am, and angry, I'm not going to blame you for being worried."

"But you should! You should not just forgive people because of eventuality, you should be angry and stay angry! How can you just accept this, Harry?" Harry helplessly shrugged his shoulders, throwing his eyes upward.

"I adapt Blaise. It might be painful, but I adapt." Blaise made a noise of disapproval in the back of his throat, but fell silent. Harry continued to rub circles into his back, laughing inwardly over how
their roles seemed to be reversed. The darker boy's shoulders slowly relaxed, and he leaned into Harry's arms, huffing out a laugh when the smaller boy grunted.

"...Hey Blaise?"

"Hm?"

"What are we going to do about the giant dog thing? We haven't exactly made any headway in the past week or so."

"Oh. Theo and Hermione already hashed that out." Harry shoved Blaise away, gaping at him in disbelief.

"What do you mean, 'hashed that out'? Why didn't any of you tell me? What-what did they find out?" Blaise rubbed his head and dug around in his pocket, pulling out a scrap of paper a moment later. He handed it to Harry.

The only things written on it were "Nicholas Flamel- Philosopher's Stone," and "Cerberus- weakness to music," which was underlined several times over. Harry flipped it over, seeing if there was more, but that was it.

"They thought it would be best if we said as little as possible," Blaise explained, taking the note back and replacing it, "So if it got intercepted no one would really understand what it meant. I haven't actually told Draco yet, since he's been, y'know, less than enthusiastic about it. He even sent it with a generic barn owl, of all things. Can you believe it might really be the Philosopher's Stone?" Harry shook his head dumbly, still processing those tiny words. The Philosopher's Stone- that was like hiding the bloody holy grail in a secondary school. What insanity had gripped Flamel to ALLOW that? He ran a hand through his hair and realised it was down. Had he really been that distracted this morning that he forgot to put it up?

Tying it into a small tail, he finally replied to Blaise. "Honestly? No. Flamel'd be a fool if it really is there. Do you think there's any reason?"

"Maybe he's hiding it, or using it as insurance?" Blaise hummed. Harry shrugged, and was about to answer when something crashed into the ground next to him, startling the blood out of both of them. He hit whatever it was only to hear a pained groan and peeked over to see Draco, who was rubbing his head with a scowl.

"You know, if you didn't want me here, you could have just told me. I know you two love your brotherly bonding time." He grumbled, laying down a bundle of flowers. Harry turned to Blaise to ask just what he meant by "brotherly bonding time", but the other boy was shooting Draco daggers from his eyes.

"You know, if you didn't want me here, you could have just told me. I know you two love your brotherly bonding time." He grumbled, laying down a bundle of flowers. Harry turned to Blaise to ask just what he meant by "brotherly bonding time", but the other boy was shooting Draco daggers from his eyes.

"Uh." He stuttered, eyebrows rising, "Did I miss something here?" And while Blaise vehemently shook his head, Draco barked out a laugh that told him yes, yes he did.

"Oh Harry, so innocent. Idiot here's been calling you 'brother' for months. Honestly, you'd think you'd be suspicious and actually look up what 'fratello' meant." He said bemusedly, handing his bundle to Harry. Harry stared down at them, a mixture of daffodils and daisies in the strangest colours, mixtures of blues and reds and yellows and greens. He shuffled them a bit before tentatively glancing at Blaise under his lashes. The boy was blushing to the roots of his hair and wringing his hands. A smile crept on Harry's face, and he cast his eyes upwards once more.

"Five years. You'd think you'd just be able to tell me outright."
Harry paced nervously back and forth. He was in his room, packing for the trip back to Hogwarts tomorrow. Everyone else was surely asleep, the moon high in the sky and the house elves glowering at him disapprovingly when he went outside his room. His clothes were sandwiched into his trunk, books shrunk and slipped into a pocket sewn in the lining, and various knickknacks tucked away in the crevices. His wand, *Atronaches*, and *it* were the only things out, sprawled across his bed. He glanced at them anxiously before spinning on his heel once more. His dilemma was a large one, and nothing of the sort that would solve itself.

Should he bring them? What if someone searched his things, found the book and discovered his secret? Or if someone saw *it*, and saw how it reeked of magic and how it just couldn't possibly be anything normal? He'd be expelled, investigated, suppressed, something horrible and damming. But he KNEW he couldn't go without these, knew he definitely couldn't leave them in the Manor for the Malfoys to find, especially considering it was uncertain if he would ever return.

He let out a whine before halting and staring resolutely at the bed. With firm steps, he marched up to it and picked up *Atronaches*. A jerk of his hand and it was shrunk to the size of a pill. He opened the necklace Blaise had gifted him, gazing down at the faces of his parents for a moment. He carefully laid it inside, making sure not to cover his parents' faces. They smiled and waved as they had each time he opened it, and his mother mouthed a hello. He gave them a weak smile before shutting it and turning to the last issue. With trembling fingers, he delicately picked up the small journal, rubbing his fingers over its leather. He pried it open to the first page, and froze with fear as he saw what appeared.

**Hello. Are you the one who has been hovering around me the past while?**

---

**Translations:**

*cani* - dogs

*Spiacente, spiacente fratellino e Io non posso dire esso abbstanza* - I apologise, I apologise little brother and I cannot say it more
In Which the Night is Long

Started 22-12-14

Harry dropped the journal, cursed to himself, picked it up and nearly dropped it again. When he checked, the two sentences were still there in small cursive letters that looped together. It took him a moment of staring before he remembered it wasn't polite to just stare at something- someone? He didn't want to think about that- and grabbed a pen out of his suitcase. He doodled around on the page until the ink started to flow (which made the pages rustle, for some strange reason) and began to answer.

*Hello. I suppose? I didn't quite know that could sense that. Or just tell?*

**Not many do. Excuse my bluntness, but who are you?** Harry paused, and chewed on the end of his pen. Well, he certainly couldn't give his name out, if what Dorea had speculated was true, but if he threw out some random tidbit, then it would certainly be suspicious. *Maybe... Ah, I know what to say.*

*My housemates call me Augustus, because of some old memories. It fits in the mouth better than my real one right now. And you are?*

**My name is Tom Riddle. You don't go by your real name?**

*I'd rather not. It's part of a story that's more bothersome than anything interesting. Not as interesting as yours where you somehow make a journal able to respond, I'm sure. This time it was Tom who paused. Harry waited, sitting back on his haunches.*

*I'm afraid our stories are much the same, Augustus.* He wrote, the strokes of his quill cautious. **Why don't you tell me where you found me, instead?**

*Oh, my host isn't very cautious. Has enough cliches hidden in his house that it was easier than riling up a prefect.*

**And why did you take me? I highly doubt that you saw my journal and decided to take it on a fancy.** Harry cleared his throat and ducked his head, trying to think of how to phrase the fact that both him and Dorea had went on, well, a guess. Thinking back, he supposed it was just a tiny bit foolish to go blundering into it. Just a bit.

"*In Lucius' study, there should be a bookshelf hidden by spells and a wall. The buffoon walked by me one day bragging of it with one of his 'acquaintances'. There you'll find a small alcove in the top most corner of the wall, to the right." Dorea whispered, glancing from side to side to make sure the other portraits weren't listening. Thankfully, Harry's notice-me-not was still in strong effect, and their eyes slid past them as if they were mere specks.*

"*But what is it?" Harry asked, confused. "You were talking about that man, and how he was strong and powerful. Lucius doesn't have him squirreled away in his office like some trinket, does he? Because that's more than mildly wrong, and I can't exactly go without reporting something like that...""

"*Merlin, no, Harrison, how do you even think up things like that? No, it is related to the man simply... something of import, I suppose. From what Lucius had said that day, I have been able to*
decipher that it is at least something that the man holds dear. And the only thing that man held dear by the time he met Lucius was power, magic, himself, and his knowledge. I think it's safe to assume the man wouldn't harm himself, so it's most likely a journal or collection of some sort of his amassed knowledge." Harry's mouth formed an "O" and he nodded his head along, seeing her logic. But there were creases, of course.

"But what if it's something else? Something more dangerous than you think?"

"Why do you think I did not want to mention it, boy? What if I am sending you off to your death, all to avoid the monkeys that parade around the damn world? Just saying this makes me feel like I am betraying your parents!" Dorea growled, sending Harry a sharp glare. He shrank back and twiddled his thumbs. "No, Harrison, I'm sorry, don't do that." Dorea sighed, and ran a hand through her wavy hair. "You must understand, no parent wants to endanger a child, even if it is not their own. If I could, I would stay with you somehow, but I am confined to the paintings and you can't exactly take me with you. If I could just give you this information, I would, but there is no way to bring you to the old Black home."

"Would have to steal from the Malfoys or ask them." Harry muttered. Dorea nodded wearily.

"It is better to take something unobtrusive than something obvious." Dorea said, sounding as if she was quoting someone. "And if this can actually help you with your... gift, then I feel obligated to attempt it, since the Ministry certainly doesn't see it that way... now off with you, before your little friends become worried."

A knock at the door startled Harry out of his thoughts, and he glanced down to the journal to see an inquisitive Augustus? Searching around, he grabbed the pen from where it had fallen out of his hand and scribbled a "Sorry, I'm afraid that's a matter for another time where there's no interruptions and shut the journal and shoved it under the bed.

"Come in!" He called, slightly proud that his voice didn't waver with anything. A click, and the door slowly opened, Blaise's head peeking into the room. He smiled when he saw Harry on the bed, and raised a brow at the suitcase.

"Buonasera, fr-arry. Harry. Still not done packing?" He asked, stepping into the room and shutting the door. Harry nervously laughed and scratched at his hair.

"Not really, got preoccupied. And stop worrying yourself about calling me fratello, Blaise, seriously. If I didn't mind in the park I don't mind now. Why are you still up?" Blaise flushed and huffed out a breath, laying down next to Harry on the bed. He stared up at the canopy for a few seconds before turning to Harry, giving him a searching stare.

"Do you think you're ready for tomorrow?" He asked, "I wouldn't judge or be an arse if you aren't. I don't think I am, really, if only because I'll have to look around and see what Mama's doing." A lie was on the tip of his tongue, ready to go, but it died once Blaise admitted he was scared himself.

"..No, I'm not either." Harry confessed, giving his friend a crooked smile, "I feel like people are going to somehow know and stare at me, or like the others are going to judge me or something. There's no way they don't know with how Theo and Draco are." Blaise snorted, but quickly sobered.

"Don't worry about them. When Theo figured it out, he actually took me aside and asked me. I didn't tell him anything, of course, but he still knew. He's kept it to himself so far. And Draco's dealt with this before, so he knows what not to do."
"Wait, Draco's...?"

"The Blacks and the Malfoys aren't peaceful families, Harry, and they aren't very good with their choices. As far as I can tell, his parents lucked out. From what I've seen, Narcissa just gets a bit too overprotective sometimes and Lucius is just a little too attached to his work." Harry stared at him, not able to respond. Blaise gave him a grim smile. "The noble families aren't all politics and fighting, Harry. There's a reason so many people shout out against them. A lot of them are survivors. They just won't admit it."

"Oh." Harry mumbled quietly. He curled into himself, pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. They lapsed into silence, Blaise gazing up at the canopy and Harry staring at the spot where he had shoved the journal under the bed. At some point, Blaise slid an arm around Harry, tugging him closer, and Harry leaned into it, knowing it would be the last moment of peace in a while. By midnight, when one of the elder Malfoys peeked their head in, uneasy and troubled, the two had fallen asleep, both thoughtful and concerned even in slumber.

"Oh lord, someone get the camera-" "Draco, no that's not proper-" "But mother-" "Draco-"

Harry stirred, opening his mouth with a large yawn and feeling a pop in his jaw. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, and there was a small awwww next to him. Opening his peepers, he turned to see Draco, standing nervously by the bed with an old-fashioned camera in his hands. He gave Harry a wobbly smile, and squealed when Harry grabbed him by the shirt. Harry would have laughed at it if it weren't for the fact he was currently tugging the camera out of the other Snake's hands and tossing it behind him on the bed. Draco watched with a dropped jaw, relaxing in relief when it didn't headboard- and when Harry released his shirt.

"Yer her's not licked." Harry mumbled, his words coming out in a jumble. He squinted up at Draco's head, marveling at the fluffy hair in the way only someone whom has just woken up can. Draco smiled again and nodded.

"Yes, it's not. Say, Harry, why don't you go and take a shower, huh? Freshen yourself up." Harry mumbled something in response- or could have just made some indistinguishable whine, no one could really tell- and jerked up, not quite sturdy on his legs. Draco pushed him a little to the bathroom, and watched in bemusement as his short friend nearly slammed into the wall before dragging himself into the room and shutting the door. After a moment he turned back to the bed, glancing between the near-packed suitcase, lucky camera, and Blaise, who was drooling onto the sheets. He quickly knocked Blaise in the stomach, smirking when he heard the Italian let out a groan of pain. Narcissa stood next to him, giving him the Disapproving Motherly Stare, patented right next to the Approving Fatherly Nod. He gave her a meek grin, as if to say kids do the darndest things.

"Okay, I know Harry isn't stupid enough to do that, so I'm giving you five seconds to run before I come after you, Draco." Blaise groaned, giving the blond the evil eye. Said blond immediately hightailed it out of there, and Narcissa watched with exasperation as this all went on, wondering how they were going to have breakfast and get to the station in time.

Inside the bathroom, Harry was sticking his face into the sink to try and wake himself up. He had filled the basin with cold water, and as he sunk in the shock jolted him fully awake. As he came up, he heard the mirror chuckling.

"You look like a drenched kitten, darling." It commented, laughing harder when he scowled at it. "Oh don't take it personally honey, kittens are adorable!"

"I'm a boy, I'm supposed to be handsome, not adorable." He complained, shedding the clothes he accidentally slept in last night. He gave them a distasteful eye before sending a strong scourgy at
them. When they were starched, pressed, and folded on the floor, he stepped into the shower and set it on spray. Lord, he would constantly thank magic for automatic perfect temperatures.

"Boys can be adorable and pretty and everything in between." The mirror said sternly, before switching to a lighter tone. "So how much longer are you stayin'?" It asked over the spray. He opened one eye before closing it again, lathering his hair with shampoo.

"This is our last day. Last morning. We're going back to Hogwarts around 11.30." He replied, wincing when some of the lather dripped into his eye. He heard the mirror moan in disappointment through the cloud of flame surrounding his eye.

"I'm gonna miss seeing your sweet face around here, honey." It said sadly, seeming to radiate the feeling. He chuckled awkwardly, not knowing how to respond, and went through the rest of his routine, stepping out ten minutes later with a content sigh. He went through the usual motions-drying his hair then braiding it, getting dressed, making sure he wore his ring and locket. Checking himself in the mirror, he smiled in satisfaction. As he left, the mirror called out, "Good luck, sweetie! Hope you look as cute the next time you visit!" He chuckled, not knowing how to respond, and went through the rest of his routine, stepping out ten minutes later with a content sigh. He went through the usual motions-drying his hair then braiding it, getting dressed, making sure he wore his ring and locket. Checking himself in the mirror, he smiled in satisfaction. As he left, the mirror called out, "Good luck, sweetie! Hope you look as cute the next time you visit!" He rolled his eyes, knocking the door closed. Harry walked down to the dining room, deciding to ignore his suitcase for now, and walked onto the scene of Blaise trying to put jam into Draco's hair. He paused at the door, trying to process just what the hell was going on.

"I-what? What is-?" He tried, staring back and forth between them. Lucius sat in front of them, face hidden in a coffee cup and eyes balefully watching them. He seemed to be trying to distance himself from it; that, or he was trying not to laugh. Narcissa was nowhere to be found.

Harry slowly walked in, taking a seat next to Lucius to avoid bits of jam hitting him. The man glanced over at him, the not-laughing expression getting stronger and turned back to the scene in front of him. Harry watched as well, slowly grabbing a slice of bacon at one point to chew. When Blaise started to reach for the butter knife, Harry loudly cleared his throat. The two boys froze and whipped their heads to where he was sitting.

"Uh," Blaise began, glancing between Draco's ruined hair and the knife under his palm. "Iiii can explain?"

"You can't. You really can't." Draco said woefully. "Unless you want him to do something to you too."

"No, you know what, I don't want to know, just get off him and stop playing hairdresser, Blaise." Harry ordered, waving his wand a little at Draco and murmuring gibberish for appearances. Draco's hair was cleared of food substances and slicked back at once; the Malfoy shot him a grateful look before turning to his neglected plate and digging in. When Blaise started muttering under his breath, Harry shot him a sharp look that made him stop in an instant.

Narcissa walked into the dining room five minutes later to see Lucius quivering over a cup of coffee, Draco edging his chair away from Blaise, Harry giving both of them admonishing looks, and Blaise giving the jam contemplative glimpses. She decided she didn't want to know.

Right before they were to leave, Harry sneaked down the hallways, going left, right, straight, right, until he came to the painting of Dorea Black once again. When the woman spotted him, she smiled tightly and gave a questioning tilt of her head. In response, Harry reached into his breast pocket, pulling out the journal just enough for her to see. When she did she sighed terribly, but she didn't say anything, only shaking her head as if to say "what a shame".
"It's not what we thought. What you thought." Harry whispered, leaning forward.

"Then what is it, Harrison? A memoir? A record of correspondence with someone?" She asked wearily, staring at the spot of his winter coat. He shook his head.

"It's him, I think." He whispered, watching as her eyes grew horrified and confused.

"But you told me he was vanquished!" She near-shouted before catching herself. Some nearby portraits looked over disinterestedly before going back to their conversations or dozing. Harry helplessly shrugged his shoulders, not knowing what to say.

"He calls himself Tom Riddle. That—that's what his name used to be, right? Before he went insane and everything?" Dorea absently nodded, eyes still wide, and whirled around, stalking to a shelf in her painted room.

"Go. I need- I need to think about this. Ask around. I'll have a friend of mine in Hogwarts tell you what I find. Just-go." Harry wanted to protest, but the woman was already buried in a book. He knew he wouldn't get an answer out of her. So he went down the hallway, where Lucius was still asking them if they had everything.

At half past 11, the four of them were bustling through King's Cross magical section, Harry staring up at the familiar red train. Narcissa kept an arm at their backs, making sure they were near at all times, and glared around at the crowd surrounding them. Many people were, giving others the evil eye or even sneers; no one trusted anyone, because who knew what horrible secret they might be hiding behind glamours and threats? When they were near the train, Narcissa stopped and turned them toward her.

"Boys," She began, looking them each in the eyes. "You need to stay together more than ever right now. I don't care what feud you may have, or whatever tie-ups you may have, stick together. Keep by your housemates, and don't let your guard down. More than ever, now, the Snakes will be hunted. But we have venomous fangs, and we know how to use them, yes?" They nodded obediently, their faces serious. She smiled, a sad one, and hugged them close, uncaring of Harry's stiffening or Draco's grumbles. "I'm going to miss you three. No matter the blood, we are family."

When she let them go Harry shuffled a bit, blushing. But he was smiling too, and didn't mind when Lucius gave them the Fatherly Nod.

With that, they clambered onto the train, walking until they found the last compartment. Blaise set their things in the rack above while Harry let Hedwig out of her cage to hop around the room. She gave an appreciative hoot and nuzzled against his face before perching on the seat back, waiting for him to open the window.

"Do you think we'll see the others soon? Hermione told me she'd just look for us once she got on the train." Harry asked, avoiding a swinging bag form Blaise. "Oi, watch where you toss that, please. I like my nose not broken."

"Theo said that he's going to round up as many of us as he can and head for the usual compartment." Draco replied, taking a seat next to the window. Harry took the one across from him, and Blaise beside Harry. "Do you think-"

The door slammed open, cutting him off, revealing a hassled Theo followed by Hermione holding a crumpled newspaper and Neville, who looked about to cry.

"Pansy's on her way, there was some situation at her house." The mousy boy rushed out, closing the
door behind them and casting a locking charm. "She knows the counter-spell for the door, so don't worry about that. Now, does anyone want to share who spilled? And I mean who else, because Longbottom already admitted that he blabbed to his grandmother." He gave them all a wide-sweeping glare, baring his teeth in the parody of a smile. "I can guarantee you it wasn't me. So who did it?"

"I don't see why you're so worried, Nott. It's not like you're affected at all." Blaise said irately, giving the boy a raised eyebrow. Theo snorted, running a hand over his face; Neville edged away from him, and Hermione quickly took a seat next to Draco, who eyed her but said nothing.

"I may not be good at charms, but my sister apparently is. We found that out when the healer cast a *revealo* and her face was suddenly covered in bruises. Turns out the whiskey isn't as hidden as my father thought." He said bitterly. "Mother never did like the fact she hanged out with that Diggory much." He fell back, clumsily landing next to Hermione, who jumped and edged as far away as possible to give him space.

The compartment went dead silent, Draco and Blaise staring at him in disbelief as Harry cast his eyes upward. So Blaise was right last night, in some sense. He didn't feel much relief at that, or anything positive really. He just felt sort of sick, and his chest ached. Gazing at the faces around the compartment, he gave Neville a sort of grimace when he caught his eye. The boy couldn't have possibly prepared for a furious, stressed, and hassled Theodore.

He'd have to give him a talk later about discretion and what not to say.

"...So what's going to happen?" He asked, broaching the tension that hung in the air. Theo glanced at him, his eyes sunken in more than they had been the last time he had seen the pureblood. "Are you going to be investigated? Taken away? Given to your father? Do you have any say in what happens, or is it left completely to the courts, whatever amounts to those here?" Theo blinked a few times, straightening up in his seat. His face took on a clouded expression, and he glanced down before looking back up.

"They already had the investigation. Mother was deemed unfit to care for us or stay near us, and they interrogated Father until they were certain he had no part in... in what she was doing. So I suppose we're just going to be staying with him, now." He muttered, trailing off at the end. Hermione reached a hand out to him, but stopped, as if unsure if it was appropriate. But after a few moments of hesitation, she decided to hell with it and wrapped it around his shoulder, pulling him closer. Distantly, as if it was miles away instead of just a couple dozen metres ahead, the whistle sounded, and the train began to slowly move. Harry absently pat the window with a hand, thinking *te apero* without really processing it. The window opened smoothly, and Hedwig flew out with a delighted hoot.

"I'm not saying it will be alright Theo, not by a long shot, but you still have your father and sister, right? Even if she's scarred, she's still here, which is the most important thing. And.." She paused, before charging forward. "You have us. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say we won't leave you alone with this right now. We won't leave anyone alone right now. Right guys?" The five of them nodded enthusiastically, Blaise even leaning over to give Theo a hug. He gave them a weak smile, but it faded away when there was a rattling at the door.

A click sounded, and it was pulled aside by Pansy, who stood there her bags. She blinked confusedly when she saw the site in front of her, but wasn't able to get a word in as the boys took her bags and set them atop the rack, creating a growing pile. Harry debated shrinking them for space, but decided there wasn't much point. She stood uncertainly in front of the door.

"Um... Should I be worried? Nott's actually showing something outside of spite, and Longbottom
looks like he's about to have a breakdown." She put forth tentatively, rubbing her arm. Someone snorted, Harry wasn't sure who, and a spell was thrown into the air afterward to enlarge the compartment. The seats lengthened, and he could swear he heard a squawk from the next compartment over.

"It's nothing to worry about, Pansy. Some poison's just been left in the den." Theo sighed, running a quick hand over his eyes. He glanced around at them, face serious. "And I'm not the one with the largest issue."

Harry stiffened as multiple eyes landed on him, and his mouth twisted unpleasantly as he eyed them back. Hermione, Neville, and Blaise's faces were calm, but he could see the underlying current, the stream of worry that cut through it and created almost a ripple in their clouds of violet and brown and creamy orange. He huffed and squirmed a tiny bit before relaxing as best as he could in his seat.

"Harry?" Theo asked softly.

"Hm?"

"Well?"

"Well what?" The Nott gave him a deadpan stare, and Harry raised his hands in peace. "Yes, okay, I'll stop. But I-I don't know exactly what you expect me to say."

"Did anything happen? We all had those healers jump in for a visit- Snape always does something when an article like this pops up. So? Did anything happen at the Malfoys'- Blaise? Draco?" The two kept quiet. Draco still had yet to say anything since Theo burst in.

"Well," Harry started, his tone like that if he was talking about the weather, "On Christmas we saw the article, and a while later Professor Snape visited. But that was about it, besides a giant damper being put on the day." Pansy seemingly choked on nothing, and Theo's eyes widened.

"Woah, what!?! What!?!" Pansy screeched, leaning forward. Harry, of course, scrambled back, and Theo leaned over to shake the girl, shushing her. "No- don't shush me you idiot! You three seriously had Snape come over? He only does that with- with-" She cut herself off, lips flapping uselessly and hands making nonsensical gestures.

"With the worst cases." A voice spoke up softly. They all stared over at Neville, who shrunk back. He cleared his throat uselessly, not knowing what to say.

"Neville? How would you know that?" Harry asked, bewildered. The timid Gryffindor twiddled his fingers, getting them somehow tangled.

"M-my Gran is the head of the Child's Protective Services in the Magical UK. Th-the heads of schools in the community come to her a lot about suspicions, and P-Professor Snape usually handles the worst c-cases himself, instead of going with a M-Mungo's healer." The six of them blinked, and Blaise Harry tilted his head in confusion.

"But that doesn't explain how you know-"

"She was trying to convince me to be less scared of him." Neville interrupted, looking miserable admitting it. "I t-told her about the trouble I was having in class and she went into l-lecture mode. It was one of the things she said when she got r-really into it." The group was quiet for the next few moments, those new to the Slytherin family's methods processing it and those long engrossed in it processing just what that meant.
"Sooo..." Pansy trailed off, glancing between Draco, Harry, and Blaise. "I really hate to stick
accusations where they might not be true and highly offensive, but..."

"Accusations?" A voice said from the door. Pansy yelped and had some sort of violent spasm, hitting
whoever spoke in the stomach before running to the window. "Morgana, Parkinson, did you need to
hook me in the stomach?" they groaned.

The groaner was revealed to be Moon, her black hair hiding her face, although Harry was sure it was
contorted in pain. Behind her was Daphne, Gregory, and Vincent, all who were looking quite afraid.
Finally, Moon straightened, sending a weak glare to Pansy- who glared back with a sneer- and
turning to Harry. When she actually looked at him, her face faltered, and she opened her mouth to
say something.

"We're scared." Was what came out, and was something clearly not meant to be said, if her wincing
meant anything. But she riled herself up and dug on. "We all saw what happened in the paper, and
we had those healers show up. And there's no doubt that we're not the only ones affected."

"And what do you want me to do about that?" Harry replied coolly, his eyes narrowed. "You four
left weeks ago. Of course, we all still talk to Gregory, and Vincent and Daphne, but you four
announced loud and clear that you wanted nothing to do with us but small talk and answers that you
missed on homework. And another note that I might mention is that you seem to be missing part of
the entourage that left. Where's Millicent?" Moon's lips drew back in a snarl, and she looked ready to
slap Harry, but Daphne pulled her back. The small blonde took her place, giving the girl a
surprisingly stern glance.

"Slytherins stick together," She announced, trying to exude confidence she most certainly didn't
have, "And we made the mistake of not following that. All five of us. And now, with the scandal and
the examinations- we, we have to stick together Harry. If we don't, who knows what might happen."

"And Millicent?" He pressed. A chill was creeping into the air, and Blaise and the others around him
edged back. Unknown to the others, Theo pulled his wand into his hand, watching the interaction
with a sharp eye. Daphne flinched, and blew out a noisy breath from her nose.

"She went to the castle early. Her parents sent her there when they saw the article on Christmas. She
hasn't told us why in the letters we've exchanged." She answered. "It's the truth, Harry, and you can
ask her when we see her at the feast. Please?" The chill receded, and Harry stared at her with
searching eyes, his face blank.

"If she isn't at the feast and I find out you four left her alone to fend on the train, or if any of you step
out of line, I won't hesitate to toss you into the cold in nothing but your starkers and even throw
an aguamenti at you. Namely you, Moon, since you seem to love tension. Do you understand me?"
He blandly asked. Daphne and the boys hurriedly nodded their heads, and Moon answered with a
drawn-out, annoyed "Yes,".

They expanded the compartment again, Hermione and Harry giggling a bit when one of them
murmured "bigger on the inside". They were soon all settled in, Harry in line next to Blaise,
Gregory, Neville, and Daphne. Draco and Hermione were sitting next to Vincent and Moon, while
Pansy leaned against Hermione's legs, refusing to be near Moon.

They sat there awkwardly, some not knowing what to say and others not quite remembering what
vein of conversation they were on earlier. Others purposely didn't say anything so no one tried to
pursue it again.

"So." Moon started, clearing her throat, "Accusations?" Harry internally cursed the girl, and
externally sent a small shock to her hair. She jumped, and scowled when her curly locks started to frizz.

"Oh yeah!" Pansy exclaimed. "We were-uh..."

"Snape visited the Manor over the break." Draco cut in, speaking up for the first time, "And the three of them were dancing around the subject." Harry made a distinct choking noise in the back of his throat, and Blaise gripped his shoulder lightly so he couldn't do something like plow through them and run. Moon blinked slowly at them, and a frown crept across her features.

"So which one of you is it? I doubt it's Zabini, since you Mediterraneans seem too huggy to do anything like that. Potter? Malfoy?" She asked bluntly. Daphne whacked her upside the head in response, and the olive girl yelped in pain.

"It's not our place to ask." The small girl started, stern in this instant of offense that Moon had created. But Harry raised a hand, making her quiet, and cast his eyes upward as if to ask help for the annoyance he was about to create.

"It's me." He simply said. Daphne mouthed a few more words, repeating what he said, before closing her mouth. She looked down, not quite able to look him in the eye. In fact, most the others who hadn't known or suspected weren't quite able- Vincent and Gregory were steadfastly staring at spots above his shoulder, and Moon's wavered from his nose to his forehead now. Harry frowned.

"You know, it's not quite polite to go and act like I'm any different. I'm still the same Harry Potter you argued with and begged answers from. The only thing that's changed is now you know something about me."

"Yeah, Harry, but that's..." Gregory muttered, tentatively staring him in the eye. "That's horrible. I mean, to get Snape, that's got to be horrible."

"Yeah, and I managed it. I lived it. I'm not weak." Harry spat, the chill entering the room again. Greg threw his hands up in supplication, not wanting to anger the other boy, and Harry deflated. "Sorry. I don't like talking about it. Thinking about it."

"I don't think anyone does Harry." Theo whispered, leaning on Hermione.

---

*God, this is unbearable.* Harry thought as they sat at the Slytherin table. The Great Hall was almost dead silent, only whispers and ghosts floating in the air. The ghosts themselves even seemed dim, floating around near the students with gloomy faces and frequent furtive glances at them. Most of the upper-year Slytherins were asking after lowers, seeing how they were, even asking how their "visits" had turned out. Since Harry and the others had sat down, he had heard at least four cases spanning the table that made him feel sick.

"I thought Snakes were supposed to look after each other." He murmured to Blaise, sitting to his left. Neville and Hermione had been forced to go back to their tables for the feast, although the girl had stayed close as possible to them, taking a seat behind Pansy, who was three seats down. Beside her was Millicent, whispering things into her ear with a serious expression. Daphne had been telling the truth, on the train. Thankfully. Blaise sighed and shrugged against his side.

"We aren't infallible, fratello. We have chinks in our armor." Harry shivered. And then felt a bit queasy, watching the rest of the hall. The Gryffindors, or at least the majority of them save a handful, were glaring around the cavernous room, some even sending them solely to the Slytherin table- and in one case, the Hufflepuff table. *People don't- they don't really think we're behind this, do they*?
He jumped when the doors banged open, and a frazzled-appearing McGonagall walked into the room, striding between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Everyone went dead silent, watching as she slowly made her way to the Head Table and finally sat down. In the Headmaster's chair. An uproar immediately rose in the Hall, and multitudes of students rose from their seats, questioning or yelling or protesting something they didn't understand yet or didn't want to. McGonagall rose herself, sending up a red flare with her wand. The Hall quieted when it exploded, and when she stared at them firmly, the crowds slowly sat back down, not wanting to face the Transfigurations professor's wrath.

"Before we begin our meal, I would like to say a few announcements. Students, from now until an unforeseeable date, I will be acting as Headmistress." She began, sending up another flare when the crowds' voices swelled up again. When they faded, she continued. "Due to recent accusations and evidence that has come forward, Headmaster Dumbledore will be indisposed for an uncertain amount of time. Until then, I will be running the school, with Professor Snape as Deputy Headmaster. Along with this," She hesitated, gazing out at the hundreds of faces staring at her with mixes of emotions, knowing that she was going to be both regretful and grateful of her next words. And then she uttered the ones that would change Hogwarts for weeks to come. "Along with this, any student who has not had a documented and satisfactory medical exam in the past two months shall be required to report to the Infirmary at a scheduled time for an examination or consultation. Anyone who does not report at the scheduled time will be found and escorted by a teacher. Due to this undertaking, classes will be suspended for, at most, the next week. I apologise for such grim news just as we come back from our families. Thank you." She floundered at the end, sitting down with an unsatisfied frown. Beside her, Snape sighed and gave his goblet a longing eye. As it filled (and the Great Hall burst with noise) he grabbed it up, taking a sip of the wine now in it.

"...That's why he had us all examined?" Harry blurted out, taking no notice to the food appearing on plates and platters.

"Well that, the article, and general worry probably. Better to cover all your bases." Draco commented from the side, grabbing a turkey leg.

"So we don't have to go down?"

Draco slowly stopped his attack on the leg, and turned to Harry. A grimace crossed his face, and replied, "If your examination didn't come up with any red flags. I... I wouldn't keep your hopes up, Harry."

"Oh." Blaise huffed out a sigh next to him, and heaped a good amount of vegetables and ham onto his plate. "Blaise, come on."

"You are eating this now or you are eating it later." Blaise said primly, filling his own plate with more meat than probably recommended by health officials. Harry glared at him as he cut into a piece of ham before turning to his own and grudgingly shoving some peas onto his fork. He didn't quite feel like touching anything resembling food, but he also knew that Blaise was completely serious when it came to food; the boy had already pulled the "now or later" card on him multiple times, and almost carried it out once if it weren't for Hermione stopping him.

Harry didn't really eat, shoveling random bits into his mouth from time to time to make Blaise happy; he mostly just watched others, seeing people with outraged expressions and panicked ones. He wondered if the panicked ones were because they'd find something they didn't want found, and then internally hit himself for wondering the obvious. After a while, he tossed his fork down onto his plate, rising.

"I'm not really hungry, I'll see you guys later." He muttered, near-rushing out of the Great Hall.
Blaise called out after him, and stood to race after him. But he wasn't quick enough, Harry making it up the stairs and onto one of the moving staircases before the Italian could reach the first stairwell. Blaise blinked dumbly in the passageway, unsure for the nth time in the past week of what to do.

Later, at a time he wasn’t sure of and didn't care to find out, Harry lay curled up in a giant beanbag. He had run up to the Needs Room, the first place he could think of that would be difficult to find him in. When he had pulled open the doors, instead of the strange training ground he had become used to, the room had morphed into a small room, with a fireplace splaying one wall and a beanbag in the center. Not much else was there, and he liked that. The simplicity of it was better than the complexity of senses and emotions that had been the Great Hall. He had settled into it, and just let his mind drift, not thinking of the examination or Theo or his friends or even the small little book resting in his robe pocket right now. The only he focused on right now was the warmth of the fireplace and the fact that the pulsing in his feet was actually quite nice and he didn't know why he had never felt it before. Maybe he hadn't paid enough attention?

A vibration brought his mind back to the forefront, and he looked around confusedly before realising it had come from his robe. Pulling out the journal, he noted with no small amount of apprehension that the damn thing was actually shaking in his hand. He cautiously opened it, blinking at the words on the page. Absently, he held up his hand, a quill forming in it without a second thought. He murmured a thank you, even though he knew no one would hear it besides himself.

We're in Hogwarts. was written on the page, the words rushed, as if the person writing didn't have enough time to write.

Yes. Harry wrote, You can tell?

As clear as I can tell you're a veritable behemoth. Tom snapped. You're a Hogwarts student? Teacher? What house? What year?

Is it that important?

Very. Harry tapped his pen against his hand in thought, before deciding to just be candid with it.

I'm a first-year Slytherin. Does that help any? Need to know the date, too?

Fi-That would be helpful, thank you.

Well aren't you just the most polite thing ever. It's December 28th, 1991. The journal went silent, and Harry rolled his eyes, setting it on the carpet. Rolling onto his back, he stared up at the ceiling, absently tracing the small patterns inlaid into the stone. When it started to change, he startled and sat up. The stone faded, dark blue and stars bleeding through to create a scene much like the Great Hall's. He laid carefully back down, now gazing up at the stars, which gazed back at him. I wonder, is this building more than people think?

He stayed that way for only a few minutes, the journal near his head and the fire crackling. Another vibration caught his attention, and he propped himself up on one elbow, glancing towards the journal. A new message had appeared.

What was the reason you mentioned for taking me, Augustus?

How are you able to do that vibration?

...Later. Or sooner. Your reason, Augustus.
I didn't mention one, actually. I'm afraid we were interrupted before I could say anything. I suppose you could say it deals with magic. A friend of mine said you might be of some help with a problem I've encountered, although neither of us expected you to be a sentient, talking magical artifact.

She said you encountered it in a way as well. And that you were dealt a fair hand with it.

And your friend's name?

Dorea Black. Or Dorea Potter, I don't if she changed it. The journal went silent again, and Harry sighed, impatiently tapping the edge of it with his pen. Glancing around, he wondered what the time was, and blinked as a clock appeared above the fireplace. Seeing the time—just a bit past 9.30—he gasped and jumped up, shoving the journal into his robe pocket and dashing out of the room. He was going to be killed, he knew it, Blaise wouldn't let him out of his sight for weeks, Snape would give him detention for a month at least. And then he stopped short again, realising something quite important.

He had forgotten the most important guideline of the Snakes. Never go the halls alone. Gulping, he peered down both ways of the hall, not trusting the shadows. He ducked into the room again, more than anxious and searching his clothes to see if he had his two-way mirror on him or if he had packed it. His search proved fruitless—why would I PACK that!?—and he tugged on his braid, wondering what to do. He walked around the room, trying to think of a way to contact one of the others or of any passages he may have heard of that kept away from the main corridors, before stopping and looking around. The room was still the same roofless, fireplace and beanbag space it had formed when he was first in. But as he glanced around, panicked, it morphed, slowly melting into a narrow, spindling passageway that steadily went downwards and away from him.

He honestly stared at it in disbelief for a moment before praising the Founders and the castle and dashing down it. It was steep, but not too much that one could go sliding down it or lose their footing and sprint down by accident with no stop. And it was dimly lit, only enough light coming from the sconces on the wall to let him see where the walls were, and no more. Even with his heightened sight it was hard to see, but Harry supposed it didn't matter when you were going in one direction.

What seemed like five minutes later, he was tumbling out of a painting in the main hall, the owner grumbling at the jostling of their frame. Carefully closing it, he peered down the corridors again, and froze when a meaty hand came down upon his shoulder. Memories flashed in his mind of other instances mirroring this, and he felt a full-body shudder, fighting off the instincts to curl up or shoot off a blast of fire behind himself. He heard a chuckle from the owner of the hand, and forced himself out of its grip, turning to see them.

It was a Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, both older years by their height—probably seventh years, knowing his luck. The Gryffin had a nasty grin, his eyes hazy; the Raven looked irritated, as if they didn't know why he was there. If Harry was remembering right, they were a Prefect and a Quidditch member, the Raven playing Beater for the team. And they were both big enough that they made Harry nervous.

"It seems one of the little Snakes isn't in their den, huh?" The Gryffindor chuckled again, and Harry swore he could smell something definitely alcoholic on his breath. Jesus, what was the drinking age for wizards? "And it's little traitor Potter at that. What do you say we do with him, McGonagall?"

"I say we do nothing, you piece of trash." McGonagall hissed, glaring at the boy next to him. "I don't want to hear you complaining about Gran taking points from you again because you think I care, and I feel more like punching the shit out of you than an 11-year old. Just let me take you up to the dorms so I don't have to worry about you choking on your own vomit." The Gryffin sneered at his classmate.
"Don't give me your holier-than-thou attitude, I know you've done worse. And this-this little brat deserves it, siding with those slimy Snakes and messing with Fred and George- they told me he threatened to poison them! When they were just doin' some harmless pranks! He's probably responsible for Dumbledore getting kicked! Him and his lil' friends!" He shouted, waving his hand in Harry's direction. Harry shrank back, and slid his wand into his hand, praying he'd have time to use it- or something worse. "I say he deserves something, a little payment for everyone he betrayed!"

"That's hardly reasonable, give me your wand before you-"

"No!" The Gryffindor shouted, lunging away from his friend. He dragged his wand out of his pocket, nostrils flaring and pointing it at nothing in particular. "You can't stop me this time, McGonagall!" McGonagall was dragging out his wand by this time, and Harry was trying to figure out how this had turned into a showdown and scuttling backward, into the shadows. Except it wasn't shadows and was in actuality a very temperamental man. A temperamental man who had been searching for his missing student, and was alerted to the commotion by a very scared portrait.

As the Gryffindor's wand flew out of his wobbly grasp, Snape's voice called out in a chilled tone, "One hundred points from Gryffindor, and a month's detention with me, Hayes. And I will be alerting your House head to your trips to the Hog's Head, along with your propensity to attacking your fellow classmates. I am sure she will see to further punishment." The Gryffindor, Hayes, gaped in outraged astonishment, his hand grasping air- as if that was going to give him his wand back. Snape let out a put-upon sigh and stunned the boy, making sure to charm him with a mobilicorpus charm so he didn't get a concussion. Unfortunately.

McGonagall, who was still standing to the side with his wand drawn, watched the scene with guarded eyes, only relaxing when his peer was unconscious and floating. He turned to Harry, checking him for any injuries- although he knew there were none, having watched the whole debacle play out. "Hey, I'm sorry about that, Potter. I caught him when I was going up to the library and he thought it would be the best thing ever if I went along with his scheme. I guess it was for the best?" Harry shrugged, not meeting his eyes. The older teen sighed, but didn't try for more conversation.

"I suggest you go to your dormitory before I give you detention as well, Mr. McGonagall. I will be informing your guardian of your part in this as well." Snape cut in, glancing up sharply from where he was directing the body to float. The Ravenclaw needed no further instruction, scurrying down the corridor with one last glance at Harry. Harry watched him go, feeling like the situation may have just worsened.

"Walk with me, Harrison." Harry jumped, and hurried to follow the tall man, carefully staying away from the body now trailing in front of them. For the first few minutes, which took them up two flights of stairs and across a hallway, they stayed quiet, Snape staring ahead and Harry trying to avoid catching attention. But, of course, they couldn't just go on like that for the whole time because of- well, the circumstances, and Professor Snape eventually pinched his lips and breathed heavily through his nose.

"You will have a week's worth of detention with me as well, Mr. Potter, for putting yourself in danger and giving everyone around you a veritable heart attack, along with breaking a house rule." Harry gave him a startled glance, and was about to say something, but Snape's pinched expression had him keep quiet.

"I'm sorry, sir." He mumbled instead, ducking his eyes to the floor. "I didn't realise I worried everyone. I-" He cut himself off. Clearing his throat, he felt a heat flood up his face, and felt the urge to hit himself. "I didn't remember the rule you told us, sir. I should have."

"Yes." Professor Snape agreed, his voice amiable. "And if you had followed it, I'm sure one of your
peers would have warned you to hurry back to the commons to avoid this, or they would have stopped you from wandering at all and saved all of us the trouble of searching the castle head to toe to make sure you didn't accidentally break your arm or give yourself a concussion." Harry winced and squared his shoulders.

"I didn't know it would create this much of a problem. I just didn't want... I didn't want to stay in that room, with all the tension and whispering. It felt like a time bomb waiting for someone to start the timer. Sir." Professor Snape sighed, and glanced down at the boy trotting next to him. He looked uncomfortable, and tired. There were slight circles under his eyes and Snape could say with certainty that Harry had probably been on edge since the students had arrived, maybe earlier. He knew the feeling well, having dealt with the copious staff meetings and arrangements that had started last week and gone on continuously since then.

"I know." He murmured, stopping as they reached the portrait to the Gryffindor commons. Professor Snape cleared his throat, catching the attention of the podgy woman in the picture. "Would you please open, Epona? I need to see to this student."

"O-of course Professor! But, the other one..." The woman hesitated, glancing at Harry and then his chest- his tie? Snape rolled his eyes and waved off her concerns. She opened, revealing a room that was quite opposite to the Slytherin commons. It was cavernous, with the ceiling at least 20 feet above, and decorated in tones of gold and crimson. There were plush armchairs scattered everywhere, and a fire was blazing in the hearth on the other side of the room. People were chatting about the room, some surrounded by books and papers and other leaning in to make sure they weren't heard. As the portrait opened, the people in the common room looked over to them curiously and froze, eyes widening. Silence descended, and Harry nervously slid behind Snape a bit, not knowing what to do.

"I believe this is yours?" Snape drawled, eyebrow raised in disdain. He pushed the floating student into the room, others immediately rushing to get him. Harry spotted one of the Weasley twins among them, a grim expression splayed on his face.

"Damnit, he must have snuck off again! I told you all he was doing something, but no! This is what, the fifth time?" One of them hissed, tugging him over to a chair. He was plopped down, and the student who had spoken- an older girl with freckled, dark skin and hair tied in a ponytail- walked up to the teacher and Slytherin, grimacing. "I'm sorry about him sir, we thought he was sneaking off somewhere, but the others.. elected that he was probably just getting snacks from the kitchen. What...?"

"He was wandering the halls after paying a visit to the Hog's Head. He is very fortunate that I stopped him before he could assault another student. Now, if you will excuse me-"

"He WHAT? Is the other kid okay? Oh God, I can't believe this-"

"The other student if fine, Miss Johnson, and I assure you that you should believe it. Mr. Hayes also has a month of detention with me; I trust you will see that he attends it." The girl reluctantly nodded her head, and that was that. Snape closed the portrait, and Harry's view of the commons was gone and they were just walking back to Slytherin now. Harry let his mind wander as they walked, his eyes aimlessly drifting from painting to painting, before a thought popped into his mind.

"Professor Snape? When I was in your office that time... who was that man in the painting?" He asked. "Was he just... there, like the one in the commons?"

"Yes. Both paintings have been hanging there since before the 1800's."
"Oh." Harry looked down, brow scrunched in thought. "Has- has the one in your office always been like that?" Snape paused in his steps, eyeing Harry with confusion.

"Like what, Harrison?"

"Well, silenced I suppose? He tried to talk to me, and nothing came out, and there was magic around it, so..." Harry trailed off, watching Snape's expression go from confused to deadpan in the verge of ten seconds.

"I am going to have to look into that, Harrison." He replied, his tone implying that he would rather hit something, preferably himself. "Not one potions teacher has ever mentioned such a spell on the painting. It must have been assumed that he was just mute."

"Oh. Isn't that a bit of an oversight?" Professor Snape snorted, and absently nodded.

It only took them a small while to reach the Common Room, and Professor Snape told the wall the password- *ignis omnes purgo*- , leading them into the common room. Harry gulped as the man nodded a farewell to him and strode over to a group of students clustered in the corner; he had a feeling he really didn't want to go down the stairs to his room tonight.

"*Vai morire e io me vado fare. Tu sei un idioto.*" Blaise intoned flatly when he opened the door. Harry flinched and made to close the door. "No- no do not dare run away- we are doing this *now* Harry." The Zabini was angry, charged and ready to go at something, to the point where his concentration was slipping and his accent leaking into his English. Harry slowly opened the door again, steadfastly staring at the stone under his feet. "Vieni." He didn't need to know what it meant, slowly shutting the door behind him and shuffling to where he knew Blaise's bed was. At least three others were in the room, and Harry wasn't very inclined to look up and see who it was. "*Three hours, Harry.* Do you know how worried we were? After everything that has been going on, you thought it was alright to run off and disappear to *Dio* knows where. Did you eve-" There was a *thwop* and grunt of pain, and Harry quickly peeked up to see Draco glaring at Blaise, Neville behind him.

... Uh.

"Neville?" Harry asked, jumping when everyone focused on him once more.

"He followed us back, and curfew hit before he could get back in time." Draco replied in response, slapping a hand over Blaise's mouth. "Snape gave permission on the grounds he doesn't spy him in the same clothes tomorrow."

"Oh." Harry sort of hated how he kept repeating that tonight.

"So, watering down what Blaise was saying, what the heck Harry. Where did you even go to? None of us could find you where we looked."

"I went to the Needs Room. Turns out it doesn't just turn into a training grounds either." Draco blinked, and his brow furrowed. Behind him, Neville was giving off a confused air that said *What? What room? What?*. 

"Harry, we went there. We just got an empty classroom when we tried to get in. You weren't in there at all." Harry shrugged his shoulders helplessly.
"Well, that's where I was. Maybe it's built to where you won't be found if you don't want to be, I don't know Draco. All I knew is that I wanted to be somewhere where I didn't need to think." Draco hummed, taking his hand from Blaise and scratching his chin in thought. "And I've got detention with Professor Snape for a week, so you don't need to find a way to punish me." Harry sarcastically added. It was quiet then, and awkward.

"So..." Harry started, not knowing what to say.

"If you do that again I'm sticking a tracking spell on your socks." Blaise said, trotting to the bathroom and past Theo's bed; his curtains were pulled closed, and he had most likely put up a silencing spell. Knowing Blaise and Draco's tendency to argue, he probably had good reason. Harry watched him go, and then shot a bewildered look to Draco, who shrugged.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Harry. I honestly only stayed near him to make sure he didn't go insane when you came back, so my job is done. I'm going to go pass out and try to ignore Greg and Crabbe's demonic snoring. Try and get some, alright?" Harry nodded to him, and the blond left the room himself. All that was left were him and Neville, who was still seated on the bed. Harry twisted to him now, locking gazes. They were silent before Harry cleared his throat and jabbed his thumb at his bed.

"You can take that for tonight, if you want. I'm not really in the mood for sleep, and Blaise stopped caring about me invading his sometime during the holidays. You might fit my pajamas...?" Neville weakly smiled, and Harry took that as a sign to go ahead and find something. Soon they were both changing into a sets of nightwear, although Neville's were a bit too long for his legs. As they both stared down at his legs drowning in fabric, they began to giggle, Harry hunching over from the force; the absurdity of it, having a practical sleepover after a night of chaos. They both curled on Harry's bed with smiles on their faces, Neville tucking in to sleep and Harry breaking out one of his textbooks for the long haul that was going to be the night.

---

Buonasera - good evening

te apero - I open you

ignis omnes purgo - Fire purifies all

Vai morire e Io me vado fare. Tu sei un idioto - You are going to die, and I am going to do it myself. You're an idiot.

Vieni - come
Harry woke to a bothersome vibrating against his leg, and blearily blinked his eyes open. It was dark, and the others were sleeping peacefully, although he could hear Neville shifting next to him. Speaking of which, the boy was hogging most of the bed.

Sliding off, he groped around for whatever was going off and eventually grasped at his robes. It was something in his pocket, and he processed in small, exhausted jumps that, whelp, looks like someone wanted to talk at the asscrack of dawn. So he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, trotting out of the room and towards the common room, where there’d be actual light and no chances of waking up his friends.

When he opened the journal (after settling into the most comfortable armchair and staring down Maybe-Slytherin), he was startled by the speed at which letters suddenly zoomed over the page.

You're one of them aren't you? That's the only reason tha- there's no other reason Dorea would speak about me, knowing her. So you must be a Child of Circe, it's the only feasible reason I can see with how you worded it. Harry groaned to himself and dug through his robes, luckily finding a pen that was probably left over from when he was convincing the others that quills were tedious throwbacks.

Did you know it's about three in the morning? I haven't checked since I had to make sure I didn't crack my head open going somewhere with decent lighting. And that's a lot of capitalization, are you sure you don't want to capitalize 'of' too?

Augustus.

Okay, yes? She popped that out as a name, so I suppose. The others called me an Atronach, so I'm guessing it's more of a "left to preference" sort of name. The journal vibrated in his hands again, and Harry wondered again just how that was possible. And then decided it didn't matter, and began to doodle a cat in the corner as he waited for a coherent answer.

Why did you need my help? From what I remember, Children are practically put on a pedestal, trotted around like the next leader of the world.

Yes, well, it's obviously changed from whenever you were created. Every mobile person I've talked to about this has told me if I don't hide myself I'm liable to be sentenced a danger and executed before I can level a city.

Why the bloody hell would they think th-"Boy." Harry startled, and glanced up to the portrait above the fireplace. The man's grey eyes were piercing into him, and he had a brow raised.

"Er, yes.. sir?"
"You do know what that is, yes?" At Harry's slightly confused expression, the man rolled his eyes and leaned forward. "That thing stinks of dark magic- I can tell just from here. I suggest you hide it if you do not want anyone to discover it."

"Well I know that- I'm not incompetent." He scowled, narrowing his eyes at the portrait. "Why do you care, exactly? It's not like this is the first dark-saturated thing to come through this common room, and I'm not the first student to stay up, for sure."

The man snorted. "You're the first one I've seen conversing with a chunk of a soul." He replied tartly, before edging out of sight. Harry stared blankly at where he was, before glancing down at the journal. Why the bloody hell would they think that? Most Children are taught control and release exercises if they're found, not treated like bombs about to be set off. That's practically heathenous, since they're considered a blessing from magic.

Since we are.

He twirled his pen around, wishing he was asleep. It might have to do with the recent war. I don't know- I wasn't exactly raised surrounded by magic.

You weren't?

War?

Story, Tom. Brothersome and long. Listen, could we continue this discussion about society's fluctuating views later? I haven't been getting enough sleep lately as it is, and the portraits are starting to freak me out. Intentionally. The journal went silent, and Harry took it as his cue that he could go back to bed. He trudged down to his room, pensive debating the disadvantages of saying to hell with it and getting rid of this thing before it ruined more than it was worth.

The next time Harry woke up, it was to someone nudging his back, murmuring something he couldn't make out. He batted their hand away, but it came back with a vengeance.

"Go awaaaayy, I want to sliiieeeep..." He whined, shoving his head farther into the pillow. There was a muffled giggle over him, and the next moment he had someone cupping their hands near his ear.

"RISE AND SHINE, FLYBOY! TIME TO GO PUT MEAT ON YOUR BONES!" Theo- and it had to be him, no one else could make their voice stay that smooth when they shouted- blared, jumping back when he swung an arm at the mousy boy.

"You know, you didn't need to yell in my ear." Harry groaned, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

"Yeah, but you didn't wake up the last four tries, so it was either that or water." Blaise quipped from across the room. "We've got a few minutes before Draco and the others start complaining outside the door, so hurry up." Harry reluctantly dragged himself up, wishing he could have gotten just an hour or more to feel less dead. Tossing on a sweater and a pair of slacks and quickly brushing his hair, he emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, glaring at Blaise's awkward grin.

"Stop that, you look constipated. Why are we even bothering to go to breakfast today? It's not like we actually have anything that'll prevent us from eating later than usual." He snipped, making sure his bed was neat and his things were packed away- or hidden- before following Theo, Neville, and Blaise into the hallway.
"Well, normality can help keep comfort, or something like that." Blaise replied, wincing. "And it'll look suspicious if we don't show up, right? So we're going. Buongiorno, girls, Draco. Vincent and Gregory not up yet?" Daphne and Millicent gave amiable waves while Pansy mumbled something that may have been a greeting, her attention focused on... whatever she was doing with her hair. Harry suspected she may have been trying to plait it.

"They're sleeping in or in a coma, I can't tell which anymore." Draco rolled his eyes, shifting the bag on his shoulder. "Can we just go? I want to sit down so I can go over the essay in Charms- you know how Flitwick is with his grading." They began their walk upstairs, passing other Slytherins on their way. Some gave greetings and waved, while others steered clear or gave them the stink eye- most likely because of the Lion in their midst. When they did that, Harry gave them an unimpressed stare, waiting for them to pass.

He didn't pay attention to the conversation, not really. His mind just sort of wandered, drifting over the events of the past few days and his own friends. Letting his eye flow over them, he was struck by a sudden sense of relief- without them, and this easygoing familiarity, he had a feeling he wouldn't be taking all of the past week as he had- hell, the past few months, considering the beast and quidditch incident.

It's amazing, how much friends could ground you.

"-Harry?" He jumped, looking over to Pansy, who was staring at him with a bemused expression. "Were you even listening?"

He smiled back apologetically. "Sorry, I sort of spaced out. What did you say?"

"You've got your hair down, and it makes you sort of look like a fluffier Snape." Harry blinked, and patted his hair, ignoring the strange comparison.

"I sort of forgot to put it up this morning. I don't look weird, do I?" She shook her head. "No, just fluffy. It's sort of cute- but you might want to get it cut soon if you don't want it past your chest." He hummed, and the conversation went back to the current of school assignments why, Daphne talking about some study group the Puffs had made? He couldn't make tails of it, having not kept up.

They reached the Great Hall soon, and it was already packed, breakfast having reached the point where everyone but late-risers was there. They took their normal spots as the table, Neville sliding in next to Hermione, who had a textbook leaned against the milk. Moon was near them, sitting close enough to be able to hear and be in conversations, a sour expression on her face. Harry assumed she had gone with an upper-year, not wanting to travel in their tiny troupe.

"Morning." Hermione said absentmindedly, giving them a small smile. There were a few grunts and hellos as they settled in.

"How was it at your table last night?" Theo asked, shifting while Draco pulled out a roll of parchment.

"Well, about as well as expected." Hermione sighed, shutting her book. "A few upper years were worried about classes, and some were worried about themselves. Some of the muggleborns were freaked out. I think I heard one person arguing how this was illegal- but it's not, since teachers act as our legal guardians during school sessions." She bit her lip, face troubled. "I heard from a seventh year that one student ran off after the feast- and Professor Snape ended up bringing him back under mobilis corpus. A lot of people are upset with him- the seventh year I mean- especially since
everyone is saying the student almost attacked someone, and he didn't really stop them. Do you guys know anything about it...?" She trailed off, seeing Harry scratch at his chin, eyes averted, and Blaise scowl. "Um."

"Harry." Blaise said evenly.

"A week's worth of detention."

"You are kidding me, right?" Harry snorted and didn't answer, grabbing a bowl of blueberries and spooning some onto his plate.

"Harry, you're k-kidding, right? Playing a-around?" Neville stared at him incredulously. Internally, Harry acknowledged he was screwed if even Neville was giving him that look.

"In my defense I was thinking mostly about curfew, not anything related to being attacked by a drunken seventh year." He replied tiredly. He flinched when Blaise put his head down on the table with a loud groan.

"Sorry." The Italian boy ignored him, and Hermione shook her head in exasperation.

"Er, well, idiotic excursions aside-"

"Oi!"

"-what about you, Longbottom? No doubt the Lions were roaring at Dumbledore getting kicked out." Neville shifted, grimacing.

"A lot of people were b-blaming the other houses, but m-most of them were, um, quiet. It was really weird, actually." He peered at them with an unsettled expression. "I-I don't think they were in that sort of, uh, situation themselves- n-not that many people. But more, more like they were w-worried? It was mostly fourth and b-below that were angry, I think. I don't think this is something they're going to pick sides on." A few in the group nodded grimly at that.

"So..." Millicent began, trailing off.

"So how do you think they're going to go about this charade?" Moon interrupted, speaking up for the first time. When everyone looked towards her, she scowled and plowed on. "They can't exactly schedule appointments out in the open because of privacy, and they can't schedule them in common rooms since they have to run around and plan everything with the headmaster gone. So how are they even going to do this?"

"Well... they could always send owls, since no one will really be able to spot them in the mail. And I don't think it's come yet, either." Hermione said hesitantly, glancing at the windows. It was bright out, a cold but snowless day.

"But it would still be really obvious, because of the sudden influx of random owls that land at people." Theo pointed out. Hermione grimaced and didn't reply.

Conversation dropped, with only the occasional murmur from Blaise and Draco over the essay. Harry was fairly certain it was the one on emotion-changing charms, and felt the strong need to ask why Draco had put off something that easy, but was interrupted by the mail before he could.

"Well, I guess that proves Hermione's theory." Theo remarked as significantly more owls than usual swooped into the hall, obscuring nearly the whole ceiling. "Although I'm sure a good portion of those are from distraught or disturbed parents."
No one said anything when, besides Nicola's distressed letter about the headmaster and school, a small piece of parchment was dropped in front of Harry's plate.

"It says 'one, today'." Blaise glanced at him from his spot against the trunk.

"Are you going to go?"

"I sort of have to, don't I? Or else they'll, they'll force me to, or treat me like a wounded animal and coax me. And I don't want to be coaxed."

They were sitting outside, bundled up and sporting a strong heating spell Harry had whipped up with a warmth. It was just the two of them, the others unwilling to go out in the cold or unwilling to follow Harry with the expression he had.

"You've got two hours. Calm down and just brace up for it. There's not much they... well, not much they can really do. Professor Snape already conducted the physical, so they just have to verify the results."

"But I don't want them to!" Harry exclaimed frustratedly. "I don't- I don't want to be with the Dursleys anymore, of course, but after that, what's going to happen! I get put in an orphanage? I go off to the highest bidder?"

"Realistically?" Harry glared at him, and Blaise put his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, didn't know if you wanted it sugar-coated, should have known with you. Honestly, Harry? You'd go to the closest relative, and since purebloods are so interconnected, you'd probably end up with one of us. I'd say Draco or Longbottom. Draco's mother is the great-niece of your grandmother, and I know Longbottom's family had a Black marry into it. Potters tended to marry out of families, so it's not likely anyone will really look towards them first, either. If not those, then you'll go to Snape, since we're his wards during school and in case of emergencies."

"And if they decide to do it some other way? Or if I'm just some gamble for money and prestige?" Harry darted his eyes away, grimacing. Blaise hummed in thought, and then scowled. He reached for his friend and pulled him close, ignoring his yelp of surprise.

"Now why would they not want you for you, fratello? You're a practical four-house package in one, with enough survival instinct in you to wear a snake skin."

"I'm also the half-blood Snake from a Lion family." Harry replied flatly, sinking against Blaise. "I'm lucky you left an impression on most of our friends before I actually met them, and I'm lucky to be here than in Gryffindor and isolated for being friends with a Slytherin."

Blaise was quiet for a moment, his arms tightening around Harry's shoulders. "My mother likes you. Loves you. Lady Malfoy adores you, if how she acted when we was any indication. And Draco was less than fond of you at the beginning of the year, if you remember right, Harry. And now he worries about you as much as Granger and Longbottom do. What you are in relation to what your family was- that doesn't matter. You became you on your own. And if it comes down to it and it's obvious you're going to be a trophy for some family, one of us will take you in. Now shut up and just relax before your exam." Harry looked up at him, and saw the darker boy staring across the lake, his eyes somewhere else. Following his eyes, he sighed and sunk into the embrace.

Harry shivered, having just come in from an accidental impromptu nap with Blaise outside. They had drifted for a little while after Blaise's motivational speech, and ended up falling asleep because of the
quiet and the warmth spell surrounding them. When they had woken up, Harry had five minutes to
run up to the Hospital Wing, and the warmth spell had worn off, leaving them cursing and shaking.
He'd sneezed at least three times on the way here, and he wouldn't be surprised if whoever it was
poking and prodding him told him he was getting a cold.

Casting a quick tempus one last time, he pushed open the large doors and peeked inside, raising his
brows at the amount of white curtains, enough to make the spacious room seem small. He could hear
a faint murmuring throughout the room, indistinguishable despite it sometimes becoming loud. He
hovered in the doorway, not knowing what to do, when Professor Sprout rushed up to him with a
harried expression.

"Hello-" She paused, seeing who it was, before recovering, "Hello Mister Potter. Could I see the slip
you received at breakfast?" He fumbled through his pockets, pulling out the slip and handing it to the
woman. She tapped it with her wand, her face folding in as it did- whatever it was supposed to.
"Follow me, Mister Potter, we'll get you set up. There will be a robe in your space, please put it on."

So he followed her and was promptly parked behind a curtain, left to his own devices. Thinking of
how many curtains there were pulled in the wing, he wondered, I guess a lot of students don't have
recent physicals on file? It's thorough, but... The sound of soft arguing caught his attention, and he
leaned forward, trying to catch snippets, It was two women- Professor Sprout and...?

The curtain suddenly pulled back, and he quickly sat up to look in the eyes of P-Headmistress
McGonagall, who was going over a scroll with disbelieving eyes.

"Headmistress-" Sprout started, but McGonagall cut her off with a look, and the other woman
sighed, resignedly heading off in another direction.

"Hello, Mister Potter." The woman said curtly but not unkindly. "I see you've had a recent physical
already?"

"Professor Snape had us all pass through one over the break, ma'am." He replied uncomfortably. The
woman made a noise before setting the scroll aside.

"Severus always was thorough." She muttered, drawing out her wand. "Mister Potter, if you could
take off any glamours or concealments you may have? I prefer to do it the easy way; if not, I will be
required to remove them myself." He shook his head and with a harsh breath, quickly but shakily
took off his ring, flinching as his ring finger disappeared in a flash. He knew his lightning scar and
the small ones poching his hands had reappeared as well. He was going to have to get used to that,
along with getting desensitized to people seeing them. He heard a sharp intake of breath above.

"I see.. Is that the only one, Mister Potter?" He ignored the strain in her voice and nodded. "Alright.
Please... show me your hand, so I may examine it." He obeyed, and began to daze out as she asked
for a certain limb, or examined an old scar. Hunched in slightly on himself, he saw no reason to pay
attention to the moment. It was the same thing over and over again, routine like how the Potions
Professor had done it, and decidedly uncomfortable when he actually paid it any thought. She went
over his crude amputation, felt for improperly-healed breaks, recorded what she found on another
roll. He was unsurprised to see it looked much like the one beside it.

"Don't they just use magic for things like this?" He absently commented, not realising he had spoken
aloud.

"It is much more plausible if it has been physically examined and found, Mister Potter." The elderly
woman replied, startling him. "Especially in cases such as this. If you could please turn, I would like
to confirm the last of it. After that, there is just a series of questions I need to ask you." Glancing up,
he saw her face was much more tired than earlier. He wordlessly turned, tensing on the eyes on his back and the slight touches at the worst scars.

"Mother and Joseph, what I would do to that man..." He heard from behind, a barely audible hiss that the Transfiguration master probably didn't even register saying. She eventually straightened from her hunching over his back, clearing her throat. "You may change now, Mister Potter. All that is left is a few questions."

"About home life or the injuries? Because I already answered all of those for the Professor, ma'am." He asked politely but curtly, gratefully sliding back into his clothes. It was amazing how being near nude for only ten minutes could make you feel like you streaked through the middle of London.

"I... no, Mister Potter. Harry. Those were recorded beforehand. This is a different matter. When you were at home, were there any... outside attempts to help you in any way? A concerned teacher? A worried friend?" He stopped, staring at the woman, before his face broke into a disbelieving grin.

"You don't know? When I was around, Social Services started investigating to the point of pulling in the Dursleys, but because of some 'mix up' that my grandfather cleared up, they never continued. I was put under the impression that all my direct relatives besides Petunia and Dudley were dead?" Her face went paper-white, and he was sure that if it weren't for her determination to stay calm, she would have collapsed or broke into swearing.

"I see. And, when were you introduced to magic, Harry?" She asked with a definite twitch in her left eye. His grin widened, he couldn't help it, all this shit that was his luck was near unbelievable.

"When I was around six. I met Blaise in a bookstore, and he started to crudely teach me about the magical world." He tilted his head, thinking. "The Dursleys only really mentioned it when I had accidental cases, calling it 'freakish'. Is that all, Professor McGonagall?" There was ice curling around his fingers and he was desperate to leave before he did something he regretted, like accidentally freezing one of his teachers.

"I suppose, Mister Potter." She answered tiredly. She paused, staring at a spot on the wall with intense fervor. "I guarantee you Mister Potter, if I could have seen what that... man allowed to happen, none of this would have come to pass."

He scurried past her without a word, hands spiderwebbed with frost.

The fact they were all hiding in the Needs Room had nothing to do with the ice trailing to the library. None at all.

Okay, that's a blatant lie prefaced by the half hour it took to melt it all and whack Harry into complacency. With a Hermione hug.

It was the whole group plus additions, the other firstie Slytherins and Neville having been informed of the room. Their looks of awe when it turned into the training room were gratifying, in a way. So now they were all sitting on bean bags, some of them going through books (Hermione and Millicent) while the others discussed what was possibly the most confusing subject at the moment.

"No but why did you all even feel the need to find this place? Why bother with the heavyweight training things?" Daphne asked, shifting uncomfortably on her bag. "We're first years, and in Hogwarts, why train?"

"It's a mix of fear, paranoia, and survival instinct." Theo replied pseudo-wisely. "After the troll incident, the cerberus, and Harry nearly dying mid-flight because of a hex from Quirrell- and we all..."
agree it's him after Snape turning tolerable? - it was decided that this school is about as safe as a public street."

"We're not going to do anything insane though, just build endurance and learn some defensive spells for now." Pansy piped up, eyes wide. "Can you imagine if we tried to do something like the inversion curse? We'd probably turn ourselves inside-out!"

"Okay, someone is explaining why that is something you even know, but for now, can we actually discuss the fact there's a Cerberus in the school? And the fact it's guarding, according to Theo's James Bond mesage, the Philosopher's Stone?" Harry asked, vaguely gesturing to Theo as Hermione snorted.

"Wait, no, back up Potter- the Philosopher's Stone? you've got to fill some of in, seeing as we haven't been in your band of misfits all this time." Moon screeched, yelping when Daphne pinched. "Oi! It's a valid question, I'm not being rude this time!"

"Long story short, the dog monster we ran into before, what, Hallow's Eve? Is actually a Cerberus, and is guarding the Philosopher's Stone of Nicholas Flamel, who was mentioned by Hagrid. Considering that it's practically his only accomplishment besides research and the overwhelming gossip of him and Dumbledore being bar buddies, it's a reasonable deduction."

"Apparently."

"Quiet, Harry. Now, does anyone want to deliberate on that? anyone have any more news than what took months to figure out?" Theo drawled sarcastically, flopping back on his bag. "Because it'd be helpful, I guess. Maybe in presenting a case to a teacher."

There was a silence before Daphne cleared her throat, a peculiar expression on her face. "Er, you said Quirrell tried to hex Harry, right? I've actually heard him in the halls sometimes, when he doesn't think there's anyone else. He's always talking to someone. About... things."

"Someone? Things?" Harry pushed with a frown.

"I don't know who, their voice isn't familiar- but it's very strange. It's always high and raspy, as though they have a cold. And.." She hesitated here, her face paling. "I heard them talking about the unicorns in the forest, right before some of that blessing disappeared, and about 'the defenses'. I think that they're trying to get past something. Maybe it's the Cerberus?"

"Maybe." The half-blood allowed with a grimace. "It'd add to his repertoire of horrible traits. I still can't look at him without getting a headache. Pain-causing abilities aside, what would even happen if he got the stone? Why would he even need it? It wouldn't improve his teaching at all, and he doesn't seem the type of bloke to try and dominate the world. More like the servant type." An audible pause went through the room, before someone muttered,

"There are a lot of desperate dark followers...

Harry had a pounding headache again and he'd swear by his wand that it was because of the stare directed at his head. With an irate alight he sighed in relief as a yelp sounded through the Great Hall. Glancing up, he could clearly see through his lashes Quirrell trying to put out his flaming plate with his sleeve and failing spectacularly.

"He was staring at me." Harry mumbled at Blaise's admonishing look, knowing he wouldn't fool the Italian by deflecting blame. Turning slightly, he asked, "What are we going to do? I'd rather not have a raised and insane Dark Lord- I don't think anyone at this table does, no matter their family
leanings." Quiet grunts of agreement followed, some of their friends deflecting their eyes.

"Well, we could always go the brain-dead Gryff way and try to fix it ourselves, ignore it until it's too late, or try to convince a teacher to believe us." Blaise whispered back, spearing a piece of chicken.

"I prefer my skin on my body and my body the way it is." Draco hissed, peeking around the table. Didn't have to, really, considering the four tables were barely populated. "But I also like the idea of not being an obeying servant at eleven."

"We could go to a teacher. Some of them have to be suspicious, and they can't all be oblivious to what Dumbledore orchestrated." Pansy piped up. Theo waved an agreeing fork, mouth full of kidney pie.

"Sprout would send us to counseling, Flitwick would berate us for insulting a teacher, McGonagall would doubt us because we're Snakes, and the giant oaf wouldn't even be able to help." Moon sighed.

"What about Snape?" Multiple pairs of eyes turned toward Neville with no little degree of bewilderment. "H-He'd probably believe us, since he's already helped a-against he knows about the dog." The bewilderment in certain eyes increased, but in others, it turned thoughtful.

"That might actually work."

"Wh-Potter, this is Snape we're talking about!" Moon hissed. Harry gave her a bland look. "Number one, what reason does he have to believe us? We're brats! Number two, he'll just push us to the side and treat us like we don't know anything! Number three, he hates you!"

"You've missed a lot." Harry replied calmly, setting his fork down. "And I think things around here are uprooted enough that he might actually listen. He wants to protect students, and having hellspawn and legendary artifacts in the castle isn't going to do that. And besides, do you want to try and protect it on your own? I don't want to go down there again, but I sure as hell don't want anyone else to either." He paused, shuddering. "Not to mention it's the perfect distraction from this icebox of an atmosphere right now." Peering around at the group, having grown surprisingly large in the past few days, he gave them a small smile and raised his hand slightly, little sparks crackling.

"Now, who votes we take the Slytherin way and save everyone's hides?"
Severus Snape did not need this shit today. Here he was, only half into what was turning into the most emotionally-gruelling week of the past decade or so, buried in reports, accounts, and documentations he had to sort through and then send to Minerva because the others were swamped with just making sure the damn brats went to their examinations and held still. Not to mention Pomona's breakdown at discovering one of her favourite students was apparently a very good actor. It was enough to make him want to break out the whiskey, but he still had ten more reports to go through and possibly flag before he consider doing anything that horrid. The only respite he had (and lord, calling that nuisance a respite) was the portrait that had talked nonstop ever since he unsilenced the man, only falling quiet when he left or snapped particularly badly. Oh, he was kind enough, going by the definition, but if you said so much as a word in the room he'd go on it and make a thirty-minute speech barely related to it. Gryffindors.

There were also the brats parked outside his door arguing for the past hour or so. He didn't know how many there were. He couldn't tell what sex they were through the door either. But he could hear them, arguing like a goddamned married couple right outside his door, in the Slytherin's Commons no less..

He needed this as much as he needed another ulcer.

"You might as well come in, considering you're as loud as a starving orc." He called, sighing when he heard one curse in response. Loudly. Oh look, the idiot had finally shut up. Miracles above.

Harry was the one who opened the door sheepishly, and he smiled at the man giving the three of them a deadpan stare. Then dropped the smile, feeling fake, and shuffled aside to let the others in. It was only him, Hermione, and Theo since he was sure anyone else would be redundant and ruin their chances. It had taken far too long to convince Blaise and Moon of that, but thank Merlin for Pansy and her hexes. Those two couldn't go out in public for the next few hours if they wanted to keep their pride.

"May I help you three?" Their teacher asked with a raised brow, shuffling the papers on his desk before deciding on simply shoving them inside. Someone coughed into their hand.

"Well-" Theo started, twitching slightly as he brought up a smile, "We were sort of."

"There's an ancient Greek beast in the school near students protecting a danger-magnet of a magical holy grail, and we're pretty sure Quirrell is trying to bring back the Dark Lord." Silence reigned, and Theo had a mini-conniption next to Harry. Said half-blood was unrepentant, and gave Professor Snape an even stare as the man regarded him blankly.

"...I feel the need to question how you drew this conclusion, children." He eventually stated, the
sentence not even coming out as inquisitive. Harry decided to ignore that in favour of the mostly calm waves of red surrounding the wizard and plowed on.

"We accidentally- Blaise, Theo, Pansy, and I- ran into the third corridor because of the staircase or something, found the room, and then told the others. When we visited Hagrid that one time, he let slip about the Philosopher's Stone, which Theo deciphered as Flamel's. Quirrell's generally creepy, tried to kill me during a Quidditch match, and probably wants the stone? Likes to whisper in the hallways about things that point to it. So we're going the not-inevitable-maiming way and going to a teacher who might actually listen to us. Because as much as we don't want a new-minted psycho, we also don't want newly-minted scars." The waves slowed, and Professor Snape's lips turned down into a frown.

"And what exactly do you all expect me to do? Charge in and take down another teacher based on your suspicions?" The trio shared a look, and had any of them really thought about that? But Hermione stepped forward this time, taking the lead.

"Not at all, sir." She replied, voice calm. "If anything, we'd rather just confirm our theories so we know to be wary. There's enough going on that anything could happen." When that garnered no response, she opened her mouth to speak more, but a dramatic sigh from the side stopped her in her tracks.

"Honestly, Severus, I'd expect you to at least entertain them, for their own sakes. Here, I'll do it for you: You Snakes are completely right." Oh, he took off the silencing spell, Harry thought. The man in the portrait scritched at his beard, mouth stretched in a sneer.

"Who are you?" Hermione asked curiously, taking him in. His skin had darkened from the last time Harry had seen him, as if he had been out in the sun. It made him look a mite better, at least compared to earlier when he was paler than the halfblood himself.

"Call me 'Ric if you want, or Godric, or that Greek hedonist who needs to stop teaching students transformations, I doubt you will be down here enough that it will actually matter. But that is besides the point! The point is, every other portrait I have had the pleasure of conversing with- finally- is deeply distrustful of that little upstart, and enough have reiterated his little mutterings that it is apparent he is plotting something involving the Stone and the Dark snit you call a Lord."

"And just what am I supposed to do about it, you insipid-" Snape started, his voice rising, before he cut himself off with a sharp breath and rubbed at his temples.

"You do not need to act at all, my dear Severus. Us four are fully capable of restarting the old lady and taking care of this wyvern of a man." Ric stated matter of factly, fingering the hilt of the sword at his hip.

"Wait- but- aren't you a portrait?" Theo asked. "I'm fairly certain we were all taught that there's only enough magic in paintings to keep them in motion."

"No," Harry piped up, eyeing the painting itself. "I think there's some in his, at least. That sheen's still there." Cue strangled noise from Theo.

"See! The Child has confirmed I'm not a derelict, so stop doubting me! Just- let me confer with my shield-mates and we shall take care of it. As best as we can. I may have to convince some of them. We will keep you updated." And then he was gone, slipping out of the frame with a hum. Theo spun around to Harry with a disbelieving expression and he raised his hands in defense, scowling.

"Oi don't give me that look, you know I had an examination. No way to hide that when everything
gets swallowed faster than air."

"What are you talking about?"

"Stupid pureblood things." The two boys chorused, giving each other surprised glances at the response. "It's just an etiquette rule I sort of broke." Harry continued, waving a hand and giving her a look that said *drop it*. She did. In the background he could hear the Professor muttering about this being his fault for choosing to teach children. Poor man.

"Will you three please leave for now? As you just heard, that... individual is taking care of it, and I am afraid he actually is the most certified to at the moment." He averted his eyes for a moment, looking as though he was pondering just what to say to get them out. "I certainly cannot refute your claims, especially as it will not protect you any to lie. But I am not someone who can handle this situation adequately, either."

As they reluctantly left, ready to go and report to the others like gossiping hens, Harry paused in the door before half-turning with a frown and said, "You know, you may not be able to handle this situation, but there's a reason we came to you."

Harry would have relished how nice it was to see the normally stoic man's face spasm if it weren't for the fact everyone in the common room was staring at the fireplace as if it was possessed. He curiously moved to catch a view of the front and stopped, eyebrows raising in disbelief.

"I guess we know who one of his shield-mates are." Theo murmured beside him, taking in the scene as well. Said scene was the current all-out brawl that was happening between Godric and the mystery portrait man. Probable Slytherin. Screw it, in all likelihood it WAS Slytherin, who else would try to gouge a man's eye out with a fork that viciously otherwise?

"If this was a cage fight, he'd be disqualified." Hermione mused.

"What?"

"What? My mother likes alternative sports." She said defensively, and Harry felt the need to tell her no, that wasn't the problem, actually no yes it was because why did her mother like cage fights of all things?

Terrifying. He watched as Godric grabbed a chunk of Slytherin's hair and pulled, and ouch that had to have hurt. It also seemed to have stunned him, because the other man quickly started yelling at him- in a language no one could understand, mind you, although it sounded almost like Blaise's tired Italian- until Slytherin went lax. The two stumbled out of sight, and Harry wondered where they had gone until a few moments later he heard Professor Snape shout, "GET OUT OF MY OFFICE."

They hurried down to the living quarters before anyone could realise they had just come out of Snape's office, Harry raising a brow when the others came into view.

"Is that othello?"

"Shush Harry, I'm winning." Blaise said, flipping a line down the board. Greg looked less than happy, but also less bored than usual. A good thing, he supposed? The others were doing random activities, with Millicent and Vincent working on homework while Moon, Daphne, and Neville argued about something important enough that Neville's stutter had petered out. He could see Pansy and Draco leaning against one of the doors and drawing something with a worrying intensity.

"I'm pretty sure we just managed to doom ourselves." Theo commented absently, taking a seat next
to the game. "We somehow ended up roping portraits with external power into all of this. Do you suppose that's a bad thing?" The group visibly paused, Pansy even looking up from her sketch of... a tree he thought?

"What?"

"The man from Snape's office- who's named Godric, by the way- just got into an all-out brawl with Slytherin, and has more magic in his painting than normal ones.. I don't think I've ever seen anyone besides myself handle an uppercut that well." Harry mused, settling next to Greg and pointing at a certain row that'd tie him with Blaise.

"Harry, no." Blaise berated, wincing at Greg's move. "Ah, screw this, I don't think I'm going to keep playing to lose. I forfeit, Greg."

"He referred to his three shield-mates and him restarting the 'old girl' to deal with Quirrell." Harry pursed his lips, thinking. "I feel like I should be looking into this more somehow."

"What, you mean how someone named Godric just got into an all-out brawl with Slytherin and claims to know two other super-powered paintings? I wonder what it means!" Theo said sarcastically. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yes, that would be it. Except there's too much going on right now for me to really care. We have enough to deal with, what with the situation we managed to stumble on."

"Crisis would be a better word for it." Draco muttered. Pansy nudged him and then went back to their tree.

"He did say he would keep us updated."

"So- what now? do we stop our research and training?" Daphne continued with a frown. "You all didn't get very far in it, and we just joined..."

"Oh no, of course not!" Blaise spoke, waving off her concerns, "We'll continue like any properly paranoid children and just make sure we can defend ourselves. For now-" He cast a quick tempus, frowning at the numbers, "For now we should take Hermione and Neville back to their own common rooms, si? Let's avoid any incidents with curfew at the moment. And later, when we have time, you all are telling us how you managed to tell Snape that with success."

Harry stared at his hands, curled up in his bed while the others snored softly. It had to be around midnight- maybe even past it a little- but he couldn't sleep. Spread about him were some of his textbooks, mainly those involving magical theory from Charms and Transfiguration. *Atronaches* was there as well, half-covered by the covers with the diary splaying it open.

He had small notes in them, reread sections time after time. Tom had said it would help it come easier, but he'd argued back that what he needed was a way to control it, not make it easier to *accidentally let loose*.

**You need to know how to use it first, don't you? You can't control something you aren't familiar with.** Was the reply. Harry had grudgingly agreed, remembering the ice shenanigans from earlier that week, which was why he was sitting on his bed now and trying to feel the magic that was constantly reacting to him nowadays. He'd been sitting on his bed for maybe ten minutes, trying to focus, before giving up and shifting to the position he was in now.

Tom hadn't explained this well enough. The books hadn't explained this at all- they were entry level,
which wasn't something he could work with when his magic was developing at insane rates. So, what was he supposed to do, he wondered? He closed his eyes with a grimace, letting his mind blank while he tried to come up with ideas.

But then after a few moments it felt like something blanketed itself over him and someone punched him in the chest and his head started to sting and **whoa** and he opened his eyes.

"Oh- my." He breathed quietly, staring around the room. This was- far more advanced than his usual aura pick-ups. The beds were glowing, the floor was glowing- even the walls were glowing. He groped around his bed, searching for Tom, and flinched when his hand hit something dusty. Looking back cautiously, he saw... the diary. He ran his hand over it again, feeling a nonexistent layer of dust, or maybe sand, or something else tiny and particle-like. Its appearance, for all intents and purposes, hadn't changed. He picked it up slowly, flipping to the nearest clear page. It was in the front, despite all the arguing they had done.

**Well?** Appeared on the page, the writing slow and deliberate.

*You feel as though you're covered in sand. And the room's glowing like it's been painted neon. Is that supposed to be happen?*

*You're seeing the magic around you- latent and active. That of the castle, dorms, and this diary are latent. As such, you cannot normally sense them.*

*But it also felt like I was covered in a blanket, and like someone punched me in the chest.*

**Remnants in the air and your own core. It's natural. Now that you've had that little lesson, why don't you go ahead and explain to me just what you meant by a war going on earlier.** Harry paused, pen poised over the paper as he considered just what to say. The Dark Lord... Tom had to have some inkling of that. The formation of a plan. Or... maybe it came later in his life? The most anyone knew about the Dark Lord's life was that he had gone to Hogwarts and was the Heir to Slytherin. What could he say without directly letting him know that Harry knew about you-know-what?

Slowly putting his pen to the paper, he wrote, **Well, there was a war obviously, between two factions. A lot of people label them as muggle-sympathisers and purebloods, but it was more- 'Ah, what were the words Blaise had used? Oh-' Traditionalists and Liberal-Progressives. The Traditionalists' unofficial leader went insane, formed a group called the Death Eaters, and then started slaughtering muggleborns and those clearly aligned with the Progressives. And then HE was killed. A lot of his people went on trial and were sent to Azkaban or let go, and a decade passed. That's about it, to be honest. Traditionalists barely have a voice now, and the latest pseudo-minister of Magical Britain is an idiot.**

The diary was quiet.

**Tom?**

**That is certainly... unexpected. Traditionalists and Progressives were generally balanced from what I remember.**

**Well, it's not the 40's anymore. The way of society you know has been dead since World War II.**

**Thank you for that, I couldn't tell at all.**

**Augustus? What was the name of that Dark Lord?**
When Harry woke the next morning, the magical light show had ended, but there was a thrumming under his feet that he hadn't noticed before, and when he touched a hand to the wall, it pulsed in an almost welcoming way. Blaise and Theo had given him worried looks before leaving him to his morning activities, knowing better than to ask. The incident with the hairbands and Hedwig proved it wasn't worth the pain.

After braiding his hair and tossing on a sweater and slacks, they trotted out to the Great Hall, which had begun to gradually fill back up over the week. People were still quiet, and some still held expressions that seemed more appropriate for a funeral, but at least they were there.

"So what do you think they're going to do? Gang up on him in a hallway or something?" Greg asked, peering over Neville's shoulder as he groomed one of the plants he had nicked. The smaller boy huffed and shifted the plant so he wouldn't hunch over as much.

"Maybe collaborate with other paintings?" Daphne suggested, passing a pitcher of milk to Pansy.

"I doubt they have enough power to really do anything." Moon muttered. Hermione absentmindedly pinched her and ignored the yell of indignation.

"Don't be so depressing, we have to be positive about this." she scolded the Snake. Harry could see Moon about to shoot something back, but a shape loomed over them, and they stared up to see a familiar face.

"What are you firsties talking about now? It's not another gossip ring, is it? Because I don't think Farley can take anymore choking." Marcus Flint peered down at them, dark eyes narrowed. Said prefect glared daggers at the Quidditch captain from her seat, where she was angrily murdering a plate of scrambled eggs.

"Nothing." Daphne squeaked.

"Actually, Flint, could I talk to you? About Quidditch." Harry piped up, shifting uncomfortably.

"About quitting, right?" Flint said wisely. At Harry's stunned expression, he elaborated, "The first game you had, you nearly went splat on the sand. And you've been less than enthusiastic about joining the team and having anything to do with the sport. I told Professor Snape it wasn't a good idea to sign you on so young- nerves and all. He actually agreed, but hey, House pride."

"So... Is it possible for me to slide from the team?" He asked dubiously.

"Terrence was fine enough, before we found you. Don't worry about it." Flint grunted, sliding down the table to the upper-years with a wave. Harry watched him leave with a blink before turning back to his friends.

"That was easier than I thought."

"Hey, at least it means no more near-death experiences for you!" Theo cheered, grinning widely as he stabbed a sausage. Blaise kicked him under the table with a scowl.

"Why do you feel the need to be so morbid?" He growled.

"It's a coping mechanism. Now, I say they'll pull some overpowered move and blow the lid off this whole mess." He raised his fork in oath. "Or, they'll adhere to the code of the knights of old and slay
Later, sometime before dinner was supposed to be but after the impromptu hide-and-seek they accidentally had, Harry, Hermione, and Neville had curled up in one of the smaller corners of the library and were discussing frogs of all things. Harry thinks they meandered to the subject because of Neville losing Trevor again. Honestly, if a pet tries to escape that much, it's most likely not a good decision to try and keep it.

Harry had been right in the middle of impressing that on the chubby boy when Millicent of all people jogged up, trying to make her way to them quickly and quietly.

"There's Aurors in the school!" She hissed when she was close enough, eyes wide.

"What?"

"Aurors! They're here to investigate, apparently. I saw them walking down to the Headmaster's office." Well. That wasn't good. They jumped from their seats, hurrying to follow their friend who had taken back to running out into the hallways. Reaching the office, it was obvious that news had spread very, very fast. That, or a crowd had already been there when they arrived. Fight maybe?

But McGonagall was there, giving the gaggle of students a death glare fit for a queen, and was sternly shooing them all back.

"There is nothing for you all to see here, and I suggest that unless you want detention for the next two weeks, you leave promptly." She snapped, managing to make some people squeak out of crowd slowly dispersed, some grumbling while others were whispering under their breath. Millicent pulled them away with a disappointed huff.

"Well, you can't have really expected us to catch a glimpse of anything. They were already in there, and we're just students, so we can't follow them around or anything." Hermione reasoned wisely.

"There wasn't much point coming down here."

"Yeah, but, it's the most action that's happened in the past week." Millicent muttered as they wandered down the hall.

"You mean besides the frequent examinations half the student body's been having?" Harry asked dryly. Millicent breathed out a laugh and smiled sideways at him.

"That's something. But I mean something hinting at them taking action. Besides the newspapers, there's been virtually no activity- my mother's confirmed it in her letters. The Ministry AND the International Confederation's been quiet, and it's freaking anyone involved in politics." She scowled slightly, glancing out a window. "Everyone's been assuming it means that nothing's going to be really done, since the school is separate from the government."

"That's..." Harry swallowed. "Unnerving."

"I know. But Aurors showing up means that they haven't shot the issue to the wayside. Mother'll be happy. She always worries about this sort of thing." They fell into silence, walking until they came to one of the courtyards. Some students were huddled in it, a roaring campfire started in the middle,
where some amazing person had conjured a brazier.

They grouped around it as well, a slight ways from the others but still near the fire. They were
luckily prepared for the weather with gloves, and a beanie in Hermione's case. It was nice to see the
snow fall around them as they kept warm.

"So when do you actually start serving that detention with Professor Snape?" Hermione asked after a
pause, still adjusting her cap. "It's been almost a week since he assigned it, right?"

"He moved it to when classes begin again because of paperwork or something," Harry replied with a
shrug. "I can't say I mind. More leisure time for me. Plus, he's been getting more and more twitchy- I
think I even saw him agreeing with Professor McGonagall over dinner last night."

"So?"

"Without any back-handed comments. It was almost civil, compared to the usual digs-contest they
have. I've noticed it, they don't stop even if a student's in earshot."

"Hah, yeah, you should have seen them a few years ago," A student near them piped up, leaning in
with a grin. "It was like a constantly-waging battle with them- get one-up on the other and win
temporary house pride. It was hilarious up until the point they got terrifying. You're lucky it died
down before you popped up here, Potter." Harry shivered at the image. It had to be like a mother lion
and a territorial barn owl facing off.

"I'm Ambrose. What're your names, gals and guy?" The student asked, turning more to them. He
was a Hufflepuff, Harry noted, and his face was friendly despite what seemed to be burn marks
decorating it.

"I'm Hermione, and this is Neville and Millicent. We're, um, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Slytherin
respectfully," Hermione said, giving him a smile back. "Why are you wearing your uniform?"

"Habit keeps one a calm man," He said wisely, closing his eyes before breaking the moment with a
snort. "Nah, I'm messing with you. I'm only wearing the tie, it's a habit of mine to look 'presentable'.
I'm guessing you four don't care, seeing your sweaters decorated with timely classics of television."
Yes, Doctor Who and Sherlock did stand out, didn't they? He had to wonder if Neville actually
knew what either were, though. Or what a tobacco pipe was. Did they have cigarettes and such in
the Wizarding World? "But that's besides the point! Actually, no, it's directly related... how did such
a mix-up of houses get together, I have to ask?"

The quartet shared glances, before Neville took the wheel, surprisingly. "To be honest, it's all
because of Harry. He partnered up with me in Potions so I wouldn't have as much trouble,
and then started being my friend."

"And he saved me from a troll on Halloween and defended me against his housemates," Hermione
added.

"And didn't act any different to me or our other friends when we left the group and came back. He's
like a magnet," Millicent finished. Harry was blushing up to his roots and trying to hide the fact he
wanted to bury his face in his sweater.

"Well," Ambrose said, staring with a surprised expression, "Those certainly are reasons."

It was nearing the end of the week, and there was still no sign of Dumbledore. The news hadn't
managed to catch sight of him or any tips, the Aurors had come and left, and as far as Harry knew,
the examinations had finished. Classes began in a day or so, not counting he couldn't shake the unnerved, twitchy feeling creeping up his spine and making him glance everywhere. Blaise and Draco had asked him just what was wrong at least half a dozen times but he didn't know how to explain it beyond 'I'm just nervous' unless he wanted to sound insane. There was a chance they'd believe him, but there was also a chance they would think the "stress" was getting to him. Please, he'd been stressed since he stepped foot into this school, and he managed it fine by reading and ignoring the outside world every few hours. Ha. Haha.

"Okay Harry, you cannot keep telling us nothing is wrong when you do that every other minute." Blaise finally snapped as his friend glanced around the Hall once more. "What is wrong? We will listen to you, you know."

"I-is it about going back to classes, Harry? Because that's unders-tandable." Neville tried. Harry shook his head in frustration.

"No it's not that, okay, it's just- the air feels wrong right now, and it feels like something's going to go bad and in a very very bad way and it's," He gestured wildly at nothing, running his other hand through his loose hair. "It feels wrong in here." He grit out.

The group shared glances- namely, Draco, Theo, and Blaise. "Do you think it's because of the thing?" Theo slowly asked, eyebrows furrowing. Harry shrugged, fiddling with his ring and twisting it round his finger.

"Probably," He muttered. He paused, shifting his feet on the floor, before slowly asking, "Does anyone else feel the floor vibrating?"

"I-...wait, yeah. What is that?" Theo's face was perplexed, looking under the table with a few of the others.

"There's nothing on the ground and no one's going stupid with their magic as far as I can tell." Moon murmured, eyes narrowed. "And the Weasleys have laid off their idiotic pranks ever since McGonagall's announcement." Other students were noticing, and Harry felt the urge to bolt, run out until he was completely away from the castle and maybe then the oily feeling in the pit of his stomach and the splitting feeling in his head would go away.

"The bloody hell is this!" Someone from Hufflepuff yelled, standing up with a terrified face.

"Students, keep calm! We will find out what is going on!" The Headmistress yelled from her spot, rising. She stilled suddenly, however, eyes going wide as they slid to her side. Harry could dimly see Quirrell saying something, almost convulsing in his seat, but then the feeling pitched to a peak, and a wave of foreign aggression came over him and there was a scream of agony.

Up at the Head Table, Quirrell's turban- and most of his head, in fact- had caught fire and refused to be put out.
“- Rry... -od ...-zure... -NON È UN- ...” Harry blinked, eyes unfocused and watering. His head felt like it had been split open, and his skin felt oversensitive, and going by the angle, he was probably on the floor. Why was he on the floor?

“Harry? Harry!” Blaise? Slowly sliding his eyes over, he could see the Italian boy by his side, near hyperventilating. Harry tried to respond, or do something, but his tongue felt like it was stuck to his mouth and his limbs were as heavy as weights. “Oh my Gods, Harry, can you hear me? I- your eyes are open, that has to be good, right? *Your scar* -”

“Blaise get away from him we need to have Pomfrey or one of the teachers look over him-” And that had to be Draco, who had far more panic in his voice than Harry had ever heard. Harry could just barely see him standing on the other side of the table. It was then he realised that the Great Hall was filled with, well, screaming and wailing.

“STUDENTS! CALM YOURSELVES! YOUR PREFECTS WILL ESCORT YOU BACK TO YOUR COMMONS *NOW*, AND YOU WILL WAIT THERE UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. FOOD WILL BE DELIVERED IF THE SITUATION CONTINUES.” A deep voice called above the others, scaring some of the yells into silence and causing a flurry a movement. Harry whined at the noise.

“He made a noise- is that a good sign?”

“He’s reacting to Snape, probably, let’s be happy he can do at least that- Farley! We have- we have an *giant bloody issue* here and we don’t know what to do how do we even deal with this-”

“Nott, what the hell are you talking about? Hurry and start moving- what’s wrong with Potter? *What is that on his head* ?” Harry made another whine, and tried to move. “Shit- it doesn’t matter- just-” Hands slipped under his back and legs and then the pain spiked and his mind floated away.

“I wonder if it’s because of the paintings or because of the shade.” Was what finally woke him, barely murmured but still jolting him nonetheless. He let out a small breath and opened his eyes, relieved that the pain from earlier was nearly nonexistent. Now it was just a tolerable level of stinging all over. Sigh. “Harry?”

He tried to sit up, and hands hurried to help him, keeping one on the small of his back and another on his shoulders. He was unsurprised to see it was Blaise. He was surprised to see they were in the Hospital Wing. He gestured slightly to the room, not trusting his throat.

“What? Do you need- oh... After... Quirrell, caught fire, you sort of had a- Hermione claims it was a
seizure, but...” Blaise bit his lip. Harry poked him sharply, and the other boy flinched back with a sharp look, before continuing in a soft voice. “Harry, your scar started oozing. The glamour completely broke and we could see it oozing black gunk. We took you here as soon as we could, and Pomfrey looked you over.” Harry lifted a hand to feel it, slightly flinching at the feel of it after all this time. It felt inflamed, puffy against his skin.

“What do you think it was?” He finally asked, his voice hoarse. Blaise flinched again, looking uncertain and scared and angry all at once. He handed him a glass of water, not answering just yet. Harry drank from it gratefully.

“I... Fratello, you know I love you with all my heart, and would not lie to you. Your scar, when it started doing that, it felt almost tainted. Like if we touched it, we would make ourselves sick. And it only started doing that when a shade exploded from Quirrell. Literally exploded- it, it was horrifying. The back of his head was like a giant sore afterwards, according to those who were closest, and the thing that came from it was just hissing horrible things and it was almost as if it was... as if it was Vvv-Voldemort himself, risen from the grave.” Harry stare at him in incomprehension.

“You said his name.”

“No one who causes pain to you or the others deserves a title like Lord.” Blaise snapped back, eyes blazing. Harry’s heart warmed and slightly shivered at his friend’s protectiveness. The darker boy’s face softened and he ran a hand over his head, sighing. “And the face we saw was- Lords and Ladies, it was something Black, at least. How are you feeling? Madam Pomfrey said there was not anything she could really do, couldn’t figure out what was wrong. She is in a staff meeting right now, I think.”

“Not that great.” Harry admitted. “Everything stings, and it sorta hurts to talk. And for some reason it feels like someone scrubbed my head raw. Better than earlier, I guess.”

Blaise huffed at him. “Stop talking then, idiot. Just lay back down and sleep a little longer- you look like you need it.” Harry was about to protest, but Blaise sent him a look that told him there was no point. “We’ll be right here when you wake up.”

When he woke again, light was shining through the windows and Madam Pomfrey was leaning over him with a critical eye. He froze and stared at her as she straightened and cleared her throat.

“You seem to be doing alright physically Mister Potter, but I suggest you take it easy.” She said quietly but sternly. “I can’t say for sure what happened, but be thankful your friends rushed you down here as quick as possible. Who knows what could have happened if you stayed in that room.” The woman shuddered- remembering last night?- before turning her eye back to him. “How are you feeling? Are you experiencing any memory loss, strange pains?” He shook his head at both. “You sure?” A nod. She gave him one more hard look before sighing and rushing off to do... whatever a magical school nurse did. Remembering last night himself, he searched around for Blaise, spotting him huddled on a bed with Draco and Hermione.

Oh, He thought numbly, They all came down. I guess that explains Blaise’s choice of words? A ray of light was shunting into Draco’s face, and going by his scrunched expression, he wasn’t quite happy with it. Hesitantly, Harry reached out and nudged him a bit to the side, moving him away from the light. His face eased into a relaxed expression. How are they all fitting on there?
His question was indirectly answered when Hermione shifted, kicking Blaise in the calf. He grunted and shoved her— all the way off the bed. The resulting squeal was just a tad amusing. Just a bit.

“Why did you all huddle on one bed if you can’t even fit on it?” He asked dryly as they began to wake up, grumbling (and apologising, in Blaise’s case).

“Are you kidding? Who would want to sleep alone after last night’s horror show?” Hermione griped, trying to brush out some of the knots that had formed in her hair. He quickly solved her problem with a slight flick, wincing at the resulting twinge. “Besides, it was easier to do that than have these two constantly falling out of the chairs.” She waved vaguely at the ones near his bedside.

“Very true... So...” Harry trailed off awkwardly. “I have no idea if I’m allowed to leave yet.”

“Let’s assume you are since you’re not foaming at the mouth and **go.**” Draco muttered, rubbing at his arm. “I hate hospitals.”

“Don’t we all?” Blaise rolled his eyes, sliding on his shoes as he straightened his clothes out.

“But shouldn’t we wait for Madam Pomfrey?”

“Hermione, the school’s practically in a crisis situation, I don’t think she has the time to even worry about us. Let’s just go to the Slytherin Commons and hang there for a while, it’ll be safer than here.” The Snake took the girl gently by the arm, helping Harry up with the other. “Besides, I’m eager to get out of these clothes. I haven’t felt this disgusting since Pansy spilt wine on me during the Saturnalia festival.” Draco snorted at whatever memory that brought up as they ambled out of the hospital wing, heading in a beeline for the dungeons.

“Just what’s been going on since last night? Did you three get any news on Quirrell before you followed me and bunkered down for the night?” Harry asked. The portraits were all silent, watching the halls and their group. Harry tried to ignore how some were conspicuously empty.

“None at all— besides what everyone saw, the students were shut off and kept in the dorms. We had to convince Snape when he appeared for a few minutes that you needed to go down the Hospital Wing because of your seizure.”

“Hermione, a seizure doesn’t make a curse scar bleed black tar.” Blaise said tiredly, clearly done with the topic. “It also doesn’t **just coincide** with a shade being banished from our Defense teacher’s head.” The Ravenclaw gave him a glare, but didn’t respond.

“I wonder what’s even going to happen to Quirrell, now? Whatever that thing was, it was pure Black Magick, so he definitely can’t keep teaching.” Draco mused, heading down the stairs first.

“Oh they’ll just let him off the hook, his stint during Quidditch and the whole harbouring-a-shade thing don’t add up to ‘Azkaban’.”

“Zabini, I swear to God—”

“Shoosh.” Harry clapped a hand over his mouth, leaning towards the wall. “I think I hear something.” Dimly, through the cobblestone, you could make out someone yelling or arguing, a whole crowd probably. But the Slytherin Common Room was at least another hundred feet— and never rowdy for fear of angering the portrait or Snape. Hufflepuff’s was on the other side of the castle. Which meant... what? The others were staring at him in confusion, but he ignored them in favour of frowning. Putting a hand to the wall in confusion and trying to figure out the voices, Harry stumbled back with a yelp as the stone vibrated.
“Are we going to be attacked?” Draco asked faintly, backpedaling from the wall. Harry could hear someone get out their wand as he searched for his- hidden in his pocket, tucked in his pants, where!? The vibration built to a rumble, and the stones of the wall began to rearrange themselves, grating against each other and creating a... door. They were scared of a door.

“I don’t know whether to feel relieved or exasperated.” Harry muttered, peering at the new entrance. The door was dark, possibly oak, and had no handle. He patted it perplexed, and jumped when the voices began again, much louder and clearer.

“You say that it is in any way safe for him to remain in the castle, Filius?” A voice was bellowing, easily identified as Snape. The man sounded like he was ready to snap someone’s arm in half in anger. “He has been practically harbouring the Dark Lord for who knows how long!”

“Severus, the man is injured and in pain, and we are not certain that he willingly let the You-Know-Who into-”

“That sort of parasitism can only be done willingly. Believe me, I know.” Snape hissed, interrupting the small man. “Minerva, you can’t possibly think that it is safe- you are the Headmistress-”

“And I believe he should be given over to the Aurors for endangering the student population and practicing dark magic.” The Scot’s voice was tight, and Harry had a feeling her face would be one of exhaustion right now. “There is no way to... completely verify that he was under the influence of You-Know-Who. Merlin knows the Ministry wouldn’t believe what we saw... What we all saw.” The voices fell quiet, and the four shared anxious glances.

“I doubt there’s much in the way of disproving it. We all saw its face, and Mister Potter’s reaction is enough to convince me.” Madam Pomfrey suddenly sniffed.

“His reaction?” McGonagall inquired, voice suddenly sharp.

“Severus saw it as well. His classmates said that once that thing bled out of Quirinus, Potter’s glamour broke and his scar started to leak, well, something. When I checked it this morning, it had faded to a silvery line, like it’d hardly been there at all!” Harry pawed at his scar, turning to Hermione- the closest- who was nodding with raised brows. “If that’s not a sign that it has something to do with that monster of a wizard, I don’t know what it is.” An uproar broke out, and Harry realised- this was a staff meeting. The castle or whatever had let them in on a staff meeting off all things.

“-Soon as possible, and then allow the students to roam the castle again. There is no point in restricting them after that.” McGonagall finished, sounding resigned. Harry supposed she had just decreed that Quirrell was sentenced to damnation or something along those lines. “It would be wise for the House heads to inform their students that they will soon be allowed to roam free. Bathsheda, if you could..?”

“Of course, Minerva.” There was rustling and scraping, and soon the noise petered down to nothing. The four students waited with bated breath for something else to happen- but the wall began to rumble again, and the door disappeared as quickly as it disappeared. The four stared at the spot it vacated in bewilderment, not knowing how to react.

“Well that was certainly interesting.” Harry breathed out, glancing at the others. “I- does anyone else feel like this... shouldn’t be mentioned?” No one else disagreed. “Okay. Is- is my glamour really broken?”

“It’s... you can’t really notice.” Blaise reassured, giving him a weak smile. “Your scar’s hidden by
your hair—really light, too—and the biggest things are under clothes, so—"

“So the only thing really noticeable is your scar and the one on your lip. I’m sure that one has a story, too.” Draco finished, leaning in. Harry snorted, rubbing at where he remembered it being and silently reapplying his glamours.

“Yeah, word of the wise, concrete and glass hurts. The scrapes healed, and this didn’t.”

“THERE YOU—four?- ARE!” A voice cheerfully bellowed behind them. Spinning, Harry saw Godric in a painting across from them, smiling cheerfully as the owner of said painting cowered next to a fruit tree. “I would like to inform you that the wyvern has been taken care of! You have no reason to worry anymore!”

“Wait, you’re the reason that whole mess last night happened?” Blaise asked, incredulous. Godric gave him a bewildered expression.

“Well, I would not call it a mess, but I suppose— the castle responded to our wish and awoke for a time—""

“SHUT IT! The students could have been harmed by the shade that came out of Quirrell, WE could have been harmed, and I am pretty sure half the student body is going to be having nightmares and running to their parents now! Harry bled tar from his godsdamned scar and you have the audacity to still be a cheery fool!” Blaise shouted, stalking dangerously close. Harry felt with a sinking pit in his stomach that he should probably tell Blaise that the magic followed the figures from their paintings. But would that stop him, is the question. The floor hummed underneath him and he shifted uncomfortably, placing a calming hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Blaise, calm down, he couldn’t have predicted this would have happened to me. I— we didn’t think anything would happen, how would he? We’re lucky it didn’t happen in a small environment or something.” Blaise paused, gritting his teeth, before sliding back behind the halfblood. An improvement. Godric still looked bewildered, but it was mixed with guilt by now, and he was fiddling with the sword at his waist. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see someone speaking to the painting’s occupant and ushering them out.

“I am deeply sorry, I did not predict that it would cause such an uproar. I had thought the staff would be able to ably protect the students. But why would it have affected him so? Are you able to tell me, boy?” He directed the last question to Harry himself.

“Because, you infant, he was a VESSEL, how many times do I have to tell you this.” The person near the tree snapped, coming closer and slapping Godric over th. "Sal, you know I can’t understand you when you use that.” Draco squeaked. Harry glanced at him with some confusion. Because of the nickname?

“It is SALAZAR, and you are going to have to stand it until I reach my painting.” Slytherin snapped again, leaning against the tree. “Then I can pretend you’re still silenced and that I’m just a humble mage with a pet snake and a speech impediment. Goddamn Rowena and her spells.”

Harry furrowed his brows in confusion, but stayed silent. He had a feeling there was more to this than he thought. Did Ravenclaw really have something to do with the silencing spell on Gryffindor’s painting? If so, what was on Slytherin? The founder suddenly spun in Harry’s direction, piercing him with a intense stare. He shrunk back for a moment, wondering what the hell was going on.
The man simply sighed without comment and broke his stare to tromp off, muttering something about mead. The group watched him go with bewildered stares.

“Someone give me something do, I’m dying here stuck in this damn dungeon.” Blaise moaned from his spot on the ground, garnering an unsympathetic eye-roll from Pansy.

“You could do your homework, if you’re that bored. Especially since it’s due in two days.” Blaise just groaned again, laying an arm across his eyes. Theo lightly pat his side in mock-sympathy.

“So you’re alright? No demons possessing you or anything?” Theo asked, turning to Harry with a frown. The halfblood could only shrug.

“They have no idea what happened. Just that Vv-the shade thing caused it.”

“It always happens to you, Potter. Next thing you know, you’ll be speaking in tongues and sprouting eyes all over yourself. Or playing patty-cake with the Gryffins and Huffers. Oh wait!” Moon exclaimed up from her spot on the floor, reading from a textbook. Blaise made a choked sound, and Draco hit him again.

“Well, Professor Snape said we’d be able to move around soon again, right? at least that’s a relief.” Daphne said. Harry tried to manage a smile, but was also stuck on the thought that right now, Aurors were escorting one of their former teachers to a dank cell before interrogation or jailing or however they handled this in Wizarding England

“Yes, but we’re still left sitting here, alone and left only with damp turkey sandwiches.” Moon pressed the text to her face in mock horror. “Damp turkey! It’s torture I tell you!”

“You could be in Shakespeare’s with that act, Moon.” Harry commented dryly. “I-.... I just realised. Do you even have a first name?” She gave him a blank look.

“Minerva.”

“Seriously?”

“There’s a reason I don’t mention my first name, Potter. Go back to not knowing or you’ll find your dinner mixed with a potion that’ll give you hives.”

“Can we call you Minnie? We’ll put mouse ears on your head and have Harry as Mickey!” The glares Theo received from both his housemates made him shrink back. “Okay, okay, understood.”

“So, ignoring Theo’s idiocy, does anyone want to play Othello?”

“Blaise, why-”

“It’s a nice game and keeps me distracted! Why don’t you-” A whistling sound went through the air, and the group looked up with alarmed faces. Then one of the prefects’ heads popped up in the frame of light from the commons, expectant.

“Snape’s here, are you... eeeleven coming?” He asked, squinting down. He then squealed as they came barreling up, straightening out before anyone could see. Snape was giving them an unimpressed stare that said he knew exactly what game they were playing.
The next half hour is not spoken of for the sole reason that, due to the carelessness of a student who had taken to smoking stress away and decided to step near the exploding snap game set up, most of the common room and some of the students were set on fire. Along with Snape. The expression on Slytherin’s face as he stepped into his frame would have been priceless if Harry hadn’t been busy shooting Augamenti’s and douse’s at everyone within soaking range. By the end of it, the student who had pulled out a cigarette threw his whole pack on the ground and stomped on it, Snape looked like a drowned cat, and Flint looked ready to cry while staring at his burnt robes.

Snape decided to leave them with the message that classes would begin tomorrow, he’d be teaching DADA, their parents were informed of the recent incident, and that Mister Sanford- the smoker- was in detention with Filch for the next month. Before stumbling back through the commons portal and spitting something in what Harry thought may have been French. Or maybe something Northern?

School returned to normal so quickly it was disturbing. Some people the next morning were downright unsettled, whispering and staring at the spot where everything had gone down last night - or something- while others picked at their meals and glanced at the ceilings every so often. Looking for an owl, or rain maybe.

The Snakes surrounding Harry that morning were overly cheery, smiling at each other and twitching every so often. He swore he saw Bulstrode- the older, unidentifiable sibling of Millicent- start muttering to themselves at one point. The other tables paid them no mind, thank Merlin. Hermione had stuck to her own table for once, feeling the need to console some of her housemates. The looks on their faces made Harry think that she was slowly terrifying them instead. Was Theo rubbing off on her?

“So who’s teaching Potions now? The fat guy?” Draco mumbled, stabbing a fork in the direction of the indeed portly man at the Staff Table. Harry shrugged his shoulders, picking at his toast and fruit. Blaise nudged him, so he grudgingly shoved an apple slice in his mouth.

“P-Professor Bathsheda said that his name was Professor Slughorn. I think he used to teach here a l-long while ago?” Neville piped up, shifting across from them. Harry turned back to the table, giving the man a measuring stare. He was surrounded by, of all things, a nauseating lemon-yellow, making Harry’s mouth taste like nasty lemon drops just by looking at him. He turned his eyes away before he was noticed.

“I don’t care as long as he’s competent.” There was a fluttering above, and the owls rushed in, coming in almost as heavy as they had the beginning of the week. Harry was sure that every parent possible (or every one that cared) was mailing, making sure their child hadn’t been damaged or neglected by the staff. He’d be surprised if some weren’t threatening to pull them out because of the whole incident.

Two owls raced towards them, quickly followed by another, smaller one that had swooped by the Gryffins before segwaying. Letters were dropped in front of the whole group, with only Theo noticeably having none. He seemed to ignore it in favour of peering over Draco’s shoulder.
“Dear Harry and Blaise: I have to say that while I am horrified at what has happened so close to you and the other children, I cannot say I am surprised, if only because that figlio di una puttana* was as idiotic as Dominic. Wasn’t that her third husband?” Blaise nodded. “Please mail me as soon as you can, because while Severus’ sharp letters are reassuring, I would rather hear something more than a mass-mailed emergency notification. Love, Mamma. I think she stuck a cheering charm to this, the need to sink my head into my plate’s lessened.” Blaise snorted and gently took the letter, reading it over again before beginning to sketch out an answer.

“Better than Mother and Father. I think they’re ready to rip Dumbledore a new one- and they’re blaming him for this. They actually like McGonagall, right now.” Draco commented, folding his.

“Creepy.”

“I know, right?”

Transfiguration was weird. Hallow’s Eve levels weird. McGonagall, while still running the class as hard as usual, was literally the calmest in the room when it came to messing up their magic, as everyone was expecting a) a meltdown, or b) the castle to make them explode. The Snake was certain she had taken a potion or cast a spell, because while she looked tired, none of the stress from the past few days was present on her face. Harry watched a girl nearly break into tears when her pillow turned into rock rather than a book, and decided it couldn’t be anything else. He himself managed to turn his into an outwardly-perfect copy of Dracula, and then took to doodling in it with an extra pen. By the time McGonagall swooped near him, he was inking in a tiny picture of Snape doused in water.

“Mister Potter? May I ask what you are doing, exactly?” Harry spasmed, slamming the book closed with a blush. The Professor-slash-Headmistress was giving him a raised brow with an amused tint meaning yes, she had seen wet-kitten Snape.

“Uh-waiting to make sure I’ve performed the spell right?” He tried, handing her the tiny novel. She inspected it, feeling the texture, and eyeing the cover.

“Uh-waiting to make sure I’ve performed the spell right?” He tried, handing her the tiny novel. She inspected it, feeling the texture, and eyeing the cover.

“Good wandmanship, Mister Potter, five points to Slytherin. However, I suggest you not let Professor Snape catch eye of it.” He nodded vigorously, waiting until she was two desks away to pry it back open and furiously began inking again. Blaise sniggered next to him, focused on turning his yellow cushion into a copy of Sir Baggenshield’s Adventures.

Herbology had a slightly wilted Sprout doing a slightly obvious lesson on herbs that could be used for healing potions or salves, having them handle various magical mint-ferns that were purple and seemed covered in hideous glitter. Harry swore one sneezed on his hand, and Greg sniggered when Harry wiped a hand on his robes in disgust. Then the fern he was handling sneezed all over his front.

And Defense, while managing to make everyone terrified out of their wits- outside the Snake House and Harry’s Band, at least- proved to be interesting. Snape, clearly very angry with their past (by two days) teacher, reviewed the past four or so months, having them revise their notes while spitting
insults about their previous lessons. It wasn’t that Quirrell had been a bad teacher, he was just... a bad teacher. Who didn’t teach them how to accurately defend themselves against vampires, werewolves, redcaps, sirens, or nagas. Which Snape rectified.

Harry would say the day was nice, ignoring the tense air and nervous tics nearly everyone had at the moment. By dinner he was relaxed, humming to himself as he speared a piece of chicken on his fork.

“So how was your morning? Must have been a bit weird, sitting with your dorm mates after so long.” Hermione gave him a bemused glance, taking a seat across from him as Draco and Blaise argued over the Potions essay assigned.

“Most everyone thought I’d been turned dark, so I spent half the time discussing last night with them and the other half gritting my teeth. Did you take something?” Harry snorted, grinning.

“Nah, I think the day’s just got me relaxed. It’s been so nice I can’t help smile, you know? Besides, ‘normality keeps a man sane’, or something.”

“What about that detention with Snape you’ve got?” Theo piped up, swatting Draco over the head as he edged into the mousy boy’s space. Moon rolled her eyes next to him and stole his roll. “Woman, I will take your fork and knife- you’re going to be spending the night scrubbing cauldrons or something, if that’s still his territory. You might even be helping him clear out the Quirrell parts of the Defense Room.” They all paused, equal parts disgusted and slightly delighted at the idea.

“The room wouldn’t smell like garlic anymore.” Harry ventured, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “Although that might have been his head, considering the ‘parasite’.” The rustle of the evening mail could be overheard, and he huffed as a newspaper nearly landed in the potato mash. Hermione took it up, skimming the pages for anything interesting.

“Parasite?” Moon cut in sharply.

“What would you call the thing from last night?” Harry deflected. She scowled, but didn’t argue, especially when Hermione cleared her throat, dragging their eyes to her pale face. She quietly turned the paper around revealing a monstrous headline declaring, “Shade Hiding in Teacher, Hidden Abuse and Harassment, and Power Grabs- A Damning Trail of Evidence Against Albus Wulfric Percival Dumbledore.”

One of them groaned. Harry thunked his head on the table and began to laugh.

“So, now Dumbledore is the Wizard Devil, everything that’s been going wrong at Hogwarts is his fault, and nearly every parent in the community is having an aneurysm and demanding that wizarding children be watched closer, especially in non-magical environments.”

“This would have been useful years ago.” Harry commented, leaning against Draco until the paler boy grunted. “Do you think this means they’ll make some sort of Child Services Department?”

“They already have one.” Draco retorted, shuffling a bit until he was comfortable with the weight of his friend. “It just mostly looks after cases that are reported to them, or already adopted children.”

“Wonderful.” Blaise snorted, tossing the paper somewhere behind him, where it was promptly caught by Theo, who rolled his eyes. “At least they have Dumbledore now. I don’t think anyone
would have expected him to be hiding out in a derelict pub down in Hogsmeade.”

“Well, he wasn’t really hiding out, more of just... drinking away the rest of the world.” Theo added helpfully, dodging the elbow thrown at him. “But now they do! And they can keep doing whatever they’ve been doing, just with their main perpetrator.”

Harry hummed, staring at the sky above as he frowned. The man really hadn’t been hiding- more of just waiting. With about five different bottles of alcohol. From what had been written, it was his brother’s pub. He didn’t know how to feel about this.

Happy? Avenged? He couldn’t tell, to be honest. The man had started it all, of course, had even let Voldemort in the damn castle- but that wasn’t going to stop just because he was gone. So he only held a small dash of relief, along with a sense of... waiting. Waiting for something to happen again.

Like Quirrell wasn’t enough.

---

*Figlio di una puttana - Son of a whore! I think!*
Detention led Harry on a wild goose chase at first, with him checking both the Potions’ classroom (no longer Snape’s) and the man’s office in the Commons before he scampered down to the defense room with a minute to spare. He opened the door to see Snape leaning over a conjured, blazing fire brazier, paused, and then tried to close the door.

“Mister Potter.”

Later, Harry would tell his friends he was made to write lines about how he couldn’t wander the halls past hours like a dunce. In reality, he had spent the full hour solemnly helping Snape throw things into a conjured fire brazier. It was surreal. He was fairly certain the man had forgotten he actually had detention.

He walked back around nine, Snape shooing him off with mutterings about curfew and not repeating incidents. The students in the commons greeted him well enough, although Farley had yet to stop eyeing him like he was a bomb. He cheerfully waved at her with a larger grin.

When he came into his room, Theo and Blaise were huddled around a bed, arguing over an assignment. They glanced up when he came in.

“Did you get the house elves angry, Harry? Your bed’s messier than this morning.” Harry shot a look over- and yeah, that definitely was a larger disaster zone than usual. He shrugged, he wasn’t a kid, was he? He’d been taking care of his own space for a long while before house elves came into the picture.

“Maybe something pulled them away? I can just take care of it, so it’s not much of a problem.” He commented, sweeping up the few books scattered on the coverlet. The journal slipped a little off the top and he tilted, making it slide back into balance. They all went stacked on his side table. “I’m going to head off to bed early, so I’ll talk to you guys in the morning, yeah?”

“Night.” “Buonanotte, fratello.”

Professor Snape wasn’t being a worrying pyromaniac when he came in the next night, but was frowning viscously at a pile of scrolls on his desk. He glanced up when the door opened, his face clearing when he saw who it was.
“On time, I see, Mister Potter. Please wait one moment.” Snape pulled out his wand, conjuring a large chalkboard to the right of him. “Write ‘I will not wander the halls and put myself in danger’ on the board.” Harry almost asked how many times, but peered at the size of the thing and thought Well, probably too many. He picked up the chalk resting in the tray and began, internally cursing his small handwriting and height as he tried to reach the top of the board. He could hear Professor Snape rustling at his desk, presumably starting to downgrade anyone who thought they had written a decent essay.

When he reached the middle of the board, Harry paused, grimacing at the stings in his legs. Maybe-yep. He was an idiot. The Snake shook his head in exasperation as he adjusted the level of the board, easily lowering it and giving him more ease. The fact it took him five minutes to even realise this was most likely Not Good.

By the time he had three lines, his hand was cramped and he shook it, trying to wring out some of the pain. Behind him, Snape was starting to mutter in something that may have been gibberish or swears, and threw something. It may have been a paperweight.

Harry turned, curious, and yep, there was the tiny dog statuette, lying on the ground forlorn. “Essays not meeting expectations, sir?” He asked awkwardly, giving the man a small smile as he glanced up. The dour professor gave a snort, turning back to his work.

“Let it be known, Mister Potter, that if you and your little group ever become as bad as these supposed sixth years, I will not hesitate to down enough cheering draughts to scare Headmistress McGonagall. Only that would numb the utter insipidity and inaccuracy of these essays.” He made a rough growl, gruffly slashing against one of the papers. “How did Quirrell become hired?”

“Likely through desperation, sir. From what Blaise and Draco told me, people are terrified of the DADA position.” Harry offered, making another few lines on the board. He wondered if Snape would mind if he wrote bigger. Would it matter if it was obvious?

“Indeed.” Another few minutes passed, Harry reaching about a fourth down the board. He felt a gaze on his back and paused, confused when Snape sighed behind him. “Mister Potter, you do not need to write that small.”

Harry turned in confusion. “Sir, I write like this for everything. I think Professor Flitwick once called my handwriting ‘smaller than a pixie’s’.” The man obviously wasn’t amused by the comparison, and Harry startled when he raised his wand, shooting a spell at the board. “Wh-oh.” The board had been made smaller, and now Harry’s writing filled at least half. “Thank you, sir.”

“This is supposed to be a punishment, not an exercise in redundancy.”

“Of course, sir.”

Harry trudged in the next night, exhausted from the day. Despite only having one class, the others had decided to have an impromptu training session, and he had spent the majority of the afternoon arguing with Moon on why she needed to run, why they were learning defense instead of offense at the moment, and why he was the one taking the lead of everything (answer: Everyone automatically poked him for answers or help. Thanks Theo.). The end of said session had been packed with a round of laps around the track, and an impromptu duke-out with Moon. Who was quickly healed. By
the time dinner rolled by, he wanted to crawl into his bed and stay there for hours, but they still had homework to complete and look over. And now this.

“Are you well, Mister Potter?” Snape eyed him when he walked in, once again going through a pile of scrolls, albeit a smaller one. Harry nodded, too done with the day to bother with a proper response. “If you say so. Today you will be helping me label potions for the medical wing. Professor Slughorn is busy with... other pursuits.” His tone belied his less than positive opinion on whatever that meant, and Harry wondered who could be so bad that the man couldn’t even be respectful to them as a peer. But then he remembered this was Snape and not someone like McGonagall. And that this was also the man known for supposedly making people sick with one glare.

“Are you talking about the...” Merlin, what was the stupid name that upper year had mentioned? Oh- “The Slug Club, sir?” The man gave a violent twitch. That answered that question. “What potions need to be labelled, Professor Snape?”

Professor Snape gestured to a small group of vials, all crowded onto one of the desks. Harry curiously picked one up, bringing it close and sniffing i- oh god, ew, no , he quickly put it down. Had to be something for infection or broken bones.

“That tends to be the reaction most people have.” Snape said dryly, coming up behind him. Harry shifted to give him more access as he reached for one of the vials. “The ones green in colour are to be labelled ‘anti-infection/bacterials’, while those red in colour are to be labelled ‘pepperup potion’. Please do not get these mixed up, it will be a horrid situation for all.”

Harry set to work, humming softly as he did it. It was quite easy, much less harsh than what he heard Snape had a tendency to assign. He’d heard multiple stories of having to help Filch or clean cauldrons from other Snakes and a few ‘Puffs who weren’t too unnerved to talk to him. But, compared to this... he wondered if they were exaggeration. A little, probably.

It probably also had to do with the fact the man wasn’t the Potions teacher anymore and wasn’t in charge of cauldrons.

He made a small noise when his quill hit the glass, frowning at the uneven line. He ran a thumb hard against it, concentrating and watching as the unnecessary ink slowly faded away. Amazing how such an annoying, dangerous, terrifying skill could be used for mundane fix-ups. Ha.

“And how have you been handling that, Harrison?” Harry jumped. Snape was staring at him through his lashes, an unreadable expression on his face. Harry wondered what the hell he was talking about before he actually glanced down and realised he must have seen that little parlor trick. Well.

“So...sort of well? Well, not really, but I’m figuring out how to actually rein it in, technically. I sort of froze the hallway a few days ago but that was the first big incident since Christmas?” Snape didn’t look impressed but what else was he supposed to say, it was going chipper and there hadn’t been any problems despite the fact he’s something most think is a time bomb? ‘Yes Professor Snape, I’m better than a wino with-’ okay. No. No getting off topic.

“Really sir, I’m fine-” Harry set down the vial hurriedly, at which point the glass melted and fused with the table. It didn’t budge when he tugged on it.

“Quite. Harrison, there are actually ways to prevent such outbursts. But...”

“But you would have mentioned them if they were safe or viable.” Harry muttered. He cleared his throat and said louder, “What exactly would happen? What are they?”
“There are potions that help children with particularly chaotic accidental magic, but they often cause extreme lethargy and mood swings, and in some cases damage their magical development. While you may not be a child, you are hardly anything close to a teenager yet, which means you are still underdeveloped. Old spells exist to reign it in permanently, but most involve blood or body magic. Which is illegal and highly dangerous.” Professor Snape replied seriously. The room was quiet, and he had set his quill down what seemed to be a long time ago. “And as your ...Head of House, you are in my care, and I cannot willfully allow more harm to come to you.”

“...Oh.”

It was silent for the rest of the evening, even if he tried to be polite when he left for the Commons.

The others didn’t quite understand why he was so quiet the next morning, but when he shook his head, they dropped the subject. Blaise piled more eggs on his plate and in retaliation Harry made his sausages fly away to Millicent. Millicent was very satisfied with the results.

Charms was spent awkwardly positioning the others away from the Gryffindors, who had apparently started something in the halls and decided to continue it. Or the others had. He didn’t bother keeping track and just made sure everyone knew boils were painful and very possible for him to conjure up. Their lesson today was on charming items to change colour, of all things. Were all charms superficial?

Transfiguration involved him coming in and seeing Professor McGonagall perched on her desk and washing her paws. He cleared his throat, blocking the door a bit before anyone could come in. She quickly changed back, composed and straightening a few stray papers. A handful of points were allotted to the “McGonago” jar, with extra for keeping a straight face at being caught.... er, complying with instincts? Catting? Dear Morgana no that wasn’t a word.

They tried to transform pillows into chalk bricks and it was confusing and too easy. He spent most of the time turning the brick into different colours of chalk and smearing the dust on people’s robes without them noticing. He drew a boat on one Gryffindor’s, while Blaise eyed him and made sure McGonagall didn’t notice. Or the kid. Pavarti something? He didn’t really remember.

Dinner was uneventful, and soon he was in front of the DADA classroom again, knocking on the door. When Snape called him, he walked into the site of another fire brazier.

“Sir, is this really-”

“Do you want to burn horrible artifacts or not Mister Potter.”

“....I don’t think it’s wise for me to answer that, to be honest. Was Professor Quirrell really this dark? I know everyone’s saying he was leached off by Vvv-oldemort, but school rumours aren’t quite something to reliably go off of.” Snape gave him a hard look that said the answer was obvious and didn’t need to be said. “Right.” There was a pile next to the pit, smaller than the first one but just as repulsive to him. He held up the first item gingerly, tightly wrapping a shield about his hand. It felt as if he was touching something slimy and pulsing, ugh. The Professor quickly cast a spell, one he had refused to disclose, and Harry threw it into the fire immediately afterward. That was the procedure- he’d grab the item, Snape would do his thing, and then Harry would cast it away like the ring on top of Mount Doom. Except this was Hogwarts and he was five foot two.
It wasn’t dangerous either, not per se, just really, really uncomfortable to where he felt the need to bring hand sanitizer. He was throwing in a small necklace when he paused, realising something.

“Professor Snape, I had a ring- when I woke up in the Hospital Wing a few days ago, it was gone. Who took it?” The dour man gave him a blank look before reaching into his pocket, taking out a small item. Oh. He gratefully took the ring, slipping it on and cancelling his own glamour, which had been hard maintenance for the past week.

“Is it uncomfortable wearing that?” The man asked idly, tossing another spell at a book the first year held up. Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

“I’m used to it, and I don’t feel quite comfortable without it. It’s sort of my own little barrier, keeping another piece of me away from... er, fans? Disturbing people who think I defeated one of the most powerful wizards in the century.” Snape snorted, a corner of his mouth quirking up.

“I must admit it is a relief to see you are... not the same as your father. To say such is an understatement.”

“That’s nice.” They stood in silence, continuing to ritualistically throw things into the fire. It was only ten or so minutes later when they finished, and Harry helped put out the fire, watching dubiously as Professor Snape banished the brazier to who-knows-where. “...Sir?”

“Yes, Harrison?”

“Where am I going to end up after this fiasco?” From the spike in the teacher’s magic, Harry had a feeling he didn’t need to specify what he meant.

“...I am afraid I do not know.”

“Alright. What about now, when they’re probably in the process of shoving test after test onto everything to see if it’s fake?”

“Mister Potter-”

“Sir.” Harry gave the man a long, honest look, silently asking himself if he really wanted to know. Did he? What if he was going to be a ward of the Ministry or something equally horrid? Professor Snape mouth did a thing that made him look almost guilty and the energy around him drew in, and Harry knew he wasn’t going to get a straight answer.

“You will be in my care until the matter is completely resolved. Please go to your Commons, Harrison.”

He trudged down the halls, not catching the attention of the few in the Common Room as he passed them. Most were studying or congregating around a poker game. He didn’t quite take notice. The door to his room was open and he went inside in relief, happy to be able to relax after the day. His things were spread across his bed again, books everywhere and the blanket askew. Strangely, the house elves were still avoiding him like the plague. Eh.

As he flopped onto his bed not a minute later, he really, really wished he had thought things through, on a visceral level only those who go to clown school or take PCP do.
The diary was on his bed. It stopped being on his bed when he let out a choked noise and fell onto the floor, dragging the sheets and it with him.

“Oh my god, Harry??” And there was Blaise and Theo, peering at him like he was insane. He wheezed, not having the energy to explain someone just cut out most of his chest and didn’t bother sewing him back up. Or rather, that was what it felt like. “Harry?? What happened? Did you break something? How do you break something falling onto your bed?”

“THEO-”

“Are you lot fine in there? There was a noise, worried some of the others.” Theo waved away whoever was there with a lie of horsing around, but locked the door with a charm for good measure. 

Bless you, Theo.

“Help- me-” Harry wheezed out, waving a hand and gritting his teeth. Theo hurriedly pulled him up, helping him sit on his bed as Blaise gathered his sheets, hand almost brushing the diary. Harry dragged him close and away from it, panicking. That was the only thing capable of his reaction, and he’d prefer if his friends didn’t go through it with their exhaustible magic wells. Blaise gave him a worried look and huddled in close, wrapping an arm around him. Harry ignored the look, trying desperately to clear his mind. He could do this, he could, Tom had said it was Atronach 101, he already did it unconsciously-

His mind clamped down, and his eyes squinted as the light show he had been seeing on and off the past week came back, the metaphorical blanket of magic covering his shoulders again. He drew in a rattley breath as he shifted himself just so, opening a “door”, and-

It almost sunk into him, slowly gathering on his shoulders again and sinking in. It was almost a cycle, one he was eternally grateful he could access.

“Harry?” Someone whispered, breaking his concentration. He opened his eyes slightly, not realising he had closed them, and tried to smile at his friends, clearly freaked out. It didn’t help in the slightest.

“You’re glowing.” Blaise pointed out in a hissed tone, eyes wide. Harry shrugged, breathing out a long sigh as the process slowed, the magic he was pulling in coming to a stop and settling on his shoulders permanently. To say he felt drained was an understatement.

“Atronach thing,” Harry muttered, rubbing his arms and trying to get rid of the soreness, “I- I sort of messed up and my magic blew out all at once. Needed to- to replenish it. ‘R s’mthin.”

“Okay. I’m going to accept that explanation for now, since you look ready to collapse.” Theo said cautiously next to him, rubbing a hand on his back, “Later, however, you’re going to be interrogated. Thoroughly.” Harry blinked at him blearily, covertly glancing down at the diary as they backed off after deeming him functional. If he imagined (hallucinated) well enough, it looked as though it had become covered with dust, embodying what it had felt like to him. He twitched a finger, too tired to bother with more than an intent. The diary jerked sluggishly and was dragged under his bed with little fanfare, the others not noticing as they watched him anxiously. Theo huffed before helping him up, tugging off his robe. “Okay. Bedtime now, no stories or sweeties or teddies.”

“I’ll go put up Monopoly,” Blaise mumbled, crossing over to the opposite side of the room. Harry made a questioning noise as he stumbled out of his uniform and into something he didn’t have to wear in public. “Mamma keeps sending board games. She shrunk down othello for me when we first arrived, but I never had a chance to break this out. It’s a thing at home for some reason.”

“You mean it’s a thing because your mother keeps finding American men.” Theo retorted, eyeing
Harry as he crossed over to his own bed.

“Women, actually. She meets them in tourist spots and ah, chats them up. They give her gifts. A lot of them are strange muggle things.” Theo snorted, and Harry shook his head. The wonders of Nicola Zabini. The woman probably had half the people in Venice under her thumb just through blackmail. As he tugged an old shirt over his head- one of the few he had that weren’t from the Dursleys or disturbingly formal- Harry collapsed onto his bed with a grunt, happy this time he wasn’t electrocuted by an asshole diary. He rolled around until the blankets were wrapped around him, easily falling into slumber.

He had quite a strange dream that night. Not strange in the sense that it had no logic or sense itself, but rather that he had never felt like he had control in his dreams to such an extent.

There was an older boy in a button-up and slacks, staring at him as if he were a walking walrus (but wait, he had seen one of those, hadn’t he? Ha) and poised at a desk as if he were waiting to write something. There were pages and pages of writing tacked around him, and as Harry leaned closer, he vaguely recognised the words on them. It didn’t sink quite in.

The older boy called his name, except it was the one Blaise and him had invented, and Harry had asked ‘yes?’ but then he paused, because he could clearly recognise those words now, conversations he had held with Tom, and he stared at the boy at the desk and said ‘Oh’.

It made sense now that the only things in this space were the pages and the desk and Tom himself. The air around them felt strange and thin, as if it could disappear at a moment’s switch and he thought, ‘this wasn’t natural’.

And then Harry jumped forward and punched tiny Voldemort in the face.

When he opened his eyes, he felt slightly restless, as if he should have gotten just an hour more, and sat up, startling Theo who was already getting ready. He didn’t feel hollowed out anymore, thank every thing in the sky.

“I punched the Dark Lord in the face.” Harry said absently, blinking slowly. The expression Theo gave him clearly said he didn’t believe him and was he sure he was awake? Maybe Harry should just lie down some more. When he voiced this, Harry threw a textbook at him and lurched to his feet. “I had a really weird dream.” He mumbled as he padded to the bathroom.

He went through the motions- his hair was getting a bit long, should he cut it?- and emerged a short time later, less undead and more alert.

“Why are you up so early?” He asked Theo, who was debating putting on his shoes by the door. His friend shrugged his shoulders.

“Woke up and didn’t bother going back to sleep. You feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to-”
“No.” Theo glared at him. Harry flicked a finger and turned his hair neon purple. “Wait until Blaise is up so I don’t repeat myself. And if you tell any of the others, then be prepared to lose sleep.” The other boy rolled his eyes, finally shoving his shoes on with a huff. What did he expect, a full dissertation? Harry wasn’t even planning to even tell them anything, really- the whole Shade thing had been bothering him more than he admitted (true) and his journal had triggered his magic and made it go haywire (barely true). Not that they knew that. He’d ignore the guilt and cast a lengthy amount of wards around the diary as compensation until he could figure out what the hell happened.

Lord, he was going to give himself a headache.

Everyone stared at Theo, who gave them a raised eyebrow in confusion.

“No? Have you looked in the mirror today?” Moon drawled, looking as though she wished she had a camera, along with Draco (who indeed did have one, if broken).

“Yes? Why are you all staring, it’s becoming unnerving.” Hermione was the one who broke the news.

“Your hair’s a, um, lively shade of purple. Here,” She took a small mirror out of her bag, handing it to the Snake. As it passed into his hands, Harry flicked his hand a smidge, smiling when his friend’s hair reverted to normal.

“Wh- it’s perfectly fine! Same shade of brown and everything! Are you all pulling one on me?”

“Theo- no, it’s too early for this. Not even going to bother. Does anyone know what we had for our Defense homework? I haven’t done it yet and can’t remember for the life of me what it was on.” Draco sighed, tearing his piece of toast into pieces.

“I think it was about spells to detect different creatures?” Millicent said thoughtfully. “Or something like that. I did it the night it was assigned.”

“Shut it Bulstrode, I was tired.”

Theo and Blaise cornered him after Charms, squirreling him away from the main group and ducking into an unused office. Or supply closet. It was small, alright?

“Explain.” Theo pushed bluntly, keeping in front of the door. Harry gave a put-upon sigh and set his things down, relaxing on what might have been a low shelf or a bench.

“Look, this whole ‘Atronach’ business, it’s new to me, yeah? And, the other thing is, it’s not new to anyone else, because they’ve been given propaganda since they were kids. As such, no one’s written much more beyond ‘they’re dangerous’- you know how I know that? I’ve looked. Barely a word on them in the school library. I didn’t have time to look through the Malfoy’s, and I doubt those books you gave me were common, Theo.” The pureblood shifted uncomfortably. “So, I haven’t got much to work on when it comes to dealing with it. There’s bound to be... hiccups. Last night was a large
“Okay, but what was it?” Blaise spoke up from the side. “You looked like someone had blown your side out last night. That’s not something to brush aside, fratello.”

“My magic blew out of me. Er, sort of. I think it was a delayed reaction to the shade or something.”

“Harry, you can’t expect us to believe that— it’s so flimsy that Longbottom would be able to see through it.” Theo cut in sharply, glaring him down. Harry glared back, lips curling.

“Really? How do you expect me to explain it when I don’t even understand it? When I don’t even know how my own body works?” Theo opened his mouth to answer but Harry cut him off, on a roll. “The book that you gave me only gives a bloody history and vague description of them. Do you expect me to understand everything after just reading that? What about books that barely brush the topic, only going on and on about how ‘oh you need to channel your mind completely to do this little thing I’ve been doing since I was eight’? Or how about I go to someone and ask if they can help, and get reported because I’m already under pressure here for turning out Slytherin in a wholly Gryffindor-dominated family?” Harry smacked his hand against the shelf-bench, teeth clenched. Ice crackled before quickly melting away, and his glare faded into an expression of agitation. “What am I supposed to do when that happens whenever I’m upset now? What am I supposed to do when my magic reacts in some weird way and there’s no explanation for it because everyone like me is chained up or dead? It’s only been a month since it started and I can hardly stand it.

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED to ...” He stopped, running a hand over his face. “No- I’m not doing this. I’m not going to say you’re cornering me or anything as stupid as that, but I’ve had too many ‘Potter’s luck moments’ in the past few days to deal with this.” Harry grabbed his bag, shoving past Theo. Behind him, Blaise mouthed a succinct ‘WHAT JUST HAPPENED?’ to Theo.

Theo hadn’t looked at him since the incident. The others were assuming it was because there was a stick up his ass. Blaise was glancing between the two of them occasionally, torn over what to do. Couldn’t really side with one friend over another, could he? Ha.

Harry ignored both of them, stabbing his chicken with a ferocity that was only usually displayed when the Lions were harassing them. He was eternally thankful the others had brushed off the drama, Hermione washing them all over with a debate about something from Herbology that had reached the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws already. Something to do with ivy? He didn’t know.

He still had detention tonight. Bugger.
The school laid quiet until just after Easter.

The holiday had been spent alone with the dormitory emptying, few students missing out a chance to visit their family again. Harry had nearly been forced to push Blaise out the school to make him go home, but eventually the only ones left were Theo and him. It was awkward, and the Potter was sure that if it hadn’t been for him having the nightterror, Theo would have never loosened up.

He still made him swear not to tell the others about how he was dealing with it less than well.

Thus, when the school filled back up and classes started gearing up for exams, Harry had managed to fall into a semi-lull, recent pressures leaving him alone. Until Professor Snape pulled him aside one day after Potions, giving some excuse about wanting to speak to him about his potion from that day. It was the last lesson before dinner, and the others had been shooed off easily considering their appetites.

Harry knew Snape had given an excuse because his potion had been nearly perfect, with the consistency being the only thing slightly off. So he wandered up to the man’s desk with some apprehension, eyeing his aura. It was held tight against the man, worrying him. The only thing it could be about in Harry’s mind was the Dursleys.

“Sir?” He asked, shifting from foot to foot. “Is this... about the Dursleys?” The man sighed, digging through his robes for a crinkled paper.

“To say the least,” he bit out, passing it over to Harry. “Your... former guardians were convicted of child abuse and negligence of a minor. Considering the situation, outward factors, and your own behaviour, it was determined that Petunia and Vernon Dursley were dangers to both you and your cousin.” Harry could read that much. In much more legal jargon, the same was written in a letter from the Ministry. It went on and on, and Harry only skimmed it for more information.

“So... what happens to them? The Ministry can’t exactly arrest them since they’re muggles, can they?” He glanced up from the letter, frowning. Snape shook his head.

“In situations such as these, trusted muggle authorities are contacted to help intervene. They are the ones who arrested your aunt and uncle and took custody of your cousin.”

Harry blinked, considering this. “I... okay. What now?” Snape sighed and gently took the letter, smoothing it out with his hands on the table.

“Now the Ministry will hold a free-for-all for custody of you, I am afraid.”

“But- sir, you can’t be serious! Don’t you have custody of me right now?” Snape gave him a blank look.
“Yes. However, it is viewed as temporary until a suitable guardian is found or until a declaration of custody has been made. You have no direct blood relations, hence the scramble. Additionally, I am regarded as a former Death Eater, and many will view it as dangerous for you to be within my care.” Harry tsked, gritting his teeth.

“So what, they’ll pawn me off to some traditionally light family because they don’t want me near former Death Eaters? That’s- bloody stupid! I’ve been safer and happier with the Malfoys than I ever would be with some group like the Weasleys! And you’ve dealt better with me than the other buffoons in my life! I’d get treated like some saviour, or-or worse, because I’m a Slytherin! They can’t just decide who I get kicked to, it’s not fair!” He hardly noticed he had begun pacing.

“Harrison—”

“No!” He spun to face the Professor, teeth bared in a not-smile. The man had risen from his seat and was worriedly standing just outside his reach. “It’s my life, isn’t it? With all I’ve gone through, they should judge that I should be able to decide who I go to, not the other way around!” Snape held his hands up in a placating manner.

“The reason they are not is because you are a minor; I assure that many most likely think you capable of doing so- but the law does not allow it. Rest assured, individuals such as Lucius and Nicola will be petitioning—”

“I don’t care who’s petitioning!” With his shout, the sconces in the room flickered and the desks vibrated. Harry caught himself, breathing heavily and his eyes darting round. He’d lost control again, so easily. Was he really so weak he couldn’t keep even a hold on his emotions?

“Harry.” Hands landed on his shoulders, making him jolt. Snape was in front of him, kneeling, and he dimly registered a dull pain in his palms. He forcefully relaxed his fingers, turning his attention to the man. “I promise you, we will not let you be sold off to the highest bidder. Slytherins do not abandon each other.” Harry’s expression crumpled, and he shook for a breath with emotion. Then he dove forward into the man’s arms, grasping at his robes with a sob.

The man held on firmly, closing his eyes in regret. To think he’d let Lily’s child to get to this point. To think he let Harry get to this point.

Harry was late to dinner, Snape avoiding going all together. The others had tucked in while he was gone, although someone had set aside a plate of food for him. He sank down in front of it gratefully. The ones who hadn’t been in class greeted him amiably enough, but Theo was eyeing him.

“What did Snape need you for?” He asked, shifting his plate away from Vincent’s range, “Our potion was only a little thin, and he didn’t make me stay back as well.” Harry shrugged. Theo scowled at him, and Harry returned the expression, slapping at Draco when he jabbed him in the side.

“It’s not really important.” He muttered. And it wasn’t, in the scheme of things to him. He was out of the fires of living with the Dursleys, but now he had to wait to see who won him in the practical lottery. Telling them anything would just worry them. And freak them out, considering some of the group still wasn’t aware of his home situation. He was quite fine with that, he thought as he stabbed at some chicken, and he’d like if it stayed that way.

“Is it about the case?” Blaise spoke up, his tone conversational. Harry glanced at him, but the boy
didn’t look up from the book he was reading. Harry sighed.

“Yes. It’s- been settled, partly.”

“What case are you talking about? There hasn’t been any in the news recently.” Hermione asked. But Theo cut her off before she could say anymore, making some hand motion that could have meant something lewd. Or violent. Oh, Theo. Hermione’s eyes widened in understanding and she glanced back at Harry in concern before overtly changing the subject. Blaise pat him on the back, and that was that. Conversation flowed around Harry, assignments and school gossip being thrown around. None mentioned Quirrel, surprisingly. Although that may be out of wariness, he mused.

Neville reached past him to grab a roll and Harry glanced at the other boy, mind wandering. Then blinked.

“Neville, what did you say your grandmother’s name was?” He asked softly, trying not to grab the attention of the others. The Gryffindor looked at him in confusion but Harry only stared back, mouth set.

“Augusta Longbottom.” He finally replied, just as quiet. Harry nodded his head, giving his friend a small smile before turning to his food. The others would believe him if he said Snape wanted to meet him again after dinner, so he was set.

The owlery was a disgusting place in Harry’s opinion, and he was aiming scours left and right as he walked in. Owls were hooting to each other and settling down for the night, although a handful watched him carefully. He ignored them in favour of watching Hedwig soar down to him, a spot of white among the tawnier birds. She landed on his outstretched arm gracefully, chirruping softly and nuzzling him slightly. He ran a hand through her feathers, smiling softly. He saw her each morning of course, but it was still a small window of time, and he was glad to pet her. She allowed it for a few more moments before shaking his hand off, hooting inquisitively.

“I have something real important for you,” He murmured, digging through his pocket for the letter he had written on the way. Thank god for pencils. “I need you to get this to Augusta Longbottom, can you do that for me, girl?” She affectionately nipped his fingers in response, grasping the offered letter in her talons before taking off. “Be careful!” He called after her, watching her fly through one of the many windows. Now all that was left was to nervously wait, he thoughtdarkly as he headed back. Well, and probably deal with the fallout. Will Professor Snape be angry?

It took a day for an answer to come. Neville stared at the large barn owl that came swooping down towards him, but Harry ignored his friend in favour of reading. His brows raised a little bit at the message, but it was pleasing nonetheless. Madame Longbottom was truly a patient woman; Neville must have gotten it from her.

“I’ll send a response later.” He told the owl, who had been waiting by his plate. He was certain he had more bacon on it before, but he didn’t mind. “Thank you.” It hooted sharply at him and took off, startling some of the others who hadn’t noticed its arrival.

“And...Harry?” Neville started. Harry made a loose gesture, which the Gryffindor took as encouragement. “...Why are you owling my Gran?” Harry took a sip of his milk, pretending to ponder the question. Or, you know, wait for others to lose interest. Blaise poked him in the side when he didn’t start talking immediately and Harry huffed a sigh.

“Well, it’s easiest to go to the top if there’s an issue, isn’t it? Speak to the one in charge, not to the idiots who don’t listen and don’t care.” The others stared at him blankly until Theo snapped his
“Right, Lady Longbottom’s in charge of Child Services in the Ministry, isn’t she? And she’s holding a seat in the Wizengamot. Smart of you to go to her, Harry.”

“But why would he need to?” Hermione asked, perplexed. “Wouldn’t it-” Theo raised a hand to stop her, casting a privacy spell before waving at her to continue. “Well, wouldn’t it just be a matter of transferring custody to his nearest relatives? Er, sorry about speaking in third person.” She added sheepishly, glancing at Harry. He waved her off.

“In the muggle world, yeah. Or an orphanage. But wizards are idiots, ’Mione, especially in the Isles. From what Snape said, it’s going to be like a Battle Royale for me.”

“That’s...” She paused, blinking. “... I’d say horrible but it doesn’t really fit.”

“That’s a normal description of the British Ministry.” Blaise piped up, smirking. It fell into a grimace a moment later, his eyes ducking to the table. “Honestly, if you were anyone else, this wouldn’t be nearly as bad, fratello. Godsdamned v-vvVoldemort.” A few of the group made noises akin to dying animals, and Draco full out slapped Blaise on the back of the head, hissing.

“What are you doing, saying his name!? We just dealt with his undead spirit less than two months ago!”

“Excuse me if I am not going to call that excuse of a human Lord Malfoy.” Blaise snapped back, leaning away. “Especially not after he’s harmed most of my friends! And no, do not try to refute that!” He swept his eyes over them all, scowling. There were various faces of disbelief, everyone silent. “Can any of you realise that if it wasn’t for his campaign, none of us or our families would be seen as- as dirt, murderers with no heart? Our house wouldn’t be treated like scum? Children like Neville and Harry wouldn’t be- Gods, where they are?” The two flinched, Harry leaning into the Italian’s side. “We may have agreed with his ideals- may, in some cases, I am not going to speak for all of us on blood purity- but his actions caused our community to collapse within itself and for us to become pariahs! I cannot lend any respect to a man who has caused so much damage. It is-” He cut himself off, threading a hand through his hair. Harry carefully patted his arm, staying quiet.

It was quiet. Most everyone had their eyes on the table, or were glancing at each other with uncomfortable expressions.

“....I think most all of us realised he wasn’t that great of a man when we learned he tried to kill kids our age, Zabini.” Moon got out first, voice strangled.

“Not to mention the fact that most of our families have been trying to cut away from former fanatics.” Vincent mentioned, shifting in his seat. “I haven’t even heard word of people like Rosier since I was a toddler. I think we were all just... surprised. That you used his name.”

Blaise shook himself, sighing. “I know, I just- why is your country so backwards? Why do they not react to Dark Lords until a war breaks out? There hasn’t been an idiot that large in Italy since the 1800’s.” No one replied, and he sighed again, turning to Hermione. “To finally answer your question, If people have enough influence, and the person if famous enough, it doesn’t matter the connection. You can buy anything off the government with enough money and smiling.” He sank lower in his seat, grimacing. “Even a person.”

Harry surreptitiously traded owls for a month, trying to multitask as finals started to loom over students. Study circles were set up almost permanently in the commons, made up mostly of terrified
5th and 7th years. Blaise almost dragged him into one claiming his charms needed work before Pansy swooped in and rescued him, babbling about needing advice.

She brushed and braided his hair for an hour before asking if they could run just a bit less in their defensive training. He extended the stretching exercises as a thank you.

The end to his undertaking came at the end of April, when Professor Snape burst into the Common Room one Sunday morning, stress twitch raring. He scanned the room before landing on Harry. Harry was not optimistic about where this was going.

He decided he was proven right when the man herded him into his office without a word, aura surging and rippling in an agitated pattern. The door closed behind him, and Harry watched silently as the potions master paced in front of his desk.

“Sir?” He cautiously asked when the man stopped to run a hand over his face. “Did something happen?” Snape glanced at him before turning to his desk and grabbing a piece of parchment. He handed it over without a word.

Ah. The lawyer finally owled him. “Is this... not good, sir? I thought the easiest way to keep in control of the situation was to go to someone in charge, so...” He trailed off, thinking of a possibility. “I can understand if you don’t want to be my guardian, but Madame Longbottom has already said anything involving, well, that, is temporary until the lawyer-social-worker-lady can review-”

“Harry.” The boy paused, glancing up. “That is not.... I am not angry. Merely... surprised.” Snape huffed, staring at him with an unreadable expression. “I was simply... surprised at your approach to this. Oddly enough, I keep forgetting you are a Slytherin, and that you hold the traits of one through and through.” Harry blinked, not sure how to take that. Snape shifted, almost... uncomfortable?

“Furthermore, I would not be... adverse to being your guardian.” The man continued stiffly. Harry squinted at him, scowling.

“Forgive me sir, but I’m not quite getting that impression. I’d rather you not do this out of some sort of duty, or idea that I need to be looked after.” The professor scowled.

“How do you think the public will react to a purported Death Eater raising the Boy-Who-Lived? How do you think they will treat you?”

“How do you think they will react when they realise I’m a Slytherin?” Harry retorted. “That my friends are all from grey or dark families? I don’t care, sir. The public can go burn, for all I care. I just want someone who will treat me less like a trophy and more like...” He looked away, grimacing again. Harry passed the letter back to his professor, shuffling a few steps back. They stood awkwardly for a few moments, words lost to both of them.

“...Could you keep me updated, Professor Snape? At this point, owls will be coming to you instead of me since you’re my guardian at present, and this is something I’d like to be in the know about.” Snape nodded wearily, knowing there wasn’t much else he could say. He watched the boy leave his office, quietly shutting the door.

He looked at the letter in his hands, and wondered with a near-squashed bit of hope if he could be better than his father.
The last month of the term was a heap of bullshit, in everyone’s collective opinion. The study frenzy had reached an all time high, with non-exam years finally catching in on the panic. Harry can unashamedly admit that at least three days out of the week have lately been spent blasting each other’s hair ugly colours for wrong answers. Blaise actually kept his corpse blue, for some reason. Theo was smacked when he commented on it making him look geriatric.

Snape had been acting the same as always, but hey, miracles were in short order at Hogwarts as far as the Potter was concerned. But would it really be a miracle, considering the alternative may not be great? Harry absentmindedly pondered it while he watched Blaise attempt to show Draco the Foxtrot. He hummed, flicking his fingers with a smattering of intent, and grinned when they shrieked at a wave of water hitting them.

“THESE ARE WOOL, POTTER,” Draco hollered, getting caught in his shirt.

“Why are you wearing wool in the spring?” Blaise was standing unhelpfully off to the side, wringing out his own clothes. The blond only gave some weird groan.

“It’s not my fault you decided to do this next to lake. And you’re being duller than Binns, so please excuse me for trying to salvage the afternoon.” Harry’s tone was dryer than the desert. And Draco, incidentally.

“Politics fuel the people, fratello, and they usually get fired up a balls. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared.” He just shrugged in response. It disturbed Theo, who had been reading against his shoulder and generally ignoring all the chaos. The mousy boy rolled his eyes.

“It’s pure bull, is what you want to say. Don’t bother sugarcoating it with your Mediterranean-ness.”

“Not a word, that.” Theo waved it away, and settled back in. It was a peaceful day for the boys.

Slytherin was eyeing them dubiously from where their group had camped in the common room, playing another game Blaise’s mother had sent, and Harry stared back with raised eyebrows.

“Most other students are studying, right now.” Slytherin pointed out. His snake was curling round his wrists. Harry didn’t notice the others shuddering as the portrait spoke.

“Most other students don’t have study sessions that end in boils and technicolor hair.” Harry retorted. Slytherin’s face blanked. Confusion, maybe? Because of terminology- did they have words like technicolor in the 900’s? He glanced down at the board, and caught sight of the others.

They all looked slightly horrified.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Draco breathed out. Harry blinked at him. “And you, you obviously don’t even know-shit.” He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. Harry stared at him dubiously, turning to the others. They were not helpful. Blaise just shook his head, sighing.
“Don’t talk to Slytherin when others are around, let’s set that as a ground rule for now.” He said, moving his piece along the board. “And snakes too, or lizards in general. Let’s just have that as something we do.”

“Look, did I miss something here? What are you all despairing about?” A snort came from Slytherin’s portrait, and he turned to the man with a glare. The brunette snorted with a smirk, and began to talk.

“You see boy, when someone loves another very much, and one of their parents turns out to have lain with a naga, or lamia....”

Snape didn’t comment on how they were all sitting with faces like ripe tomatoes in the middle of the common room with Monopoly between them. Harry sat with his face tilted back, regretting asking for clarification on words he didn’t know, and didn’t ever need to know. He didn’t regret making the others suffer for laughing, though. Theo was silently choking on laughs on the floor. The smaller boy mercilessly kicked him in the side.

“Do I want to know?” The professor’s voice startled them all; Harry swore he saw Pansy jump a foot in the air.

“Our innocence was defiled.” Someone deadpanned. Harry didn’t care who, since Slytherin let out a cackle and was summarily bitten by his upset snake. Karma. Snape sighed, deciding it wasn’t worth it to figure out.

“Harrison, could I speak to you? It is important.” Harry eyed the man, internally debating. His aura was mostly calm, beyond a ripple here or there, and his face was void of a scowl or glare. He was just stern. Harry nodded, clambering out of the pile of students, quietly following his professor into his office. The boy reflected that he was spending an awfully large amount of time in here now, huh? To think it wasn’t going to be available for three months. He glanced at Snape’s back. Maybe not?

The man turned to him, huffing when he saw Harry dawdling by the door. “I am not going to bite off your head, Harrison; I would think you would know that by now.”

“It’s not that, sir.” Harry walked closer, nudging a chair placed in front of Snape’s desk. “I just realised how often I’ve been here throughout the year.”

Snape was silent for a moment, watching him. Harry debated looking him in the eye. He wasn’t brave enough to.

“Sir?”

“It would become a very familiar place, if I... adopted you.” Harry’s head snapped up. “I am not an easy person, Harry, to live with or rely on. I...” Snape averted his eyes, grimacing. “I doubt I would be able to be the picturesque guardian, even if one shoved a litany of mood enhancers down my throat.” His eyes snapped back to Harry, earnest, as bare as the boy could remember them being. “But I would not dislike being such to you, and I would do as best I could by you. And... and try to honor your mother’s memory in watching over you.”

Harry blinked. And blinked again. Snape was eyeing him worriedly, when the silence stretched further. It took a strong rippling of the professor’s aura for Harry to snap out of it, and he looked at the floor, voice quiet.
“You... want me? You’re- you want to adopt me?” Severus kneeled down, carefully placing his hands on Harry’s shoulders so the boy would look at him.

“Harry, even if I had not known your mother, you are kind and resourceful, and clever without being cruel; you are someone Hogwarts certainly needed at my age, and who does her good now.” Severus huffed, a smirk on his lips. “And anyone who believes otherwise likely follows the gossip rags more than common sense.” Harry smiled, a tiny one, still looking at the floor. He hesitantly leaned forward, and Severus slowly wrapped his arms around the boy. Tiny hands latched into his robes, gripping tightly as a head rested on his shoulder.

Life was pretty good, at that point.

The train was as loud as it had been at new year’s, blowing steam and settling on the tracks as children boarded with luggage. Harry was mobbed by the others, all hugging or joking and trying to pretend emotion didn’t exist when others came near. He knocked Draco in the head for sneering when a Hufflepuff walked past, and was rewarded with a pout in return.

He smiled at it all, amazed in the back of his mind. To think he only had the Zabinis and Mister Smith at the beginning of the year. How the tables flipped.

Blaise grabbed him and hauled him into a tight hug, rubbing his cheek against Harry’s head. His hair was loose today, flapping in the wind as he gave his goodbyes.

“Tell us when everything finishes up, okay? And how Snape is.” He made Harry promise. The smaller boy rolled his eyes, but nodded all the same. Blaise was satisfied with that, at least. The train’s warning horn sounded, and the group gradually rushed off, dragging out promises to owl and visit. He watched them pile in at the last minute, grinning from ear to ear. He felt like an idiot- but it was a good feeling. He finally had a reason to act like one.

The train finally pulled away, and he waited until it turned out of the village to start back. Hogwarts was a looming presence behind him, reassuring in all its glory. Severus had mentioned last minute potion preparations before the summer hols, and he wanted to help the man. It’d probably be nice for him to finally have a helper. Hedwig swooped down from where she had been circling, pecking at his hair.

It was going to be a good summer, he decided.

Chapter End Notes

Holy fuck. This has been coming for three years, guys, Finally fuckin' done.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!