Heart is Where the House Lies

by alteringegoism

Summary

Where they are just and loyal, those patient Hufflepuffs are true, and unafraid of toil.

Congratulations! Your prefect here, welcoming you to Hufflepuff House. Our emblem is the badger, an animal that is often underestimated, because it lives quietly until attacked, but which, when provoked, can fight off animals much larger than itself, including wolves. Hufflepuff is the best of houses. Don’t let anyone, including those sly Slytherins, know-it-all Ravenclaws, or arrogant Gryffindors tell you any different. Oh, and if someone could convince our very own illustrious Head Boy, that git (though don’t you dare hurt any feelings he may or may not have by telling him I said that!) of the same, it’d be much appreciated. Please and thank you!

Luckily, one Niall Horan, Hufflepuff extraordinaire, is about to take on hard-headed, Head Boy Harry Styles, whether he knows it or not. And isn’t it always better when they don’t?

Notes

Merry Christmas, Peerpressure.

Note: While researching this, if any differences in details cropped up between the books and the movies, I deferred to the books.

See the end of the work for more notes

September 1st, Year One
Harry dropped his mum's cradling fingers from his well before they arrived at King's Cross St. Pancras station. Small hands freed and twitching for something else to hold on to, he placed one palm down on top of the old trunk that bumped against his knee with every bend and sway of the tube carriage in its rush along the tracks. The battered, brown case, a remnant from his mother's long ago school days and passed down to him via his sister Gemma (whose imminently fashionable wardrobe had long since outgrown its shabby confines), persisted in its knocking like a particularly nervous tic.

Lacking a floo connection, and indeed even a place to light a sizable fire in their tiny flat in Newham, the three magical members of the Styles household had been forced to travel across London the muggle way. It seemed a particularly long journey that day. Hemmed in and bogged down by hefty baggage and concealed cages, they went first by bus and then through the extensive Underground. Owing to the finicky nature of muggle transportation, they made sure to gift themselves plenty of extra time with which to arrive. At the stroke of nine that dreary fall morning, they left behind their flat and their equally muggle father sat in front of the telly. With only a hastily mumbled goodbye and nary a glance backward, the trio had set off into the brisk autumn air and, for Harry at least, out into a wide world of possibilities.

Now, as the tenth hour passed and eleven fast approached, Harry felt that airy sense of relief that had so lifted his thin shoulders settle down into leaden trepidation. Grow up. Stop being a baby, Harry scolded himself and proceeded to stiffen his spine and upper lip. The train slowed to a squeaky stop. Again shrugging off any helping hands, he heaved his feather-light charmed, but still unwieldy luggage and cat-carrier up against his twig-like thighs and toddled out with the tide of exiting people.

Each additional step that took him closer to the rail terminal seemed to drag longer and more perilous than the last. His mum's constant and deliberately cheerful prattle buzzing in his ear hardly helped, what with the way it made Harry's insides twist with equal parts longing and denial. He focused instead on forging his own careful path through the sea of muggles.

"My little bug, growing up and going off to Hogwarts," Harry's mum murmured from beside him, words limned with a sheen of tears. Her slender hand, the skin around the short nails red and cracked because no amount of 5 sickle softening potion could counteract hours spent washing and scrubbing up after muggles, rose to rest on the back of Harry's neck. Roughened fingertips petted at the softly curling hairs there. "Wait until you see the castle, oh and the lake, and Hogsmeade! But first the feast and the sorting! Imagine, you might be a Hufflepuff like me. Wouldn't that be just grand? But whatever house, I'm so, so proud of you. Of you both, my babies."

Gemma, Slytherin to the marrow, caught the quickening of Harry's step and the way their mother's hand dropped to hang useless and unsure in the gap that opened up in between. Clear as the nose on Harry's face was the distaste that scrunched the small protuberance and flared the nostrils. "I'd wager on Ravenclaw. He's always been a bit of a swot," Gemma said into the empty space. Her own trunk disguised as a huge, rolling suitcase followed obediently behind with only the lightest of prompting touches. "Anyways, I've always maintained that more than anything, that lazy old hat just puts you where you want to go, and possibly to fill some quota, the results are so evenly spread every year."

Harry sent a smile of indebted gratitude his sister's way. The lowly quirked brow he received in return was a promise to collect one day at a time of Gemma's most advantageous, and Harry's likely detrimental, choosing. One of the many hazards of being a sibling to a Slytherin. But the blood deep loyalty between them more than made up for it.
They wove through the mass of bustling travellers and alongside the numbered platforms until they passed #9, but did not quite reach all the way to 10. With some time to go before departure, few wizarding families in poorly conceived muggle outfits were to be found in the nearby vicinity. Gemma, busy with raising her chin to a regal angle at the discreetly positioned guard to the enchanted platform, nearly ran into Harry's heels, abruptly frozen as they were in front of the solid metal ticket box that marked the barrier between the mundane and the magical.

"Oi! Move it along, you little wanker!" Gemma screamed in a distinctly unmajestic tone. She shoved hard at his back.

"Sod off, you harpy!" Harry knocked her away.

"Language!" their mother scolded and grasped both their shoulders in a sharp pinch of nails. The grip changed from punishing to comforting however, when she espied the glassy sheen to Harry's wide, green eyes that he tried so hard to avert and hide. "Oh, come here, my love." She threw her arms open.

Instinctively, before any conscious thought, Harry stepped into the embrace. For a minute he sank into the warmth, the scent, and the softness that was as familiar to him as his own breathing. It took him sixty seconds, and perhaps a few more, though who was counting, to work up the strength to stamp down on and lock away the needy, mewling creature that endured inside of him. One more minute passed before Harry could push away and step back from his mother.

Harry looked down to his feet as she dabbed at her face with the loose, overlong cuffs of her best blouse. "I'm a regular watering pot today, aren't I? Don't mind me. I'll have dried off by the time we're at the train."

The thought of having to experience this moment all over again had Harry's curly head rearing. "No! I...I mean, you..."

The point of Gemma's kidskin boot tapped out a staccato beat on the station floor. "Spit it out already, Harry! We don't have all bloody day. Aisha's probably waiting for me." Her eyes narrowed and serpentine tongue uncoiled. "What, is the little baby afraid?"

Heat bloomed in Harry's cheeks at the unerring strike. He stood there with hands fisted, mouth opening wide only to reveal an empty cavity barren of words. Frustrated shame had drained his mind of all retort and rendered him mute as effectively as a silencing charm.

"It's ok, sweetheart." With her face turned away and hidden by a dark curtain of hair the same shade and wave as Harry's and Gemma's own, they couldn't be sure who their mother was addressing. "Don't know if I could handle seeing you both getting on that train and leaving your old mum behind. No, best we make our farewells here and save myself the extra embarrassment."

Gemma immediately dropped her harsh mien and stepped up to their mother's side. "Oh don't be ridiculous, mum." A tight hug and a light kiss softened the hard scolding. "You can only be embarrassed if you allow it."

That slender, roughened hand rose to the back of Gemma's head. "Only fifteen years old and already wiser than your mum. Some of us will always be made of gentler stuff, I'm afraid."

She let Gemma go after one last stroke of her hair and turned to Harry. She cupped his cheek and smiled. "You'll do fine. I know it."

That was exactly the problem. Fine had never been enough for Harry. He shook his head and
knocked it free from her grasp. "Goodbye, mum." And with those final words he pivoted on his heel and plunged into the hidden barrier.

It felt akin to passing through a piece of rubber. Sound muted. There was nothing like air there; no passage of breath or time. Strands of powerful magic wrapped around him, compressed him, and threw him out on the other side.

Moments later, Gemma appeared. Her gaze homed in unerringly on Harry and he couldn't help squirming under her long, probing look. In the end she only walked ahead of him. "Let's go."

So began a rapid fire series of instructions accompanied by a purposeful stride and a finger stabbing into the air for emphasis. They passed the gleaming red locomotive of the Hogwarts Express with its jutting, black chimney rising high above. A great billow of steam emitted from its top.

"You'll want to get on the train as soon as possible and find an empty compartment. The upper years won't take too kindly to sharing." Her finger swung round and flicked the end of Harry's nose. "And don't even think about asking to sit with me. Prefects ride in the very front carriage. Sixth and seventh years tend to take the last."

She stopped at the rear of the third carriage. "The Honeydukes trolley will make its rounds partway through the trip. Skip the cauldron cakes. Too sweet. Save your sickles for the pumpkin pasties. Just like the Cornish ones, but with, you know, pumpkin. Got your *Hogwarts: A History?* Good, you great big dork. Above all, don't embarrass me." She thumped him hard on the back.

Before Harry could open his mouth to thank her, she melted away into the crowd. Soon after Gemma's screams of delight commingled with others somewhere in the distance.

"I guess it's only you and me now, Dusty." Harry lifted the cat-carrier up close to his face. The bicoloured black and white cat on the other side of the cage wire door meowed at him sleepily. Slitted yellow eyes slid shut again. The old cat yawned and rolled away from him. "Too right, madam. Nothing new going on here. Nothing that thousands of others haven't already gone and done before you." Harry peered up into the open, looming entrance of the train carriage. "*So just get on with it.*"

Taking a deep breath, Harry gathered his luggage and the scattered bits of his nerve close, and stepped inside. The world immediately narrowed and dimmed. The corridors, all gleaming wood and brass finishes, passed by in a blur in his singled-minded rush to secure a place for himself. Harry threw his body into the first empty compartment he spied.

The door slid shut on its own accord behind him. In the silence that followed, Harry’s rabbiting heartbeat overwhelmed his ears. The frantic pace echoed in the shaking of his hands as he flipped open the latches on his suitcase and retrieved the book that lay squarely on top. It wasn't until after he'd slotted the suitcase away into the overhead, set Dusty's carrier securely against the red cushioned seat, and had settled down with the thick tome on his lap that Harry began to feel remotely like himself again. The well-thumbed pages of *Hogwarts: A History* opened reflexively to the best chapter in the entire book, the one dedicated to his namesake Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. The familiar tale of loss, discovery, and heroism calmed Harry's worries and bolstered his resolve.

Just as Godric Gryffindor's sword was being pulled from what had to be the most versatile of hats in the history of hats, two boys entered the compartment and startled Harry from his reading. Both were brunette and of a similar, middling height. Dressed in identical black robes, each dragged behind them shiny new trunks, but that was where their resemblance ended.
Where one was solid, the other was slight. The first boy's closely cropped, seal dark hair and deep-set brown eyes and tanned, puppy fat cheeks stood in glaring contrast to the second's light, flyaway tufts and blue eyes that seemed to take up nearly half of that pale face. The other half stretched into a wide grin complete with slightly crooked teeth stained gray from the end of a licorice wand held clenched in between.

Three chomps and the black candy wand vanished. "I told ya, mate, he's a firstie. Nothing to worry about," Crooked Teeth said around chews with a garbled Irish lilt.

At Harry's surprised and wary start, Crooked Teeth swallowed and let out a loud laugh. "Ya got the look of one, is all. Written all over your face, like with Liam here." Crooked Teeth elbowed his friend, evidently named Liam, in his side "Though I've told him a million times, I have, and I'll say the same to you; there's nothing to fear. Hogwarts is gonna be ace! Besides, who else but a first year would willingly read that draught of living death in book form. Hiya, me name's Niall."

Before Harry could retort that *Hogwarts: A History* was a classic and a favourite of one, Hermione Granger, the brightest and most accomplished witch of their generation as voted in thrice by Daily Prophet readers, the door to the compartment slid open to reveal two more boys. The first that walked in, or sauntered as was more the case, wore fancy green dress robes and came with a ready sneer on his pointed face. His brown hair slicked straight back into a tight ponytail only emphasized the narrowness of his features from his slyly tilted eyes to his thin, smirking mouth.

Another brunette, but his hair was by far the darkest and his brows the bushiest above wide, honey brown eyes and calm, inscrutable expression. Harry pulled the heavy, hard-backed tome in his lap up to his chest, dropped his chin, and burrowed deeper into the cushioned seat at his back.

"Clear off, Payne. This is a Puffskein free compartment," Pointy Face said. "Horan, perhaps you didn't get the owl post on Lame Payne here all the way out in the backwater bogs of Mullingar, but it's questionable company you're keeping there. Ditch the extra flab, however, and you'll have the honour of staying here with us."

Of Harry pressed into the corner, Pointy Face said nothing at all, not even casting a glance his way. Harry couldn't decide which was worse.

"What's that, Payno?" Niall looked sideways at Liam and cupped his hand around his ear. "Can't quite hear ya with all the useless gum flapping going on."

"Don't cross me, Horan. I'm warning you."

Harry's head bobbed with the back and forth byplay while his stomach quivered and clenched with nerves. Darting green eyes mapped out a route to the exit from where he sat and carefully counted the steps in between.

"Zayn Malik's here you say? Oh and with his pet rat in tow?" In exaggerated surprise, Niall swung around to face Bushy Brows and stuck out his hand. "Y'alright there, Zayn? How is Tomlinson, by the way?"

"Hullo, Niall," Zayn answered. His lips curved up around words that fairly vibrated with quiet laughter. But before their hands could meet in greeting, Pointy-rat-faced Tomlinson slapped Niall's down.

"That's it! You are officially persona non grata in the eyes of the Ancient and Most Noble House of
Tomlinson. So it is declared, so mote it be. Now get thee gone out of my compartment!” A furious and imperious finger pointed out the door.

Niall snorted, grinned a bigger grin, and planted his feet. “Like ta see ya make me.” Both Liam and Zayn sighed and took their places behind their respective friends.

As was often the case in situations that put Harry in a dither, he ended up asking himself WHAT? Would Harry AcT? The obvious answer to that had him gathering all of his courage and clambering to his feet. Hogwarts: A History went with him clutched in front as a shield. "Umm." He cleared his throat around what felt like a bludger sized lump lodged inside it. "They were, umm, they were here first."

Sharp blue eyes finally cut to Harry. After enduring a moment of cold scrutiny, Harry had all the empirical evidence he needed to conclude that he'd really much rather be ignored. He shivered and held the book up higher.

"Hmmm, don't recognize you. Not a mudblood are you?"

Niall's grin instantly flipped around. "Oi! That's not on, mate! Haven't you learned a lick from either Wizarding War?"

Tomlinson sniffed and turned up his pointed nose. "Quit your caterwauling and spare me, you bleeding heart banshee."

Tomlinson's gleaming brown ponytail ignited with a much more alarming gold-red light. Smoke and the distinctive, nose-tickling smell of charred hair filled the small cabin.

Sparing not a moment to panic, Zayn scrambled out of his well-patched robes and threw the black cloth over Tomlinson's head. High pitched shrieks instantly muffled. In quick, even strikes, Zayn slapped the flat of his palms repeatedly at the covered, thrashing lump.

When the screaming turned to 'owws' of protest, the hard claps ceased. Tomlinson's head emerged from under Zayn's robes wearing a confounded expression and sans ponytail. Only blackened and raggedly shorn strands remained of the once proud length. Harry had to hold in a hysterical snicker at the shocked and dishevelled sight of him next to Zayn who in turn stood there clad only in a pair of overlarge shoes, slouchy socks, and white briefs tinged gray from frequent washing.

Niall blinked rapidly, shuffled his feet, scratched at the back of his head, and valiantly wrestled the mirth from his lips. "Err, sor-"

A wand appeared in Tomlinson's hand, dropped down from the wide sleeve of his green robes. "Flipendo!" he shouted. The swishy dogwood length flicked down and sharply up in a v-like motion before ending in a squiggily flourish. Dimly blue light emitted from the tip of his wand, warbled through the air, and smacked Niall in his chest. Wobbling back on his heels, Horan stumbled into Harry and sent them both to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

Immediately, Horan sprang back up onto his feet. Incidentally, he took the majority of Harry's air with him in a painful whoosh when he levered off the cushioning stomach beneath him. He launched his scrawny form through the air at Tomlinson's legs. Grunting and curse words no twelve year olds should know flew out from the pair rolling around on the floor on top of Zayn’s singed robes. Harry scrambled out of their way in a backwards, crab-like crawl until he hit a wall. His thin shoulders huddled low into the corner.
Liam stepped over them oh his way to Zayn's side. He tapped his toe twice against his trunk. "I got some spare robes here if you're chilled. Or a jumper if you'd prefer."

Before Zayn could answer one way or the other, the door to the cabin shot open. Two clearly older students burst into the compartment. Both had shiny badges and held their wands at the ready. "Petrificus totalus!" they shouted in unison with impressively synchronized wand work. Four out of the five students instantly petrified. The Head Girl and Boy followed the curse up with an elegant, "Wingardium Leviosa," and proceeded to drag the floating bodies behind them out into the hallway. And just like that, Harry was left alone and forgotten.

The rest of the train ride passed in silence. Harry sat stiffly upon the plush seat with his knees pulled tight to his chest and his book unopened beside him. The pumpkin pasty he had forced himself to eat halfway through the trip sat like a stone in his stomach. He kept expecting the door to the compartment to open and someone, anyone, to walk through the entrance, but no one did.

Of the four boys, and their fate, there was no sign. They did not appear in the streams of students disembarking the train, nor in the groups of first years trailing after an absolute giant of a man in his thunderous lope over to the boats ready and waiting to transport them across the Great Lake. All Harry saw was clouded moonlight reflecting off the swelling ripples and the occasional waving tentacle before they reached the dock and alighted on land. Up they climbed a wide set of stone steps to stand before a stately witch in a tall, pointy hat and olive coloured robes who awaited them on the lawns of Hogwarts castle.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, young witches and wizards. I am Professor Sinistra, your guide to the planets and stars, and on this honourable night, your ambassador to your future. If you would direct your attention to the heavenly bodies." As she spoke, Professor Sinistra tilted her own face to the sky. The clouds parted and clear, cold light burnished the fine, stern features.

The students followed suit and looked up into inky darkness pierced with starlight. Even to the naked, untrained eye, one point glowed unusually large and bright in the sea of black. "That brilliant light that shines upon you is the conjunction of Venus and Jupiter at less than 0.3 degrees and more than 15 degrees from the sun. A rare and most auspicious start to the term. We are indeed blessed this eve."

Harry stared up in awe and hope until even after the clouds rolled in again and everything dimmed to normal. Something almost electrical shot through him, a fragile spark igniting in the depths of his being. Professor Sinistra turned and ascended the sloping lawn with brisk, sure feet. "Come along now."

She led them through a pair of gigantic oak doors flung open in welcome and then past a gleaming marble staircase that rose up to mysterious heights. The huddled group of first years slowed near a large entrance way from which warm light and the drone of hundreds of voices overflowed. An antechamber just off of this was their destination.

"Before we begin the start-of-term banquet, there is the matter of your sorting. As you should already know from your preparatory readings, the sorting ceremony determines your house, in essence who you will share classes with, where you shall lay your head in slumber and spend the majority of your free time, and those who will be your inner family within a much larger extended one. Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Slytherin, or Gryffindor: all are noble and worthy houses. Do them proud by earning house points through laudable deeds and avoiding the loss of them as a result of wilful disobedience. The most accumulated house points at the end of the year earns both the House Cup and greatly deserved honour."

Starry-eyed, Harry imagined hoisting the shining trophy high above his head to a cheering crowd.
of scarlet and gold. He could almost feel the cold metal against his skin. He was determined to.

"I will now arrange you in a single line in alphabetical order. Proceed to the front of the Great Hall where you shall listen in respectful silence to the Sorting Hat's song before it decides where you will belong for the next seven years of your life. Sortings are final. Abbott, Jonah, step lively."

It was some time before Professor Sinistra called Harry's name. He shuffled into place next to a Singh and soon after shared a nervous smile with a Traore. That it wasn't a Tomlinson, he was immensely grateful for as he and his fellow first years made the trek to the front of the Great Hall. The heavy, expectant stares of the assembled professors and upper classmen made the trip all the longer and more treacherous. Harry concentrated so hard on placing one foot in front of the other, and not falling flat on his face, that he had no attention to spare for the hundreds of flickering candles that floated overhead, nor for the wondrously exact depiction of the night sky that stretched the entire length and width of the ceiling above. The doors to the great hall swung shut with an ominous groan behind the last first year.

The queue of nervous students snaked all the way around the outermost edge of the room and came to a halt before a three-legged stool upon which sat a frayed brown, wide brimmed, pointy hat, the top half slumped over to the side in wrinkled tiredness. Whether the hat was brown by design or by age and grime, was difficult to tell. A loud coughing noise emitted from the tear along the hat's brim and then it opened wide while the point straightened into the air creakily. The low hum of chatter faded away.

In a voice that reached up to the heights of the charmed stars and out to the hall’s furthest stone bricks, the Sorting Hat broke out into its once yearly song. Harry tried to pay attention to the rousing tune that detailed the history of the houses, their four honourable and esteemed founders, and the creation of the Sorting Hat whose significance was woven into the very fabric of Hogwarts, he really did. After all, Harry had been waiting for this moment ever since he had begun to comprehend that there was much more to this world than what had originally appeared to be on (muggle) offer. Doing all that he could to appear daring and brave however, proved to be far too much of a distraction from even the most magical sights and sounds.

Before Harry knew it, Professor Sinistra summoned him forward and shooed him along to the stool with the pointy end of the Sorting Hat. Harry gingerly rested his behind upon the wooden surface and down came the Hat over his curls and further still past his chin. Mustiness engulfed the entirety of his head. Though it was pitch black inside the Hat, Harry nonetheless felt his eyes slipping closed. A dreamlike state settled over him.

Harry barely scraped together the tenuous wits about him to hold onto a single word. *Gryffindor. Gryffindor. Gryffindor.*

*Oh?* answered a dry, crinkly, and genderless voice, like the turning of ancient, leather bound pages. Delving into the deepest, darkest crevices of Harry's brain, the jaunty songster was nowhere to be found. *I've not seen a mind so divided in quite some time.*

*Be brave,* Harry thought and breathed deeply of dust.

*Rest assured, young one, you are,* replied the Hat.

Harry exhaled a cough.*Thank you, Hat sir. You obviously know your craft very well.*

*Polite as well as cunning, not to mention rather bright. Those are some elaborate and ambitious plans twining around your thoughts. But still, I'm not certain that any of those are altogether right...*
Harry dug deep for the nerve he needed to argue with that omniscient voice that echoed inside his skull. *I want to be in Gryffindor. Please, Hat sir, I need to be in Gryffindor.*

The Hat who could so easily see the surface what and how of Harry's hopes and dreams for the future, in that vulnerable plea saw straight through to *why*. It cast its ageless gaze upon the tiny light that burned deep inside. A long, tense minute of silent deliberation passed. And then another.

Finally, the Hat spoke privately to Harry for the last time. It sounded apologetic, but not contrite to Harry's mind, if a magically animated piece of clothing were capable of such ambivalent emotions. *A great well of tenacity in you, young Mr. Styles, and such is your heart, that it can only be..."

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Harry once more in his short life tasted the bitterness of disappointment and betrayal. The Hat whipped off of his head and the light of a thousand candles blinded him after his time spent in the dark. In a daze, Harry stumbled from the stool and towards the politely cheering Hufflepuff table. A glance at the Gryffindor table revealed a sea of disinterested faces forevermore closed to him. His eyes stung and Harry had to look away. Some girl, her face a blur that hardly registered, shifted aside for him on the long bench. With nowhere else to go, Harry floundered into place.

The remainder of the sorting passed unmarked by Harry, until, that is, a comparatively youngish looking Professor slipped three newly familiar boys into the hall from a side entrance and marched them over to the end of the dwindling line. He deposited Liam, Zayn, and Louis there with a warning frown. While Professor Sinistra continued to place and remove the Hat and send the sorted students on their way, the young Professor said a few private words to her. Harry could have sworn both Professors, even Sinistra, fought smiles at the end of their conversation.

"Thank you, Professor Longbottom. Malik, Zayn, step forward and take a seat."

Almost the exact moment that the brim touched that dark head, the Sorting Hat shouted, "RAVENCLAW!" Zayn's newly uncovered expression looked unchanged save for a slight, pleased upturn of lips. The Ravenclaw table received their newest member with firm applause and nods of approval.

Harry had to swallow down his green-tinged dismay when Liam Payne sorted into Gryffindor after only a moment's deliberation. The lifted Hat revealed a round, pinked cheek boy who required a push from Professor Sinistra to move on. Bumbling steps carried him to the cheering Gryffindor table. Liam's chin ducked and bobbled shyly as he took their shoulder claps of welcome. Harry's stomach churned with acidic envy.

That Louis Tomlinson in his scuffle-wrinkled emerald robes and frazzled brown coif sorted into Slytherin was a given. The silver and green house welcomed one of their own with the assured hauteur of those who are used to having their expectations met. *Must be nice,* Harry thought bitterly.

Professor Sinistra placed the Hat precisely on the middle of the stool and stood poised to end the sorting ceremony when the doors of the main entrance pushed open with a bang. Niall Horan finally made his grand appearance escorted by a matronly witch in healer robes. "Got one more for you, Aurora." said the spry, cheerful witch keeping pace with the scampering boy. Niall zipped across the length of the floor sporting a livid black eye and a cheerful mien. "Better watch out for him. Even banged up, he's a lively one."

Without prompting, Niall Horan ran up to the stool, lifted the Hat, and plopped his bum down and the headpiece on. Silence reigned. The crowd watched with rapt attention as the boy suddenly
shook with long and loud laughter and an animated conversation they were not privy to took place. The sorting did not tarry much longer after that. Even the tear that served as the Hat's mouth seemed to curve into a smile as it shouted out, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

Niall hopped off the stool and tossed the dusty old hat at Professor Sinistra with a carelessness that earned him a disapproving (and soundly ignored) glare. He bounced over to the Hufflepuff table with a roar that would put most Gryffindors to shame. The house welcomed their newest member with equal enthusiasm.

The brunette boy slid to a stop before his entire house. "Lookie here. I'm already sporting one of our house colours." He pointed at his darkly bruised eye and guffawed. The light blue of his iris stood out even more against the black shade and grew brighter still the next moment, lit from within. A hush fell over the Hufflepuff table.

From somewhere near the end of the table came an incredulous, "Your hair! It's turned yellow!"

Excited chatter broke out amongst the Hufflepuffs and spread to the neighbouring tables.

"How'd he manage that?"

"A first year with that ability?"

"Can't believe Hufflepuff got 'im."

"Not a metamorphmagi, are you?"

Niall's eyes crossed trying to look at the top of his own head. Then he gave up, merely shrugged, and popped a red Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Bean that he pulled out from who knows where into his grinning mouth. "Nah. I dunno. Stuff's always just happening. Mmm, ketchup."

Blue eyes swept along the length of the Hufflepuff table, met Harry's green ones there at the end, and widened with recognition. Niall took a single step towards him, but before he could take another, a wave of invitations swept him up and away.

Sat alone at the far side of the table, Harry clamped down on the soft, traitorous, and distinctly unGryffindorish organ in his chest that mewled so piteously. Something inside of him flickered and receded, an aching retreat that his young mind hardly noticed. He watched the students of Hufflepuff House, the kind and honest house, the soft and simple house, swarm around Niall. The loud, affable, and carefree boy fit right in. Not so for Harry. Never so for Harry. Unnoticed and left on the outside, resolve to be different, better, hardened and closed off his heart.

August 10th, Summer before Year Seven

The second best day of Harry's life, much like the first, was heralded by the arrival of unexpected, but dearly wished for owl post. Seven years later, his hands, though much larger, still trembled the same as they took the letter from the owl bearing the Hogwarts crest. Twice, the envelope almost dropped from his nerveless fingers. Finally, after three wobbling tries, Harry succeeded in wedging a blunt nail under an edge and tore the paper crease open.

Inside, there was parchment of course, and black curling letters that formed inked sentences, but Harry had eyes only for the gold and black badge that was the main source of the envelope's unusual heft. "Head Boy," Harry whispered and held the badge cupped reverently in the palm of his hand. He quickly scanned the appointment letter (later he would savour and re-read every word
numerous times and sleep with the parchment close at hand) before dropping it on his desk in exchange for his wand on his way over to the full-length mirror on the back of his bedroom door.

The badge settled easily into place, pinned to his ratty black T-shirt at a point just above his heart. All the hours spent alone in the library, many a sacrificed Hogsmeade trip, each hard won Outstanding, various extra prefect patrol shifts, and every single point deducted from his own house, had culminated in this little gold badge. After July had come and gone, Harry had lost hope of ever receiving it. But here it finally was, late perhaps, but shiny and perfect and most importantly his.

Harry did a little dance and cheered in wordless silence, the floorboards unmoving beneath him. The need to stay quiet about anything pertaining to magic, to happiness, was a reflex leftover from the days his ignorant muggle father had been around, days long since passed. Still, Harry found the protective habit difficult to break.

Today, however, was a brand new day. In the mirror, Harry brandished his new wand from Ollivander's. Thirteen and a 1/2 inches of reasonably supple hawthorn and phoenix feather core flexed and fairly hummed. It had taken many hours of hot, sticky work at the local muggle bakery to save up the blunt to purchase such a fancy piece, especially with the currently terrible pounds sterling to galleons exchange rate, but Harry had been willing to work however long and hard as necessary to get it. Wand pointed and held steady, chest puffed, and badge glinting, Harry finally felt ready to take on his seventh and final year.

"Five points from Slytherin. No, make it twenty five, for the extra cheek, Tomlinson." Harry practised his dignified Head Boy face in the mirror. It wouldn’t do to show the giddiness that bubbled inside. Especially not to those miscreants who made up his year. "Detention for a month, Horan."

Just this once, however, alone in his bedroom, Harry hopped up and down, let out a whooping holler, and allowed the glee to shine through. Yes, this year was sure to be different.

November 5th, Year Seven

"Ten points from Ravenclaw! And five more for every minute that I'm forced to chase after you, Wen and Chekov!"

Clearly caught, the two Ravenclaw fifth years slowed to a stop on the West Tower stairs and hastily shoved a plain wooden crate behind their robe clad legs. They held their hands clasped behind their backs and gave Harry twin looks of innocence as he stomped up to them, winter cloak billowing out behind him like the wings of a vengeful bat.

"Out after curfew, making me run in the bloody freezing cold, and likely transporting a dangerous and restricted creature since somehow it's become de riguere and with it," Harry threw up air quotations, "to have an exotic familiar. This despite the fact that it's clearly in contravention of Rule 3.10 governing allowable animals as outlined in your Student Code of Conduct handbook. What are you two even doing heading to the Owlerly with that anyway?"

"It's just some kind of cat creature, honest," Wen said, her nod earnest. "A friend of a friend picked it up for me at Borgin and Burkes, but the shopkeeper apparently said to be cautious when opening it, so..."

"So you hatched the brilliant plan of taking it to the Owlerly, so there'd be plenty of birds to occupy
this not-at-all dangerous cat creature in the very off chance you needed to escape. Well since you
have such concern for our feathered friends, you two will be cleaning out the Owulery under Filch's
supervision every other night for the next week."

"C'mon, Fei didn't mean any harm. Have a heart, Horny Toad." Chekov took a step down the
stairs towards the Head Boy, the tone of his complaint starting out as wheedling.

The hated, and highly inaccurate nickname—the thing wasn't even a toad for Mogana's sake!—
though of course no one ever paid any mind to Harry's sound, factual protests, always got his back
up. Chekov's second mistake was in trying to appeal to his Hufflepuff sensibilities. Everyone knew
he had none. "15 points from Ravenclaw and Owulery duty with Filch for a month."

"What the fu—" Chekov's mouth snapped shut, no doubt helped along by a warning elbow to the
gut. The Ravenclaw's lips slipped down into a sullen pout. After another pointed elbow, Chekov
muttered out a, "Sorry, I meant Harry."

Harry wanted to snort, but he'd also been called bullfrog a time or two and didn't want to give the
two Ravenclaws any other obnoxious ideas. "Go straight to your dorms and report back here
tomorrow after the evening meal at 7:00pm sharp. Leave the box. If it's anything more dangerous
than a kneazle in there, expect a meeting with the Headmistress very soon."

Wen dragged her huffing, red-faced friend away. "Alexei, let's just go. We can't afford to lose any
more house points."

The Ravenclaw boy went ungraciously. "Merlin's great, dusty balls! If only Horan had agreed to be
Head Boy."

Harry remained on higher ground and watched impassively until the Ravenclaws rounded out of
sight. Only then did he grit his teeth at the persistent and commonly believed rumour that Harry
had been everyone's, including Headmistress McGonagall's, second choice for Head Boy.

After all, who wouldn't want Horan as Head Boy? The brash, somehow permanently blond
Hufflepuff quidditch captain. Star chaser despite the incident with Slytherin three years ago that
had blown out his knee and left it forever weakened. Of course, that same match had also forever
earned him the respect of the school and fellow captain, Louis Tomlinson, when Horan held on to
an excruciating victory that would earn his house the cup. Niall Horan: ever ready with a pepper
imp or fizzing whizzbee for peckish students of any house. Top marks in charms, ahead of Harry
and Malik even, despite chattering through the bulk of the lessons to Payne and anyone else willing
to listen, i.e. everyone. Perfect handsome Hufflepuff Niall Horan. How Harry detested him.

Minutes passed as he cycled through the many, varied, and completely valid reasons he abhorred
Niall Horan, his ire serving to keep him warm from the winter chill. Only a anxious trill from the
vicinity of his feet pulled him from his mental ranting and reminded him of more pressing duties.
Harry bent to the box and lifted it waist high with his fingertips wedged into the small holes drilled
into the side. Bad idea. Sharp teeth chomped on the end of his index finger. The crate crashed
down on the hard stone steps and splintered open. A tan coloured blur raced away up the steps.

"Shit, the birds!" Harry said and chased after it. He skittered into the open stone entrance way of
the Owulery, but saw not a feather ruffled out of place, only sleeping birds huddled low into their
wings in the winter air. Soft coos occasionally drifted through the night silence. Looking
frantically left and right, Harry finally spotted a light brown ball of fluff wedged into a corner. It
shivered as he approached and curled impossibly smaller. Harry stopped at once and held his wand
out in front of him.
"What am I going to do with you, kitty?" Harry had always had a soft spot for felines and this had only grown since the passing of his beloved Dusty more than two years prior. He didn't want to stun the poor, wee thing unless absolutely necessary, but how to safely contain the unknown creature without risking grievous bodily injury? Several years of taking Care of Magical Creatures, his one pleasure elective, had impressed upon him the need for caution if one wanted to retain all limbs.

As Harry mulled the situation over, a great gust of wind blew into the Owlery and sent his heavy cloak aflutter. A plaintive meow served as his only warning before the creature launched itself at his feet and proceeded to scurry under his robes and up his long-underwear clad legs.

Claws dug into the solid meat of his thighs. The hooked tips were so sharp that by the time the pain registered, the creature had already scrambled all the way up to Harry's chest. The front of his robes distended around the lump that clung trembling to his t-shirt underneath.

Both beings froze. Needlepoint nails every so slightly scraped his pectorals and Harry bit back a nervous whimper. The front of his thighs burned. Ever so slowly Harry craned his head and peered down into the gaping neck of his robes. Golden eyes with black vertical pupils and no whites to them stared up at him from a tiny, furry, and eerily human face.

"Oh dragon dung," Harry said softly so as not to disturb the sphinx cub currently hanging off of him. He hardly dared to blink.

But before Harry could completely lose his shit at having a Class Four vicious beast inside his robes, the most remarkable thing happened. The small mouth opened, displaying a complete set of wicked looking teeth, and repeated the word 'dung' in the tiniest voice. Yellow eyes full of expectation looked up at him. Her paws flexed, grip tightening in his shirt, and Harry's large hands immediately came up to support the little body. "Err, that's right. Dung." The sphinx seemed to accept this with a knead and a nuzzle to Harry's chest. An answering tug echoed on the other side of his ribs.

"Dung!"

And as Harry's arms closed around the wee thing, as he skulked along in every shadow and corner until he reached the kitchen corridor and tapped the right barrel, and as he raced to his bed, drew the curtains closed, and cast a quick silencing and imperturbable charm, he knew he was knee deep in it. But as he fell asleep petting barely there silken wings and to the low, sweet purring of his new Greek sphinx, he couldn't seem to bring himself to care.

Raising a sphinx in secret inside the Hufflepuff dormitory turned out to be about as idiotic and difficult as he expected, but Harry couldn't give Bastet up, not now. She needed him.

"Y'alright, Harry?" Niall Horan asked from across the table after the second time Harry's nose dipped into his porridge one morning soon after.

"Yes, fine. Mind your own business."

"Sure thing, boss," Horan said and saluted. He returned to his rashers and eggs with great enthusiasm, clearly not bothered in the least.

Not so the other Hufflepuffs around them who all frowned at Harry's rudeness and made small sounds and gestures of disapproval. Harry ignored them all in favour of spooning oats into his mouth and pouring caffeine down his throat. He was in dire need of an energy boost. Bastet had spent the majority of the previous night pawing at his nostrils and batting at his curls.
Classes dragged on progressively worse through the day until finally, thank Morgana, only one remained. Charms rolled around and Harry cursed whoever had decided to pair their class with Gryffindor for it meant that Harry, one row behind Horan, had learned more than he ever wanted to know about the history and fortunes of the Derbyshire Doxies, currently 9th in the league and in danger of relegation, as he chatted incessantly with Payne. Horan flickered in and out of sight, somehow managing to wandlessly and wordlessly cast and end the disillusionment charm that so confounded the rest of the class, all the while nattering on about the Doxies’ chances against Puddlemere United later on that week. Which looked good apparently, though that might simply have been Horan’s endless and idiotic optimism.

"Don't you ever shut up, Horan?" Harry said after only managing to turn his arms transparent from elbow to wrist. Only weeks ago and pre-strictly regulated beast, Harry would have had this prepped and down in an instant.

"Course," Horan answered with an easy grin. "Not often mind, but it's certainly possible." Horan snapped his gum and blew out a bluebell coloured bubble that floated in front of his pert nose. He flicked it away with the tip of a quill. The air turned sweet with the scent of berries.

Horan's guard dog, Liam Payne, leapt to his defence at once. "Don't worry about what he’s saying, Niall."

"M not." Another blue tinged pop of gum.

"We all like listening to you talk." A round of agreeing jaw movement from the peanut gallery surrounding them. Harry clenched his.

"Aww, thanks, Payno. And the rest of you lot. Love ya too." Horan went invisible and blew out more blue bubbles to everyone’s delight, save one.

Professor Flickwit, of the tiny stature and incredible hearing, scolded Harry from his lectern at the front of the room. "Is that anyway for our Head Boy to talk? And to one of your own house no less?"

Harry buried his tired face in his arms, which did little to hide his grimace owing to his current semi see-through state.

"This isn't like you, Harry. In fact, I've noticed a marked decline in your work as of late. I needn’t remind you, though I am, right at this very moment, that N.E.W.T.s are just around the corner. Frankly, you're not doing or looking well at all. You're dismissed," Professor Flitwick said and not unkindly. "Get some rest. I expect a return to your old self by next class."

Harry kept his gaze firmly on the desk as he packed his textbook, parchment, and quills into his satchel. Ignoring all the eyes on him, especially a bright blue pair that tracked his movements to the door, Harry walked at a sedate pace until he reached the hallway and closed the door soundlessly behind him. Only then did he break into a trot that ate up the length of the empty hallways. Taking the stairs two at a time down to the basement, he homed in on the barrel two from the bottom and middle of the second row, on which he tapped out a rapid knock in the rhythm of Helga Hufflepuff.

The barrel swung open and Harry scurried through. Luckily, with the last class of the day in full swing, no one occupied the common room to see their Head Boy fall gracelessly into and dash most carelessly and uncharacteristically across the shared space on his way to the boy’s sleeping quarters.
The moment he stepped into his dorm, Harry began dismantling the multiple, interwoven layers of wards and defensive spells encasing his bed and the simultaneously small and humongous secret concealed within. For once, his persnickety and private reputation had worked in his favour for none of his roommates questioned his increased furtiveness and excessive spellwork. Harry threw open the bed curtains and plopped down onto the mattress.

“Dung!” a tiny, guttural voice cried. The small body clambered up onto his shoulders. Claws carefully sheathed, Bastet kneaded her paws against his face.

“Har–ry,” he corrected and scooped the sphinx cub up into his arms.

“Dung, hairy,” she agreed and nuzzled into his neck. The vibrations from her purrs travelled straight down into his defenceless heart.

Harry huffed out a laugh. “Got a smart mouth on you, don’t you?” And it was true that Bastet had already displayed an astonishing amount of intelligence. Her vocabulary so far had expanded at a rate of two to three words a day and she had begun to express herself in simple sentences.

“Bastet smart. Riddle?”

Harry held Bastet up in front of his face and thought furiously. “Why do boggarts live in wardrobes and cupboards?”

Pointed ears perked and listened intently.

“Because the cost of an entire flat is Riddikulus!”

Solemn gold eyes absorbed this answer. Deemed acceptable and with that need taken care of, Bastet moved on to the next major concern of sphinxes everywhere. “Treasure?”

“Ummmm.” Harry dug into his pockets and encountered an unexpected lump.”Yes, got some treasure for you here.” The lump turned out to be a gold foil wrapped ton-tongue toffee; a perfect treasure for a guardian in training. Strangely, Harry had no recollection of where and when he had picked the Wizarding Wheeze up from. He really needed to catch up on his sleep.

Bastet took the toffee in her teeth and carried it over to Harry’s pillow where she pushed it underneath. Her small paws tamped down on the protective covering. Following her excellent lead, Harry lay his heavy head upon the pillow and flicked his wand about while stifling a yawn into his fist. Once the adhesion, intruder, and imperturbable charms settled into place, and with Bastet draped over his neck, only then did Harry finally allow himself to rest.

“Outside! Outside!” the bulge under Harry’s robes and winter cloak growled.

“Shhhh! Please keep quiet a little longer, Bastet.” Harry rubbed a soothing hand along a cloth bound back while his other held up the wriggling bum. In the few weeks he’d had her, the sphinx had already quadrupled in size. Soon he would no longer be able to ferret her around under the cover of his robes.

“Almost there. If you can do that for me, I’ll even let you chase some bowtruckles tonight.”

“Promise, Hairy Dung?” said the voice floating up out of the loose collar of his robes.

“Of course, little love.” So intent was he on slipping out of the school undetected that he didn’t bother with trying to correct his name for the third time that day. The warm body pressed to his
chest went silent and slackly compliant. Harry sighed in relief and continued on his way to a lesser known and rarely used exit. The heavy wood and iron door opened out to the school's western grounds bordered by deep, dark forest.

Crisp snow glittered in the light of the moon and crunched underneath his booted feet. Only after they were well outside and at the treeline of the Forbidden Forest did Harry allow Bastet to slip out from under the protective confines of his robes. Leaping straight into the snow, tan wings fluttering and tufted tail whipping, Bastet hopped in and out of the powdery blanket of white covering the forest floor. Harry watched with hands clasped against his chest like a proud mother.

Soon after, like all responsible parents must, Harry drew a close to playtime and insisted on the commencement of Bastet’s lessons. Harry dropped to his hands and knees next to the sphinx cub crouched in a patch of long, dead grass, and attempted to demonstrate through fierce scowls and the swipe of imaginary claws how to stalk and hunt prey. The jarring sound of loud voices and stomping footsteps cut him off mid explanation. Four interlopers crashed through the underbrush so quickly that Harry had yet to fully gain his feet before they entered his clearing.

At the sight of each other, they all froze save for a levitating cask that slowly and not so discreetly made its way behind Liam Payne’s broad shouldered body. The ghostly wisps of their breath curled up into the night. Unsurprisingly, Niall Horan was the first to break the silent tableau.

“Hullo, Harry. Fancy meeting you out here.” Liam, who was inching backwards, and Zayn, who for some reason carried a bundle of sticks of different lengths and colour in his arms, echoed the sentiment, to which Harry said nothing. Louis merely rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Let’s cut the troll shit everyone. We all know we’re up to no good out here. The real question is, what is Miss Priss, wet blanket, know-it-all, house point grubbing, no fun at all Head Boy Styles doing alone out in the Forbidden forest, after curfew no less?”

“Now I’m sure our Head Boy has a perfectly reasonable explanation for–”

“Stop talking right there, Niall. The sight of Styles on his knees has obviously confounded you,” Louis interrupted.

Niall’s face already red from the cold flushed darker. “Shut your mouth, Tomlinson. A liar and a wanker that one,” he said as an aside to Harry. “Pay no mind to anything spewing from his fat mouth. We don’t.”

“You sweet, naive Hufflepuff.” Louis pinched at Niall’s cheeks until the other slapped him away. He turned his smirk, the same one from six years ago, the same one every year, on Harry. “But it takes a snake to recognize when there’s another in the grass.”

Bastet, tired of waiting in the bushes, chose that moment to leap out into the open. She landed nimbly beside her human. Wings quivered as she circled and rubbed up against Harry’s legs. At once, he picked her up and hid her away under his cloak, but the damage was done.

“Holy shit!”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“I can’t see this ending well…”

“Yes! Who was bang on? This guy.” Louis pointed at himself multiple times with the thumbs of his
mitten hands and then rubbed them together like a muggle cartoon villain. “Let the negotiations begin.”

“Blackmail really, Louis?” Liam said with disapproval clear in the stern crease of his mouth.

“If you don’t like it, Lame Payne, you know where the exits are. Literally everywhere out here.”

Niall stepped up beside his Gryffindor friend. “I’m with Liam on this, Louis. You know I’m always up for some mischief or another, but this is beyond the pale.”

Louis scoffed and his eyes gleamed as they often did before he came out with something particularly wicked. “You just have a weak spot for lads with wide mouths, like Horny Toad here.” Pushing his tongue lewdly against his cheek, Louis pumped his fist in front of his mouth. Cheeks reheating, Niall deliberately ignored Louis’ crude distraction tactics. “I propose we all go on our way and call it even.”

“It really isn’t though, even that is,” Zayn said while shifting the pile of sticks in his arms.

“Thank you, Zayn. Knew I liked you best for a reason. Remind me to bring you back some yew branches after hols.” Louis spread his arms wide in a universal gesture of innocence and fixed his crafty gaze firmly on Harry. “We’re just four enterprising and resourceful students brewing a harmless little potion. Who doesn’t like a bit of moonshine? Lads will be lads and all that. Trafficking a level four dangerous and highly restricted beast, however…”

“She’s not a beast!”

“According to the Ministry of Magic she is,” Zayn pointed out oh so helpfully.

Liam stepped in before the two longstanding rivals in marks could come to hexes. “It’s colder than a hag’s teat out here. Let’s go back to the castle and we can discuss this like grown wizards on neutral territory.”

“Fine.”

“Excellent idea, Payno.”

“Lead the way then.”

They ended up on the fifth floor in the prefect’s bathroom along with the cask, Zayn’s sticks, and Bastet respectively. Zayn immediately took off his threadbare cloak, wrapped his armful of branches up in it, set the bundle down close to the door, and then approached the swimming pool like tub set into the floor. He proceeded to turn the jewelled knobs of various golden taps with quick, precise fingers. Steaming hot water and iridescent bubbles and foam in different shades of blue streamed into the tub.

“We’re not all quidditch captains and Head Boys,” Zayn said to the others’ questioning looks.

“Lad makes an excellent point, as always,” Liam said and followed Zayn in dropping trou. Their robes and underthings pooled in heaps on the marbled floor. The two waded into the hot bath with twin sighs of pleasure.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Louis asked when Niall started shedding his things.

The blonde Hufflepuff shrugged and stripped bare with quick, casual movements. “I’m cold.” A
moon-white flash of pale arse streaked by and dove in next to Liam and Zayn.

“Leaving the hard work to me then, lazy sods.” Taking his wand out, Louis transfigured five flannels into little nubby cups. These he lined up in front of the cask and swished his wand over. Muttering an incantation, he lastly tapped the wooden barrel five times. The towel cups filled with amber liquid.

Louis handed one to Harry before levitating the other four over to the bath. Then Louis too unclasped the heavy and likely pure silver fastenings of his winter cloak and stepped out of his black robes and green Y-fronts.

“Are you all mad?” Harry said with the cup and Bastet balanced in his arms. As with the first three, he averted his eyes from the dangly bits put on display without so much as a by-your-leave.

A four part chorus of, “Yes,” answered him. Louis jumped in with enough force to splash everyone. He then immediately tried to push Liam under the surface. Laughter and sloshing reverberated loud and vivid in the tiled room’s excellent acoustics.

On the sidelines, the most that Harry would remove was his cloak, which he hung on the hooks allotted for just such a purpose. He set Bastet down to sniff around the bottles of shampoo and conditioner while he perched awkwardly on the edge of the tub.

The others horsed around and made merry and generally ignored Harry’s existence. So no different from every other day.

“Are we gonna discuss this or what?” Harry snapped when nothing but bath shenanigans seemed forthcoming.

“Calm your tits, Styles. We’re getting there.” Louis settled against the side of the tub, grabbed a cup out of the air, and took a sip while looking thoughtful. Zayn swirled the amber liquid within the glass and held it up to his nose. Liam swished a mouthful while Niall knocked his straight back.

“Quite a smoky nose.”

“A thick, rolling mouthfeel.”

“Peaty, fruity on the palate. A good level of sweetness.”

“Smooth finish. Slightly spicy.” This was followed up with a loud belch. “Definitely spicy.”

Harry fought the urge to tear his curls out from the root. Instead he took a big gulp out of his much needed drink. The rich, highly alcoholic liquid punched him right in the taste buds and throat. Fire raced down his esophagus and coiled through his intestines. For all that, it was incredibly smooth and tasty. Harry looked down at his glass with surprise and then took another slower sip.

“Good, isn’t it?” Liam said quite matter of factly.

“Niall’s a genius when it comes to food charms. All charms really.” Zayn sounded both proud and envious.

“Nah. None of that. Got generations of uisce beatha running through me Irish veins, is all.” Waving off the praise, Niall reached for a shampoo bottle and lathered up his blond hair and the piddly brown ones on his skinny chest.
As always, Niall Horan’s false modesty did not fail to rub Harry the wrong way. “Don’t be an blithering idiot. You could actually bottle and sell this. Give Blishen’s a run for their money.”

“Believe us, we know.” The four shared rather obvious grins.

Hearing that, Harry couldn’t leave his figurative Head Boy badge off, especially not when it came to these particular boys. He sat up straighter and levelled his sternest look on them. “That’s absolutely against Rule 6.18 and is grounds for suspension.”

“About that,” Louis drawled. “I want complete immunity for me and my boys for the remainder of the year.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then I guess for the first time in the history of Hogwarts, a Head Boy will be expelled and likely hauled before the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Not even You-Know-Who managed that feat. And it’d really be a shame if the Disposal Committee had to get involved, say if a certain someone, I won’t say who, claimed they were attacked by a sphinx at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.”

The towel cup crumpled in Harry’s spasming hand.

“Louis, that’s enough,” Niall cut in. “We’ll get a lot further if you quit acting like such a dick to him all the time.”

“But he makes it so easy,” Louis said, but subsided at Niall’s rare, sharp tone.

Zayn, brown eyes narrowing to sharp slits, took over the negotiations. “Four free passes each and no more detentions.”

In the end, they whittled it down to six free passes total, redeemable by whomever as long as they posed no danger to themselves or others, and shortened detentions never to be served with Filch. On their side, they agreed to a cessation on any amphibian and/or reptile related nicknames and insults (Louis argued most vociferously against this but was overruled), ceasefires on Sundays, and two bottles of whiskey thrown in for good faith, one now and the other due upon the completion of their N.E.W.T. exams.

“Glad that serious business is settled. Now I can enjoy me bath in peace.” Niall’s flung out hand delved into the bottles for conditioner and came out with a sphinx cub instead. “Why hullo there.”

“Bastet! Come here this instant!” Harry ordered from the other side of the tube and was soundly ignored.

“Treasure?” a small voice rasped.

“Oh,” Niall said to the cub gripping the third finger of his right hand in her paws. He shook his hand lightly, but she hung tightly on. “You mean my ring? Are you needing some more treasure to guard then?”

Bastet nodded, her golden eyes unblinking, grip unloosening.

Niall tapped one of his free fingers to his jaw. “Ok, but I’ll need something in exchange from you.”

Bastet tilted her narrow head and nodded again at this bit of fairness. Harry stood with every intention of interrupting this deal with the devil.
Blue eyes stared into gold. Neither blinked. “I’ll need your promise that you will guard it well to
the best of your abilities.” A solemn meeting of minds and intentions occurred and the agreement
was made. Magic sizzled in the air. The bath water roiled.

“Disgusting, Tomlinson!” Liam screeched.

Bastet swore the oath over Louis’ chortles. The sphinx let go of Niall’s hand and settled onto her
haunches on the edge of the tub. The wizard slipped the silver ring from his finger and set it down
before her. It disappeared in a flash before Harry could reach them.

“Bastet, no! Give it back. I’ll find you better treasure.”

“No trade backs,” Niall said. He slid into the water and continued with conditioning his hair.

“But you didn’t get anything!”

“Didn’t I?”

“No!”

Niall shook his head at him. Harry both hated and could not understand the pity with which the
other regarded him. “It’s done,” the blond said and dunked his entire body under the water, a most
effective end to the argument.

Harry threw his cloak on, snatched Bastet up, and stormed out of the bathroom. The door hadn’t
even closed behind him before the chatter of the other four started up again like Harry had never
been there at all. He may or may not have knocked over a suit of armour on his way down to the
Hufflepuff common room, but only the one because it so startled Bastet and earned him four long
scratches down the side of neck. He stroked her pointed ears in apology.

The ring became the crown jewel of Bastet’s collection of treasure, easily displacing the toffee, a
sickle, a teaspoon, an old brass button, and a yellowed incisor from Morgana knows what animal.
She took to carrying the ring around everywhere and Harry had to pretend to not see the stupid
silver hands holding the hard heart wearing its princely crown lest he pitch the ugly hunk of metal
into the forest never to be found again. Bastet would most likely maul him.

Harry couldn’t even seem to escape reminders of his entirely unwanted tie to Niall bloody Horan at
the dining table.

“What happened to your ring? I’ve only ever seen you take it off for matches,” Veronique St.
Claire, one of Hufflepuff’s beaters, asked.

“Found a special lady to gift it to,” Niall answered with an exaggerated wink.

Veronique only looked more confused. “A lady?”

But Niall would say no more and whispered rumours and conjecture spread like fiendfyre. Harry
completely lost his appetite with the steady parade of girls and boys that interrupted his next few
meals in their blatant efforts to talk to and entice Hogwarts’ favoured, and potentially off the
market, son. Spotting Fredricka Jordan, the Head Girl, in the mix, Harry threw down his napkin
and pushed away from the table.

Light footsteps caught up with him just outside the barrels to the Hufflepuff common room, and
then walked straight past.
“Couldn’t stomach much more of that meself. But a man’s gotta eat.” Niall called over his shoulder. He stopped in front of a massive painting of a silver bowl filled to brimming with fruit. After tickling the pear with an affectionate finger, a large green door handle appeared. The door swung open in welcome for the Hufflepuff and Niall stepped one foot inside. “You coming or going?”

Harry’s stomach chose that moment to make its complaints of emptiness known. Without pausing to think too much about it, he went.

Eating in the massive kitchens of Hogwarts was a surprisingly homely affair. The house-elves greeted Niall with happy cries of his full name and simply acknowledged his guest, the Head Boy, by ushering them to a small wooden table set for two. The same food served overhead appeared on their plates without fanfare and the two filled their bellies in blessed, remarkable silence. Conversely, a part of Harry couldn’t help feeling miffed that he apparently was the only person in the world that Niall Horan wouldn’t talk to.

Following their last bites, a house-elf dressed in a tea towel embroidered with miniature pine trees approached the table. “All the house-elves is wanting to thank Niall Horan for the fire drink gifted to us.” The empty, dirty dishes vanished and a massive treacle tart appeared in their place. “Niall Horan and guest is always welcome.” The house-elf bowed and then disappeared.

Niall helped himself to a massive slice at once. “Mmmm, love their treacle tart.”

“You gave them firewhiskey?”

“It’s the only thing they would accept,” Niall said with his mouth full of sticky syrup and flakes of shortcrust.

Harry shuddered and looked away. Then he lifted a forkful of tart to this mouth and actually moaned out loud. He couldn't even find it within himself to care in that moment. “This is absolutely delicious! I’ve never tasted a pudding so good. Surely this isn’t what they serve us upstairs.” He pointed the tines of his fork at Niall in accusation and then licked them clean.

“Made for me special. Don’t rightly know what’s different about it, just that I like it,”

“You like everything,” Harry scoffed. “Can't imagine how you brought yourself to pick a career.”

“Well...I haven't.”

Harry stopped chewing for that. “What?!”

Niall shrugged. “Like you said. Don’t rightly know what I’ll love when everything seems so good and possible. The rest of me mates have got it easy. Liam’s made to be an auror, Louis will go pro, and Zayn’s gonna be better than Gregorovitch and Ollivander combined, and make wands affordable for everyone to boot. What do you want to do?”

Harry answered quickly and decisively. “Arithmancer.”

“Now that I can safely say is a dull choice.”

Harry bristled. “At least I’ve made one.”

“Ah, but what if it’s the wrong one? Is that truly better than none?” Niall said as casually as if he were Binns discussing the Gargoyle strike of 1911.
Harry stood up so fast that his chair legs screeched. He took two hard steps away from the table, came back, shovelled the rest of his piece of tart into his mouth, sneered open-mouthed at Niall, and then stomped off and out of the kitchens.

“Harry, wait!” Niall jogged up to where Harry waited impatiently for the barrel to swing open.

“Thought up some other ways to insult me and my choices, Horan?”

“Nope, though I wish you hadn’t taken it that way. Here.” Niall pushed a packet of butcher paper into Harry’s hands. “Some raw chicken for Bastet. From the house-elves.” He strode away before Harry could thank him or throw it back in his face.

They stayed out of each other’s way after that, which was quite the accomplishment seeing as how they shared half their classes. So when they did finally run into each other, in the Forbidden Forest of all places, the encounter came with a healthy dose of awkwardness. Luckily, Bastet and Horan’s idiot mates were there to distract.

“This doesn’t count since Styles is out with his walking, talking expulsion too,” Louis declared. Liam and Zayn concurred while Harry studied his boots. Niall’s teeth chattered and squeaked around some ice mice, but otherwise made no other noise.

“Since we’re all agreed, Zayn, hide the cask and all that disgusting fur and saliva you insist on collecting behind a tree of something.”

Zayn floated the cask into a bush, carefully set some vials and packets down beside it, and then tugged his gloves into place.

“What’s going on?” Harry pushed Bastet behind him. She had grown so much since only November that his skinny frame no longer hid her completely from sight.

“I’ve always wanted to do this, but until now Styles has been wily enough to elude me every winter.”

“Louis, don’t,” Liam said.

“I mean who doesn’t even take Hogsmeade weekends?” Louis gathered up some snow in the palms of his mittens.

Liam sighed and gave in when he saw Niall and Zayn begin to amass their own projectiles. “Keep the magic to a minimum. That means you, Horan.”

“No promises, Payno. Me magic’s got a mind of its own. Harry, duck!”

“That excuse doesn’t fly anymore!” But the snowballs certainly did.

Louis started off focussed solely on pelting Harry with everything to be found at his feet, but was soon forced to defend against a triple barrage from the back and sides. With Louis sufficiently occupied, Niall made his way to Harry’s side.

“You have to fight!” he yelled at Harry’s dazed, ice crystal encrusted head, breath minty and squeaky cool on his face. “I’ll help you!” Niall dodged a fast one from Zayn and returned fire.

With Niall taking some of the heat off of him, Harry blinked his eyes free of snowflakes and finally took in the situation. He saw four boys, their arms moving in blurs, and powdery orbs exploding on shoulders, chests, legs and the occasional unfortunate cheek. He saw the way their
laughter lit the clearing up brighter than the moon. Harry’s usually stiff knees and straight back bent to the snow.

“That’s the spirit, Styles! Knew you had it in ya,” Louis called out. Not missing a beat, he launched a snowball at the mass of curls that acted as a fluttering target in the brisk winter breeze.

The battle began in earnest. It likely would have continued fairly evenly matched at three against two with Niall’s wandless charms making up the deficit, when Bastet jumped into the fray with a flap of wings and a roar of, “TREASURE!”

Her wide paws acted as perfect scoops as she turned on an angle and clawed at the snow. Great, steady mounds of snow sprayed over Louis, Zayn, and Liam. Niall’s doubling charm on the streams of white effectively finished them off.

“No fair!”

“Fuck, that’s cold!”

“We surrender!”

The war officially ended with Niall’s triumphant yodel. Leaping into the air, bum knee be damned, he pounced on and rolled around in the snow with Bastet. When the air cleared, Harry saw Zayn, Liam, and Louis buried up to their ribs.

“Well played, Styles, bringing a sphinx to a cat fight,” Louis said when the Hufflepuff got around to pulling him out, last naturally. His mitten hand squeezed Harry’s tight before letting go. Harry couldn’t keep the Cheshire grin from forming on his face and there it remained for the majority of the walk through the snow to the castle.

At the edge of the quidditch training pitch, almost inside again, Bastet bumped her furry head into the back of Harry’s knees and demanded a, “Riddle.”

Harry pitched forward into Liam, lurched sideways, and when only terribly punny knock knock jokes sprang to mind, stammered out, “Umm, n-not now, Bastet.”

“Not really Hufflepuff’s domain, is it Styles?” Zayn gibed. “Luckily, there’s a Ravenclaw on hand to assist if you’re not up to the task.”

Niall waltzed right into the middle of their ages old feud, crouched to eye-level with Bastet and asked in all seriousness, “What is the only room that ghosts cannot enter?”

They waited for it.

“The living room.”

Harry snorted and immediately covered his nose with his gloved hand to stifle the undignified noises.

“Horan!” Zayn shrieked. “You just put complete rubbish in that poor creature’s head! She’s going to be a laughingstock with riddles like that. The other sphinxes won’t want to chill with her. They’ll steal her treasure!” Niall nodded most seriously at the ranting Ravenclaw and winked at Harry over Zayn’s indignantly quivering hair.

Grown bored with the ongoing, and not infrequent for one reason or another, beratement, Louis spoke over Zayn to Harry. “So how’s the furball’s flying progressing?”
“Umm, I don’t really know. Haven’t taken her flying yet.”

Two sets of blue eyes belonging to two quidditch captains looked at him in horror. “Well, that’s gotta change,” Louis said.

“Neglecting a crucial part of her education,” Niall agreed. “Does Wednesday work for you?”

“Got that essay due for transfiguration. Best make it Thursday,” Louis said.

“Thursday at ten it is. Be on the pitch and ready to go. See you then, g’night!” With that and a flurry of cloaks, the four disappeared to wherever it was that they stored their illicit spirits inside the sprawling castle. Harry was left all alone in the corridor with Bastet and his growing dread.

Time between then and Thursday both crawled by and passed in a blurred daze. Harry endured no less than four separate complaints, first from Professor Longbottom on the state of his Sopophorous plant, its stems gone spindly and large leaves drooping. The beans harvested from the shrivelled pods gleamed a nasty, putrid yellow.

Next, professor Patil bemoaned the waste of costly pulverized siren hearts for several long minutes and *evanesco*’d his oily black Amortentia potion away. The lingering, crazily careening steam that blanketed the room smelt of boiled cabbage and vinegar and wet dog. The Professor summarily banished Harry from potions class.

Next, Head Girl Freddy Jordan ambushed him in the middle of Alchemy and blasted him in front of the entire class for missing the last two Prefect meetings. Yule, she loudly reminded him, was in three weeks and they had not even begun to discuss decorations or the ball. From the other side of the room, sat with Zayn and his snotty Ravenclaw friends, Niall offered him a sympathetic smile and pointed with a querying brow raised at the bag of choco-locos on his desk.

When Harry shook his head in the negative, Niall shrugged, glanced to his right, and was immediately pulled into conversation with the redhead sitting diagonal from him. Probably a distant Weasley with that great mess of frizzy ginger hair. She happily accepted a chocolate and Harry found himself waspishly hoping that it went straight to her hips. Jolted by the uncharacteristic venom in his thoughts, Harry whipped out his wand and cast a thorough diagnostic spell over his body, certain he must coming down with some sort of milady. But the soft blue light of the scanning incantation remained unsullied by sickness. Nagging uneasiness dogged Harry’s footsteps for the rest of the day and all the way back to his dorm.

Night provided no respite for Harry as even his little love, now grown to the size of a St. Bernard, required more time out of doors to burn off her adolescent energy and explore the limits of her evolving body. The narrow confines of his four poster bed had become a cruel prison for the sphinx during the long, lonely days. Soon, Harry had to sneak Bastet out to the Forbidden Forest in the wee hours of the morning and could only convince her to return with him at the darkest hours of night. Even then she prowled the perimeter of his curtains multiples times until dawn.

Professor Hagrid was the only one to extend him any words of praise and comfort in these trying times. Harry earned ten points from the half-giant for a marked improvement in his actual caring in Care of Magical Creatures. Meaty fingers the size of over-stuffed sausages dwarfed Harry’s shoulders as the Professor leaned overhead to point out the increased compassion and deftness to Harry’s touch and how the tiny porlocks, the shy horse guardians, soaked it up instead of scampering off and hiding in the stable straw. The Professor’s ‘good work’ squeeze almost crushed bone.

Finally, Thursday night arrived. Harry, his stomach already swooping in queasy anticipation,
dragged Bastet from the forest to the quidditch pitch to meet the others as instructed. The four were already there talking and laughing as per usual, Niall with two brooms propped bristle side up on either shoulder. Harry felt like vomiting. Bastet bounded directly over to Niall and almost knocked him flat with her demands for pets.

Niall transferred both brooms to one hand and wrapped his arm around Bastet’s neck. “C’mere you little monster. So how does a wizard know he’s real ugly?”

“No!” Zayn rushed over to slap a hand over Niall’s mouth, but had no chance against a Hufflepuff determined to jest.

“Even a dementor won’t kiss him.” Niall shook so hard in his mirth that the broom bristles vibrated.

Harry laughed despite his nerves and Bastet purred while rubbing her face on Niall’s shoulder. Everyone else groaned.

“That sorry excuse for a joke should be Kissed,” Zayn complained. “Don’t worry, Bastet. I’ll come prepared with some quality riddles for next time. I’m talking Ravenclaw level stuff.”

Something in Harry fluttered at there being a next time, but maybe that was merely the nausea churning in his gut. “How come Zayn doesn’t have a broom?” Harry asked.

“I don’t fly.” Zayn tapped the hard spine of the dog-eared book he’d brought, *What’s at Your Core: An Advanced Study of Feathers, Fur, and Fluids and their Magical Properties.* He then glanced meaningfully at the stands.

Harry swallowed hard and tugged at the tight neck of his robes. “Maybe I should stay down here too...”

“I also don’t have a winged creature that I’ve assumed parental responsibility for.” Zayn nudged him firmly forward with the corner of his textbook.

“When was the last time you were on a broom?” Louis took a seat on his Nimbus and prepared to mount up. He balanced upon the narrow length of wood with an enviable ease born from years of experience.

“In uh, broom flight class.”

The two quidditch captains exchanged glances.

“I remember that,” Liam said getting on his own broom, movements slow and steady. “Didn’t you fall off and break your nose back in first year?”

“Yes. Hence why I’ve yet to return to a broom since,” Harry answered dryly.

“Well we’ve got an easy, steady Comet for you here. Should offer you no trouble at all. You can mount up whenever you’re ready.” Niall held out the broom in question, but Harry could not make his shaking fingers move to take it. “Err, or would you prefer to fly with one of us? Tommo and I are the most experienced.”

“Don’t know if I’m too keen on you riding my broomstick, but I’m sure Niall is completely up for it,” Louis said with a leer.

“Broomstick jokes, really? What are you, ten?” Harry said.
“I’d put him at about nine. Though perhaps that’s being a tad bit generous.” Niall mounted his broom, dodged Louis’ elbow, kicked off the ground and floated about half a metre up. If possible, he looked even more at home in the air than Louis. Niall held out a gloved hand to Harry. "C’mon, Harry, I got you."

After one look into Bastet's round, expectant eyes, Harry forced himself to take it and was reassured by the strength and steadiness with which he was levered up behind Niall’s deceptively scrawny body. “Hold tight,” Niall said. Harry settled his arms around the slim waist in front of him and pressed close to Niall’s back. Purely for security reasons of course. The butterflies that erupted in flurries in his stomach could only have been from nervousness.

The three brooms hovered in a tight circle over Bastet. “You ready for this, you overgrown house cat?”

“Louis Tomlinson, don’t you talk to her like that!” Even through the many layers of cloth, Niall could feel the dig of Harry’s nails. Bastet growled and unfurled her tawny wings.

“Louis knows what he’s doing. Give him a chance.”

Bastet flapped her wings and jumped up into the air to snap at Louis’ heels. She hung suspended for a second before crashing back down to the pitch. The Slytherin continued to float just out of reach. “Gonna have to do a bit better than that, ya mangy feline.”

Launching upwards, the sphinx flapped her wings harder. Louis pulled up on his broom and called down, “Better, but you’ll never catch me like that. Imagine I’ve swiped a bit of your treasure.” Cackling, he took off into the night. After a ferocious roar, Bastet followed with Niall and Liam hot on her tail. Harry could only hold on for dear life.

Before long, Louis had them zooming around the pitch. Zayn’s hand flicked lazily at them from where he sat in the stands every time they lapped him, nose still buried in his book. “Rear backwards to slow down; lean forward to speed up.” Louis demonstrated the finer techniques on his broom. “That’s it! By jove, I think she’s got it!”

“A natural flier that one. You couldn’t have asked for a better teacher,” Niall shouted into the wind. Harry squeezed the blonde’s sides in agreement and rested his chin on Niall’s shoulder. He inhaled the crisp night air and a sweet scent like Honeydukes’ Best in the blond strands. They continued to fly in spiralling swoops and at dizzying speeds, an easy enough scapegoat on which to blame the free falling weightlessness that sent Harry’s senses soaring.

Up here, there were no N.E.W.T.s, no house points, and no expectations of a respectable future to worry about. Only Harry and his little love existed along with the ones who lifted them higher than they had ever thought they could go. The world spread out beneath his dangling feet, but in that moment there was nowhere else he’d rather be. Harry could fly all night.

When they finally came down to Earth, after much squawking and laughter, and all parted to their respective beds, both Harry and Bastet slept deeply and sweetly. Harry’s dreams that night unfolded in indigo, rich and expansive. In them a warm, solid embrace carried him beyond the stars and never once let him fall. Harry awoke well past dawn feeling oddly drained. He reached out and tugged Bastet’s heavy, loose limbed body close. Her size was beginning to eclipse his own, but for now he basked in her warmth and of being the protector of the same. At ease in a way he hadn’t been for a long time, maybe ever, Harry lollled about in his blankets and almost missed breakfast.

Harry hurriedly deposited a disillusioned Bastet–charm cast perfectly thank you very much–outside and sped to the Great Hall. So absorbed was he in finger combing his curls and
straightening his creased robes that he hardly looked up the entire, oft travelled path to the Hufflepuff dining table. Thus, Headmistress McGonagall’s interception of him before he sat caught him completely off guard.

“I was beginning to worry that you had grown remiss in your Head Boy duties, what with your recent inattention to your Prefects, but clearly I never should have doubted you. You and Fredricka had everything well in hand. Such extraordinary efforts sets the bar higher for all Head Boys and Girls to come. Outstanding work, Mr. Styles.”

Harry accepted the praise with a polite smile meant to disguise the dumb look of confusion that wanted to creep across his features. After one more, “Truly remarkable,” and a nod of approval, the Headmistress left him and only then did he look up. Harry gasped out loud.

The Great Hall had been transformed into a forest winter wonderland complete with falling, glittering snow that felt of nothing and vanished on contact. Twelve tall, full evergreens adorned with beautiful, animated ornaments lined the length of the hall with one massive one to be found behind the high table and presiding over the rest.

More than merely decorated for the holidays, this year’s theme was a clear homage to houses. All four crests plus Hogwarts’ own and ribbons of scarlet, emerald, yellow, and regal blue hung from boughs around which golden snitches buzzed and miniature brooms zipped about. Bronze eagles swooped from tree to tree dropping foil wrapped truffles as they went. Jewel toned snakes with diamond eyes and forked ruby tongues coiled around wreaths and slithered along tables leaving a fine dusting of silver behind them. The wall sconces had been transfigured into proud golden lion heads with kittenish cubs romping through the nutmeg and cinnamon scented flames they carried. Of his own house, there were pudgy badgers with sleek black and gold fur that frolicked around the bases of the trees. Harry saw not a few of them cuddled into laps and snoozing on shoulders.

“Harry Styles, you magnificent git!” Freddy Jordan thundered over, socked him hard in the shoulder, and then pulled him in for a tight hug. “How dare you make me worry for three weeks straight and then pull this off right under my nose?” She smacked a pepperminty kiss on his cheek. “Thank you. The charms alone must have taken ages to work out. No wonder you’ve looked so exhausted lately. Just let me in on the plan next time, alright? The Head Girl and Boy are a team remember.”

This time the never ending stream of students that approached the Hufflepuff table came for Harry. He took their compliments and holiday well wishes with modest deflections while furtively scanning the Great Hall. At last he spotted Niall asleep against Zayn, who in turn propped up on Liam, who had an arm wrapped around Louis. All of them slumped together blearily at the Slytherin table with a badger each in their laps.

In the long stretch of classes, Harry waited impatiently for a chance at a private word and a demand for answers that never came. He almost cornered Niall after DADA, but the blond dodged him like he was a bludger and zipped to the other end of the corridor.

“Sorry! Can’t talk. Gotta run to Ancient Runes.”

“I’m in your class!” Harry yelled after the fleeing boy.

By the time he made it to the classroom following in Niall’s wake, the other Hufflepuff was firmly ensconced with his usual crowd of admirers. Harry sulked into his seat. Thwarted confusion hung over him like a rain cloud and had the students around him inching away in their seats while his quill stabbed black marks across his parchment.
Harry's black, bewildered mood lifted only after seeing his scrawling letters rearrange themselves on the page.

Meet you at 10? The usual exit.

Harry glanced over at Niall whose face was tensed in concentration. It looked vaguely like he was suffering from gas of some sort and Harry had to fight to keep the giddy laughter from bubbling out. Instead he bit his lip and nodded once. Niall’s features relaxed into a grin. The letters on the parchment returned to their original location with no trace that they had ever left.

Harry watched the hands of the various Hogwarts clocks over the course of the day in their slow crawl to ten. Fifteen minutes before they struck the hour, Harry paced back in forth in the stretch of hallway that housed their favoured exit to the Forbidden Forest.

Niall’s loud voice reached around the corner well before his body did. “Hey, Harry. What’s the craic? The rest of them are otherwise occupied until later, and I was wanting to check on the stills—”

At the sight of that cheerful, lively face heading towards him, the muddled, throbbing maelstrom inside Harry finally calmed. Only his legs moved, without thought, without consideration, only need. Rushing forward, Harry smashed his lips against Niall’s. The hard, greedy, and frankly clumsy kiss lasted only a few heady seconds before Niall gently put his hands to Harry’s cheeks and pulled away. His normally grinning, open face looked as smooth and as inscrutable as the stone walls surrounding them.

“So, what’s that all about then?”

Harry could glean nothing from Niall’s tone and that made his own blundering and unsure.

“I wanted to—I mean, thank you. Umm…”

“So you’re thanking me?”

“No! Yes? I thought— You see— Louis is always saying…”

Niall’s hands abruptly dropped to his sides. “Louis is always taking the piss. Louis is my mate, which is what I thought we were becoming.” With every word, cracks appeared in Niall’s congenial mask.

Harry didn’t answer right away, too busy being stunned that friendship had indeed been forming between them well before these other confusing, dizzying feelings had begun to creep in. The uncharacteristic anger now seeping out of Niall walloped Harry’s belated senses. It left him triply useless.

"Is that why you think I did this? Any of this? And you wanted to do what, exactly? Pay off your debt? Ensure I’d continue helping you? What?”

Harry opened his mouth to try to articulate these half formed revelations that were bombarding his brain, but Niall continued fast and furious and allowed Harry no word edgewise.

“You don't understand me or your house at all, do you? Truly, I’m beginning to think you don’t know your own arse from your elbow, Head Boy or no.” Niall shook his head and sidestepped around Harry. “But maybe I’m the eejit Hufflepuff for never accepting until today that the Hat got you wrong.”
Harry’s throat dried and ached and emitted no sound to deny what, until this moment, he too had always believed.

“You know what? Forget it. Forget everything and we’ll wash our hands of this. Call it even. See you later, or not. It doesn’t matter, does it, Styles?” The heavy wood and iron door crashed open against the stone wall with the force of Niall’s anger.

The stabbing pain in Harry’s chest insisted that it did matter, and greatly so at that. But as Niall walked out into the snowy night, as Harry still could think of nothing to say or do to bring him back, and a figurative and literal door slammed shut in his face, he began to realize that Niall wasn’t wrong about the rest.

How long he stood there frozen with indecision, Harry had no idea. Liam, Louis, and Zayn found him there still waiting.

“Harry? What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be with Niall?” Liam asked.

“He went to check the stills, I think.”

“By himself?” Louis asked. His mischievous face firmed with unusual seriousness.

“Umm, yeah? Think so. Had a bit of a misunderstanding just before and he didn’t want me going along anymore.”

Zayn grabbed Harry by the shoulders and shook him hard. “Are you telling me you let Niall go out into the Forbidden Forest alone?”

Harry’s teeth rattled so much that no one could even tell that he was nodding. Only Zayn’s eagle eyes caught it.

“You stupid piece of gnome shit! Do you know what’s lurking out there? I knew Niall should never have taken up with you. Your head’s so far up your own arse, you have no idea, and probably don’t give a knut, about anyone else.”

Harry scowled at having his intelligence compared to his backside for the second time in as many hours and was even more so indignant at being told by someone else how he felt about Niall. Mixed with the worry that was quickly taking over, Harry looked positively feral.

Zayn snorted and shoved him into the wall. “You don’t know what you have in Niall as a friend. How could you when you don’t even know who you are.” Zayn sneered into Harry’s face. “What? You think I didn’t notice your new wand? Twelve and a half inches of turmoil and weakly wavering.”

Liam hauled Zayn off of Harry and over to the door. “We don’t have time for you two to fight it out right now, and especially not for a lesson in wandlore! Let’s go and hope to Merlin that Niall’s alright.” He flung open the door and they all sped out into the night.

“Why’s he coming? He obviously doesn’t give a shit,” Zayn snarled. The breath left his mouth in angry whorls up into the freezing night air.

“I do care about Niall.” More than anyone, Harry included, had ever suspected. “I want to help.”

“And right now we can use all that we can get, Zayn,” Liam said firmly.

The rest of the journey to the stills passed swiftly and silently. Unfortunately, of Niall there was no
trace, there or anywhere else.

“Louis, you and Zayn head south. I’ll go with Harry and canvass the north. You both know the
signals and what to do, if necessary,” Liam barked out the orders. The other three followed them
without protest, the stakes too high to waste any more time arguing.

Two large, glowing eyes appeared in the dark ahead of them, nearly scaring Liam and Harry out of
their skins and sending them fumbling for their wands. Bastet emerged from between the trunks of
two ghostly slender birches and padded up to the two. Their wands lowered in trembling relief.
Bastet sat and rubbed her head on Harry’s elbow. “Hairy, late. What’s wrong?”

Harry patted absently between the tawny perked ears. “It’s Niall. He’s missing, Bastet.”

“Treasure?”

“We don’t have time for that right now, Bastet!”

The sphinx tensed, her long back arching straight up and tail puffing up to thrice its normal size.
Narrow nostrils flared and brilliant gold eyes widened. With a yowl she bounded off into the trees.
Liam and Harry had to run flat out to keep her within sight. Basted prowled at a fast clip along
narrow forest paths, head bent to the ground and scenting the snow and air.

Suddenly, Bastet’s head came up, her ears flattened, and she leapt into the dark with a roar of
“TREASURE!”

As they ran after her, Liam swirled his wand several times in small, tight circles before screaming
out, “Expecto Patronum!” Blue white light appeared at the tip of his wand and shot up into the sky.
They crashed through the brush towards a growing cacophony of raucous clicking like that of a
thousand castanets being shook.

They entered a scene of carnage. Hairy black legs rendered from bodies and oozing poisonous
looking blood littered the snowy forest floor. Claws extended and fangs descending, Bastet sprang
upon the giant acromantulas that stood between her and the wriggling figure hanging suspended
from a nearby tree. Tooth and nail slit them open from chelicerae to spinnerette. The dangling body
cocooned in white threads was no helpless slouch as it unravelled the silk around him almost as
fast as it was being spun. Bright flashes of light shot out from the cocoon and knocked away any
giant spider that ventured too close.

Harry and Liam joined the fray with cries of, “Arania Exumai!” and quick, slashing wandwork.
The light of their combined spells illuminated the clearing and stunned the eight eyed creatures.
Niall fell to the ground spitting thick, suffocating web from his mouth.

Flanking him on either side, Liam and Harry half-carried their wheezing friend away from the nest
of acromantulas while blasting spells over their shoulders. Bastet covered their retreat with vicious
pleasure. The spiders, their numbers greatly diminished, soon gave up the chase.

They escaped the dark, dense, and fetid patch of forest that housed the spider’s lair and hobbled
into more familiar territory. Only then could they breathe a little easier of the clean, cold air. “Are
you alright?” Harry panted in Niall’s ear.

“I’m grand,” Niall said. Harry marvelled at the fact that he could still sound clipped and flat after
almost being eaten by giant spiders. Hufflepuffs were nothing if not consistent.

Through the bigger breaks that appeared in the trees, the welcome sight of the castle loomed
overhead. “Niall, I–”
“NIALL HORAN.” A silvery blue, ephemeral cat dashed up to him before rubbing against his legs. “Help is on the way. If you survive this, know that you may not survive me.” After one last headbutt, the ghostly cat dissipated.

Niall shared a look with Liam and then stopped in front of Bastet. He scratched gently behind her pointed ears and looked her square in her eyes. Strangely, Niall’s own blue ones reflected the golden shimmer. “Don’t be alarmed. This will only last a minute.”

“What will-?” Harry got out before his arms and legs snapped tight to his body and he went rigid as a board. Liam caught him before he fell face first into the snow. His jaw clenched shut and curses unavailable to him, green eyes sparked instead and blasted fire at them.

“Stay out of sight until we’re well gone. Look after him for me, ok?” One last rub and Niall and Liam left them situated behind a tree. The two were just in time to meet Professor Hagrid and Headmistress McGonagall barrelling towards them through the dark, the Headmistress a much more terrifying sight than the towering half-giant.

Foregoing magic, the Headmistress reached the blond Hufflepuff and administered a good old fashioned and most satisfying ear twist. “Risking your life, the lives of your schoolmates, and not to mention our own, and for what? Some low-grade hooch?”

“It’s really good, if you want to sample–Oww, oww! Ok, ok! Not so hard!”

“Detention until you’re thirty!”

“Glad to see ya alive and kickin’, m’boy!”

Niall’s whines of protest faded into the night and so too did the gentle ribbons of magic holding Harry quiet and motionless. Bastet nudged him to his feet with her large head and herded him to the edge of the forest. It took Harry two steps past the treeline to realize that the sphinx had not followed.

Golden eyes glowed from within the shadows of the trees. “Too dangerous for Treasure. Keep Treasure close inside. Protect, as Treasure does you.” Finished speaking in riddles, Bastet deposited the silver claddagh ring in Harry’s hand and pushed it firmly closed with her warm nose. Then she took a deliberate step back, firmly on the other side of the line drawn in the ground.

“Goodbye, my Hairy.”

Harry’s wavering cry rent through the stillness of the night and echoed through the barren branches. He stumbled forward in the cold, glistening snow and threw his arms around Bastet. His hands almost did not reach all the way around to the other side, she had grown so much in the short time he had known and loved her. Burying his damp face in her tawny fur, the scent of forests, winter, and a wild magic he could never truly know filled his nose. Harry wished desperately then for a spell that could make this moment last for an eternity, to prevent the advance of time, to stop a breaking heart. But such a thing did not exist and Bastet’s heart beat strong and yearning beneath his, thundering within the cage of his arms. “Goodbye, Bastet. My little love, always.” He let go.

The blazing glow of gold faded into the depth of the forest.

Ring clenched tight in his fist all the way back to the castle, Harry did not once look back all the way through the deserted corridors into the empty Hufflepuff common room. He couldn't bear to. Practically crawling into a plush armchair, he tried to wait up, but the fear and the adrenaline and the night’s revelations left him feeling like he’d survived being hit by the Hogwarts Express. Lids drooped against his will and he fell into a fitful sleep by the fire. When the first students leaving for
the Great Hall awoke him in the morning, of Niall there still was no sign.

Harry rushed forward and pushed a fourth year aside who had one foot in the barrel and ran the entire way to the Great Hall. He immediately spotted the shock of yellow at the Gryffindor table surrounded by three other dark haired heads.

“You’re still here, thank Morgana,” Harry huffed and puffed with his back bent double and fists resting on the table.

Niall opened one swollen, sleep deprived blue eye. “Had to promise away me life, but here I am. Didn’t tell them about Bastet, so don’t worry.”

Harry breathed deeply and wheezed out, “Was worried about you.”

“Well you don’t have to anymore. Your secret’s safe.”

Harry dropped to his knees upon the hard floor. “Niall, please. This is my fault. I know that. I’ll talk to the Headmistress. I’ll serve every one of your detentions.”

“Don’t got any.”

“I’ll pay your fines and do your assignments. I’ll tell everyone I lost us the House Cup this year. I’ll repeat seventh year. Whatever it is, I’ll do it. Anything!”

“Don’t think you can act as Flitwick’s apprentice in me place. No offence, but you’re not anything special at charms.”

Louis piped up at that. “May not be detention, but this way McGonagall really will have you by the bollocks ‘til you’re thirty.”

“It’s for the best, really. I know you were just going to fuck around and go to Doxy games after graduation.” Liam added his two knuts to the conversation.

“And this way you can keep me well stocked on acromantula web and venom,” Zayn said.

Niall, Harry, and Liam shuddered simultaneously.

“About that. No.” Niall clapped his hands together. “Now that me future’s written in Hogwarts stone, let’s eat. ‘M starving. Was almost someone else’s dinner, ya know.”

The four filled their plates and continued on as normal. Harry rose to stand stiff and stuttering beside them. “But I still have to make it up to you.”

Niall rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his palm. His lips twisted down in an uncharacteristic frown. “Styles, I already told you I don’t want a single thing from ya.”

“What if it do? Want something from you, that is.”

“Then you should have demanded it like a Gryffindor, or bartered for it like a Ravenclaw, or schemed for it like a Slytherin.” Niall swung his legs over the bench seat and stood up. “Excuse me, but I’m suddenly needing to sit with my house before I lose me appetite.” He turned his back on Harry and walked away.

Standing alone once more, upon a rocky precipice, at the edge of a forest, Harry asked himself WHAT?, but it occurred to him then that in this moment, and indeed in all moments henceforth, there was only one Harry to consult, only one Harry that truly mattered. The answer was waiting
there when he peered into his own heart. This thing that had always been there, always been true. Harry chased after Niall and in the middle of the Great Hall, in front of the Headmistress, all their Professors, and indeed the entire school asked, “Why did the Head Boy want to date the Hufflepuff quidditch captain?”

That caused Niall to pause. The entire hall watched and waited.

“Because the chances were better that he was a keeper.”

Niall slowly turned around. An unwilling smile spread across his face. “You little shit.”

Harry approached Niall slowly and carefully as if he were a particularly ornery Hungarian Horntail, but did not stop until they were toe to toe. “I might have bits of ambition, and wit, and daring, but I can’t do any of the things you said because those aren’t my house. I’m a Hufflepuff, the loyal house, the forgiving house, the best house if only because it has you in it. You are what I want, but I’m simply, humbly asking. Please let me keep you?” Harry held out his hand.

When Niall only looked at it and did not move for a long, agonizing moment, Harry blurted out, “Also, I took all those N.E.W.T. level classes for nothing because I’m going to be a Magizoologist.”

That earned Harry a full-on, head back, open mouthed, explosion of laughter. Body still shaking with mirth, he finally took Harry’s hand in his. The metal encircling one of the fingers brought the chuckling blond fully down to earth. Niall examined the silver claddagh ring on Harry’s right hand with the point of the heart oriented towards the thin wrist.

“Bit presumptuous, don’t you think?”

“I really hope not. I don’t much fancy having a broken heart.”

“Best give you a chance then. A Hufflepuff with a broken heart is truly a pathetic sight.”

Harry took that as permission and wasted no more time existing as a separate being from Niall. He reeled him in, wrapped him up in his arms, and planted a deep, long kiss on that rare and elusive mouth. He couldn't contain the light that blossomed inside of him and spilled out of the widest smile he had ever smiled; he didn't want to.

The determined press of lips ended to the deafening whistles and cheers of the school. They parted, but would never truly be apart ever again. “Harry Styles finally embracing his inner Hufflepuff. Quite the yule gift you’ve given me and here I’ve nothing for you in return.”

Harry’s arms tightened and his fingers locked against the small of Niall’s back. "Besides your lovely hand, which is gift enough, there is one other question you can answer for me…”

“Shoot.”

“Did you turn down the Head Boy position?”

Niall wriggled and ducked straight out of his embrace. "Would you look at the time? And I’ve not even had my full brekky yet. Wonder if there’s any treacle tart left in the kitchens."

"Niall!"

Laughter echoed in the place Niall had just been. Zooming out the door, he led Harry on a merry chase up and down and through the halls, and which he would for the rest of their long, happy
lives. Harry Styles, Head Boy, tied for first in class, proud Hufflepuff, and future noted Magizoologist, could imagine no greater achievement.

FINITE INCANTUM

End Notes

Not beta'd, but now edited by yours truly. Apologies if I've gotten anything wrong. Hope you enjoyed!

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