Summary

Harry is an elf. No, he's not a bloody house elf. He lived in a place where they had got him confused with a house elf for nearly six years. They had him doing all the chores and he slept in a cupboard. Not a particularly cheerful cupboard, either. But he's not a house elf. He's a regular elf, thank you. Come on, people. It's like you're not wizards or something. PreHogwarts, NOT a creature fic. Character study.

Notes

Translation into русский (Russian) available (!!): Волшебные эльфы и где их искать by Fleur Forsyte
Wherein Harry is Abandoned

"Why does Harry have to come? He'll ruin it! He's stupid!" Dudley kicked Petunia's seat as Vernon loaded the picnic basket into the boot.

"Mrs. Figg couldn't watch him today, Diddykins, you know that," Petunia simpered. "Don't worry, I won't let the boy ruin our perfect holiday!"

Harry stood quietly on the sidewalk, his small bag in hand, waiting to be allowed inside the car.

Vernon slammed the boot shut.

"That's right, boy." He opened the driver's side door and hefted himself behind the wheel. "You'll behave in Kent, or it'll be the cupboard for a week for you."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said, climbing into the back. He considered putting his seatbelt on, but what with the colour Dudley's face was turning, he thought he'd be safer unrestrained.

It was going to be a long drive.

Harry was right. It had been an interminably long drive. Dudley, never one to react well to boredom, had decided about twenty minutes into the trip that Harry was taking up too much space. When they finally arrived at their destination, Harry had indents in the shape of the car door on one side of his body, and bruises in the shape of Dudley's trainers on the other.

Upon arriving at the picnicking site, Vernon and Petunia had Harry set up their picnic table with all the supplies they'd brought. It was a company picnic for Uncle Vernon's firm, Grunnings, so there were other families in their area too, often with children. Harry had already been forbidden to talk to them, and when he finished setting up, Uncle Vernon instructed him to go locate the bathrooms.

Harry wandered off toward the small wooded area nearby instead. When Uncle Vernon gave him a task like that, it just meant he wanted Harry to disappear and not cause trouble. There was no reason to come back until the picnic was over. The wooded area was mostly quiet, though from time to time, a couple kids would burst through the thicket, stare at Harry curiously, and wander away when their parents called. No one stayed to talk to him, though.

Harry was fine with that, though. He had put a lot of thought into what he would bring when he learned about this day trip. He'd brought basically everything he owned, including an extra set of clothing, just in case he got muddy. Uncle Vernon had refused to allow Harry into the car with dirty clothing before, and Harry didn't want to imagine how that might turn out this far from home.

He was playing with his toy soldiers now, the ones Dudley had melted in the microwave and abandoned. Harry was having them fight the trolls he'd created out of interesting shaped rocks he'd found. All of the soldiers had strange deformities from the microwave, but those were just war wounds. The trolls were winning, after all, and the soldiers would have to call in reinforcements soon. Harry cast his eye around the small clearing he'd settled in, wondering what would come to help the soldiers. Probably the green elves. He plucked a few small branches from an evergreen and stuck them on their ends in the ground near the soldiers. Elves were always good fighters, and they had magic. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia didn't like it when Dudley watched shows with magic in them, and they positively blew up when they caught Harry reading fantasy books, so Harry knew magic was something dangerous and important and amazing.
Harry became so completely engrossed in his game that by the time he looked up again, the slant of the sun through the trees was significantly angled. Packing his toys into his knapsack, he examined his clothing and found that his trousers were a bit muddy. He took another couple minutes to change there in the wood; if he emerged from his hiding spot looking scruffy, Uncle Vernon would not be best pleased.

He decided to slip into the lav and straighten himself out a bit more before he found the Dursleys, but when he exited the wooded area and started walking toward the picnic site, he found that many of Uncle Vernon's coworkers and their families had already left. He walked faster, hitching his bag up on his shoulder. A foreboding feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he neared the area where he had last left his relatives.

He slowed his steps as he crested the small hill they had been picnicking at the top of. Aunt Petunia would surely have something to say about his disappearance, and would probably make him clean up their area and pack the car by himself, now that there weren't so many people. Uncle Vernon would spend half the car ride home telling Harry how ungrateful he was. Dudley would kick him some more. And they would all-

Harry stopped in the center of the empty picnic site and looked around. Nearby was the nearly empty car park where the Dursley's car had stood just a few hours ago. Uncle Vernon's sensible sedan was nowhere in sight. Harry's lungs felt constricted, and his heart was pounding in a distant sort of way. He looked around and saw that most of the other picnickers were leaving. If one of them spotted him here...

Feigning normalcy, Harry ducked into the lavatories and locked himself in a stall. He sat on the tank with his feet on the seat and made himself stay quiet, forced down the little whimpers and harsh breaths that wanted to spill out of him. If one of the people from outside heard him in here, he'd be caught and they'd send him to the police. The Dursleys had told him awful things about the police and nothing Harry had heard elsewhere or seen on the television (when he was able to watch without the Dursleys noticing) shed a more positive light on the police finding him. He huddled into himself and bent his forehead to his knees, breathing harshly (but quietly) into his trouser leg, his head pounding a white staccato behind his eyelids.

He stayed there for what felt like hours, until all the noises of other people outside the lavatory went silent, and all he could hear was the wind rustling through the trees. Even after the silence had reigned for longer than Harry could keep track of, he stayed in the lavatory, doubled over, arms wrapped around his thighs, staring dully at the door to the stall. There was a lot of graffiti on it. 'Shawna is a bitch', and 'Jay woz here 1985' were scrawled in his direct line of sight. There was a deep gouge through Shawna's name. Harry waited, and when his throat stopped feeling quite so raw and his face was tight, but no longer wet, he unbent himself and climbed off the toilet. He couldn't stay here forever. Toilets had people to clean them. Someone would eventually find him.

He ducked outside and glanced around, scrubbing at his face. The sun had nearly set already, and there was no one in sight. Without stopping to consider his options, he veered off toward the woods where he had spent most of the day. He would regroup and make a plan there.

Harry reached the wood and climbed one of the trees as high as he could without feeling the tree start to lean. He hunkered down as the last rays of light died, his knapsack secured firmly to his back. He hugged the trunk, pressing his face against it and feeling more grounded, and he thought. Now that he'd had some time to get over his initial panic, Harry had calmed down a bit.

For a kid his age, Harry had no illusions about his relatives. They didn't like him, they didn't love him, and they didn't care about him. He was a nuisance, that's all. When interacting with him, they
spent most of their time trying to make him more useful, and spared no expense to let him know just how useless he actually was. If he wasn't doing chores, he was being punished for some offense or another. It made Harry a very pragmatic sort of six year old.

He knew the Dursleys hadn't just forgotten him. He knew they weren't coming back. It was dark already. They could have driven to Privet Drive and back at least twice in the time since he'd noticed their absence. He knew that the only way he was going to see Privet Drive again was through his own efforts. Vague plans of boarding a train or a bus filtered through his mind. Though he wasn't really sure how those things worked, he knew they must. People used them every day to get home.

But as Harry came back to himself, he slowly began to realize that he might not want to.

The Dursleys were awful. He dreamed daily of another family that would come and whisk him away, that would save him and love him and treat him like their own the way the other kids' families did, the way the Dursleys treated Dudley. He wanted badly to belong to someone else, mostly so that he wouldn't have to notice how much he didn't belong to the Dursleys.

Harry breathed in the calming scent of the trees around him and finally acknowledged the inevitable. He didn't have a family. He didn't have relatives anymore. All he had was himself, and really, that was all he'd ever had. He was no worse off than he had been before.

It was this thought, so completely novel and yet so obvious, that knocked Harry entirely out of the panic he had been in since he'd realised that the Dursleys were gone. He had everything he owned with him. He had a place to sleep for the night, and it wasn't as though he hadn't slept in a tree before. Aunt Marge's dogs had kept him up a tree overnight on more than one occasion. Suddenly exhausted, Harry managed to drift off, allowing himself to imagine that this was just another one of those times, that he was in the back garden and Ripper was pacing restlessly around in the roots, a low rumble in the back of his throat for whenever Harry shifted.

There was a town near the picnic site. This thought was foremost in Harry's mind when he woke the next morning, and as he climbed down from the tree, stiff but well rested, he considered how he might get there.

That was silly though. He was on his own now. Walking was the only option, really. Harry hitched his satchel up on his back and started off through the trees along the motorway, following the signs. As he went, he began to realize that obtaining food was important. He'd snitched a bit of food from Aunt Petunia as she put their picnic together yesterday morning, but he'd eaten all that already. He hadn't expected to have to make it last indefinitely. Usually there was a bit of warning for that sort of thing. Uncle Vernon's moods were fairly predictable.

As he thought about it, though, he realized that getting food would be easy. When the Dursleys decided not to feed Harry, all he had to do was nick their leftovers from the bin. Kids at his primary school threw out food too. He just had to find a school or a neighborhood where the garbage bins were accessible.

He reached the edge of the town as the sun reached its height in the sky, and considered his options. The main road in town was probably the best place to go at first, to figure out where the school was. He turned onto a larger road and followed it, certain that it would lead him where he needed to go. Sure enough, as he walked, the houses grew closer together and shops began to crop up.

He spotted a grocery and eyed it. There was food in there. And where there was food, there were people throwing food out. Harry had learned this at a young age. It was hard not to notice when everyone had extra but him.
He walked toward it cautiously, trying to figure out where they would keep the bins.

Harry learned within the couple weeks when the various food stores in town threw things out. There were other people that sometimes came to investigate the bins, and Harry made sure to stay well out of their way. He saw them sometimes, out of the way of the rest of the town, in the places he had thought would be safest to sleep or relax (until he saw they'd had the same idea). He didn't talk to anyone if he could avoid it. And he usually could.

He still didn't know what the town was called, but it hardly mattered. He was good at being unobtrusive, and knew enough to stay out of sight when the other kids his age would be in school. It was nearly summer and then he'd be able to move unimpeded for most of the day. Until then, he'd lie low.

He spent a lot of the day after school was out at the library in town. No one looked twice at a kid in a library. No one expected Harry to buy something or get out, and when the librarian saw him sitting at a table with a book she'd smile and leave him be. Harry nicked a couple 'Surviving in the Wilderness' books from the adult section and hid them inside picture books. He struggled through them, since he had only recently started reading books that didn't have pictures in them, but he thought he understood a fair amount of it. There were pictures, at least. Those helped. He learned a bit about how to keep himself warm at night, how to light fires, and what plants in the woods were definitely not edible. He smuggled the most useful book (the one with the most pictures) out of the library, and tore out the metal in the binding that made the library buzzer go off so that he could keep it in his knapsack without alerting suspicion.

After a while, Harry moved on from the survival books (though he kept his nicked guide). He read selectively from the children's section, whatever caught his eye that day, and eventually curiosity drove him to the adult section. His comprehension skills improved dramatically when one of the librarians pointed out the children's dictionaries and taught him how to use one.

Harry had two changes of clothing in his bag, which he wore until he couldn't ignore how dirty they were. The librarians had started looking at him askance. He had already spent some time thinking about this, though. The picnic site had been near a river, and Harry went back one day and washed his things on rocks, like the pictures in his 'Surviving in the Woods' books.

All in all, though it wasn't warm, it wasn't peaceful, and Harry spent a lot of time stressed, hungry, hiding, and lonely, he managed to get through several months living in the small town near the picnic area. He had just enough food and he was resourceful for a kid his age. More importantly, he was tiny, and he could fit places where others couldn't, which gave him a lot of hiding places where no one would think to look for him.

One of the older people who frequented the grocery's skip took an interest in Harry after the first month. He frequently tried to speak to Harry and follow him. Harry didn't like attention when he was still living with the Dursleys, but now even the sound of another person's voice directed toward him got his adrenaline up, and he ran away empty-handed a fair few times.

Tonight, Harry had had to wait for a couple people to leave before he could get to the bins himself, so he was already feeling antsy and ready to run. He climbed over the rim of the skip and dropped inside, hoping to fill his bag up and not have to come back until next week. There was some perfectly good bread, which Harry took, and a torn box of cereal that was only a little bit damp. He had just finished rooting through a bag half full of bruised, near rotten vegetables (everyone else had gotten all the decent stuff, so Harry was left to sort through and find a passable cucumber and a few apples), when he heard someone approaching.
He froze and crouched down further, peering out through a gap in the small square door in the side of the skip.

"Hey, kid." It was the older man that had been following him. Harry clutched his bag to his chest, squishing the bread. He didn't answer.

"Kid, you okay? You got any parents?"

Harry stared at the small door. His heart was pounding and his limbs were shaking. He willed the door to stay closed with all his might.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," the man said, though Harry ignored this. If the man wanted to talk to Harry, he was probably bad news. He was standing right outside the skip now. Harry pressed himself against the back corner, staring at the small door. The top of the skip was closed. His only way out was that little door, and Harry could see the man standing just outside it.

"It's okay, kid." The man put his fingers up to the gap and tried to open the little door. It wasn't budging. The man cursed and reached up to lift the top instead. Harry's heart leapt and he saw the man's scruffy face appear milliseconds before everything went dark and his entire body tensed like it was being squeezed through a drainpipe.

Harry gasped as he opened his eyes and found himself clinging to the trunk of a tree. Baffled, he took stock of his situation. He was perched on a branch forty feet above the ground on the other side of the car park. From this height, he could see the skip and the grizzled man standing in front of it, peering inside. Harry blinked. His knapsack was squeezed between him and the trunk, and though the food was squashed, it was still perfectly edible.

He took a few minutes to calm himself down, staring avidly at the old man in case he found Harry in the tree and came after him again. For his part, the man just stared into the skip for a bit longer, walked a full circuit around it, and eventually wandered off.

Once he left Harry's sight, walking in the opposite direction, Harry allowed himself to really relax. This was one of his safest hiding places. No one ever climbed trees to sleep but him, and no one in this town ever really looked up. Even if they did, the leaves obscured most of Harry's position. He decided to just stay here for the night, and worry about how he'd gotten there tomorrow.
Wherein Harry Takes Leave of Kent

Harry took the situation at the skip seriously, and spent a long time in his tree the next morning jumping thoughtfully from branch to branch, wondering how he could have done it. He knew no one else would have helped him escape like that. No one cared about him, even if they knew he was here. Harry helped himself, so he knew it had been him that had helped this time, too. The only question was 'how'. If he'd done it once, he could hopefully do it again, and being able to escape from dangerous situations like that at will would give him no end of peace of mind.

When school let out for the day, Harry climbed down from his tree, put on his 'people clothes', (which he tried to keep as clean as possible) and walked to the library, alert as usual to any unwanted attention. He wandered through the stacks, wondering where he could possibly start his search. There had to be some mention of something like what he'd just done in one of the books. The library hadn't steered him wrong yet.

"Are you looking for something, honey?" Harry flinched, still unsettled from last night's confrontation. The librarian greeted him sometimes and offered help, like with the dictionaries. He was good at putting off her suspicions usually, and he didn't think she'd ever noticed him cleaning himself up in the boys' bathroom, but today she looked concerned.

"I..." Harry looked up at her with big, hopeful eyes. "I want to read a story about people who can disappear."

Harry had heard her talking about fairy princesses a couple weeks ago with a little girl, so he knew she wasn't too likely to get angry at him for mentioning unnatural things. All the same, he held his breath after asking the question and watched her purse her lips with some trepidation.

"Like magic, you mean," she decided, nodding. Harry nodded along, and was relieved when she smiled at him. "We have some stories like that. Do you like comic books?"

Harry knew what comic books were and liked that they had a lot of pictures, but he also knew those were pretend. "I want real stories about people who can disappear," he said.

"It's sometimes called teleporting," she said, and beamed at him. "People can't really do that, dear. But maybe you mean mythology?"

Harry didn't know what mythology was, so he nodded and let her lead him through the shelves to another section of the library, filled with older looking books.

"The Greek gods travelled like that sometimes," she said, and pulled a book off the shelf for him. "There are also some mythological creatures that can, like fairies and elves and genies."

Harry nodded as she spoke and picked out a couple more books for him. He didn't think he was a Greek god. From the way she spoke as she plucked more books off the shelf, it sounded like a lot of work.

After the librarian showed him how to use the indexes in each of his books and left him with a small smile, Harry settled in to read, dictionary at hand.

All the different books agreed with the librarian: normal humans couldn't do things like disappearing and magic. Which disqualified Harry from the species. Harry thought of his life at the Dursleys', something he'd avoided in the past few months. Strange things had happened sometimes. His teacher's hair had turned blue once. Dudley's toys broke when Harry was particularly furious with
him, even if Harry and Dudley weren't near them. The Dursleys had always looked at him funny when these things happened and spoke loudly about unnaturalness. Maybe they were right. Maybe Harry wasn't human. Maybe he really was unnatural. That would explain a lot.

The knowledge that the Dursleys were right about him unsettled Harry. He tried to stop thinking about them again, the way he'd managed for the past few months, but he couldn't get it out of his head. When he was littler, he'd always hoped his aunt and uncle would eventually come to like him, but over the past year before they left him at the picnic site, he'd begun to realize the truth.

They didn't like him and never would. He knew other families weren't like this, and Harry had blamed them. He had always hoped someone would come for him who wasn't awful like they were.

The news that the Dursleys had had reason to call him unnatural was therefore jarring. It was his fault, not theirs. He really was an inhuman freak getting in the way of their normal, happy lives.

The librarian cast several concerned glances at Harry's red eyes and nose as the week progressed. But Harry was practical. He didn't waste the entire week moping. Unnatural or not, he was all he had to rely on. He had to keep himself safe, and that meant figuring out what he was.

Harry read through as much mythology as he could get his hands on, looking for creatures that did what he'd done. He found a few, and realised that he probably had more powers than just disappearing. He took notes in painstaking capital letters in a notebook the librarian gave him, sometimes eschewing writing altogether and drawing pictures instead. Each likely creature was recorded, along with all their powers and weaknesses.

After dark, Harry tried in vain to repeat his feat of transportation. He concentrated on the feeling of being compressed tightly and tried his hardest to be on the other end of the alley. He achieved a small success one night by moving several feet across the alley when a stray dog startled him, but he wasn't completely sure if he'd stumbled the distance or disappeared, and climbing a fire escape to get away from the dog didn't give him much time to think on it.

At the end of that week, things came to a head. The old man was back, standing at the base of Harry's tree and looking up at him.

"Kid," he called, and Harry froze, not even daring to sniffle, though he badly needed to. "Hey, I just wanna help." He scratched his head as Harry remained unresponsive. "Look, I'm not gonna tell the cops about you. You're just too young to be living on the streets without someone to watch your back. Where are your parents?"

Harry swallowed and clung more tightly to the tree trunk, refusing to look down until he heard branches rustling toward the bottom of the tree. The man was trying to climb the tree. Harry panicked and squeezed his eyes shut, wishing the man would just leave him alone.

A loud cracking sound made Harry's eyes fly open. The thick bough the man had been hanging onto had snapped, dropping him at least ten feet to the ground and landing him on his arse. With a heavy chunk of tree on top of him.

Harry didn't question his good fortune. While the man was still cursing and struggling to get the heaviest part of the branch off his torso, Harry swung himself down to the (new) lowest branch and slid down the trunk, bracing himself with his feet, hands safely ensconced in his sleeves so as not to tear them up. He was off running before the man could sit up, racing down the road to the other side of town, where there was a forest he could disappear into. He'd have to leave this town. He made it
to the forest safely and slowed down only enough to keep quiet. Within twenty minutes, he'd crossed
couple roads and was circling farmland, trying to stay out of sight. He eventually calmed down
even to be willing to follow a road, and found the main motorway the Dursleys had used to get to
Kent. He only recognised it because it was the largest road he'd seen since he'd arrived.

Harry crouched down on the side of the road, contemplating his next move. There was a town across
the motorway; he could see the lights from here. This wasn't nearly far enough away from the other
town and the man for Harry's tastes, but it might have to do for now.

Harry crossed the motorway, looking both ways carefully, and trekked across the open fields to the
main road. This town was a lot like the one he'd just been in, and he couldn't feel comfortable. He
kept walking, and after about five minutes, he reached the edge of town and a set of train tracks,
which he frowned at. He started walking with them, an idea forming in his head. He had wanted to
take the train or a bus back to the Dursleys a few months ago, but Little Whinging wasn't the only
place the trains went.

Harry hitched his bag up on his shoulder. He had cleaned his clothes and taken a bath in the river
very recently, so he looked presentable. He had half a loaf of bread and a few dented cans of soup
left from his last skip raid. He could conceivably get on a train.

It was late already, and when Harry reached the train station, there was only one freight train in
evidence. Most of the cargo cars were just large containers that had alarming symbols on the sides.
Harry avoided these and crept alongside the train, which was humming with energy, though it wasn't
moving yet. Not all the containers had the symbols, but Harry decided to bypass most of them. He
found a couple toward the end that were just normal cars with slats running along the sides. He
climbed onto a ladder at the front of the car and managed to pry one of the
loose slats open far
enough that he could squeeze through.

Inside, there were just boxes and barrels. Lots and lots of barrels, stacked high. There wasn't much
room to maneuver, and Harry barely had enough space to climb up onto the top of one of the boxes,
several feet up. It was suitable once he got settled, and the walls formed by barrels and boxes
stretching up to the roof of the car on all sides were comforting. Harry let the soothing rumble of the
powerful engines lull him to
sleep, and when the train lurched into movement some interminable
amount of time later, Harry lifted his head groggily for only a moment before settling back down into
dreams.

Many hours later, Harry was awake and crouching on a barrel to watch the scenery whizz by
through the slats. Morning would come soon, and he was quite ready to get off the train. He'd
already passed through an alarmingly busy metropolitan area or three, and had been certain he was
about to be discovered at the most recent of them as people rattled past the train, banging on the
doors and having loud conversations.

He waited until the scenery faded back into trees and fields, then slipped out of the slats, dragging his
knapsack behind him and clinging to the ladder. The train didn't stop outside of the metropolitan
areas, but Harry had noticed it slowing down at most stations, and he thought he could jump off with
minimal fuss.

Sure enough, as dawn lit the edges of the sky, the train slowed to pass through a small station
surrounded by quiet houses and fields. Harry climbed down to the lowest rung on the ladder and
used the slats in the car to climb onto the side, where he waited for a moment before shoving off the
train into a leap that took him several feet from the train and tracks. He tumbled down a grassy
hillock and came to rest, slightly scratched and winded but otherwise intact, at the edge of an open
field.
Harry straightened himself up, brushed his clothing off, and set off through the field. There was a wooded area nearby. Harry liked wooded areas. He felt more comfortable in the woods than he did in town, where anyone could be watching him. There were more escape routes in the woods, for one thing.

He passed a patch of wild strawberries as he picked his way along the edge of the field. The dim light rapidly grew brighter as he stooped and filled the front pocket of his knapsack with them. Upon moving a small fern out of the way to better reach another patch of strawberries, Harry was surprised to discover a largish snake sheltering under the foliage. He stepped back, somewhat alarmed. His survival books at the library had warned against adders, and this one looked vaguely like the pictures.

The snake in question cried out in surprise upon being revealed. "Who's there? Get away!"

Harry reared back and fell on his arse in surprise. "E-excuse me," he apologised, almost reflexively. "I didn't mean to, er, that is, bother you, or, ah..."

The snake, who had all but disappeared into the undergrowth, paused and turned around to face Harry. "Well, hello. It can talk. They're not supposed to be able to talk. Odd."

Harry frowned. "I can talk just fine, thank you." He grinned suddenly as a thought occurred to him. "I can talk so well that I can talk to animals! How else could I understand you?"

"I've been linguistically inclined since I was a hatchling," the snake informed him in a superior tone. "On the other hand, in all my days, I have never heard one of you humans speak a single coherent word."

"I'm not human," Harry said. "I know I look like one, but I'm not."

"That's lovely for you," the snake said. "Now let's get back to my point. How do you know it's you that's so special? What if I'm the one with special powers that let me talk to animals, and you just got lucky coming by this particular strawberry patch?"

This was a compelling point. "But... you said you've never spoken to a human before."

"You said you weren't a human," the snake pointed out reasonably. "Maybe I've never met another one of your kind before."

Harry felt a bit put out. He had wanted to have a new power. It would help him figure out what he was, and it would be interesting. "Well," he said, a thought just having struck. "Maybe if I find another animal and try to talk to it, we'll know."

"You'll want to find a snake," the snake disagreed. "The other animals in this area can't string two words together. It'd be like trying to talk to a tree. If you're going to learn how to speak properly-""

Harry frowned. "I can speak just fine. I don't need lessons."

"You're a babbling child, of course you need lessons" the snake informed him. "Here, let's go find another snake. We'll see if you've managed to figure out how to speak a proper language, or if I've just developed a special power. Come with me."

Harry followed, feeling conflicted. On the one hand, it was a talking snake. He was pretty sure they weren't supposed to talk. Someone would have mentioned it, he felt. Even if it was the snake who ended up being the one with special powers, this was still an interesting development, and it would be nice to have someone to talk to. People were too risky.
On the other hand, the snake was kind of bossy. Harry hoped he could talk to the other snakes too, so he wouldn't be stuck with just this one for company.

The snake slithered out of the strawberry patch and into the nearby forest. The sky was light now, and Harry tracked him through the undergrowth as the snake kept up a monologue on the forest and its various failings so that Harry could follow his voice. Eventually, the wave of one sided conversation broke, and the snake asked Harry a question that he was actually meant to answer.

"What are you then, if you're not a human?"

"Not sure," Harry shrugged. "I don't think most of the creatures in my notebook can talk to animals, though. This should narrow it down."

"If you're the one with the powers," the snake reminded him. Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Right," he said, and the snake took up his monologue again. Harry tuned him out until he heard another break in tempo.

"I have a curiosity you might be interested in," the snake said. Harry stopped and peered at the forest floor. The snake had come upon another of similar size and colouring, and both snakes were coiled up and surveying Harry with their glassy eyes. "I can talk to it," his snake explained to the other. "Or it can talk to me. We're not sure."

At what must have amounted to a skeptical glance from the other, still silent snake, Harry's bossy snake reacted defensively. "I know it sounds impossible," he said. "But just watch. I can make it speak."

Harry knew this was his cue, though he was somewhat offended at being treated like one of Aunt Marge's trained dogs. "I'm not an 'it'," he said irritably. "I'm a 'he'."

The other snake reared up in alarm. "Goodness," it exclaimed. "It really does talk!"

"He," Harry insisted.

"Is it a present for me?" The snake slithered up to Harry and stuck out a forked tongue to taste the air around him.

Harry hunched his shoulders and crossed his arms, displeased.

"No, no, no," the first snake said. He seemed disappointed that his friend could understand Harry. "I found it."

"Then what do I care?" The snake made a full circuit around Harry, inspecting him thoroughly. "Are you sure I can't keep it?"

"Quite sure," Harry's snake said. "Finders keepers."

"I'm off then," the other snake said. "I spotted a lovely lady down by the river. Finders keepers."

Harry's snake grumbled a bit, but let his friend slither off uncontested. Harry waited until the other snake was out of sight before speaking again.

"I'm the one with special powers," he pointed out, feeling smug.

"Yes, and aren't you proud of it," the snake said. "Where is your nest, anyway?"
Harry shrugged and slid down to sit against a tree. "I don't really have a nest," he explained, opening his knapsack and pulling out his notebook. "I sleep wherever."

"That sounds dangerous," the snake said, pleased. He slithered closer. "What have you got there?"

"It's all the things I might be," Harry said, flipping through the pages. "I can't be a fairy because I like bread a lot and iron doesn't hurt me, and I can't be a witch because I'm a boy." He wrinkled his nose. "I'm not a genie or a god. I can talk to snakes and I can disappear places."

Harry had already crossed off several other options based on their weaknesses. He wasn't a vampire because he'd gotten into someone's unlocked house one night without being invited, and anyway, he didn't drink blood.

"I think I'm probably an elf," Harry said after staring at his notebook for a while. "They can talk to animals and disappear like I can, and they have green eyes and they live in the forest."

"I thought you said you didn't have a nest," the snake pointed out.

"I don't," Harry agreed. "But I think I like forests best. I think I'm an elf."
Wherein Harry Has Boons

Harry spent the rest of the day rereading his notes on elves and being introduced to other snakes. There were a lot of them in the area, and his snake introduced Harry to most of them.

"We're not the most social bunch," he said after one snake snapped at them to bugger off. "We don't have noisy get-togethers like the bloody birds. But we keep track of each other. Just in case."

It turned out that 'just in case' included 'just in case we get hungry'. Harry found this out in the afternoon, when after introducing Harry to a small, nervous garden snake, Harry's snake captured it in his jaws and ate it.

Harry stared as the tail of the other snake disappeared down his snake's throat.

"Why did you bother introducing me?" Harry asked. "Is that what snakes do? Say hello and then eat each other?"

"If they're smaller and I'm hungry," his snake said philosophically.

Harry frowned. "Elves don't do that," he said.

His snake snickered. "You don't know that," he said. "Three hours ago, you didn't even know you were an elf."

"I have read books about elves," Harry informed him in a haughty tone. "Elves don't do that."

As the day progressed into night, it started to get chilly. Summer wasn't quite over, but it was a near enough thing that nights like this were becoming more common. Harry had been lucky in the town where he'd spent most of his time after the Dursleys had left. There had been plenty of indoor places to hide on exceptionally cold nights, and he hadn't often had to figure out how to make a fire. Tonight was different. If Harry wanted to avoid towns and all the people that went with them, he'd have to learn how to deal with the cold on his own.

He knew the basics of building a fire from his survival books, but he'd always managed to nick matches from the grocery. He'd never had to make one from scratch before.

Harry gathered some dry wood anyway. He stacked it up in a pile with some crunchy leaves and tried to light it with two rocks, to no avail.

"What are you doing?" The snake circled Harry's pile of wood, tasting the air occasionally.

"Trying to make fire so I can be warm," Harry explained, crouching down on his heels to get closer to the leaves.

"I approve of being warm," the snake said, and started making helpful suggestions. "Why don't you try hitting the leaves with the sticks? Or maybe you could blow on the rocks instead."

"Do you know anything about fire?" Harry asked. The snake paused.

"Not as such," he admitted. "But I can learn."

Elves could make fire. Most of the books Harry had read had agreed that he could control it, which meant he could probably make it too. The only question was, how.
He hadn't gotten very far with disappearing in the time since he'd discovered it, and he had a feeling that making fire would be something of the same thing.

He tried doing what he always did with his disappearing practice. He closed his eyes and pictured the fire, as hard as he could. Then he pushed himself into the idea with a physical jerk. He opened his eyes.

"Nothing," he muttered. He picked up his two rocks and tried that again, but he was getting cold and frustrated. He closed his eyes and pushed himself again, and even clanged the rocks together for good measure, but all he got from that attempt was a sore thumb from where he banged a rock on it.

He snapped his eyes open again and huffed angrily as he threw the rocks at the pile, where they clashed together and set the wood ablaze.

Harry fell on his back, shocked.

"You did it!" The snake seemed impressed. "How?"

"I'm not sure," he said. Harry had felt a brief surge of power rush through him when he threw the rocks, but he wasn't sure how he'd called it up.

"Well, congratulations anyway," the snake said. He slithered closer to the fire, then backed up. "Find me a nice rock, would you?"

Harry obligingly found and dragged over a nice flat rock, which he positioned near (but not too near) the fire according to the snake's directions. They sat warming themselves together for a while, and Harry dozed quietly in between finding enough wood to keep the fire going.

It occurred to him that he was probably seven now, and had been for a little while. He wasn't sure what month it was, but if summer was starting to wane, July had to be over already. He wished himself a happy birthday, like he did every year, and decided this was as good as he could have it under the circumstances. It wasn't as though finding out that he was an elf and making an acquaintance with a snake were terrible birthday presents, late though they might be.

Harry got better and better at being an elf as the weeks progressed. Now that he knew what he was, it seemed like things were falling into place. He managed to figure out how to start fires on command, a very useful skill which he was quite proud of, and he was setting up a nice nest in the forest. The snake had pointed out that winter was coming, and that he would personally be retreating somewhere underground with the other snakes to keep warm. Harry had quite liked the idea of living underground for the winter, though he wasn't sure at first how to go about it.

That was until he'd found older, deeper parts of the forest. There was a particular tree whose roots were quite large and exposed cavernous gaps underneath the trunk where Harry could fit easily and comfortably. He worked to make the underside of the tree deeper and filled in all the gaps but two, so that he could have a way in and a way out if things got tricky. Then he began stockpiling food stolen from grocery skips in the nearby towns. He had a lot of dented cans stacked in one corner, and a respectable amount of bagged cereal. His snake was usually fairly willing to keep watch over the nest when Harry left, since Harry kept him warm and sometimes brought him mice or lizards to eat in thanks.

Harry didn't talk to people, usually. He didn't really pass as a neighborhood child anymore: his hair had gotten wilder than it had ever been, and his clothing had turned a permanent shade of dull brown, no matter how often Harry washed them. He knew he looked like a strange forest creature,
especially if he took off his trainers and trousers and walked around in the tee shirt that had once belonged to Dudley, which went down to Harry's knees. He fastened his belt around his middle when he did this, and looked as close to a proper elf as he could manage with the enormous wire frame glasses his aunt had bought him off the bargain shelf two years ago dominating his face.

It was a useful look, something Harry had discovered accidentally on one of the last hot days of the summer. He had been walking down a quiet country lane, headed for a nearby pond, when a boy a little bit older than him rounded the bend in the road and stopped short. Harry had stopped too, wondering whether he should run, when the boy spoke.

"Wh-what are you?"

Harry blinked, then smiled. "I'm an elf," he said, feeling inordinately pleased at the recognition. "What's your name?"

The boy took a step back. He was carrying a fishing pole and a tackle box. There were two fish tied to his box, and Harry eyed them with interest. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

Harry blinked at him. "But I'm an elf," he repeated, cocking his head to one side. "That doesn't really count."

The boy bit his lip and looked Harry over again. "What do you want from me?"

Harry knew that elves often made trades, but he had never really considered how he would do that. The books had said he might help the humans, or take advantage of them.

"I can give you a boon," Harry said slowly. "But I'll want something in return."

"What's a boon?" the boy asked suspiciously. "And why should I give you anything?"

"A boon is whatever you want it to be," Harry invented. "You ask me for something, and if I can manage it, I'll get it for you. Whatever you want. Cleverness, secrets, power, you name it. And you should give me something because then it's fair. We trade."

Greedy curiosity flashed in the boy's eyes. "I want to be clever," he said. "And I want to know things before other people do."

"I want one of your fish," Harry said. "And that knife you've got on your belt."

The boy reached for his knife, then paused. "Wait," he said. "How do I know you're a real elf?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at the insult. "Who do you think you are?" he asked. Then, because the boy wasn't quite buying it, he made a fire spring up at his feet. It was a great trick, and when the boy jumped back, Harry felt a burst of pride.

"Just for that, I'll want both your fish and the knife," Harry said, still acting affronted. The boy handed over all three objects with sheepishly averted eyes and a half muttered apology.

Harry allowed himself to feel pacified and reached into the front pocket of his oversized shirt. When he found interesting looking stones, he put them there. They would be perfect for his purposes. He poked through them thoughtfully, then picked out four of the most brightly coloured and interestingly shaped, and handed them over.

"Carry them in your right pocket," he instructed. "Don't tell anyone you have them, or where you got them. The blue stone will make you see further than other people. The rest will make you clever."
The boy's expression was satisfyingly impressed as he held the stones in his hand and examined them closely. The blue one had a hole through the center, which Harry thought was particularly clever of him. Harry cast a quick glance over his own spoils. The knife was shiny and sturdy, and it could snap closed. The fish would mean he wouldn't have to eat until tomorrow night at earliest.

He glanced up at the boy, who was still engrossed in his stones. Harry didn't want to talk anymore, so he stepped over to the side of the road and leapt across the short ditch and through the bushes. As he walked away, he heard the boy cry out in surprise.

"Hey! Where'd you go?"

Harry snickered.

On the other side of the forest, there was another village that Harry went to infrequently. When he did, he always passed a small cottage with sheep cloistered in a field alongside. He made good use of his knife when the sheep were near the fence, cutting off chunks of their wooly coats and stuffing the material in his pockets. The sheep were flustered by him at first, but soon got used to his presence, and Harry ripped open a bit of the lining of his button down shirt and stuffed it full of wool until he could wrap himself in it at night and stay warm without a fire.

One day, as he was leaning through the fence, harvesting sheep wool, a voice interrupted him.

"Hello there."

Harry startled badly and fell off the fence. He pushed himself up into a sitting position to face whatever danger that voice had presaged, heart pounding.

A blonde head poked through the fence. "Are you alright?"

It was a girl. She looked to be at least ten years old, and she was watching him curiously. Harry stared.

"Oh, no!" she said, looking down at his trousers, which had torn. "I'm sorry." She spent about five seconds looking apologetic, but soon went back to watching him with suspicion. "Who are you and why are you bothering our sheep?"

Harry frowned at her. "I'm an elf," he explained. "We were having a boon. I was doing a spell to keep them healthy and they let me have some of their wool."

The girl looked skeptical.

"Well look at them," Harry said defensively. "Do they look like they mind me? We were getting on fine until you came along."

Indeed, more sheep were wandering over to the fence to observe the confrontation, some of them standing so close to Harry that their hooves were in danger of stepping on his hands.

"People can't talk to sheep," she pointed out. Harry sighed in a very put upon fashion.

"Well it's lucky I'm an elf, then, and not one of you humans," he said, and stood up. He brushed himself off and pulled the trousers off, which were torn badly enough that they might as well be useless. He wrinkled his nose at them and tucked them under one arm. "Since you're here and you ruined my trousers, we might as well have one too," he said. "What kind of boon do you want?"
The girl looked taken aback.

"What's a boon?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's anything you want it to be. I can make you an amulet or make you cleverer or whatever you want, really."

"Like you were making the sheep healthier," she said. Harry nodded. "Exactly."

He shook out his trousers again and reached into one of the pockets for a chestnut, which he set to floating above his fingers. It was something he'd been working on, and it was a useful demonstration for the skeptical. Sure enough, the girl's eyes went wide with shock.

"Now," Harry said. "Since you ripped my good trousers and I'm still going to give you a boon, you should think of something really good to give me in return."

Her eyes darted back and forth between Harry face and the chestnut as she wrinkled her brow in thought.

"I could fix your trousers," she offered. "Or even better, I could make them into a bag for you instead. I'm good at making bags. My auntie showed me how to make a bag out of my skirt after I ripped it on the shearing razor."

Harry took a good look at the brown denim in his hands. He did have the other pair of trousers, and a bag would be useful. His knapsack, which had been ratty from the start, had developed a few too many holes to be functional for much longer. Harry had figured out how to mend smaller holes in his clothing like he made fire, but not on the scale of his trousers or his knapsack. He mostly left it in his nest these days.

"Are you good at that sort of thing?" he asked.

"My mum says I can make anything," she said proudly. "She says I'm brilliant at it. And I'll even make you a pair of gloves for the winter, if you like, since you were helping our sheep."

Harry did like that idea.

"Alright," he said slowly. "I'll come back in two days for my things, and if you're finished, I'll give you a boon."

"We'll meet right here," she said, nodding eagerly and making her fringe flop into her eyes. Harry ducked through the fence and faced her with direct seriousness.

"Don't tell anyone about me," he warned. "Else I'll give you a curse instead."

"No, no of course not," she assured him. "I won't tell a soul."

"Right," Harry said. "This time in two days. What do you want your boon to be? Make it good."

"I'll come up with something great," she promised. "I'll think hard and I won't waste it, I promise!"

Harry nodded and took everything out of his trouser pockets before handing them over. "See that you don't," he said, and set off for the road and the forest beyond that.
Wherein Harry Goes Guising

Harry was still having difficulty with his disappearing. He had managed a multitude of other small feats, but disappearing was still something that defeated him. He practiced regularly, but according to his snake, all he managed to do usually was pop out of existence and pop right back where he'd been standing.

He hated the feeling of restriction when he was popping around, but he found that he was actually able to hold himself in that state of nonexistence for about thirty seconds before he had to come back. It was like holding his breath underwater, but with more pressure. He didn't think he'd be able to practice much once winter really set in; it was cold enough recently, and disappearing sapped most of the strength he would usually use to make fires.

In the meantime, it was harvest season. Harry was having a literal field day. He spent the entire morning wandering from field to field, filling his new bag with corn and potatoes and sugar beets. He had thought hard about what to offer the girl in exchange, and his new gloves and bag were well worth his effort. She had asked for a charm to get her more friends.

Harry had taken a fiery red stone and melted a keychain ring that had taken him ages to find around the edges of it with a fistful of fire. It actually ended up looking pretty nice. He told her to wear it around her neck whenever she talked to people, and it would make them like her. He only felt a little bit guilty about lying to her; she had been delighted by the stone and gave him his things along with a kiss on the cheek.

His new bag was clean, though it was still that dull brown colour. There would be no getting rid of that. The pockets from his trousers were included in the design, and the legs of the trousers had been re-appropriated as belt and flap. It was both efficient and useful, and Harry liked it. His new gloves were thick wool and kept his hands nice and warm. They were a bit big, but that wasn't really a problem. His trainers were a bit big as well.

His knife fit nicely in the pocket she'd added to the strap, and all his smaller miscellany fit in the inner pockets. Harry felt quite official with his new bag. It seemed like something an elf would have, and he filled it with corn and beets and smiled at how well the stitching held up. His knapsack wouldn't have fared so well.

He would have liked to figure out a way to preserve the food so that it would last him the winter, but at the very least, he figured it would keep him from having to eat any of his canned food before he absolutely had to. His snake had given him the idea when he asked what Harry would do when he ran out of cans.

There had been hunting lessons, too. Harry's snake was nothing if not bossy, but that translated well when it came to teaching.

"Since I won't be around to help you when winter is here," the snake explained as they crept through the forest in pursuit of rabbits, "we'll have to make sure you don't die before I wake up. Now what I usually do is sneak up on them, catch them by the neck, and squeeze them with my jaws until they give up. Then I eat them. Try that."

"I have a knife," Harry said, brandishing it for examination. "And I don't think my mouth works like yours does. I think I should probably use my hands instead."

"Get those things away from me," the snake said, offended. "Look, use whatever ridiculous
appendages you want, see if I care. The point is stealth and persistence."

Harry nodded, and they settled in to wait for a rabbit to come by. Harry was ace at going unnoticed around people, and long months of living out of doors had given him a knack for staying near silent in the forest as well. A rabbit hopped up and nibbled at a bit of greenery as they watched.

Harry coiled his limbs beneath him and launched himself at it, knife in hand. The rabbit leapt away, startled, but Harry had already landed half on top of it. It bucked and wriggled frantically and managed to slip out from under Harry while he was still getting his bearings. Harry sat up as the rabbit dashed off and examined his hand. He had cut himself on the knife when he jumped. It was just a little cut, so Harry mended it like he would mend a tear in his shirt and examined the newly healed wound with a careful eye as the rustle of the rabbit's escape faded away.

"So close," the snake said, slithering up next to him. "Next time, try using your jaws."

"I don't have jaws, I told you," Harry said, pouting. "Look at my teeth." He bared them at the snake, who opened his mouth in a strange imitation of Harry's movements. Sharp fangs glistened in the sunlight for a moment before the snake snapped its mouth shut.

"How do you get anything done, that's what I want to know." Harry's snake reared up and flickered out his tongue as he examined Harry's teeth more thoroughly. "Those must be nearly useless."

Harry snapped his teeth at the snake, who reared back and hissed at him. Harry laughed and offered an arm, which the snake refused, as usual.

They walked along the very edge of the forest with the nearby town in sight, and Harry paused, peering out from behind a tree at the closest houses. It was much more busy than usual for this time of day.

"What are they doing?" he asked. The snake scoffed.

"Why would I know?"

"I think they're all kids," Harry said. He got a strange feeling in his chest. "I... I think it's Halloween."

Harry's snake made a confused sound. "What's that?"

"Kids dress up and go guising, and they get food and sweets and things," Harry explained. He leaned around the tree and looked closer. It did seem like some of them were in costume.

"Go get some food then," the snake said, pleased. "See you back at your nest. Don't take long. I want a fire."

Harry glanced down as the snake slithered off, then returned his attention to the town. It was definitely Halloween. He looked down at his clothing. He was wearing his long shirt and belt with his trainers and bag. It could pass as a costume if he didn't let anyone get too close of a look at him.

He was going guising.

Harry dropped into line behind a small group of children that were making their way around the edge of town, giggling and comparing candy. Some houses were dark and had signs on their doors, and the children ignored these. At every door, each child would explain their costume, and Harry would chime shyly at the end, "I'm an elf."
No one questioned him. They all smiled and dropped food and sweets into his bag just like everyone else's. He was getting a pretty decent pile of food together, mostly bite sized Mars Bars and lollipops. He had never gone guising when he lived at the Dursleys. It was quite a bit of fun.

The group Harry was following went to all the houses on the outskirts of town. It sounded like they'd already done all the others. They reached one house that was very near the forest, and a woman dressed like a witch opened the door, beaming with excitement.

"Hello, dearies, and what are we dressed as this year?" She was carrying a stick and a bowl full of strange looking sweets, and was wearing a full length robe with a pointy hat.

The kids all went through their routine again.

"I'm a ghost!"

"I'm a Frankenstein!"

"I'm a witch!"

"I'm a cat!"

Harry blinked innocently up at the woman. "I'm an elf!" he told her. She smiled down at them all, enthused.

"Very good! I love your witch hat, honey. It's almost as nice as mine." The little girl giggled and tipped it at her. "Oh, but cats have whiskers! And elves have pointy ears!"

Harry didn't like being directly addressed, but he dimpled up at her anyway. The girl dressed like a cat seemed happy enough, so he would be too.

She waved her stick at them and beamed. "There you go," she pronounced. "Now you're a proper cat, and you're a proper elf!"

Harry looked at the girl, and noticed that she had somehow sprouted whiskers. He stared for a moment, then reached up and felt his ears. Sure enough, they felt pointier than usual. He frowned at the woman, whose smile faltered slightly. That wasn't good.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, pulling a cheerful expression over his confusion and taking a box of sweets when it was offered to him. It was jelly beans.

After that, he followed the other children at a slight distance, feeling his ears and trying to figure out how she'd done that.

"Ow, don't pull on them! That hurt!" It seemed that the girl dressed like a cat had actual whiskers now. The Frankenstein turned around to look at Harry, presumably to ask about his ears. He caught Harry's eye and froze at whatever he saw, then turned back around to face the other kids.

Harry was still pondering his new ears when he finished up gathering sweets and returned to his nest in the forest.

"Do my ears look different?" Harry tilted his head toward the fire so that the snake could see better.

"How should I know what your ears look like?" the snake asked. Typical.

Harry didn't think that woman had been an elf. She looked just like all the other humans, and she fit in with them. There was no evidence that she could talk to any animals or disappear like he could.
But she could do at least some little tricks like Harry.

Harry spent half the night curled up under his sheep-wool shirt, wondering over the mystery of the strange woman. The next morning, he woke up to discover that his snake had disappeared in the night and that a layer of frost had settled over everything outside his nest. He spent the morning collecting moss and sticks to block off the exits and conserve heat.

Winter meant a lot of time for contemplation, since Harry avoided leaving his nest except to hunt or scavenge for food in the forest or in one of the nearby towns. After a few weeks, he started getting bored, so he began venturing into the towns to see if he could find anything to take back to the nest to keep himself entertained.

The church in the nearest town had a back door where people dropped off donations. Harry checked regularly, though he rarely found anything particularly useful, usually just dishes and children's toys and clothing that didn't fit him, but which he sometimes took anyway to use as padding and blankets when he slept. Tonight, there were some toys and books and a long woolen sweater, clearly meant for a teenager. Harry took the sweater and a stack of books, but left the toys.

Harry considered books to be highly useful. Not only were they good for relieving boredom, but after he'd finished reading them, they were great for insulating his nest, and though he hadn't had to resort to it yet, he was aware that they were potentially good kindling.

He thought about the lady who had given him the pointy ears pretty often. He knew she couldn't be an elf, because if she was, she wouldn't have thought elves needed pointy ears. Knowing this made Harry feel loads better, but there was still the question of what she was. He knew most people couldn't change his ears like she had, and that she was something different because of it. He wished his snake was still around, so he could have a second opinion. He knew about people, since he, like Harry, spent most of his time avoiding them at all costs.

Harry passed the woman's house with care when he had reason to, and saw her doing more tricks like what Harry could do. The difference seemed to be that she had that pointy stick. Harry had consulted his well-battered notebook and decided that she was probably a witch. She was a girl and she could do magic with a magic stick. It made sense. Anyway, she had a cat. There was also an owl that hung around, which made Harry suspicious until he realized that it seemed to deliver the post for her.

His books had been uncertain on the subject of witches. They said water and fire were weaknesses, which was reassuring. But then, they had often disagreed. Some of them said that witches were evil, and some of them said they were just normal women who had magical powers, just like wizards were just old men with long beards and staffs who had magical powers. Harry remembered some of the fantasy books he'd read, where the witch was usually the villain, who cackled and stooped and had warts. This woman didn't look like that. Then again, she might be in disguise. Witches did that too, according to his notes.

Harry decided to avoid her thoroughly, just in case.

One positive thing about that winter was that Harry managed to figure out disappearing. After he got into his canned food, he started leaving small fires sitting in the bottom of the empty cans at night, and the small nest Harry had built held in the heat from his canned flames reasonably well. He found that his flames would usually last at least half a night even without kindling, as long as he didn't want them to be big.

So with that worry out of the way, Harry started practicing again. He found that he was able to jump small distances with practice, and soon he was able to pop all over the forest (it came in extra useful
when the hunters started nosing around and Harry had to be able to disappear at a moment's notice). The trick seemed to be knowing exactly where he was going, and picturing it clearly before he tried.

He only tried on days when he'd had a good meal. There were weeks when he could only reasonably eat every other day, unless he managed to catch something in the forest. There had been weeks like that since he started living out of doors, but in the winter, it was a bit harder to grin and bear it. He continued raiding the skips in town, but sometimes there just wasn't much food, and Harry was too worried about what might happen to him if he didn't have the extra to be willing to dip into his stockpile too heavily. He could manage every other day. That wasn't anything new for Harry. He knew from experience what it felt like when he needed to eat, rather than just wanting it desperately.

Some days, when it was particularly cold and Harry was feeling particularly down and lonely, he would trek over to the sheep farm where the girl lived that made his bag, and crawl into the barn where the sheep stayed. They were extra wooly since the farmer wasn't shearing them during the winter, so Harry could cuddle up with them and feel warm and safe and comfortable for a little while.

By the time the snow started to melt, Harry had decided he wanted to leave his forest. It had been a good place to stay for the winter, but he didn't want to get too settled in one place. The last time Harry'd gotten too used to a town, that grizzled old man had come after him and only a tree branch had managed to save him. Getting approached again in this area was something he wanted to avoid. He knew the sheep farmer was suspicious, as he'd seen the man examining his footprints in the snow even though Harry had taken pains to disguise them. He dreaded to think what might have happened if the farmer had decided to follow them back to his nest.

So he resolved to wait until his snake resurfaced, say goodbye, and then leave. Walking would get him wherever he was going; there was no reason to risk trying to board a train. He didn't exactly pass for a normal human anymore, and anyway, it wasn't like he had anywhere particular in mind. He'd walk for a few days and find somewhere new to settle.

It took another month or so for his snake to show his scaly face again. Harry, being warm blooded, had been wandering around the forest in his trainers and his long sweater for several weeks since. He'd gotten much better at hunting over the winter, so when his snake arrived, he found Harry in front of a fire roasting a pheasant.

"Is some of that for me?" he asked, coiling himself near the fire on a flat rock that Harry had left there in expectation of his return. Harry reached out, peeled off a hunk of meat and skin, and tossed it over. The snake snapped it up and ate happily.

"Good to see you again," Harry said, snapping the leg off the spit and taking a bite himself. "I'm gonna leave soon."

"Where will you go?" His snake twitched the end of his tail and shifted comfortably.

"I don't know. I think I'll just walk. I've been here too long."

They sat in silence for a while. "Don't forget what I taught you," the snake said eventually. Harry grinned.

"Stealth, persistence, and use my jaws. Which I don't have."

"Right, right. You keep saying that."
There was another long silence while they ate more pheasant. "Tonight, or tomorrow?" the snake eventually asked.

"Tomorrow, I think," Harry said. He bit his lip. "I have to put all the stuff I borrowed back in town and get some food to take with me. I can do that tonight."

His snake stayed around and watched while Harry cleaned up his nest. He was fairly fastidious, so all he had to do was put the bit of food he had leftover in his bag and take all the books and little items he didn't need anymore to the sheep farmer's house and leave them near the mailbox. His gloves and bag had been beyond useful, and Harry was grateful for them.

He made one last foray to the grocery skip and managed to find a couple loaves of bread and some vegetables that still looked good, and the next morning found Harry and his snake hovering by the tree that had housed Harry's nest for the past several months. New grass was growing on the hillock of dirt that Harry had built up around the roots, and if you didn't know where the moss covered entrance was, it would look like any other tree.

"It was good to meet you," Harry said. The snake flickered out its tongue.

"It was good to find a two legged creature that is not a complete dunderhead," the snake allowed. Harry smiled at the high compliment.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Harry tugged the strap of his bag more securely onto his shoulder and set off alone toward the part of the forest that opened into an empty field.
Wherein Much Profanity is Uttered

Chapter Summary

Seriously, guys, Much Profanity is Uttered. Lots and lots and lots.

Harry walked. He really didn't have anywhere in mind, so his route was essentially dictated by the path that seemed least likely to take him into populated areas. He rested when he felt tired, ate when he was hungry, and hunted when he saw opportunity. He found a small pond one afternoon, and had a swim to clean off the residue of winter. It was still chilly, but Harry considered getting really clean for the first time in months well worth it.

His sweater, once nice beige, had darkened to the same dull, stained brown as his bag and the rest of his clothing. He pulled it off and let it soak in the water while he paddled around. As he swam, he investigated his surroundings. He'd noticed the rope swing dangling from a tree over the pond that indicated people living nearby, but hadn't spotted a house or cottage on his way down.

Even so, he didn't stay long. Harry might miss the conversation of his bossy snake friend, but that didn't mean he wanted to talk to any humans. They were frequently dangerous.

He wrung out his sweater and put it on, then set off again.

He walked for days and days with no particular goal in mind. He sometimes veered too close to towns, and took these opportunities to raid grocery skips and make boons with young children. Harry was getting good enough at hunting (and the season was plentiful enough), that this was becoming less and less necessary.

He slept when he was tired in fields under the stars and up trees. Every morning, he woke up and looked around at where he'd ended up, but he didn't stay in any one area for longer than a couple days. There was nothing to keep him anywhere, and his bag was big enough to hold everything he absolutely needed. He decided to just keep walking until he found something interesting.

He reached a large river after a couple weeks, and followed it. It was ringed with fields and sometimes houses, but he traveled quickly and he traveled light, so he was left alone for the most part. The river was getting more and more narrow the further north it went, causing Harry to entertain the idea of swimming across several times. His bag wasn't waterproof, though, and some of his things would be spoiled by the wet.

Eventually, it was narrow enough that he could see to the opposite side, and he decided to give disappearing a try. He was in a deserted cornfield, lacking even birds to notice what he was doing.

He'd never tried to disappear quite this far before. He wasn't completely sure that it would work. Better now than never, though. Harry took a deep breath, stared intently at the opposite shore, and pushed himself into disappearing.

On the other side, he looked down at himself. His bag was in order. Everything seemed to be in place. He looked over at the river. He could see in the distance the spot where he'd been standing. He had succeeded! Harry smiled to himself and set off along the road, away from the town he had appeared on the edge of.
There was a forest up ahead. It looked promising, so Harry altered his path to make a beeline for it. He walked along the outskirts of it to get a better idea of the area. It seemed to be huge, and the nearest town was the one he'd passed on the way in, as far as he could tell.

Harry ventured deeper into the forest, taking note of streams and trails. He might stay here a while. It was well suited to him.

At one point, he felt goosebumps and stopped abruptly. The air had shimmered like he'd walked through a heat wave.

He looked around for a cause, but the forest was as calm as ever. Harry shrugged and kept walking, thinking of finding another snake friend. Despite how bossy his last one had been, Harry missed him. He hadn't had nearly as much luck talking to other animals since he left his nest. Birds were fun to exchange pleasantries with, but his old snake friend had been right: they weren't much for conversation.

"Hello," he said aloud as he walked. "I'm an elf. Er. Lovely day, today."

There was no immediate response, but Harry wasn't discouraged. He knew snakes were frequently standoffish.

"This forest is nice. I think I might stay here a while, if that's alright. Er-"

"What the fuck do you want?"

Harry stopped in his tracks at the sudden voice. "I. Um. Hello?"

"Bugger off, ya bleedin' tosser!"

The sound had originated in a nearby patch of ferns. Harry backed away hurriedly.

"I'm sorry," he said, uncertain. "I didn't mean to bother... you."

A ferret emerged from the ferns, surprising Harry. It looked strangely irate for a ferret.

"You son of a three legged whore," the ferret said. "What the bloody hell do you want?"

Harry paused, taken aback. "I...I...hello?"


Harry sighed. Ferrets were apparently complete gits. Maybe he'd been safer just talking to snakes.

"Do you know any snakes?" he asked, without much hope. Even if the ferret did know any, who was to say they wouldn't be gits too? Like minded types tended to stick together, after all.

"Faff off," the ferret said, and scurried through Harry's legs and away down the trail. Harry wrinkled his nose and hitched his bag up. What an unpleasant creature.

"Are you coming, or are you just going to bloody stand there like a wanking halfwit?"

The ferret was waiting expectantly for him at the foot of an auxiliary trail a few feet away. Harry blinked in surprise and stumbled after it.

They walked about half a mile further into the forest before the ferret stopped and cautiously approached a hole in the ground.
"Hey, you bastard son of a hydra!" the ferret yelled. "Get your tree-buggerin' arse up here."

"Bugger off, yourself," said a voice from within the hole.

"Hey, whatever that was, fuck you in the knee," the ferret called again. "I've got a bloody meal for you."

Harry took an alarmed step backward.

"What did he say?" another voice asked. "Tell us what he said."

"He said he has a meal for us," the first voice said. "And, oh yeah, he's still a prick."

Harry liked the first voice.

"He's lying," said third voice. "I can't believe you two are going to fall for his tricks, you're both idiots."

"Shut up," the first voice said. "We're hungry and you know it as well as we do."

"Maybe he's brought us a nice rabbit," the second voice said. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Shut up yourself," the third voice replied, ignoring the second. "We're not hungry enough for that damned thing to sneak attack us when we're not expecting it."

The first voice huffed. "Then we'll bloody well expect it, and we'll send you out first. Salazar, we're getting as bad as that stupid git out there."

"Hey, are you mongoose suckers listenin' or are you too busy twiddlin-"

"Fuck off, Jarvey." A vivid orange snake head emerged from the hole, hissing irritably. Harry backed up further. It was quite long, at least as long as Harry was tall. As it emerged, he realized there were two more heads attached, which explained the three voices. The snakes had black banding, which made for a very pretty, if not alarming colouring. Two of the snakes took immediate notice of Harry, eyeing him with unveiled interest as the third continued to hiss at the ferret.

"Hello," Harry offered. Animals tended to react better to him when they knew he could speak as well. There was something about having a conversation with him that made them less likely to try to eat him, no matter how his old snake friend might have treated garden snakes. If all else failed, Harry took solace in knowing he could always disappear away at a moment's notice. He hoped that would be enough.

One of the snake heads drew itself up at his greeting. "Hello, little one!" It seemed delighted. "Well look at this, fellows! It can talk! How unusual. Can we keep it?"

"We should eat it, before it tries to eat us," said the other head that wasn't dealing with the ferret. "I know the look in its eye. That's a suspicious look. The two of you would try to keep it and end us up roasting over an open flame."

Harry waved his hands and shook his head. "No, I wouldn't try to eat you. I already have other food, and I don't eat snakes! I like snakes."

"Aw lookit, it likes snakes!" The middle head, who had previously been delighted with Harry, swayed with satisfaction. "See? I like it."

The left head flickered out its tongue, still the snake equivalent of narrow eyed. "I don't trust it."
The last head on the right finally turned away from the ferret to examine Harry. "He says he brought it to us because it asked him to," it said. "What do you want with us?"

"We should keep it!" said the middle head. "Can we keep it?"

"Quiet," said the right head. "We can't keep it. It isn't a pet. It can talk, can't you?"

"Er, yes," Harry said. "I mean, I can talk. I just wanted to meet a snake. I had some snake friends in the last forest I lived in, and I just thought maybe you might want to be friends too?"

The three heads all looked at each other. The ferret took this moment to interrupt.

"Oi! You can talk to that bleedin' thing?" It seemed impressed. "Fuck me. What're the three pronged phalluses sayin'?"

Harry was beginning to think the ferret's words weren't personal, though it was hard not to be offended all the same. Even Uncle Vernon never talked like this.

"You can talk to it," the right head realized. "Tell it we say to fuck off."

Harry opened his mouth. "W-what?"

The three heads were looking at him, all three in smug agreement. "Tell him to go bugger a weasel," the left head suggested.

Embarrassed, Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "Do I have to?" he asked. "What if he tries to bite me?"

"He won't," the right one said with confidence. "He knows we'll eat him. Go on and say it."

Harry opened his mouth. "They say... er..."

"Fuck off," the right head supplied helpfully.

"Tell him he's a foul mouthed, clay brained bit of tick shit," the middle head said with enthusiasm.

"They say hello," Harry said, blinking rapidly. The ferret looked almost disappointed.

"That is not what we said!" the right head exclaimed.

The left head reared up and hissed as well. "We will eat you if you don't relay the message correctly."

Harry looked to the other heads for help, but they were both nodding.

He sucked in a breath. "And also," he said, and the ferret perked up a bit. "They say that you're, erm..."

"A four legged frog sucker," the left head supplied.

"Who's too dense to realize that he stinks, he's ugly, and his mum doesn't love him," added the middle.

The three heads and the ferret waited expectantly. Harry swallowed.

"You're a four-legged, erm, frog sucker..." Harry said.
The right head egged him on. "Who's too dense..."

"Who's too dense to realize that you... you stink," Harry took a small step back as he spoke. "you're ugly, and, er... your mum doesn't love you. Ah - please don't bite me!"

The ferret wheezed, and it took Harry a second to realize the noises coming out of him were laughter. "You corn-tossing pole floaters!" he said delightedly. "Weak fanged worm suckers!"

"Tell him to bugger a pile of dragon dung." The right head seemed oddly amused at the ferret's reaction.

Harry, after a brief hesitation, dutifully repeated this invective to the ferret, who straightened up, beaming. "I like those slimy arsewipes. Tell the bastards to keep it classy."

He scurried off into the forest, leaving Harry alone with the three headed snake, all of whom were looking pleased with themselves.

"Now," said the right head. "What are you?"

"I'm an elf," Harry explained, still feeling a bit intimidated by the size of this new snake and by how clearly outnumbered he was. "I just got here."

"An elf?" The left head swayed slightly. "Like a house elf?"

Harry frowned. "I haven't lived in a house in a long time," he said. The three heads peered at him.

"Hmm. It doesn't really come across like a house elf, does it?" The middle one agreed.

"It's young," said the left one. It flickered out its tongue. "Doesn't taste like a house elf though."

"I think I'm a forest elf," Harry offered helpfully. The snakes appeared skeptical.

"Never heard of a forest elf," the right one said.

"Well just because you haven't heard of it, doesn't mean it doesn't exist," the left one shot back. "You're not the cleverest reptile to grace Salazar's green earth."

"Well then by extension, you're just as much of a dunderhead as I am," said the first, irritated. Harry noted that the middle one seemed to be staring off into the middle distance, enchanted.

An odd bunch, really.

"It was nice to meet you," Harry said. "I'll see you around the forest, then?"

The two heads snapped out of their argument to look at him again. "Right, right," said the right head. "We'll finish this conversation later, elf."

Harry nodded and backed away.

The three headed snake turned out to be an invaluable friend. They found him the next day, scratched to pieces and slowly healing his wounds with a tiny wince for each, and tsked.

"You tried to climb in a bowtruckle tree, didn't you?" The right head flickered her tongue out to investigate. "You did. They don't take kindly to intruders."
"I caught that," Harry said grumpily. Having healed another small gash on his shoulder, he paused to fix where his sweater had ripped as well. The snakes watched as Harry took swig of water from the fizzy drink bottle that he'd nicked from one of the towns he passed on the way to this forest, and kept healing himself.

"You'll want to offer them woodlice if you want something from their trees," the right head suggested. The left head muttered something disparaging that caused the other head to hiss at her. The middle head was staring into space again, murmuring faintly to herself. The other two were working together to drag her dead weight as they moved.

"Otherwise," the right head continued, "Just avoid them. You'll be able to tell which tree is which by-" 

"-by the bowtruckles attacking you," the left said.

"By the magic. Bowtruckles usually live in the magic trees," the right head said, annoyed. "You can taste it on them."

"It's a bloody mammal," the left head pointed out. "A primate, even. It can't taste."

"I can too," Harry disagreed. "Just not as well as you can."

If snakes could roll their eyes, the left head would be, Harry could tell.

"Not well enough, it means," she translated.

"Give it a try, at least," the right head suggested. "Go on. That tree, there. Is that a magic tree or not?"

Harry looked at the tree the snake was indicating. "That one's not magic."

"There you go!" The right head said, proud and casting a smug glance at the other. "See, it can do it! How did you know?"

Harry hesitated. The snake was so proud. "I...well I slept in that one last night."

"Oh." Now the left head was smug. The right head persisted. "Well how about that one?"

Harry peered at the tree next to the first. "How do I tell?"

"You have to taste the magic," the right head explained.

"It already said it can't taste as well as us," the left head said critically. "This isn't going to work."

"Shut your gob," said the right head, and turned back to Harry. "Now go ahead and try to taste it."

Harry walked over to the tree and stopped a safe distance away, in case there were bowtruckles. He peered more intensely at it, then breathed in deeply. He tasted forest, mostly. Moss and damp and wood and stillness and, faintly, scat. He also noted that he needed to take a swim soon.

"Focus on the different scents," the right head directed. "What do you taste?"

Harry inhaled deeply again, closing his eyes. He listed off the different scents out loud.

"Good," the right head said encouragingly. They both ignored an unhelpful, sarcastic aside from the left head. "So is the tree magic or not?"
Bugger if Harry knew. "Er... not?"

"Right!"

Harry beamed. The snake slithered a ways through the forest and paused in front of a particularly tall tree. "How about this one?"

Inhaling, Harry focused. He could taste the same things as before.

"Not?" he guessed after a moment. The left head scoffed.

"See? It can't tell the difference. This is pointless," she said. The right head hissed.

"Try again," she said. "Focus carefully. Find some difference between what you tasted at the last tree and what you taste here."

After a quiet minute, Harry ventured a guess. "I... my tongue feels a little bit tingly?"

"Good, good. Let's see if you can tell any of the others apart."

And so, they moved from tree to tree, Harry diagnosing each as magical or not. Sometimes it was fairly obvious, especially in the case of the tree where a bowtruckle reared its stick-shaped head at them and Harry stumbled back, nearly falling over in his haste to escape. He slowly began to recognise the signs of a magical tree without having to spot a bowtruckle first, and took careful note of the look of each, just in case he needed to avoid them in the future. The right head of the snake also explained what woodlice were and where to find them, with considerable commentary from the left.

They eventually began sniping at each other and Harry left them to it, pleased with how the day had gone and ready to explore more of his new surroundings.
Harry stayed in the forest for a long time. He never once had to venture out, as the spring months were plentiful in terms of hunting and gathering. Sometimes he and the snakes brought each other game. Like his last snake friend, the three headed snake was less than averse to sitting with Harry by a fire at night and having their food cooked before they ate it.

The ferret found him sometimes, and the five of them would have long, winding conversations, during which the three heads of the snake would make him repeat all manner of despicable profanity to the ferret, who would laugh uproariously and snicker out an equally offensive riposte. Harry learned a lot of words he hadn't known existed, and the ferret helped him translate into English some of the stranger things the snakes said, apparently for the sheer joy of the insult.

Harry soon came to realize there was a part of the forest where the interesting creatures lived, like his ferret and three headed snake companions, and that if he passed through a certain invisible barrier, the forest became quiet and mundane again. He tended to not go into that area, because while he'd seen humans walking and driving in those parts before, he'd never spotted one inside the barrier. He figured he was safer keeping away from the human part of the forest.

A few other interesting creatures made an acquaintance with Harry as weeks passed. Some of them were just passing through, like the strange hopping creature clutching a lantern that Harry had seen one night, or the huge dog that Harry had avoided out of unquestioned instinct. Similarly, during the week of the full moon, Harry heeded the three headed snake's warning and made sure to sleep in the highest branches of the tallest trees, and to get settled in well before moonrise. The night wasn't his during that week, and he respected that.

Some of the creatures lived in the forest full time, like the unicorns whose silvery hair Harry collected when he found it caught on thorny bushes. Particularly strange was the half horse, half human, who informed Harry haughtily that he was a centaur, and his name was Azure. Harry was taken aback by this. He hadn't asked or been asked for a name since he had stopped talking to humans. He knew his name was Harry, in the same way that he remembered that he'd once lived on Privet Drive. It was an unused, dusty memory, though he pulled it up and dutifully told the centaur, right after explaining that he was an elf and getting an eyebrow raise for his trouble.

"Harry," the centaur said, slowly. "Harry."

"Yes," Harry said. "I'm an elf." Just in case the centaur had forgotten.

The centaur stared at Harry for a long moment. Harry fidgeted, feeling nervous and awkward, even more so when the centaur suddenly reached down and brushed his long fringe off his forehead.

"An elf, indeed," the centaur said. He seemed strangely baffled. "How did you get to this forest, Harry?"

"I walked," Harry said. "Obviously."

He had decided that his disappearing was a Secret of the Elves, and that it was too useful to just reveal to anyone. This decision had been made after a long conversation with the three headed snake, which revealed among other things that the left head (and only the left head) was highly venomous, though the snakes preferred the element of uncertainty and so swore Harry to secrecy.

The centaur continued to inspect him as though he was a tiny, fascinating insect. Harry shifted under
his stare. Eventually, to Harry's relief, the centaur looked away and up at the sky, which was clear. Twilight was near, and he inspected what they could see of the sky as thoroughly as he had Harry.

"This life will not last forever," the centaur said absently. Harry frowned up at him. "Mars is in the third House."

Harry waited, but the centaur did not seem inclined to say more.

"Thank you," he ventured after a while, and retreated to a distant part of the forest, where he wouldn't have to watch the eerie centaur watch the sky any longer.

It was around noon a couple weeks later when Harry's world turned on its head. He was crouching on a branch, unwinding an abandoned spider web and spinning it into a stronger thread, thinking idly of different ways to improve the roof on the shelter he'd built in case of rain, when a man wandered up and stood beneath his tree, watching him.

"Hello up there," he said. "And what manner of creature are you?"

Harry disappeared on reflex, popping back into existence in a much taller tree behind the man. His spider threads were clutched tightly in his fist as he stared down at the perplexed figure.

The man, for his part, had long, stringy white hair, and wore long yellow... robes? He seemed a bit odd, tasted like the magic trees, and was holding a stick that made Harry instantly wary, not that he needed the reason.

"Hello?" The man turned in a slow circle, putting the stick away (along with a few of Harry's worries) and holding his hands up in a supplicating gesture. "I don't want to hurt you, little creature."

The man turned in another slow circle and dropped to his knees. "You're safe," he said. Harry narrowed his eyes and disappeared to a lower branch of the tree, silent and suspicious, but still very curious.

"Can you speak English?" the man asked in a soft voice. "My name is Xenophilius. I'm looking for Dirigible Plums. I heard the Forest of Dean has a lot of them if you know where to look. I only want to examine them, and perhaps take a few seedlings, if that's alright."

Harry stared at the man for a full minute, but he never moved. He had never traded with adults before. He was worried they might not realize what he was, and try to take him to the police or the Dursleys or force him to pretend to be human again. He wasn't human, and he didn't want to be.

"I won't hurt you," the man repeated. Harry screwed up his courage and disappeared to the lowest branch in his tree.

"How do I know that?" Harry asked. The man looked up at him slowly, a pleased smile spreading over his face.

"I give you my word as a wizard that I will do you no harm," he said, making an odd motion that burst into a ring of flame around his palm. Harry watched in fascination.

"That was your word?"

The man nodded, and tried talking again. "What kind of creature are you? Do you have a name?"

Harry frowned. He didn't like that he kept getting asked that lately. "I'm an elf," he said out loud. "A
forest elf," he added, in case this wasn't completely obvious.

The man's eyes lit up. "That's fascinating," he said. "I've never met a forest elf before."

Harry preened a bit, brushing his hair back over an ear to reveal the sharply pointed tip. The fellow was properly impressed. Harry didn't think he minded him quite so much anymore.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Dirigible Plums," the man explained eagerly. "They're tiny little orange plums, and they float. I've heard it rumoured that they grow in this forest, but it's very dangerous, finding them."

A smirk played about Harry's mouth. "It is," he agreed, not because it was for him, but because he knew he could lead this man into any number of dangers if he tried to trick Harry. "I've seen those plums before. They're quite tasty."

Hope sprang across the man's face. "Would you be willing to show me to them?" he asked. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Elves don't just do favours," he hinted. It took a moment, but realization dawned on the man's features. Strangely enough, he seemed delighted.

"I'll pay you, of course," he blustered, opening up his bag and digging around in it. Harry adjusted the strap of his own bag, curious.

He pulled out a small sack that clinked as he moved, then frowned at it. "You wouldn't have much use for galleons, would you?"

Harry blinked at him.

"No, I expect you wouldn't." He rifled through his bag again. "You, er... you can't read, can you?"

Harry nodded. The man was intrigued. "Fantastic," he said, and pulled out a stack of books. "Would you like one?"

At the sight of the dusty hard covers, Harry took half a step forward. The man noted his pause and lifted each in turn to show Harry the covers.

*1,000 Magical Herbs and Fungi*, said the first. Maybe.

*Holiday with a Hag*, said the next. Harry waved his hand, uninterested.


*A History of Magic*. Eh.

*Magical Amulets and Charms, A Guide*. Harry squinted at this. A girl in a small village on the way to the forest had asked Harry for an amulet. He had faked one.

"That one," Harry said with a nod. The man set the book in the air, and it floated over to Harry, who examined it suspiciously before picking it up and leafing through it. When Harry finished and stowed it in his bag next to his survival manual, the man looked at him expectantly.

"Right," he said. "Let's go." He led the man quickly through the forest, easily avoiding many of the pitfalls and dangers by experience. Learning to taste magic had taken a good bit of effort to master, but had ultimately been worth it.
After a half hour's silent walk, they arrived in the part of the forest where the tiny Dirigible Plums floated. Harry picked one off a bush and ate it, watching as the man's eyes widened with awe.

"Can I...?" he asked. Harry narrowed his eyes.

"What else have you got?" he asked. The man rooted through his bag, eventually pulling an apologetic face and showing Harry a few empty glass jars.

"I'll take them," Harry said, already envisioning all the useful things those jars could hold. "You can take two plums for every jar."

In the end, Harry got four jars and the man thanked him profusely, promising to tell the world of the kindness of elves as Harry led him back to the edge of the forest. Harry squinted at him.

"Don't tell people you met me," he said. "I don't like people."

The man nodded, apologised, and said his goodbyes as he wandered off through the trees.

What an odd human, Harry thought as he examined his new belongings.

Harry began to feel uneasy in the forest after that day. It might have been that the man knew where he was and could come back any day or night, or it could have been the strange, dark haired, cloaked figure that showed up one morning, stalking through the forest and sending Harry to the tops of the tallest trees. This figure did not worry about scaring Harry or any of the other creatures in the forest. It held a stick and tasted powerfully of magic and death.

The figure unsettled Harry badly, and he stopped feeling secure when he was away from the three headed snake. This was a reliance he was not particularly proud of, especially after the events of one hot summer afternoon.

Harry had just taken a dip in the river that ran through this part of the forest, and felt refreshed. His hair was already feeling pleasantly springy, and his clothes had dried quickly too. He hadn't worn shoes since he'd arrived in this forest. Indeed, he had left them in a tree toward the beginning of his stay and had frankly forgotten where. It wouldn't matter for another couple months at least. He wandered past a thorny bush, calling out for the three headed snake, and eventually reached the hole where the ferret had first introduced them.

"Are you in there?" he called. "Hey, wankers, are you in there?"

"We're coming, we're coming." That would be the right head. She sounded grumpier than usual.

"...still bloody hurts, though." The middle head sounded put out.

They emerged from the hole in the ground, and Harry's face went slack with shock. He took several steps backward and hit a tree trunk.

"What happened!" he asked, staring in horror at the bloody wound on the left side, from which another head had hissed sardonically at Harry just yesterday. "Wh- how did this happen?"

"We got sick of hearing it from her," the right head said, performing a complicated movement that seemed to be the snake equivalent of a shrug. "Every bloody minute it was something else. We were never good enough. You know what she was like."

"You... you killed her?" Harry was appalled. "Because she annoyed you?"
"I saw that we would do it," said the middle head, in a dreamy voice. "I knew exactly how we could, and then we did."

"It was a very good plan," the right head said fondly. "She never saw it coming. Which is good, because those fangs were deadly."

Harry's mouth was still hanging open. "What did you do with her?" he asked, finally.

"Oh, we ate her," the middle head said. "Except for the fangs. Deadly, you know. Terrible. I hear they give you indigestion."

"They're over there." The right head nodded her scaly head toward a small pile a ways away from the hole. Harry walked over to it and dropped to his knees. Several fangs and a bit of skin were all that remained of the left head. He blinked and pressed his lips together tightly for a moment. Then he pulled out one of his new jars and nudged the whole lot into one, sealing it tightly and putting it back in his bag. Bastard though she might have been, Harry would miss the left head.

Harry would still have stayed in the forest with the three – er, two headed snake, if not for the return of the cloaked figure two days later. It seemed to be searching for something, and Harry had no intention of sticking around to find out if the white haired man had broken his promise.

He said his goodbyes and set off away from the forest the morning after next. He was more cautious in his travels than he had ever been, avoiding anything but the absolute outskirts of towns, and disappearing with haste back across the river when he reached it.

Harry found a small hunter's shack one night after he'd been travelling at least a week. He looked at it suspiciously. It tasted strongly of magic, and had a slightly skewed look to it. Harry had seen places that looked like that on his way up to the forest, and had noticed how most people walked right past them as if they didn't exist. He had never ventured to see inside one, but if people would ignore the building, it seemed like a good place to be.

Harry opened the door cautiously, prepared to disappear at the slightest provocation.

Inside the shack was a pub. It was much larger inside than the shack could even pretend to be, and there was a small smattering of people at the bar, and various tables dotted the room. The whole place tasted of magic, and everyone was wearing those odd robes that the white haired man had sported, though these were much more subdued in colour. No one looked at Harry standing in the doorway, gawking quietly, so he let the door fall shut behind him after a moment and sat down in one of the booths, feeling tense but curious.

"Whaddaya want?" Harry jumped, startled. A stooped old man was sitting at a table right next to his booth, though Harry had thought he was asleep.

"Nothing," Harry said.

The man, who had his chin sitting in his palm, squinted one eye at Harry. "How old're you, an'way?"

"I'm an elf," Harry said. That was his default answer when a human started asking him questions.

"A house elf?" The man peered at him with myopic eyes. "Yeh don' look like an elf."

"A forest elf," Harry said testily. He'd have to look up these 'house elves' and figure out what they were all about.
"Tha'd do it," the man agreed. He squinted at Harry again. "Whassat?"

"A forest elf?" Harry frowned. "I live in the forest usually, and I give boons sometimes. You do something for me and I use my elf abilities to do something for you."

"Oahhm," the man mumbled. Harry blinked at him. "So if I wanna be able to see through people an' the lies they tell," the man said, with a clever expression, "You'd make me somethin' to let me do that, right?"

Harry nodded, nonplussed. "I can make you an amulet that lets you see what's hidden," he offered. He'd been pouring over his new book during his daylight hours, and had memorized the requirements for a couple of the amulets already. There were a lot of ingredients required that Harry had picked up in the forest while he was still there, like certain herbs, feathers, even snake skins, and of course the unicorn hairs, which were more useful than Harry had expected them to be. "What would you give me in return?"

The man eyed him and chuckled. "Alrigh', little elf." He picked up the strap of a bag that sat on the floor between them. "If you impress me, I'll give you one of my wares."

At Harry's expectant silence, he opened the bag and started pulling out shoes of all shapes and sizes. "I see yer lacking," he explained as he pulled out a particularly nice pair of leather wrap boots. "They'll all adjust to the righ' size as you get bigger, o'course," he continued, and chuckled again. Harry pointed to the boots, and the man packed all the rest back into the bag. Harry watched with interest. Like the hunter's shack, the bag was not big enough to hold everything that was inside it, and like the pub, it positively reeked of magic. Harry wanted to learn how to do that.

He made the amulet from memory, adding a bit of a twist in the form of a seeing stone dangling in the center of the web of spider strands, like the one he'd given to the last person who asked to be able to see more than they should.

He set the amulet on the table and watched as the man picked it up and looked through the stone at Harry. After a moment, he blinked and turned the stone on the man behind the bar.

"My, my, my," he muttered, and turned the stone back on Harry. "Have yer boots then, child. Imma go have a word with the barkeep."

Harry snatched them up and stuffed his foot into the first one while the man stood unsteadily. By the time he had them secured, the man had approached the bar and was sneering something. Harry made a quick bid for the exit and the door was just swinging shut when he heard the shouting start.

He started disappearing in sharp hops as far as he could see until he felt that he was an acceptable distance away, then breathed out a harsh sigh. That had been nerve wracking. He looked down at his new boots.

Ultimately worth it, but incredibly nerve wracking nonetheless.
Harry began keeping an eye out for more slightly skewed, magical tasting buildings as he travelled. For one thing, they were frequently good for food, if he played his cards right and looked clean. For another, there were always interesting things to be traded for inside.

Harry was just walking away from one of these establishments, eating a turkey leg and examining his new spectacles (lifted from a sleeping drunk, but they made his eyes work better. He'd been hunting for a new pair for a while), when he heard a faint whining sound and looked around.

Nothing stuck out, but that didn't mean there wasn't anything. Not two weeks ago, Harry had heard a strange noise coming out of the ground near where he'd been digging up potatoes. He dug up the noisy plant, curious, and found that the roots were screaming. The sound was bad enough that he was barely able to disappear away before he collapsed, waking hours later in a darkened forest.

Harry was officially cautious about strange noises. So when he heard it again, he spun around and crept toward the sound, ready to disappear if need be.

It turned out that there was no need. It was just a dog, huddled next to a leaning gate and whimpering. Harry frowned at it.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked. The dog gave no response, but sniffed curiously at Harry's fingers. Harry remembered he'd been eating turkey when he extended his hand and the dog started lapping furiously at his palm. He pulled a piece of meat off the bone and held it out, careful to keep his fingers clear as the dog snapped it up. Harry watched the dog eat and was walking away when it started whimpering again. The dog was following him, Harry realized when he turned around. More to the point, it was limping after him.

He sighed and walked back over, kneeling down. The dog's leg was cut badly. Harry tried mending it, but that only helped a little, and the dog pulled away, alarmed and snarly. Harry managed to calm it down with soothing sounds a bit more turkey and mended its leg again, then had to repeat the process four more times before the wound finally closed.

The dog licked at Harry's face, and Harry would have taken this as a sign of affection if he didn't know he had turkey grease all over his chin. He let the dog lick him anyway, laughing when it tickled, and fed it the rest of his turkey leg.

When he got up to walk into the wood nearby, the dog followed, wagging its tails.

Harry and the dog were a fine match. The dog was very good at detecting intruders on their private world, and would growl whenever a human that didn't taste like magic approached (Harry had started calling them 'stale' in his head, since he liked the taste of magic, and someone without it tasted like hard, flavourless bread). The dog would sit quietly and wait while Harry gave boons, and Harry had mastered looking like a wise, timeless elf to anyone under the age of thirteen.

It was also possible to speak to a certain kind of adult. Those that tasted like magic were much less likely to question Harry's manner of dress as long as he kept his hair reasonably neat, and the people he saw in the pubs he wandered into were usually too inebriated to question his story or ask where his parents were. It was strange, because he knew for a fact that the stale people wouldn't allow a boy his age into a pub alone, but no one ever questioned him in places that tasted of magic.
Tonight, rather than speaking to one of the men slumped over a barstool, Harry was speaking with a young barmaid. He had been ready to disappear when she first approached him, but her delight when he told her he was an elf was too palpable for him to resist. He even showed her his ears, which she cooed over. She had just gotten out of Hogwarts, she told him. Hufflepuff. Whatever that meant.

Harry had finally decided to get down to the bottom of his 'larger on the inside' dilemma, so after he was certain she was safe to talk to, he waited for her to have a free moment and got her attention.

"Ma'am," he said, kneeling on his barstool and leaning over the counter on his elbows. She smiled at him with dimples and served another lager to a hooded man at the far end of the bar.

"What can I do for you, honey?" she asked, and leaned on the bar with him in a conspiratorial manner. "I've got a few minutes free, so make it snappy."

Harry smiled up at her when she winked at him.

"I wanted to know what kind of magic makes the pub so much bigger on the inside?" Harry asked. "Elf magic is a bit different from what you've got."

The barmaid looked like she wanted to pinch his cheek. Harry was glad she restrained herself. "It's called wizardspace," she told him. "It's a delimited expanding charm, easy-peasy. The building's on a large scale, so it was a bit of a trick; took all four of us and a specialist to get it right in the end. But something small like your bag, I could do that in a minute, no problem."

Harry looked down at his bag, then up at the barmaid. He made sure to widen his eyes just a bit and look up from under his fringe. It had worked in the past. "That's brilliant! Can you show me?"

"Course, love." She touched his chin with her thumb, and Harry managed to keep himself from visibly flinching, only barely. He was probably lucky that someone called her away a second later, as he was sure he was making a face. She held up a finger and bustled off to deal with a customer, leaving Harry to regain his bearings. People didn't ever touch him, magical or stale.

She had said she would show him the spell on his bag though, so Harry carefully unpacked it, wrapping everything in the torn length of cloth at the bottom of his bag that had once been his long t-shirt from his old life.

When she returned, he set his bag on the table with hopeful eyes. She smiled down at him and pulled out her magic stick, prodding at the bag with it.

"My, my, this is well worn," she said, and cast a rapid series of spells that had his bag looking newer and sturdier almost instantly. Harry was pleased already. When she frowned at the bag and waved her stick above the opening in a circle, he leaned forward. As she traced the circle, she pressed her stick into the bag, further and further, and Harry watched with something approaching awe as her arm disappeared deeper and deeper into the bag, until all but her shoulder had vanished.

"There we are," she said, pulling her arm out and nodding with satisfaction. "That'll stick. See? Easy-peasy."

Harry beamed at her. "Thank you, miss." He reached into the sack of his belongings and fished around for something suitable. Bored one night, he'd braided some unicorn hair together and wove them around a frozen ashwinder egg, which he had acquired while spying on a little boy being taught to track the creatures by his father further north. It made a nice necklace, which he presented to her. "For your trouble," he said as her eyes widened.

He packed his things into his bag while she gushed over the necklace, pleased at the newly expanded
contours and the amount of space he now had to work with. He glanced up and saw her admiring it in the mirror over the bar, and took the opportunity to disappear. She had looked like she might want to kiss him or something.

As the months wore on and the warm summer breeze twisted into a sharp, biting autumn wind, the dog stuck around, no matter where Harry went. Sleeping in trees became a thing of the past, except for one week a month.

Instead, he curled up with the dog under convenient bushes and inside small caves when they found them, though Harry quickly learned to check the cave walls for minesigns after a run-in with a disgruntled dwarf who was upset because the smoke from Harry's fire was ruining the air quality in his mine. Harry had smoothed things over by sharing a large portion of the turkey he'd caught, and the dwarf stayed for a while, explaining about the different minesigns and why Harry should probably bugger off when he saw most of them.

The dog was good at keeping watch when they finally did find a secure place to rest, and Harry felt safe and warm enough to sleep deeply when he was there. Harry and the dog never spoke English. They usually communicated through barks and growls and body language. It was all about tone, really. Harry could express most of the same feelings and thoughts with the dog as he could with snakes and humans. Sometimes, more.

Harry was particularly grateful for the dog's presence during the harvest season. The fields were overflowing with food, and Harry and the dog took what they wanted and filled his expanded bag cheerfully.

It was when Harry passed through a small kissing gate in Essex and felt a strange chill that he knew something was wrong. He took a deep breath and tasted magic, but it had a sour tang to it. He whistled at the dog, who paused and perked his ears up.

"Who're you?" The voice from the other side of the gate startled Harry badly, and he spun around to meet it with trepidation.

It was an old woman, grey haired and robed, glaring at him and pointing a magic stick at his face.

"I'm an elf," Harry said, trying to keep his voice from wavering. He couldn't leave the dog, and he didn't know how well disappearing would work if he tried to take him along.

"You don't look like a house elf to me, boy," she said, looking him up and down. "That your crup?"

"He's with me," Harry admitted, wondering what crup meant, and if she was insulting them. "I'm not a house elf. Just a regular elf."

"Right, and I'm the bloody Minister for Magic," she sneered. "What're you doin' in my fields? You a thief, boy?"

"No," Harry said, though this was technically a lie. "I'm an elf. A forest elf. I can give you a boon if you like."

"I don't want any rubbish from an urchin." She pointed the gnarled hand that wasn't holding her wand at him. "I want you off my property, hear?"

Harry nodded and started backing away from her. "That way," she snapped, pointing behind her. Harry stared at her, conflicted. Going 'that way' meant going back through the gate and passing right next to her, within reaching distance. More to the point, Harry didn't like how passing through the
gate felt, and he didn't like how the magic around him tasted right now. There was something wrong with it, as though it had been tampered with. He was afraid of what might happen if he tried to disappear when the magic felt like this.

Anyway, she might try to hurt him or grab him and take him to the police. It wouldn't be the first time someone tried, though Harry was quick and usually managed to disappear before they grabbed him. He couldn't leave the dog, though, and that strange taste about the magic worried him. He made a small whining sound in the back of his throat.

So far the canine in question had been quiet, crowding around Harry's legs and watching the proceedings, but now a low growl issued from him, aimed at the woman.

"Go on, before I change my mind," the woman said impatiently, gesturing again behind her. Harry hunched his shoulders and ducked his head as she stared at him. The dog growled again, flashing his teeth at her.

"I'm not a bloody Muggle," the woman snapped suddenly, apparently at the dog. His hackles were up now, and a continuous threatening rumble was emanating from his chest. "Tell your crup to stand down," she said, looking back at Harry.

Harry looked from the dog to the woman, who was suddenly less menacing.

"We'll leave if you lower your stick," Harry said. "And step away from the gate a few feet."

She narrowed her eyes at him, but snarl from the dog had her backing up and lowering her wand, though she kept it in her hand.

Harry chose to squeeze through a gap in the fence, rather than walking through the gate again, and his dog followed immediately after, hair still standing on end as he eyed the woman.

"I'll know if you take anything," the woman told Harry, before vanishing with a loud crack. Harry blinked at where she had been standing, startled.

Needless to say, they left the area immediately.

Harry got more sweets when he went guising that year with the dog, who was scruffy and 'precious' when Harry could keep him from growling at people. He usually only growled at stale people and threats, though, so Harry ended up making him wait by the road while he went up to stale doors with other children.

With the dog's company, Harry kept track of his travels through the mapbook of the British Isles he had received from a fourteen year old boy (among other useful trinkets) in exchange for self confidence (he had asked to be good at everything; the book had recommended this instead), which had come in the form of a ring formed from melting down a silver coin the boy had given him. It was then boiled in a can filled with gurdyroot and lovage, then carefully carved with Kenaz and Sowilo in an alternating pattern with Harry's knife.

According to the map, he'd been in the Forest of Dean before, and Harry thought he might have been near Guildford for a while before that. He had been up near Sheffield, then just outside Corby for a bit until it started getting cold. He remembered that Hampshire had been warmer last year, so he made his way south at a steady pace, hoping to outrun the winter and get something stashed away like last year. He thought he might be near Salisbury by now.

Harry's boots were proving indispensable. They not only fit him perfectly (which was extraordinary
in itself; he'd never had shoes that fit before), but they also kept his feet warm no matter what the rest of his body felt like. That, coupled with his sheep wool shirt and gloves (which had stayed rolled up at the bottom of his bag all summer) and his dog companion, kept Harry moving and working even after the snow started.

He managed to find a good hiding place in Shaftesbury, and disappeared between there and his small, unmarked cave in a nearby wood as often as he could. Slowly, he stocked his expanded bag with nonperishable supplies from the bins in town. He and the dog slept curled up together in front of a small fire most nights, though during the full moon, they ventured into town and slept under a porch at a house with a large fence, just in case.

Harry frequently mentally berated himself for leaving preparations for winter so late. Last year he had been growing bored by this time, but this year, he was still making sure he and the dog wouldn't starve. He'd gotten too used to hunting and living week to week during the summer, that was all. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

One morning around sunrise, Harry woke up feeling strange. He'd been sick before since he'd been on his own, even in the winter, but this didn't feel like that. He was colder than usual.

He opened his eyes, thinking that perhaps the dog had gotten up and wandered outside briefly, but no. The dog was still right next to him, in the same position he had been in when they fell asleep last night. Harry nudged the dog with his knee, but there was no answer.

In fact, the dog was colder than usual. Colder than he had ever been. Harry dug his fingers into the dog’s matted fur. It felt like he was cold on the inside as well as the outside. Harry furrowed his brow and nudged the dog again, whistling a little bit.

He didn't move.

Harry prodded at the canine, and suddenly recognised the kind of stillness he was seeing. He’d seen it hundreds of times before, in animals he’d hunted to eat.

The dog was dead.

Harry pressed his lips together and scrambled out of the cave on his elbows, reflexively grabbing his bag on the way and stumbling over the ashes of their fire without even noticing.

He landed in the snow and stared at the cavern mouth, blinking rapidly. He lay there for an interminable amount of time, just looking into the cave and fighting to keep himself from bursting into tears. Any kind of damp was dangerous in the winter.

It felt like days had passed before he finally realised his position, and pulled himself up out of the drift he’d landed in. His back was freezing now, the sheep wool shirt soaked through with melted snow. Harry took it off and immediately began shivering hard. One more glance at the mouth of the cave had Harry backing away, and soon he was running.

He disappeared in several short jumps toward the other end of the forest, just moving as far as he could see and trying to gain as much distance from the cave as possible. Eventually he realized he was exhausted, and looked around himself in confusion. He thought he had travelled far enough by now to be out of this forest. The map certainly made it look small.

He stopped jumping and started walking, stumbling really, until he finally reached the edge and looked out at an expansive clearing with fresh white snow glittering for acres. An elegant marble building situated itself in the middle of the enormous clearing, one that he was almost positive was
Harry turned around and looked back the way he'd come. It was possible that the forest was another one of those skewed places, the ones that were bigger on the inside than the outside, and that this building was inside.

He decided to stay away from the building for now. Just because the entire place tasted of deep, rich magic didn't mean he'd like the humans that spent time there. He liked to be cautious about his interactions with magic people. They could be even more dangerous than stale people when they weren't softened by drink.

Instead, he retreated back into the forest, found a spot between two trees that was fairly sheltered, and lit a small fire. He thought about the nice, safe cave he'd left behind with the dog while he warmed his back on the fire. He thought about the dog.

Harry rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms and forced himself to breathe normally through the pain in his chest. When his back felt too hot, Harry turned around and let the wind cool the still damp material as he crouched in front of the fire and let it dry his face instead. The heat licked at his cheeks and smoke got in his eyes, but he didn't turn away until his back hurt from the cold.

He had loved his dog.
Wherein a Pureblood is Sighted

It turned out that the marble building was a manor of some sort. Harry investigated with caution whenever he needed a distraction from his thoughts. There were stables on the grounds, which he took note of. The horses inside had wings and welcomed Harry's presence when he brought them food. There was also an area in the front of the manor that always had much less snow than everywhere else, though Harry had never seen anyone clearing it.

The grounds were larger than they had first looked, and the pristine snow that covered everything made it difficult for Harry to explore at first. As a result, he usually went walking while it was actually snowing, so that his tracks would be filled in as he went.

He was practicing a trick he had thought of toward the beginning of winter, where he levitated himself a little bit so that he could actually walk on top of the snow without leaving any noticeable tracks. Unfortunately, it was surprisingly difficult to keep himself getting distracted and falling through, so he continued walking only during snowfall.

He built a snow fort in the forest, and had been living near the manor for about two weeks when he saw a child about his age come barrelling out of a side door, bundled thoroughly and dragging a small creature behind him.

Harry tilted his head and watched as the child ran, kicking up snow and ruining the pristine white of the grounds. The creature followed and the snow reordered itself behind it, becoming pristine and untouched once more.

There was a bit of shouting when the child realized what the creature was doing, and Harry watched as the child threw snow at the creature, which stood quietly and did nothing.

'Spoilt,' Harry thought to himself, and crouched down on his haunches behind a bush to watch the scene play out. He would sit in a tree for a better vantage point usually, but branches were brittle in the winter and Harry had fallen out of enough trees to know better by now.

The child finally stopped hurling snow at the creature and pointed at it, speaking words that Harry couldn't understand from his distance. Eventually, the child turned around and stomped off, leaving the creature standing quietly on its own. Harry noted with amusement that the snow continued to reorder itself behind the child despite the creature's lack of movement.

After watching for a while, Harry decided the child was a boy. He was trying to build something, piling the snow up and working to make it into a platform of some kind. It was a curious activity, and Harry was fascinated.

The snow didn't seem to be cooperating despite all the boy's attempts, and eventually he seemed to grow frustrated and started kicking the pile he had made. He stomped away toward the stables, and when his back was turned, the creature reached out, smoothing the snow back into beautiful placidity.

Harry laughed to himself when the boy turned around again and realized what the creature had done. It was definitely a boy, Harry decided, listening to his wordless cry of frustration and watching him throw himself down in the snow and apparently sulk.

'Poor creature,' Harry thought with sympathy.
Harry saw the boy regularly over the next week. He seemed determined to do things in the snow, and Harry began to feel bad for him. He didn't appear to have the first idea about what to do with the stuff. Every morning, he would come outside all excited and slowly wilt as his piles of snow failed to become anything in particular. The creature that accompanied him would just stand there, silent and unmoving except for when it fixed the mess the boy had made.

Eventually, Harry decided to make himself known to the boy. They could make a trade, and anyway, Harry was sick of sitting alone on the edge of the forest. He missed the dog, and the boy would have to do as a distraction.

Therefore, the next time the boy and the creature made the trek from the side door into the middle of the grounds, Harry stood and wandered up to the edge of the forest, holding a bit of fire in his ungloved palm for warmth.

The boy saw him first and paused in his snow shifting to stare. The creature actually moved when he spotted Harry, popping silently to the boy's side and peering toward the forest as well.

Harry blinked at the creature. All the magical people Harry had seen disappear made noise when they did it. He knew he didn't because several different snakes and the ferret had told him so. A suspicion flickered into existence at the back of his mind.

The flames were getting hot in his palm, so Harry made them float on their own and cocked his head at the boy as he pulled his gloves back over his fingers. The boy hesitated, but like all the other children Harry had ever met, proved to be curious enough to walk toward Harry for a better look.

The creature followed a few feet behind, which Harry thought was interesting.

"Who are you?" the boy asked when he got close enough. He was wearing a hat and scarf and gloves, but instead of a winter coat, he wore a cloak over long robes. Harry thought this was a bit odd. "What are you doing on our property?" His tone was imperious. Harry just looked at him, expression blank.

"I'm an elf," he said eventually. The boy turned to look back at the creature that had followed him.

"A house elf?" He turned back to Harry and took a few steps closer. "You're a bit odd looking, for a house elf."

"No," Harry said, frowning. "Not a house elf. Just a regular elf."

"But house elves are regular elves." The boy turned back to the creature and made an impatient gesture. "Come here, Dobby."

The creature came forward and stood next to the boy, watching Harry curiously. Harry watched it right back.

"Dobby is a house elf," the boy said, pointing at the creature. Harry's eyes brightened. He had thought maybe.

"I've always wanted to meet a house elf," Harry said, addressing the elf directly. "People are always mistaking me for one of yours."

The house elf stared at Harry. He also had green eyes, Harry noted with interest. "You is an elf?" he asked. Harry nodded.

"A forest elf," he elaborated. "It's nice to finally meet a house elf. I hear a lot about your kind."
The house elf opened his mouth to respond, but the boy interrupted.

"What's a forest elf?"

"I'm an elf, and I live in the forest." Harry shrugged. "That's what you need to know. That, and I sometimes give boons," he added. "If you're interested."

The boy frowned at him, a bit of white hair peeking out from beneath his cap. "What's your name, then?"

Harry cocked his head again. "Elves don't just tell anyone their name." He had found this to be effective in deterring determined name-askers in the past. Harry didn't really see a use for names. He thought it was a very stale thing, to want to label every creature and item that crossed his path.

"My name's Draco," the boy told him, looking a bit perplexed. "Draco Malfoy."

"Okay," Harry said. "That's nice for you." He turned back to the house elf.

"I wanted to ask you what it is that you do, exactly," Harry said. The elf's ears were large and floppy, nothing like Harry's small pointed ones, and his nose was much longer than Harry could ever see his being. Harry wondered if all house elves looked like this one.

"Dobby is taking care of Master Draco," the house elf said. Harry glanced at the boy in question, who looked extremely put out at the moment. "Dobby is also cooking and cleaning Malfoy Manor and serving the Malfoy family and keeping the Malfoy secrets."

Harry digested this. The Dursleys used to make him cook and clean and do their bidding. There were secrets to be kept about them, too. Dudley had often bullied and bossed him around the way this boy did the house elf.

It seemed that, not only had the Dursleys known about him being inhuman, they had also actually been aware that he was an elf. They had just assumed, like most people, that Harry was a house elf.

"Right," he said out loud, then turned to the boy, who was getting antsy. "Would you like a boon?"

"What's a boon?" the boy asked with narrow eyes.

Harry went through his usual spiel, and watched the boy's eyes light with interest.

"So you could do whatever I asked?"

"I reserve the right to say no to anything," Harry reminded him. That was part of the spiel. The boy shrugged this off.

"I want you to help me build a snow dragon," he demanded. Harry raised a sardonic eyebrow at him. "Right there." The boy pointed to a spot not far from where they stood and led the way himself. Harry stayed where he was and looked at the house elf as the boy walked away.

"Is he always like this?"

The house elf nodded as the boy turned around and shouted at them to follow.

"Dobby was instructed to keep Master Draco safe from the grounds and the grounds safe from Master Draco," the house elf said. "Dobby is not making snow dragons with Master Draco."
Harry snickered. The boy stomped back over to them and looked at Harry impatiently. "You said you'd do what I said," he insisted, ignoring the house elf as it smoothed the snow over again. "I want you to make a snow dragon with me!"

"I said we would make a trade," Harry corrected. "And I said I reserve the right to say no."

The boy glared at him. "So you won't?"

"I didn't say that," Harry said. "But what's in it for me?"

The boy's mouth opened and closed for a minute, and he stared at Harry.

"I don't... I don't know! What do you want?"

Harry pushed out his lower lip thoughtfully. "What have you got in your pockets?" he asked.

The boy turned out his pockets, holding each item up for inspection. There were sweets and small toys and a few trading cards, along with a small golden ball which Harry picked out of the boy's palm and examined curiously.

"It's not a professional Snitch," the boy said regretfully. "Mum won't let me have one. She says I'd lose it. But it's almost as good."

"What does it do?" Harry asked, and the boy lit up, taking the ball back immediately.

"Watch," he said, doing something that caused the ball to suddenly sprout wings and zip into the air. "Now try to catch it."

Harry reached up and caught it. The boy blinked at him, then glared.

"No, you have to let it move first," he explained, taking the ball back and stepping a few feet away. He let the ball fly back in the air. "Don't try to catch it until I tell you!"

Harry watched the ball and the boy with open bafflement.

"Okay," the boy said in an excited voice as the ball began to zip around in the air between them. "Okay, now!"

Harry reached up and caught the ball again.

"No!" The boy was very frustrated now. "You're doing it wrong."

"But..." Harry bit his lip. "You told me to catch it. You didn't say there were any other rules."

"You're cheating," he said with an accusatory look. "You're not meant to catch it so fast. It's supposed to be hard."

Harry shrugged. "Sorry. Let's try again?"

The ball was in the air again, and Harry watched it, even waited for a few seconds after the boy said he could catch it, before reaching up and plucking it neatly out of the air.

A huff from the boy told Harry he'd done it wrong again.

"Elves can't play Quidditch," the boy decided suddenly. "Never mind."
"No, I like it," Harry said. "In fact, that's the trade. The ball for my help making your snow dragon."

"I... but!" The boy's expression was pained. Harry waited, resolute, as the boy looked between the house elf, the Manor, and Harry. "My Father won't like this," the boy warned. Harry shrugged. He'd be leaving soon anyway.

"Look," the boy said. "I've got lots of other stuff that isn't my favourite toy ever. I could bring you something else instead, tomorrow."

"Alright," Harry said. "Then we'll make the snow dragon tomorrow." It was obvious that this wasn't what the boy had expected.

"Why can't we make it right now?"

"Because you haven't given me anything in return," Harry explained patiently. He felt like he'd been over it a hundred times with this boy.

The boy crossed his arms and huffed, his whole face wrinkled with pique. After almost a full minute of sulking, he stuffed the rest of his things back in his pockets and tossed the ball at Harry, who caught it and tucked it away in his bag with a smile.

"Let's go make that snow dragon," Harry said, and the boy's sullen expression fell off his face.

"Do you know how to make snow dragons?" he asked suddenly, the thought apparently just having occurred to him. Harry shrugged.

"Of course."

Harry had never built a snow dragon, or even a snow man, in his life, but that didn't mean he wasn't up to the challenge. He'd built himself that snow fort, after all. Couldn't be too different.

The snow packed well today, which was more than could be said for it in the past few weeks. Harry started rolling the snow into a ball like he'd seen Dudley and his friends do in the winter, and the boy watched him, baffled.

"Go on," Harry said, panting slightly. His snowball was now almost half as tall as he was, and very difficult to push. The boy looked impressed. Harry was obviously on the right track. "Make another one and bring it over here."

They made three balls, the last one slightly larger than the first two, since they worked together to push it. Harry's gloves were soaked through with snow, so they took a break and leaned against the snowballs as the boy called his house elf over to dry them both. Harry was a bit uncomfortable when the boy grabbed his hands without asking, but tolerated it in order to be dry.

"That's a useful trick," Harry said, examining his newly dried clothing. "Can you show me?"

"After we finish the dragon," the boy said in his imperious voice. Harry rolled his eyes at the elf and turned back to the pile of snow they'd created.

"We need to make a head," the boy decided. Harry was currently crouched down, adding snow to the spaces between the snowballs.

"Make one, then, and I'll put it where it needs to go."

The boy stood in place for a minute, staring at Harry wordlessly. Harry ignored him and continued
his work, and eventually he huffed and turned around to do what Harry had told him.

"The other side should be the tail," the boy said after Harry had levitated the head on top of the largest snowball. "It needs to be hollowed out on the bottom, I think."

Harry stood back and looked where the boy was indicating. "Alright, you get the other side."

This time, the boy went immediately to the other side of the pile of snow. "What do I do?" he called, sounding confused.

"You dig into the snow," Harry told him, already working on his own side. "Just the bottom though."

The pile slowly began to take shape, with several breaks to dry their gloves and clothing. It even had wings after the boy noticed they were missing.

"It needs scales," he said, standing back with Harry to look critically at their work. Harry watched as he leapt forward and started tracing them onto the outer layer of snow, brow furrowed with concentration.

By nightfall, they had created a passable snow dragon. The boy's nose and cheeks were bright red, and his eyes sparkled with success.

"Tomorrow we should make another one," the boy said, beaming at Harry. "Do you want hot chocolate? Dobby always makes me hot chocolate after we go outside."

Harry was actually quite warm, what with all the physical labour of the past couple hours, but who was he to reject free food?

"Sure," he said, and watched as the boy and the house elf started off toward the house.

After a few feet, the boy turned around. "Come on," he said, gesturing for Harry to follow. Harry stayed where he was.

"I can't go in your house," Harry told him.

"But I'm inviting you," the boy said, and his eyebrows pulled together.

"I'm not a vampire," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "I just can't go inside. I'm not a house elf. I'm a forest elf."

"Other elves is not allowed in the Manor without the permission of the Lord of the Manor," the house elf chimed in. "Dobby is not thinking the Lord of the Manor will give permission, Master Draco."

The boy pouted and crossed his arms. "But I want you to come in."

Harry shrugged. "I can't, though. You heard him. And you can't tell your parents about me anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because if you do, I'll have to leave," Harry explained. "Those are the rules."

The boy stuck out his lip at that. "So if I don't tell, you'll stay for a while?"

Harry blinked, caught. He hadn't expected that response. Thinking quickly, Harry responded. "Every
time we have a boon, I stay another day."

"So if I have Dobby bring you chocolate, you'll stay tomorrow too?"

Harry paused. "I guess so. As long as you don't tell anyone I'm here."

Grinning, the boy nodded. "I won't tell anyone. Dobby will bring you hot chocolate. See you tomorrow!" With that he turned around and dashed off back toward the Manor. The house elf followed, smoothing the snow as they went but leaving the dragon.

After about twenty minutes or so, the house elf appeared in front of Harry, holding a mug of hot chocolate.

"Dobby is bringing the forest elf hot chocolate, as Master Draco wishes," the house elf said, beaming at Harry.

Harry smiled back and thanked him, taking the drink. It was hot and sweet, and Harry had never tasted anything so delicious in his life.

"Dobby is wanting to ask the forest elf," the house elf began, twisting its long fingers in the pillowcase it wore. Harry nodded encouragingly. "What is being a forest elf like?"

Harry thought for a moment. "It's alright," he said eventually. "Sometimes it's cold and I don't have enough food, and sometimes I get lonely." He thought very determinedly about anything but the dog. "But when it's warm and there's food, I can do whatever I want."

The house elf nodded thoughtfully. "How would Dobby become a forest elf?" Harry squinted at the trees.

"Just go, I guess."

"But Dobby is having a family," the house elf said. "Dobby cannot be leaving his family unless they is setting him free. Dobby is a bad elf for wanting to be set free!"

Harry looked up sharply at the house elf's wail. He was twisting his ears and staring back at the Manor.

"I guess my family set me free," Harry realized. "But I never wanted to stay with them. They were terrible to me."

"They is giving the forest elf clothes?" The house elf seemed both awed and horrified.

"Well, yeah, they gave me Dudley's extra clothes," Harry said. "But they left me at a park in Kent. That was when I knew I was free."

The house elf looked up at Harry with big, worshipful eyes. "Dobby is wanting to be left at a park in Kent and become a forest elf as well," he said, and then his face turned woeful. "Dobby is a bad elf."

"You're not a bad elf for wanting to be free," Harry said, grimacing at the idea. "You have every right. Now, could you teach me that trick you did to make my gloves dry?"

It turned out that the house elf knew a whole host of useful tricks, which he was willing to teach to Harry. Harry decided there were no boons between elves, even if they weren't quite the same type. They traded tricks and stories for hours, until the house elf finally had to go back inside to his family.

"Good luck," Harry said, waving goodbye. The house elf beamed back at him.
"Goodbye!"
True to his word, the boy came back the next day, wanting to build another snow dragon. This time, he brought Harry a warm cloak, which Harry thought might have been the house elf's idea since it was even brown in colour. Either way, Harry put it on over his sheep-wool shirt and was almost immediately too hot. He hadn't felt this warm away from an open fire since August. He took the shirt off and put it back in his bag before they got started. Today, he got to practice the drying trick the house elf had demonstrated to him yesterday, which pleased the boy immensely.

Harry took to sleeping in the stables, since the only cave he had managed to find nearby had a minesign that translated to the Following Dark in it. Harry didn't know much about dwarves, but he'd been told enough about the Following Dark to know that he wouldn't be sleeping in a cave with that warning in it. The house elf visited him daily, usually bringing some kind of food. He said the boy had ordered him to so Harry wouldn't leave, and Harry was happy to accept, as the food was always filling and delicious. More often than not, the boy came out to visit as well and they would play together, which often meant that the boy tried to win his golden ball back. Harry always caught it first.

One thing that threw Harry almost constantly was the casual physical contact that the boy insisted on. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen children do before, but Harry was never a participant. The boy didn't seem to care, though. He would grab Harry's wrist to pull him somewhere, or lean against Harry's side when they were tired from running around, and one very memorable afternoon, during a snowball fight, the boy had tackled him. Harry had very nearly disappeared on the spot, he was so surprised.

Exploration of the grounds was still a priority for Harry, though he never went too close to the Manor proper. Harry quickly learned that he could get away with a lot when he had the house elf and the only child living in the Manor keeping him a secret. He found a winter garden and harvested a few rare specimen, which the house elf smoothed over for him by pretending they had wilted and been clipped.

When Harry accidentally knocked over a shelf of reins and riding crops in the stable one morning, the boy very grudgingly took the blame.

"Do you know what my mum said?" he asked later, outraged. "She said, 'There aren't any other little boys getting into trouble in the stables, Draco.'" He even put on a high pitched voice when he said it. Harry grinned.

"It's not funny," the boy sulked. "I'm not allowed to play outside for a week."

Harry looked around in a pointed manner, eyebrows high. They were currently standing on the edge of the forest.

"Well, I had to tell you, didn't I?" The boy glared a bit more. "Dobby's going to sneak me back inside in a second. You had better not disappear while I'm stuck in there."

"I'll be here when you get out," Harry promised, and laughed when the boy stuck out his tongue and turned dramatically on his heel, marching back to the Manor.

Harry was very careful not to cause any trouble that week since he wouldn't be able to pin it on the boy. Once he was allowed to play outside again, Harry resumed his investigations and found a nice grouping of fruit trees that seemed impervious to the weather, sprouting all manner of apples and
pears and even cherries. Harry helped himself.

The snow dragons had long since melted, and now the boy wanted to build a snow wizard. He brought out a scarf and cap for the wizard, even, which Harry thought was odd. Wanting to keep a creature made of frozen water warm seemed rude at worst, impractical at best. Harry, on the other hand, was a mammal, and mammals were naturally warm. It made sense to keep himself that way, so he took the cap and scarf for himself.

Harry found the greenhouses a couple weeks later, during a game of hide and seek between Harry, the house elf, and the boy (in Harry's opinion, the boy was at a severe disadvantage), and three days after that, the boy confronted him.

"Did you break one of the greenhouse windows?" he exclaimed, throwing a hand out in the direction of the mess. Harry blinked at him.

"Possibly," he admitted. "But there was magic all over the door. That window wasn't covered at all."

The boy put his hands on his hips. "Well why did you have to break it?"

"I wanted to go inside, of course," Harry said. "It was locked."

"You got me in trouble again!" He crossed his arms now, sticking out his lower lip. "I'm not to have dessert for a week. There's custard pie tonight, you know."

Harry felt very little sympathy for him. "Can I have it instead?"

"No," the boy said firmly. "No custard pie for anyone."

"Bugger," Harry said, shoulders slumping.

Harry stayed long enough that he stopped needing to wear the cloak all day, though the boy stayed bundled up.

"There's still snow outside," he explained one day. "Mum says I have to wear the hat and scarf until it's gone."

Whenever the boy came looking for him, he always brought some kind of food, or a useful trinket. It turned out that Harry had been right about the item being of the house elf's choosing. Sometimes the boy expressed confusion over the item in question, like when he'd brought Harry a book on common household spells. Harry had been delighted, which only seemed to confuse the boy further.

The very next day, the boy brought him a book on 'Quidditch', which was something he had mentioned before.

"Since you like books," he explained when Harry gave him a dubious glance. "Quidditch is brilliant."

Harry kept the book and read it dutifully. It seemed to be a sport that magic people played, up in the air. That part was intriguing. The golden ball the boy had given him was a part of it.

"We have a Quidditch pitch," the boy said, next time the sport came up. "Come on, I'll show you."

The snow was melting, and Harry could see patches of green between piles of white as he was dragged across the field by his wrist. The boy dropped his hand when the reached the center and stood in the middle of a green patch, pointing out various highlights of the field.
"There's the broom shed, and those are goalposts, obviously. That's the starting line, and that's where Mum sits to cheer for me when I play."

Harry nodded along as the boy continued talking.

"I'm going to play for Slytherin when I get to Hogwarts," he said. "I'm going to be the Seeker. That's the best spot on the team, you know."

"Really?" Harry paused. "Also, what's Hogwarts?"

The boy's mouth dropped open. "You don't know what Hogwarts is? How could you not know?"

"Well what is it?" Harry asked, feeling a bit annoyed at what he thought was probably an overreaction.

"It's the best school of magic in the UK," he explained. "Though Father says Durmstrang is better, but that's all the way in Bulgaria. I might go there, actually. Father says it's the best for learning about the Dark Arts. Hogwarts only teaches Defense."

"Oh, I see," Harry said. "Of course I wouldn't have heard of it. Do elves go to school there?"

The boy wrinkled his forehead. "I don't think so?"

"Well there you have it." Harry nodded. "It's got nothing to do with me."

One day after most of the snow had melted, Harry and the boy were sitting together on the roots of a tree near the edge of the forest. They had been having a conversation while Harry collected woodlice, until the boy suddenly realized Harry had forgotten his name entirely. His mouth hung open as he stared at Harry, appalled.

"Dray-ko Mal-foy," he enunciated carefully, grimacing at the sight of the tiny creatures as Harry corralled them. "Here, repeat after me. Dray-ko..."

Harry frowned and tipped another louse into the jar. "Draco."

"Good. Mal-foy."

"I'm not stupid."

The boy glared at him and leaned closer. "Mal. Foy."

Harry sighed. "Malfoy."

"Good! Now say both."

"Draco Malfoy," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "I don't think this is necessary."

"I don't think this is necessary, Draco," the boy corrected, pointing at Harry for emphasis. Harry sighed, plucking a louse off his wrist.

"Draco," he repeated, to pacify him.

"Good. Now what shall I call you?"

"I told you," Harry said ungraciously, sealing the jar of woodlice. "Elves don't tell people their
"I know," the boy said. "But that doesn't mean I can't have something to call you by."

"This is ridiculous."

The boy quieted him with another glare. "You're my elf," he said. "So I get to name you if I want to."

Harry leaned back, raising his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"I think you look like a Hyperion," the boy said, and tugged at one of his sleeves in a fussy manner. "I'll call you Hyperion."

Harry opened his mouth, appalled. The words would not come out, until: "You can't call me Hyperion."

"Why not?" The boy appeared genuinely confused. "Do you not like it?"

"No, I don't like it at all!" Harry exclaimed. "And I'm not your elf. I'm a visiting elf."

"But you are my elf," the boy said, his grey eyes big and beseeching. "You stay here because I bring you things and we play together. Who else's elf would you be?"

Harry was unmoved. "I don't belong to anyone."

"But you're an elf," the boy pointed out in a reasonable tone. He looked at Harry like he was crazy. "That's what elves do. They belong to someone."

Harry stood. "That might be what house elves do," he said severely, "But forest elves don't do that."

And with that, he disappeared.

Harry was affronted and quite ready to leave. He was just gathering a few final items from the stables when the house elf appeared behind him.

"Dobby is wanting to ask the forest elf to stay," the house elf said, twisting his fingers in his pillowcase. "Master Draco is telling Dobby to say that Master Draco is sorry and will not call the forest elf Hyperion if the forest elf is not wanting him to."

Harry, who had frozen when the house elf appeared, finished tucking the riding crop into his bag and turned around. By the expression on his face, the house elf was both not fooled and not particularly concerned with Harry's sticky fingers. Harry flashed a quick grin at him, then sobered.

"He doesn't own me," Harry said. The house elf nodded vigorously, ears flopping with the effort. "Just so long as he understands that."

"Master Draco is understanding," the house elf assured him. "Dobby has brought the forest elf treacle tart, but the forest elf has to promise to stay."

Harry eyed the plate the house elf produced. He had discovered in recent months that he quite liked treacle tart.

"Yes, alright," Harry said, and took the plate. "Prissy little albino git," he muttered to himself. When the house elf asked what he had said, he answered, "I said thank you very much."
Despite his promise, Harry was beginning to feel like it was time to go. He stayed for another week, and vented his spleen by making a fairy circle on the Quidditch pitch. He still wasn't very good at it, but he'd read up on them in one of the books the house elf gave him. They seemed like a fine pastime for an elf.

Needless to say, the boy was not pleased.

"You're always getting me into trouble!" he said, standing at the edge of the circle and staring at it in horror. "Who's going to take the blame for this? Father will be furious!"

"I think it's nice," Harry disagreed. "Bit rough around the edges, but I can fix that with practice." The fairy circle was a rounded patch of clover and black spleenwort five yards in diameter. Harry had chosen black spleenwort because he liked the look of it and thought it would contrast well with the smooth green grass of the field. Indeed, he felt the job had been well done, all things considered.

"You're impossible," the boy said. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Pretend you're as surprised and horrified as he is," Harry suggested, thinking back to his time with the Dursleys. "That sometimes works."

The boy scowled at him. "I AM as surprised and horrified as he will be!"

Harry suppressed a grin and responded with a serious tone. "You'll be fine, then."

The boy didn't end up getting in trouble for the fairy circle, which sort of disappointed Harry. That meant he had no good reason not to inform the boy he was leaving in person, rather than through the house elf like he'd planned. Harry hadn't wanted to, but the house elf had insisted that the boy would be very upset if Harry didn't.

"Leaving today," Harry said, refusing the sandwich the boy offered him.

The boy dropped it in the grass, plate and all, and wrinkled his nose and forehead. He had abandoned his winter gear weeks ago, and his white blond hair nearly blinded Harry when the sun hit it just right.

"Why? Is this about the circle?" he asked. "I didn't get in trouble, I'm not mad at you anymore."

"No, not about that. I just have to go." In truth, the weather was getting really nice. By this time last year, Harry was already fifty miles from where he'd spent winter and still moving. He didn't want to be in Wiltshire any longer. "Look, it's not up to me," Harry offered. "It's the rules. Elf duties and stuff."

"But..." The boy faltered and looked down at his feet. "Can't you stay a little while longer?"

Harry heaved an enormous sigh. He felt like a git now. But he was getting antsy. He had to leave.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've really got to go." He was struck with a sudden inspiration. "We'll see each other again someday, I promise."

"Someday soon?" the boy asked, skeptical.

"Maybe," Harry said, hoping he sounded mysterious. The boy didn't seem to be buying it.

Harry, who had never really known anyone who wanted to say any kind of protracted goodbye to
him, took the chance to disappear when the boy happened to glance away for a second, in order to save himself from the awkwardness of the situation.

He reappeared in the forest about a mile away and hitched his bag up on his shoulder, feeling a bit lighter.

He was free again.

The spring was when everything was young and fresh and new, which meant among other things that there was a lot of game around. There were also a lot of animals coming out of hibernation, which Harry experienced firsthand one morning when he was walking down a deer trail in Gloucestershire, singing to himself.

"Hello," a voice said from the tree. "I like your song."

Harry looked up and saw the snake dangling from a branch, staring at him. "Hello," he replied. "Thank you. A three headed snake taught it to me."

"It didn't try to eat you?" The snake seemed impressed. "I met one once. It tried to eat me."

"It tried to eat me at first," Harry said, offering his hand to the small creature. It looked young, not very long and with a black zigzag on its back. It actually accepted his hand after a brief hesitation and wound down around his wrist.

It was definitely young, Harry decided. Older snakes never accepted that offer.

"I smell food," the snake said, and Harry grinned. That explained that.

"Would you like some?" he asked, reaching into his bag with his other hand and pulling out a bit of meat wrapped in cloth. The snake hissed with pleasure and devoured a hefty portion.

"You are a strange snake," the snake said to him after it had finished.

"I'm not a snake," Harry said. "I'm an elf."

"Does that mean you won't eat me?"

"As long as you don't bite me," Harry agreed. The snake wrapped itself more firmly around his wrist.

"Good," it said sleepily. "Where are we going?"

"West," Harry said. "I want to see the ocean."

Going west put Harry in a part of his map that he was utterly unable to pronounce. It didn't really matter except for when he wanted to have a boon with a teenage girl.

"How can you be a real elf if you don't speak Welsh?" she asked him, leaning against the doorframe of her small house. She had already assured him her parents weren't home. Harry shrugged.

"I live in the forest," he said. "We don't speak English or Welsh there."

"What do you speak, then?" she asked, raising a highly sceptical eyebrow.
Harry paused. What did they speak?

"Hey," he said, jostling the little snake that was asleep on his shoulder. "What language do we speak?"

"Parseltongue, of course," the snake murmured.

Harry absorbed this. "Okay."

He looked up at the girl, whose hand had lifted to press against her throat while she stared.

"Parseltongue," he repeated.

"Oh," she said faintly. "That makes sense."

"So about that tunic," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"I could make you a new one," she said, still wide eyed. "It'd take a few days though. You're about the same size as my little brother."

"I'll come back in three days then," Harry said, stepping back from where he'd been leaning on her front gate. "What should I bring with me?"

He watched her bite her lip and shift. "You're really an elf?" she asked. He nodded. "So you could get me anything?"

"Anything I'm willing to get you," he warned. She nodded quickly.

"Anything I'm willing to get you," he warned. She nodded quickly.

"Of course, right." She stared at him for another moment. "This isn't going to turn into one of those 'be careful what you wish for' situations, where I ask for money and you kill some rich relative of mine, is it?"

Harry blinked, taken aback. "I wouldn't think so," he said. "Though I should tell you I don't deal in human money."

"No, I don't want money anyway," she agreed, and tapped her chin with one finger. "What do I want? Something useful..."

"The last girl your age asked for an amulet to make boys like her," Harry suggested. The girl cast him a scornful glance.

"Please," she said. "What do you take me for? Something useful, I said." She thought for another minute. "Can you make me really aware of my surroundings? So I can always know what's going on around me, even if I can't see it, you know?"

"Yes," Harry said, pleased that she had picked something he knew. He'd already made that amulet once for himself. "I can. Three days, then."

She smiled at him. "Three days!"

Harry disappeared, reappearing seconds later in a field on the other side of her house and setting off toward the forest from there. He would have to stay in this part of Wales until she finished, but it would be worth it. His clothing was getting ratty, and his long shirt had stopped being quite so long. He was getting taller.
Wherein Harry is Properly Researched

His new tunic was very nice, and Harry got it very dirty almost immediately, of course. It had been a shade of dark green at first, and now it was a kind of brownish green that Harry liked much better. It was a bit big, but the girl assured him that if he was anything like her brothers, he would grow into it.

He reached the water a week or so later, and stood on an empty beach, looking out at it. He had never seen the ocean before. It was quite large. The wind picked up as Harry stood looking out at the sea, and he quickly realized that he was about to get wetter than the spray from the waves had already made him. It had rained a few times in the past couple weeks. Harry enjoyed it unless the day was particularly cold.

He turned around and walked away from the water. The wind here would ensure that Harry didn't enjoy this rainfall. He'd have to go somewhere warmer.

He had seen a castle near a small village on his way down here today, and thought it might have stables he could take shelter in. At the very least, there was a bit of a wood nearby.

He found the castle again, and as he reached the top of the hill it sat on, he realized that there was a magical barrier surrounding the left side of the hill. It tasted rich, and had none of the dirty aftertaste of the kind of magic that made Harry feel nervous and trapped inside his skin.

He stepped through the barrier and looked around. There was another wing of the castle that wasn't visible outside the barrier, along with a bunch of stalls lined up outside the open doors, and a small crowd of magical tasting people bustling around them. The rain had little effect here, vanishing before it dampened even the cloth ceilings of the stalls.

It looked like a marketplace. No one gave Harry a second glance as he walked from stall to stall, eyeing the wares. There was food for sale, as well as books and plants and animals, dead and alive. There were vials of vivid liquids, cloth of varying colours, and strange trinkets of all sorts.

Harry stopped at one of the stalls and peered at a small globe filled with oscillating rings. It began to whistle as he watched. The man behind the table glared at him.

"What is it?" Harry asked, pointing at the object. The man snatched it up.

"Sneakoscope," he said shortly. "Five galleons."

Harry backed away from the stall, avoiding the man's narrow expression.

At another stall, Harry was shooed away for touching some kind of glittery black dust. He offered to trade one of the stallkeepers a boon for an interesting looking book.

She glared at him. "Galleons only, kid."

From watching the other magic people, Harry surmised that galleons were gold coins. Money, then. He sighed and wandered around a bit more before stepping through the magical barrier back out into the rain. Humans were so obsessed with their money, he thought as he examined the jar of blue stingers he'd picked up from one of the less attentive stalls.

Harry followed the shoreline for four days before encountering the edge of a larger than usual town on the water and deciding to strike out east again. He inadvertently discovered the purpose of the
blue stingers a couple weeks later outside of Coventry when he pricked himself with one while examining them. It made him feel giddy, almost like he was floating on thin air. After a couple minutes of grinning foolishly at the trees, he looked around and realized he really was floating on thin air.

"This is amazing," he said to the snake, who poked his head out and hissed when he realized how far off the ground they were.

"Are you some kind of bloody bird?" he asked, coiling around Harry's arm in a displeased and agitated manner.

"No," Harry said patiently. "I'm an elf."

"Good," the snake said. "I hate those birds. Get us down now."

The sting didn't wear off for another twenty minutes or so, not that Harry minded. The snake was somewhat less pleased with the whole state of affairs, and spent the entire time winding himself around Harry's wrists, which Harry held obligingly together for him, and complaining in a hissy undertone.

Harry headed south after several weeks of wandering through the midlands. He liked the southern counties. They were filled with farmland and woods and the larger towns were easy enough to avoid. By the time the weather started cooling down, Harry had reached another shoreline near Bodmin and had circled back around past Exeter, thinking to find a nice forest and begin preparing for winter in advance this year.

He passed near a quiet village with a sign that said 'Ottery St Catchpole' one afternoon, crunching on a turnip he'd found in a garden on the way by. As he left the outskirts of the town behind, he saw in the distance a somewhat lopsided house, surrounded by a low wall beyond which were several chickens.

Harry tilted his head, appraising their size. Those chickens were good for at least three nights worth of meals.

He approached with an easy gliding lope of the sort that usually had country children eating out of his hand. As he neared the strange house, he slowed down and eyed the windows and the exits. There didn't seem to be any movement within, at least not any of the adult variety.

Harry came nearer, careful to circle the house and eye it from all angles. In what appeared to be the back garden, two boys chased each other around in circles with magic sticks, shouting and laughing. Harry perched on the low wall and waited for them to notice him. When they finally did, Harry continued to stare. One had to cultivate the right impression early, when it came to magical children. They were much more skeptical than their stale counterparts.

The two red headed boys approached him cautiously.

"Hello," Harry said, crouching on the wall with his arms wrapped around his calves.

"Who're you?" one of them asked. Harry noted that they were identical, which fascinated him. He peered at them, intent on discovering a difference.

"I'm an elf," Harry told them.

The boy on the left squinted. He had a bit of mud on his forehead. "A house elf? What do you think, Fred?"
"I guess I can see it, George," the other one said, tilting his head back and jutting his chin out in a parody of thoughtfulness. "Bit hairy for a house elf. Though-"

"He's about the right height, yeah."

Harry frowned. "No, not a house elf. A regular elf."

"Are you sure?" the one with the muddy forehead asked, tilting his head and peering at Harry. "Because your knees are-"

"-quite knobbly for someone who isn't a house elf."

"I lived in a place where they had got me confused with a house elf, once," Harry said severely. "Had me doing all the chores and I lived in a cupboard. Not a particularly cheerful cupboard, either."

The twins considered this bit of information. "Alright, you aren't a house elf, then," the one with the muddy forehead said.

"Not if you don't like closets and chores, anyway," the other agreed. "Bit of a shame. We could have got out of degnoming the garden."

"Yeah. What else could he be then, Fred, my dear?" the one with the muddy forehead asked. Harry narrowed his eyes.

"Well, George," the other said, "He could be a-"

"I'm an elf," Harry interrupted. "A regular elf. Not the household sort, just the sort that hangs about in the forest and does elvish things."

"Like... what?" the other asked. Muddy forehead leaned forward with interest.


The two boys seemed somewhat doubtful, which disappointed Harry. Usually the mystical magical bit had them interested. The Secrets of the Elves thing worked at least half the time, as well.

"I don't know," the other said.

Muddy forehead crossed his arms. "Me either."

Harry bristled. "Well, if you two are so clever, what do you think I am?"

The twins suddenly became animated. They turned to each other and began conversing in low voices, darting glances at Harry from time to time, though of course Harry could hear them anyway. He had very good hearing. It came of being an elf and probably of the pointy ears a witch had given him a couple years ago.

"Maybe. Or, he could be a gnome. A really-"

"-tall gnome. The Gnome King, even!"

Harry frowned. "What's a gnome like?" he asked, distantly remembering seeing lawn gnomes at Privet Drive. "Don't they have beards? I don't have a beard."

The other one looked at him askance. "What? No they don't. Here-"
The twins both wandered a bit further into the garden. Harry stood up on the wall and walked the perimeter until he was closer to their new position, curious. Muddy forehead stopped suddenly, and he and the other one stooped together and grabbed up a wrinkly, shouting little creature.

"Gerroff, gerroff!"

Harry nodded in comprehension. He had seen those around before. They were usually good for a spot of light conversation over half a rabbit. He hadn't known they were gnomes, that's all. He'd never seen a reason to ask.

The other one held the creature by the legs and examined it in a scholarly manner as it flailed in his grasp like an angry snake. The one with the muddy forehead poked at its tiny head, and it bit him.

"Shite!" He backed away, nursing his finger, and Harry grinned a bit.

The other one squared his shoulders and pointed at Harry with the business end of the gnome. "Be still before your King!"

The gnome glanced at Harry, muttered something foul, and began its struggle anew.

"No?" The one with the muddy forehead glared down at it. "Bugger. Guess not."

He and the other one shrugged. The other one lifted the gnome over his head and began to spin it in wide circles. Harry watched in fascination as he let the gnome fly over the wall and Harry's head. It sailed about twenty feet and landed with a thump in an old, gnarly tree.

"Good shot," Muddy forehead commented. "Though I could have got it in the upper branches."

"Dad really needs to get around to cutting that thing down," the other one said. Muddy forehead nodded.

"It's weird, seeing gnome eyes floating in the sky at night," he explained to Harry.

"They get stuck up there. It's positively-"

"-inhumane, mum says. Anyway, guess you're not a Gnome King."

"Well there you go," Harry said, satisfied. "Elf."

"Not so fast," the other one said. "We just went to Diagon Alley for our school stuff,"

"-we've got a whole book full of magical creatures you could be," Muddy forehead agreed. "Hang on."

They rushed out of the garden and through the backdoor of the house. Harry peered around and eyed a few chickens while he waited. Soon, the twins reappeared with a book and a bit of parchment.

"Alright, we're making a list," the other one informed him, sitting down on a large stump next to his brother, who was scribbling furiously on the parchment.

"Of all the different creatures you could be." The one with the muddy forehead added. Harry was intrigued, and returned to his favoured position on the wall. "So we'll just go ahead-"

"-And cross Gnome King out. First question-"

"Can you breathe underwater?"
"No," Harry said with a definitive shake of his head.

"Have you tried?"

Harry wrinkled his nose and nodded. The other one seemed disappointed.

"Oh, never mind. There goes the merperson idea."

"And the hippocampus. And the kelpie." Muddy forehead made a few ticks on the parchment and scribbled a note.

"Well, can you breathe fire?"

Harry frowned and huffed a few times. "I don't... think so."

Muddy forehead tsked and made another check on his parchment. "There's dragons crossed off the list, then. Charlie'd be disappointed. Though we haven't ruled out you being a fire crab yet."

"Are you..." The other one examined his book closely. "Hmm... are you a physical manifestation of evil?"

Both twins peered up at Harry as though it had suddenly occurred to them that this was a distinct possibility.

Harry held out his arms and looked down at them with a thoughtful expression. "Probably not."

"Do you want to maybe break something or..." Muddy forehead leaned over his brother's shoulder to read from the text. "'Exist to actively do harm and damage to the world around you'?"

"No," Harry said after a moment's contemplation. "No, I'm alright, thanks."

The other one elbowed his brother, cheered at Harry's answer. "D'you think we could pass for a physical manifestation of evil, Fred?"

Muddy forehead grinned. "It's something to shoot for, Fred."

"Anyway," The other one said, leaning over to read the list. "That rules out you being a werewolf, a vampire-

"-a hag, a red cap or a banshee-"

"Though I think you have to be a girl to be a hag or a banshee," The other one said, eyeing Harry contemplatively.

Harry shook his head.

"And also hinkypunks, dementors-"

"Thank Merlin-"

"Boggarts, grindylows,"

"Or pogrebin or kappa."

The other one finished checking off the list of items with a flourish. Harry frowned.

"Well what else is there?"
"Oh, all sorts of things," the other one said airily. "You could be-

"A billywig!" Muddy forehead exclaimed, then consulted his list with a frown.

"Though you're probably not a billywig," the other one said, flipping through the book and holding it out at arm's length in front of him, looking from it to Harry. "You're not quite..."

Muddy forehead reached out, turning the book sideways in the other one's hands. The twins tilted their heads to the right to match, and squinted at Harry. "...blue enough, I think," Muddy forehead finished, nodding and checking it off his list.

"Few too many legs, too," The other one commented, leaning forward and prodding at Harry with a finger. "What about a pixie?"

"He's tetchy enough," Muddy forehead said thoughtfully, flipping through the book again. "He could be a Cornish pixie. Have you ever been to Cornwall?"

Harry thought about it. "I think I have," he said. "In fact, a few weeks ago, I met a boy in what I think was Cornwall who gave me a couple jugs of milk in return for some magic stones. Could have been Devon though?"

"Magic stones?" Muddy forehead asked, raising his eyebrows. Harry shrugged. He liked the magic stones trick. He'd been using it for ages on people he didn't like.

"They make the owner cleverer," he said, not deigning to elaborate. Perhaps these boys would like some stones for a chicken?

The one with the muddy forehead grinned. "That's a 'maybe' on the pixie," he said, and made a note.

"No, no," The other one said. "He's still not blue enough."

"Oh, right. Next question." The other one consulted their parchment. "Do you like to dance?"

As time passed, Harry discovered that he was not a manticore or a centaur or a phoenix. He was also rejected from the acromantula family, on account of not having enough legs. He was not a niffler or a kneazle or a knarl. Not a bowtruckle or a puffeskien or a jarvey, though he demonstrated to the twins a broad enough knowledge of foul language that they had placed that on the 'maybe' list until they realized Harry hadn't yet tried to eat any of the gnomes.

Harry declared himself unmoved by the culinary possibilities in gnomes, and given his lack of venom in his lack of fangs and similarly, his lack of poison breath (or really, any interesting mouth powers to speak of, as the other one said), doxies were ruled out as well as nundus.

"And you say you can't become invisible," Muddy forehead repeated. Harry shook his head, a bit disappointed with himself as the tebo, the thestral, the diricawl and the demiguise were all eliminated right in front of his eyes.

He was not the only one who seemed discouraged. The twins were taking his lack of astonishing powers to heart, and Harry felt a bit like he was letting them down.

"I can talk to animals, and they talk back," he offered, hoping that this was a bit less garden-variety than most of his tricks had been demonstrated to be in the past few hours. He hadn't met anyone else who could talk with snakes yet, though admittedly, most of the children he'd known were impressed by the tricks. He considered that he might not have been visiting a proper cross section of society
prior to this point. Even the children that tasted like magic were usually more impressed than these two.

The other one perked up. "Now we’re getting somewhere," he said with enthusiasm. Harry grinned. The other one flipped through the book, checking up on the options they hadn’t yet eliminated.

Muddy forehead snatched the book out of his hand and flipped to the index. "You could be a goblin or a dwarf, you know," he said. "But the only elf mentioned is a house elf."

"If he was a goblin, he’d have money," the other one said thoughtfully. "And he probably wouldn’t be wearing that tatty tunic. Goblins wear fancy robes."

"I'm not a dwarf, either," Harry agreed. "I've met dwarves."

"You're a bit skinny, too." Muddy forehead nodded.

"And he'd need a beard."

"I tell you, I'm an elf," Harry insisted. "I've even got the pointy ears, see?" The twins looked at each other, then back at Harry's ears.

"Yeah, alright," the other one said.

"We're bored of looking through schoolbooks, anyway," Muddy forehead added. "Let's see you do something elvish."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Good try," he said. "But I won't reveal elvish secrets so easily."

The other one huffed. "Well, let's see you talk to an animal, then."

Harry shrugged, and reached into his sleeve and let his snake twine himself around his wrist.

"Say hello to the nice people," he hissed. The snake reared up on Harry's hand and regarded the twins with curiosity.

"They smell fearful," he told Harry. "Will we take their chickens?"

Harry shrugged. "A couple, I was thinking. Though that book they have seems useful too."

Harry glanced up at the twins. They had taken several alarmed steps backward. Muddy forehead was holding the book half up in front of him, like a shield. Harry could see the nameplate on the inside cover.

"Oh, he won't hurt you," Harry told them. "If he wants to bite, he'll ask first. He's very polite."

Fred and George nodded silently, still staring at the snake on Harry's arm.

"So anyway," Harry said, "One thing elves do like to do is have boons with humans. I can give you each a boon, if you like. Interested?"

The twins glanced at each other, then back at Harry.

"Maybe," Muddy forehead said. The other one nodded.

"But we're not going to fall for your-"
"Magic stones that make people cleverer," Muddy forehead finished, sounding wholly unimpressed. "We want something useful."

Harry lifted a shoulder. "Well, what'll it be then?"

The twins stared at each other, communing with the secret nonverbal language of twins.

"We want a charm," The other one said finally. "To keep our mum from finding our prank closet."

Harry frowned and opened his waistbag. He probably had something that would work for that. He knew his amulets like the back of his hand by now, and considered one of a couple that dealt in concealing that might work. He had all the materials for at least two of them.

"Alright," Harry said, closing the bag. "In return for one of those, I'll take a chicken."

The twins glanced at each other uneasily.

"A large one," Harry added. "It's a nice bit of work."

The other one dropped his head in a nod, and muddy forehead went over to the shed and plucked one out of the group.

"We'll tell mum it was a fox," he muttered. Harry jumped down off the wall and stepped away so that the twins couldn't see exactly what he was doing. Then he reached into his bag and took out a privet twig. He wound it into a circle and bound a lovage umbel in the center using a strand of unicorn hair. He liked these twins, so he used the real thing. He strung a few shiny rocks on the strand of hair and added a couple pigeon feathers. It made the whole thing look more authentic, and a bit of trickery couldn't hurt a charm designed for trickery. Harry stepped back onto the wall and showed them the finished product.

"You'll hang it on the doorknob," he instructed. Their expressions were impressed, apparently despite themselves. "Anyone who looks at the door will see a boring, innocent closet. Don't let them touch the charm, though."

He took the chicken from muddy forehead and hefted it. It was a particularly fat chicken. Harry would eat for at least a week. He frowned.

"Though, this is a special amulet," he said. "Not just anyone could get you one like it. How about this. I'll add a couple giddy stings to the deal," he said, and gestured to the book. "And you'll give me that."

The two boys looked at each other, communing again.

"We need this book for Hogwarts," one of them said.

"Mum'll kill us if we lose it."

Harry said nothing. The twins thought some more, and then muddy forehead's face split into a wicked grin.

"I know," he said, and cast a single glance at his brother. The other one grinned as well.

"Tell us our names," he said.

"Our real names." Muddy forehead held up a finger. "And you can't get us confused."
"If you guess wrong,"

"We get the charm and you-"

"-go away with nothing," the other one said, satisfied.

Harry thought about this. "And if I get it right, I get the chicken and the book." They nodded. "Yeah, okay."

Harry stared at them, eyes narrow. He had to do this just right.

"You!" he declared, pointing a bold finger at the one with the muddy forehead. "Your name is George Weasley. And you!" He pointed at the other one. "Are Fred Weasley. You were born first."

The twins looked at each other, wearing identical expressions of surprise. Muddy forehead scratched his head. "How'd you know that?"

Harry gave him a condescending glance. "Please," he said. "I told you I'm an elf."

The other one handed over the book grudgingly. Harry generously dropped two giddy stings into his palm along with the charm.

"How about you, then?" he asked muddy forehead as he secured the book in his waistbag.

"Anything?"

Muddy forehead shook his head. Harry nodded once.

Right on cue, a gust of wind blew a few leaves out of the tree above them, and they fell between Harry and the twins. Harry took the opportunity disappear.

He reappeared on the other side of the house and began walking toward the gathering of nearby trees, chicken held securely under his arm, clucking softly. He decided to keep it until it got really cold. It was easy enough to feed a chicken, he imagined, and he would get eggs out of the deal.
Wherein Harry is Cornered

Chapter Notes

Last chapter, guys! The sequel is currently in progress. Thanks for enjoying and reviewing, everyone! It's been pretty fantastic.

That winter worked out much better than the previous year. Harry was prepared well in advance, and had a large stockpile of food and a warm cave to sleep in before the first frost. The self-warming cloak he'd been given in Wiltshire last year was indispensable. It meant that Harry was able to move around outside more freely than in the past. It also meant that the snake didn't go into hibernation underground, but instead kept him company by sleeping most of the winter away on his collarbone.

By the time the snow was beginning to melt, Harry was on the move again, trading boons for food and useful trinkets. He found that if he stuck to dealing with children who tasted like magic, he would get more interesting trades. He was stockpiling quite a collection of chocolate frog cards. He had been introduced to magic sweets at Halloween last year when he had happened to come upon a magic family during his rounds, and had found that he quite liked Ice Mice, but nothing beat chocolate frogs. Sometimes children would trade him food or trinkets or even sickles and galleons (which Harry had decided to accept on the off chance that he found another magic marketplace) just for the right card.

But mostly, the list of boons requested of Harry went along the same lines:

"Can you make me smarter/stronger/faster?" Harry only said yes to these questions if he liked the person, and gave them the corresponding amulet.

"Can you make everyone like me?" Confidence amulet.

"Can you make me invisible/read minds/fly?" Harry usually said no to these. Except for the last. He gave the ones he really liked giddy stingers.

"Can my boon be three more boons?" No, is what Harry always said to this and all the variations on it. The people who asked this question got "magic stones" most of the time, no matter what they requested next, unless they were particularly obnoxious. Then they got insecurity amulets.

Harry ended up near Liverpool by the end of summer. He had found that he liked the ocean, and frequently walked along the coast as long as there were no major towns or cities in his way. One day, Harry reached a harbour and saw a largish boat getting ready to set sail. There wasn't anyone around at the moment.

Harry knew that wouldn't last long, so he thought quickly. He knew from his map book that he was on an island and that there were other islands nearby, and even an entire enormous continent to the east. He was on the west side of his island, which meant that it wasn't entirely likely that he would go to the continent, but still. He thought Ireland might be interesting.

Harry darted around the rock he'd been crouched behind, dashed along the pier, and climbed aboard the ship. There were a lot of cars onboard, and Harry crouched and ran between them, avoiding the small groups of people milling around until he found an empty truck with a covered bed to crawl
He heard the boat's horn blast several times after a long while, and after peeking through the dirty window, surmised that they were leaving.

"What are we doing?" the snake asked as he wound through Harry's fingers. "We're moving, but we're not."

"We're on the water," Harry said, feeling a rush of excitement. "We're going somewhere new."

"On the water?" the snake seemed baffled, flicking its tongue out to taste the air. "What kind of creature are you?"

"I'm an elf," Harry reminded him, grinning. "And anyway, it's nearly autumn. That means I'm ten by now. I wanted to do something different this year."

"I'm three," the snake said, curling his tail around Harry's thumb. "You don't see me nattering on about it and dragging my companions onto the water like some kind of unnatural mammal-fish thing."

"Elf," Harry said.

"Daft," the snake corrected.

When the truck lurched a few hours later, Harry jerked out of a doze and blinked at his surroundings, confused. It was dusk, and they appeared to have docked.

He rubbed his eyes and made sure the snake and his bag were still secure, then slipped out of the pickup truck and hurried over to the last row of cars, peering past them at the new land he'd managed to make it to. He frowned at it. He could see fields and forest, but they were beyond what looked like an almost impenetrable wall of houses and streets and concrete and people. Behind the taste of salt and sea and exhaust, Harry could only taste stale. He hoped the rest of his new land didn't taste the same. The snake poked his head out and confirmed Harry's negative view of the town.

"We're not staying here, are we?" he asked, curling around Harry's neck. "It's awful."

"No," Harry said. "We're getting out of here as quickly as possible."

It was going to be difficult, though. He focused on a car park he could see nearby and disappeared to the rocky beach in front of it, then walked as calmly as possible toward a nearby bridge.

As he got closer, he realized with horror that the bridge was lifting itself up, out of the way of a boat. He couldn't walk across a bridge like that. He peered through the gathering darkness at the other side of the water and disappeared after he felt he had a good enough grasp on it.

He was on a road now. Bright lights flashed in his eyes as cars sped past, pressing Harry back against the railing. He walked along the sidewalk next to the water and stared at the trees he couldn't quite see well enough to disappear to. When there was finally a gap in the traffic, Harry dashed across and disappeared into the trees, only to encounter chain link and wooden slats not far in. The trees were little more than a sound barrier.

Harry was ready to start hating his new land with a passion when he finally found a break in the houses, one that revealed a real copse of trees. He investigated, and slumped in relief when he
realized he had finally found the edge of the wild areas. This appeared to be a park, but he could keep walking until it was behind him. He wondered briefly if he really had made it to Ireland.

The wind blew, and Harry shivered. He'd have to find a warm place to sleep for the night. It was nearly time to start searching for a winter place.

It took two days and several detours around towns, but Harry found a nice forest. He had to climb over a stone wall near a road to get in, but otherwise, the only sign of humans were a few roads and trails within the forest that reached dead ends after a while and were easy to avoid.

Harry found a village nearby and stocked up on canned food, and when winter came he and his snake survived reasonably well, though there was a scare midwinter when Harry woke up one morning feeling extremely ill. He huddled under his self-warming cloak inside the small lean-to he'd devised from fallen branches, leaves, and moss at the beginning of the winter and sniffled as he flipped through his books, looking for something that would make him feel better.

His snake actually noticed Harry's distress enough to wake up and hiss soothingly at him. "It's not natural, going out in these temperatures," the snake explained. "You'll feel better if you get warm and sleep."

It took a few tries, but Harry finally started up a fire at the entrance of his lean-to and managed to boil some willow bark he found buried in the depths of his bag. The tea did make him feel better. He soon fell asleep, the snake hissing a soft, vulgar song that Harry had taught him several months ago about a snake that encountered an acromantula and ate it whole.

It didn't occur to Harry to figure out where in Ireland he might be until spring arrived. He set out for the main road outside his forest to try to find a signpost of some kind that he could use to find his location, but he couldn't find any of the names on the signpost on his map.

There was nothing in his immediate vicinity but small villages, though. Harry supposed that they might not bother writing the names of those down. He kept going west, away from the town he'd arrived in on the boat, and encountered water that same day. He frowned. This wasn't just a lake. This was the ocean. Harry stood on the edge of a cliff overlooking the water and frowned. He had come from the ocean in the east.

Harry turned around and headed east again, and sure enough, by the next day he had reached ocean again, rocky cliffs and all.

It didn't make sense. There wasn't a part of Ireland that was quite this skinny. At the relaxed speed Harry was walking, it should have taken him about a week to get from one shore to another in Ireland, at even the narrowest parts.

Harry decided to be methodical about things, and followed the shoreline south. Eventually he found a slightly larger than usual town. It was called Castletown, and Harry compared that to his map of Ireland with increasing distress. It was right on the water. It shouldn't be hard to find, but there was no Castletown on the water in Ireland.

If he wasn't in Ireland, where was he? Harry sat down on the beach where he'd found the sign and flipped to the back of his mapbook, scanning the index for Castletown. There were several of them. He flipped to each page and examined them thoroughly, but none of them were on the water, until he found the page titled 'Isle of Mann'.
That looked right. Harry sighed in relief and took a better look at the island he had landed on.

It was three days walk at its longest. It was positively tiny. Harry got up and kept walking along the beach, away from the town. He resolved to follow the shoreline and see how long it took him.

Two weeks later, Harry was feeling that distress again. The island was very pretty, but it was still an island. A small island. He was starting to feel claustrophobic.

He hadn't met many animals, outside of a few disgruntled goats and a couple feral cats that both hissed at the snake when they noticed it. The snake always hissed back, and Harry hissed at both of them to be quiet, which usually sent the cats running. The sheep here were alarming and had way too many horns. He didn't like this island.

He decided to get back to the harbour he'd arrived by and try to get a ferry back to England, where he at least had space to move around.

His first mistake had been taking the boat to the island in the first place. His second mistake was pausing on the way to Douglas when he tasted magic and following the trail to a small shed near a ramshackle cottage.

He ducked inside the barn, and just as he'd suspected, it was a larger-on-the-inside pub that reeked of magic.

It looked like a place for tourists, which made Harry immediately wary, but no one looked at him so he kept moving, looking around for an easy target. There was a woman sitting alone at a small table, giggling into her tankard. She was definitely a tourist, by the way she was dressed.

Harry had found that people that tasted like magic tended to dress oddly when trying to mix among the stale people, and this woman was no different. She had a pair of wellingtons on under a pinstriped skirt and a tie-dye t shirt. She must have been planning to 'blend in' later on with the locals. Harry thought the magical people were going about it all wrong. He just didn't mix with humans at all, stale or magical, unless they were having a boon.

Like right now, for instance.

"Hello," Harry said, standing next to the woman's table. She leapt in surprise and blinked owlishly at him.

"Hello, dear," she answered. "Aren't you precious?"

Harry wrinkled his nose at her. "I'm not," he denied, and got down to business. "I'm an elf. It's tradition among the elves of the Isle of Mann to welcome one special guest to our island every year by allowing them to make a trade with us," he told her. "This year, you've been chosen."

She beamed at him. "Oh, isn't that just delightful! They didn't have elves last time I came here!"

Harry stared at her. "Right," he continued eventually. "So what kind of boon would you like? The elves can provide you with anything within reason."

"Okay, honey!" she said, and put her chin in her hand. Finally she dimpled at him. "How about you go get my steak and kidney pie from the front?"

"For your ferry ticket?" Harry asked, smiling back at her. She beamed at him and pulled it out.
"How did you know I came the muggle way?" she asked, setting it on the table to show him. "It's so quaint, isn't it?"

Harry peered at it, certain he could find someone later to explain when Thursday at three o'clock was. He didn't want to go into town unless he was able to leave immediately after. He dutifully went up to the front and brought her food back when her order came up, and when he set the plate down, he palmed the ticket and stuck it in his bag.

"Have a lovely night, ma'am," he said. She beamed at him.

"You too, honey!" she said, picking up her knife and fork. Harry was nearly to the door when she suddenly shouted.

"Hey! Hey, he took my ferry ticket!"

Harry bolted, pulling the door open and dashing out, ready to disappear. He was a second too late, though. One of the magical people by the door acted quickly, grabbing him by the elbow as he dashed away. He set his arm on fire to make them let go, but the woman was already there, frowning down at him with her wand drawn.

"You made a trade," Harry told her stubbornly, trying to pull away from the man who still had him by the arm. Outside the pub, no one else was around. He needed to get away. "Let go of me!" He was panicking inside. He couldn't disappear unless the man let him go.

"I didn't think you were serious!" the woman snapped, suddenly looking a lot less tipsy than she had. "Where are your parents, young man?"

"I told you, I'm an elf!" he said, glaring. "Now let me go."

"You're not an elf," she said. "Give me back my ticket."

"I am!" he insisted. "You can bugger off if you don't believe me."

She put a hand to her mouth. The man holding Harry's arm jostled him.

"Watch your language, kid! What's your name?"

"Elves don't tell humans their names," Harry sneered. "You lot aren't careful enough with them."

The woman pursed her lips. "Look, just give me back my ferry ticket!"

"We had a fair trade," Harry said. "I did what you asked. You agreed that the ticket would be my payment."

"I didn't think you were serious!" She crossed her arms, trying to look foreboding. Harry hadn't had to worry about a foreboding adult since the Dursleys, though. He just glared back.

"I was," he said. "Elves don't joke about trades."

"House elves don't make trades," the man said. "We ain't stupid, kid."

"I'm not a bloody house elf," Harry snapped, ignoring the way the man tugged at his arm again. "I'm a forest elf. There's a bleeding difference, and it's not my fault you humans are all a bunch of clay brained, fangless pricks that only notice other species wandering around when they're useful to you."

He had gotten that last bit from a dwarf, and he thought it was a particularly clever bit of rhetoric.
The two humans disagreed if their faces were any indication.

"Look, kid," the man tried again. Harry huffed at him and shoved his hair out of his eyes, ready to snap out another irritated demand to be released. The woman interrupted his attempted interruption with a gasp, suddenly staring at him with wide eyes.

"His scar!" she said, suddenly way too close to Harry for comfort. He stumbled back toward the door, struggling against the man's grip.

"Did you see his scar?" she asked the man. "It looked like a lightning bolt! That's just like the Boy-Who-Lived's scar, isn't it? Do you think this is where he vanished to?"

The man knelt down and grabbed Harry's other arm. Harry stared at them both with wide eyes and struggled harder. "Let's see your forehead, kid."

Harry leaned as far away from the woman's hand as he could, but she managed to push his fringe back eventually. The two of them gasped. Harry set the man's arm on fire this time. He yelped when he finally noticed, letting Harry go. Harry stumbled away and disappeared before either of them could grab him again.

He reappeared at the edge of the forest and kept going, jumping as far as he could see. He reached the shoreline like that, barely stopping before he disappeared himself right into the sea.

He sat down on the edge of the cliff face, panting and staring back in the direction he'd come from. No one had followed, thankfully. They never did when he did that.

Whenever she had been planning to leave wouldn't be soon enough, now. The woman would know what ferry he was trying to leave on, too, and she might try to catch him.

He had to get off this bloody island.

Harry slept in the highest tree he could find that night, feeling absolutely trapped and miserable.

"I should have bitten them," the snake said with regret. "I am sorry for not helping."

"It's okay," Harry said, rubbing his face with one palm as he leaned back against the trunk and let one of his feet dangle. "If you'd bitten them, they probably would've just searched harder for us."

The next morning, Harry popped down from the tree into an ambush. A dark haired man in a dark cloak appeared from nowhere the moment Harry's feet touched the ground, and stared at him. Harry stared back, appalled.

"Harry Potter," the man said with relief, reaching a hand out to him. Harry stumbled back toward his tree instead, momentarily stunned. How did this man know his name?

"We've been looking for you, Harry," the man said, in a soft voice that sounded like it was far more used to scolding than soothing. "The Dursleys-"

Harry did not wait around to hear more. This was his biggest nightmare, come true. He disappeared immediately, back to the cliff face he'd ended up at yesterday. It was close enough that he didn't even really have to think about it, and when he got there, he started disappearing north, aiming for Douglas and the ferry.

The dark-cloaked man was waiting when Harry arrived at the docks, and Harry felt like crying. He
was looking around as though he knew Harry was near but couldn't quite spot him, which was good, because Harry was trying really hard to go unnoticed right then.

Harry squinted at the boat that had just docked. It wouldn't leave for a while; the people on board were still milling around with their vehicles, waiting to get off.

He couldn't wait where he was. The dark-cloaked man would almost certainly find him, given enough time. Harry disappeared back to the nearby forest, ever vigilant in case the man followed, and hunkered down in a tall tree. If he got on the boat before it was ready to leave, the dark-cloaked man might notice and then Harry would be trapped on a boat with him. Judging by the way he had been waiting when Harry woke up, the man had a way to find him.

His only hope was getting back to the main island, where the dark-cloaked man would have a lot more ground to cover and Harry would have a lot more room to hide.

And the only way to do that was to get on that ferry without the dark-cloaked man catching him. Drawing him away might work. Harry hated doing this kind of thing, but he was desperate. He was high enough in the tree that he could see the docks from where he sat, and when the ferry had finished reloading and looked ready to leave, Harry braced himself.

"Ready?" he asked. The snake hissed an agreement and wound himself tightly around Harry's wrist.

Harry disappeared back to where he'd been hiding, got his bearings, and reappeared right in front of the dark-cloaked man, who his wand, startled. Harry stared at him for a split second with wide eyes, then disappeared again, reappearing a hundred feet away where the dark-cloaked man would just barely be able to see him. Sure enough, the dark-cloaked man noticed him and disappeared himself. Harry didn't wait. He disappeared again, a hundred feet away from his last position, and sure enough, when he reappeared, the man was standing where he'd been, looking around for him. Harry disappeared again before he could be spotted, and popped onto the boat as it set off into the open sea.

He slid underneath a station wagon, heart pounding. He thought that stood a chance of having actually worked.

At least, he thought that until the dark-cloaked man's face appeared in the space between the tyres, filled with irritation.

"I do not have time for this," he said, grabbing Harry by the ankle and dragging him out from under the vehicle.

He ignored Harry's shouts and struggles and pulled him close, disappearing them together. Harry could feel from the pressure that it was a much further distance than he'd ever travelled alone.

When they reappeared, Harry stumbled away from the dark-cloaked man, frantically taking in his new surroundings. He was in a mountainous, forested area. There was a small town directly behind them, and they stood at a set of huge gates. Beyond the gates was a castle, larger than any of the ones Harry had been to before. Never mind taste; his entire being was filled with the richness of the magic in this place.

The dark-cloaked man grabbed him by the arm and dragged him through the gates, and Harry felt the shimmer of magic close over him in a sticky embrace. He could feel the restrictions settling over him, and knew that if he tried to disappear, he'd fail.

He had to find a way to escape.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!