Say a Prayer

by mad_fairy

Summary

During the summer between first and second year Harry does something that has unexpected consequences, for himself and for the wizarding world.
"Home sweet home." Harry said bitterly as the door of Dudley's second bedroom slammed closed behind him. "Well, I guess it was nice while it lasted. Stupid house elf."

Harry had been home from his first year at magic school for just a few weeks. It had been quiet and peaceful so far. He'd left his relatives with the impression that he could turn the lot of them into toads whenever he wanted if they gave him a hard time. Yeah, it had been kind of lonely--they'd taken to completely ignoring his existence wherever possible-- but still better than years previous.

It had all ended today. He'd walked into his room and found an odd creature that called himself a house elf. He had warned him against returning to Hogwarts. When Harry had refused to stay home, he'd gone downstairs and dumped a pudding on his uncle's guest's head with magic.

Now uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were both furious since uncle Vernon had lost the big deal he'd been trying to close. Even worse, they now knew he wasn't allowed to do magic. A note had come from the Ministry warning him against underage magic use--which was really unfair since it hadn't even been him! Even worse, the warning had landed in his uncle's hand rather than his own. Uncle Vernon had wasted no time taking all Harry's school things and locking them up in his old bedroom--the cupboard beneath the stairs.

He was now locked in, and according to Uncle Vernon he would continue to be for the foreseeable future.

"Stupid house elf. Stupid Ministry."

His owl, Hedwig, hooted from her cage.

"Tell that ruddy bird to be quiet or I'll break her ruddy neck!"

A cold feeling of horror fizzled through Harry's veins. He knew better than to think it was an idle threat. He couldn't even let her out because stupid Uncle Vernon had padlocked her cage shut! He hurried over to the cage and stroked her breast lightly to keep her calm. As he did his eyes fell on a latch he'd never really noticed before on the bottom of the cage.

"Huh. What's that?"

Some investigation gave him the answer. The bottom could be easily removed! He'd never noticed before. He'd always just reached in through the door to clean it before.

"Be real quiet, girl. Okay?"

He carefully undid the latches and lifted the top of the cage free, and then looked at the window. He really didn't want to do what he was about to do... but it was too dangerous for her not to. It was going to make being imprisoned in his room for the remainder of the summer a lot harder to take, and a lot lonelier too. In the end though Hedwig's life and safety was more important than his comfort.

He found an old notebook of Dudley's that had never been used and a broken pencil that still had a point. He tore out a page and scribbled a quick note, and attached it to Hedwig's leg with a bit of string.

"Take this to Ron, girl, and then stay there for the rest of the summer, okay? If he says he'll wring
your neck, he means it. It's not safe here."

Hedwig seemed to object to leaving him there on his own, but Harry was adamant.

"Go girl. Be safe. Don't let them see you, okay?"

Hedwig finally relented. She flew to his shoulder and groomed his hair gently before heading for the freedom of the open window. Harry watched her till she was out of sight, his heart heavy. Once she was gone he went and flopped on his bed and indulged in a prolonged pity party.

"It's been a weird year." Harry sighed.

A lot had happened. He'd met a talking snake, found out he was a wizard, gone to magic school, met the guy who'd murdered his parents…or what was left of him anyway. Now, he'd met a weird little green house elf, been threatened with more trouble at school, and was now being held prisoner by his loving relatives.

It was going to be a long summer. Hedwig had only be gone a few minutes and he missed her already. At least while she was here he had a fellow prisoner to keep him company.

In the end, Harry could only feel sorry for himself for so long. He was bored. Really bored. Bored enough to take a look at the piles of Dudley's broken junk that took up most of the space in the room in an attempt to distract himself from the fact that he was bored, lonely and trapped.

"Broken tv, broken game console, broken cars, broken action figures, unused school supplies…enough for three students. I really can't believe Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon let him be so bloody wasteful. Broken, burned, exploded, broken, broken, broken… Man. Why is all this crap even still in the house? Hmm… telescope. And it actually seems to be okay. Well, the base is broken and the casing is a bit cracked, but the lenses seem alright. Maybe I'll do some stargazing tonight. I do have astronomy homework… Wish I could remember what it was. Bugger. Encyclopedias, little engineer's project guide, everyday science, the wonderful world of mathematics… Who was dumb enough to buy all these for Dudley? It doesn't look like any of them was ever even opened. In fact, knowing Dudley I'm positive they weren't. The wonderful world of Doctor Who? Who's that? Children's classic literature. Boy Scout manual? Since when was Dudley a ruddy boy scout? Weird. Star Trek: The final frontier. What even is all this?"

Harry had always been a curious boy. Before Hogwarts books and the library had been his haven. He had long suspected that Dudley was allergic to books. He had often used that fact to his own advantage. Dudley and his gang had never bothered him when he'd hidden out in the library. It was odd, now that he thought about it. He'd become as bibliophobic as Dudley since he'd started Hogwarts. If he was honest it was mostly Ron's fault. Ron was as allergic to books and learning as Dudley. Harry had followed his lead so he wouldn't stop being friends with him.

Hermione, on the other hand, loved books, loved school work, loved learning. In a way she was just as responsible as Ron for Harry's aversion to the library. She liked being able to nag them about homework. He had thought, briefly, about letting his real intelligence show once he was away from the Dursleys and at Hogwarts, but his friendship with Ron and Hermione had killed that passing thought right quick.

He had been beyond curious about magic and all one could do with it, had wanted to delve into all its secrets… Instead, he had spent the year goofing off, playing endless rounds of chess and exploding snap and had only cracked open a book when absolutely necessary for homework or Voldemort-related research. He had a year of magic school under his belt, but in truth he knew little more than he had at the beginning of the year going in.
"It isn't like I can even try to make up for slacking off all year with all my stuff locked up," he realized. He sighed despondently and grabbed a book at random from the shelf and began flipping through it idly as he continued musing. "I can't even really do it while I'm back at school. Ron and Hermione are with me 24-7…except when I'm at quidditch practice. Can't really go early in the morning. I pretty much wake up in time for breakfast and not much else… and Hermione's usually already been awake for an hour or two. Damn."

Ron wouldn't leave him alone to read or study, and he would certainly blow a gasket if he wanted to spend time in the library.

Hermione would be supportive, but only so long as his grades never competed with hers. She was a vengeful sort and wouldn't take such an affront lying down. She would be as quick to sabotage his scholarly interests as Ron were that the case. It suddenly occurred to him that with the way things were he was pretty much going to miss out on actually learning as much as he wanted to about magic. It was a depressing, not to mention sobering, thought.

"What am I even reading? The wonderful world of mathematics. It's something to do, I guess. I used to be pretty good at maths… though this doesn't look like the maths we did in school. Huh. Something new then."

He grabbed one of the empty notebooks and the broken pencil from before and laid across his bed to start reading.

Harry woke with a start when he heard the lock on the door opening. He'd fallen asleep on Dudley's math book. He shoved it, the notebook and pencil under his pillow just as the door swung open. Aunt Petunia would take all the books from the room if she thought he liked them or was touching them.

To his surprise, it wasn't aunt Petunia at the door, it was uncle Vernon. He had a drill in his hand, several packages at his feet, and a manic look in his eye that made Harry very nervous.

"Boy! Go see your aunt!" he barked. Harry was quick to comply.

When he got downstairs aunt Petunia simply sneered at him and started him on chores. While he was weeding the garden a couple of men in a van appeared and installed bars over the window of Harry's room. Once they'd left, bars installed, Harry was called back in and given a sandwich--two slices of bread and a slice of cheese, and sent back upstairs. Uncle Vernon was waiting by his door looking well pleased with himself. He grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and tossed him inside, shutting the door behind him. The locks he'd just installed--a half dozen of them at least--were fastened one after another, each making a rather ominous 'snick' as they were engaged. Harry numbly noted a cat flap had been installed in the base of the door.

"Enjoy your stay boy! You'll be in there for a long, long time! You won't be going back to that ruddy school either! I've had enough! There will be no freaks and none of your ruddy nonsense in my house!"

Harry's blood ran cold and a cold sweat broke out all over his body. He banged on the door and rattled it in the frame, but Uncle Vernon just laughed and walked away.

"You quiet down in there, boy. If I have to come in there you won't enjoy it. Have fun, FREAK!"
He was trapped, a prisoner in his supposed 'home'. He had no way to tell anyone either; he'd sent Hedwig, his only link with the outside, away. Upon studying the bars on the window he realized it was probably just as well he had; she probably wouldn't have fit, even if he could get her out of her cage.

Yesterday had been his twelfth birthday; already twelve was looking to suck way more than eleven-- and he'd nearly gotten squashed by a troll and killed by one of his teachers while he was eleven! Finally, exhausted and despairing, Harry sunk down in a miserable heap against the door. As of right now, his only hope was that someone would notice if he didn't show up for school September 1st and come investigate. If they didn't, he was trapped for good.

The next few days passed with agonizing slowness. He was let out in the morning to use the bathroom and then was immediately locked back in. He was fed once a day through the cat flap--usually cold cans of soup still in the can and a small cup of water. The room was stifling, and he was hungry all the time.

He began making his way through all the books in the room one after another in a desperate bid to keep from going mad. It was easy to lose himself in tales of space travel-- Dr. Who, who sounded like a wizard: his ship was bigger on the inside than out, and he had a 'sonic screwdriver' that sounded sort of like a wand! He also travelled through time! Star Trek was a crew of thousands on a massive ship whose job was to explore the galaxy.

It all sounded rather grand to him. He himself had never been anywhere but here and Hogwarts, and trapped as he was, a chance to explore all the known universe sounded like just the thing. With those out of the way he turned to the encyclopedias he started with looking up topics related to space exploration and moved out from there. Once he'd exhausted those he just flipped through each of them and read whatever caught his fancy.

He lost track of time even while keeping his mind sharp as he could. The walls, and the routine, never changed, and the Dursleys remained as hateful as ever. He no longer knew if he'd been trapped there for days or weeks, or if any kind of rescue was on its way or ever would be.

All this was on his mind as he sat on the floor by the window, peering at the moon through the bars. "I'm not going to be able to get out of this on my own. I can't get out of the room, and even if I make a break for it when I'm let out for the bathroom, where will that leave me? I don't have any money, I don't have my wand either. With that I could at least try and do magic and get the ministry's attention…. And hope they rescue me rather than kick me out of school or arrest me."

It was at times like this that Harry really regretted his lack of parents. He had no one in the world to take his side, or look out for him. He'd been on his own for as long as he could remember--the Dursleys certainly never took care of him.

"I'm really stuck, aren't I? There isn't anyone."

The thought was entirely too depressing. He went back to his encyclopedia to try to take his mind off how very awful his life was. He was currently reading about Norse mythology. Harry figured Aunt Petunia didn't know there was stuff like that in here or she wouldn't have let them in the house.
"That's what I need. Intervention of a god would get me out of here. Who though? Not Thor. Yeah, he'd probably get me out, but he'd probably kill the Dursleys and wreck half the neighborhood before he was done, and then he would fry everyone with lightning. Loki would be a better choice. He'd do something sneaky. I need Slytherin not Gryffindor right now. I don't think Gryffindor tactics will help me much."

He chuckled to himself sadly as he realized Ron would probably disown himself as his friend if he could hear what he was thinking. Heck, Hermione probably would too.

"Maybe Slytherin with a touch of Ravenclaw. Sneaky and smart."

Harry smiled to himself wryly. "I guess I've finally cracked. My only escape plan is to hope an ancient Norse god decided to help me." He looked up at the moon again and chuckled. "Couldn't hurt, right? Loki, god of mischief. god of lies, hear my prayer. I need help. I need... help."
Strange meetings

Chapter Summary

An unexpected visitor sends Harry's summer into a new direction.

"Boy! Get up! Make it quick. I don't have all day to sit around waiting for you!"

Harry snapped awake and scrambled for the door, only to have aunt Petunia grimace and recoil as he passed her.

"Filthy freak! You stink!"

Harry turned a furious gaze on his aunt from the door of the bathroom. "In case you've forgotten, I've been kept prisoner for days now. I haven't been given a chance to take a shower, and all the rest of my clothes are locked up in my trunk!"

"Don't you backtalk me, boy!"

Harry just glared again and shut the door. When he emerged a few minutes later, feeling slightly better from having relieved himself, and drunk as much water as he could manage from the tap before his aunt got too impatient, he found her still standing in the hall, arms crossed and looking irate.

"Strip the bed. I won't have you stinking up my nice, clean house!"

Harry gritted his teeth and marched inside, doing as she ordered. Once the linens were in the wash she made him get a fresh set of clothes from his trunk. He managed to slip his wand into the pile without her seeing.

He was shooed upstairs and allowed five minutes to take a shower and change. There were fresh linens waiting on the bed when he returned and a layer of white powder on the rug inside. Harry sighed, made the bed, and then went down to fetch the vacuum. When he was done, he put his old sheets in the dryer, his dirty clothes in the wash and then was sent to vacuum the rest of the house. Once all the vacuuming and the laundry was done he was sent back upstairs and locked in once more.

Harry sunk down on the bed and pressed his hands between his knees to keep them from shaking. His all too brief taste of freedom just made being back in here that much worse, even if he did feel marginally better from being clean again.

"I will admit, I'm a bit confused. You're being held prisoner, but instead of overpowering that odious woman and making your escape when given a golden opportunity to do so, you asked me for help."

Harry jumped and nearly fell off the bed when the voice addressed him. As he watched, the area around the chair at his desk began to sparkle and the lights coalesced into a very tall man in very odd clothing…who strangely enough bore a strong resemblance to Harry himself.

Harry pointed his wand at the man and backed up as far as he could away from him.
"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man smirked at him. "I am Loki, of Asgard."

Harry's stomach did a flip and he gaped at the man for a long while. When he made no move, threatening or otherwise, he allowed his wand to drop until it pointed to the floor.

"Um… hi? No offense but… I really wasn't expecting anyone to answer."

"I almost didn't, but it has been a very long time indeed by your reckoning since the mortals of Midgard have called upon me for aid. I was curious. So… you are a prisoner, but rejected a chance to escape, so it must be something else… need a troll killed? That's what we were usually called for."

"Uh, no. If a troll comes along I can take care of that myself. You just have to whack it with its own club and knock it out. I don't think there's any trolls in Surrey in any case."

"You can take care of trolls but you cannot escape from a single ridiculous woman without aid? I am still confused."

"Trolls are easy if you've the skills to manage it. This" he waved his hand to encompass the room "Is more complicated. Yeah, I could have run out the front door, but what then? I'm a kid. If I'm off just wandering around on my lonesome, sooner or later the cops will pick me up and I'll either be brought back here or sent off to juvie hall. I'd still be a prisoner. Not to mention I haven't any money, and I'm not allowed to use magic during the summer. If I'm stealing food and whatnot I'll end up being arrested and then I'll be a prisoner again. If I try to use magic to make my situation better, I'll get in trouble. I've already gotten a warning from the Ministry this summer, that's how I ended up here, and it wasn't even me that did it!" he added bitterly.

"Why don't you back up and start the story from the beginning?"

"The beginning, huh? Well, for that I'll have to back up a bit."

"By all means."

So Harry did just that. He told him about living with the Dursleys and odd occurrences that always left his relatives bad tempered, talking snakes at the zoo and his visit by Hagrid to tell him he was a wizard and going to magic school. He told him about the weirdness with the philosopher's stone, the troll and the end of the year-- his teacher possessed by the man that had murdered his parents and still wanted to kill him.

Loki was a good listener, and he asked a lot of questions. Harry ended up talking for a couple of hours. Loki was nice enough to conjure up a glass of water for him when he started getting hoarse from talking for so long.

When Harry finally fell silent, Loki sat back with his hands steepled in front of him, deep in thought.

"Well, this will never do. Since I have chosen to answer your plea, I suppose I am now beholden to helping you… and I will admit, I have no desire to leave a young Seiðmaðr in such odious conditions if I have any say in the matter. Very well. It is decided. You will be coming with me, for the remainder of the season at least. After that you can return to your school."

"With you? Uh…okay. If you're sure. I don't want to be a bother."
"If you were I would not have made the offer."

"Um, thanks. Where are we going to go? Are we going to Asgard?" he asked in sudden excitement.

"Sadly, no. I daresay Odin would be, shall we say, less than pleased with me should I bring a mortal to the city eternal. Not to worry. I have a little place in London. We can stay there for the remainder of the summer. Now sit tightly for a moment while I arrange things with your…aunt."

"Aunt Petunia? You can't! If she knows you're here she'll kill me!"

"She will do no such thing, I assure you. I won't be a moment."

Loki stood, and standing was even taller than Harry realized. The funky gold horned helmet he wore barely cleared the ceiling. He waved his hand at the door and the many locks unlatched and the door swung open. Loki sauntered out, cool as you please and down the stairs like he owned the place.

Harry heard aunt Petunia shriek when she caught sight of Loki and winced, but it got quiet after that. Harry waited tensely for the sound of dishes being thrown, or more shrieking, but it never came. Finally he couldn't take his curiosity any longer and crept to the top of the stairs and peeked down. There was no one in the living room. Quietly he crept the rest of the way down the stairs and peeked down the hall. Loki and a somewhat dazed looking aunt Petunia were in the kitchen. Aunt Petunia was signing something which flashed with light when she was finished, before rolling itself up into Loki's hand and disappearing.

"Ah, Harry, child. Good timing." he waved his hand and the locked door to the cupboard under the stairs sprung open. "Let us gather your things and we'll be off."

Loki gestured at Harry's trunk which rose off the ground, spun in place between Loki's hands a few times and disappeared.

"You can't go outside looking like that!" Petunia shrieked, seeming to recover her wits all at once. "What will the neighbors think!"

"Hmmm…Yes, I suppose you're right." Loki sparkled like he had when he first appeared and his leather outfit vanished leaving a very expensive looking three piece suit in its place. Loki sniffed and brushed some imaginary lint off his lapels and struck a pose. "Better?"

Petunia relaxed and nodded, though she still looked rather pinched and unhappy. Loki looked at the worn, massively oversized clothing Harry was wearing and wrinkled his nose in distaste before waving a hand at him. Harry's clothing changed till he was wearing a matching suit. "There. Much better. Well, let us be off. Time is wasting." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and smiled insincerely in Petunia's direction. "Madame. A pleasure."

Petunia's sour grimace proved she heard the lie in his words and didn't appreciate it. Her eyes fell on Harry and she seemed to grow uncertain all of a sudden.

"Where are you taking him?"

"That, madame, is no longer your concern, remember?"

Man and boy vanished out the door. Petunia shrugged and went to the living room; if she was lucky she'd be able to catch the end of her show.

Outside, Harry took his first breath of fresh air in two weeks and smiled. Movement above his head
caught his eye and he spotted two large ravens perched on the phone line, watching them. Loki didn't seem to notice their presence, he simply guided him down the street. As they passed Magnolia Crescent, he spotted Mrs. Figg on her lawn surrounded by her many cats and waved to her. She didn't wave back, just hurried inside looking worried. Maybe she hadn't seen him?

Loki led them to the park and then smiled. "Hold on tight, child." Between one step and the next they were gone.

Harry jumped under Loki's hand, looking around in awe at the new place they'd suddenly appeared in. It was a large apartment, with high ceilings and done in rather grandiose style. Large intricate tapestries covered many of the walls, with floor to ceiling velvet draperies covering the windows in between.

"Here we are." He set off into the apartment and looked around, Harry followed along after him like a lost puppy. Everything had happened so fast, he was still trying to wrap his mind around how quickly his circumstances had changed. Loki gestured again and Harry's trunk reappeared.

"You mentioned you'd not had a chance to do your school work. Why don't you get started on that. I'll be back shortly."

"You're leaving?"

"I'm going to make a quick trip to your ministry to register your change of residence. While the mortal authorities can't really do anything to me, it would still be irritating to have them dogging our steps."

"Can you get them to remove the underage magic charge while you're at it? The warning I got said if I got more warnings I might be expelled. I don't want to chance it, especially since it wasn't even me."

"I can certainly look into it. You get to work. I'll return shortly."

Harry's stomach grumbled.

"Olaf! Brunhild!"

Harry jumped when two little green people popped into place before them. Harry would have been more amazed had he not already met Dobby a few days (weeks?) ago.

"Is the kitchen stocked?"

"We cans gets right on it. How longs yous be staying?"

"Until September 1st at least. This is Harry. He is my new ward. He'll be staying with us. Get him some food, something light to start with. He's not been getting much to eat lately so he may have to work his way up to regular meals. After that, lots of food fit for a growing boy. Oh, and get his measurements. He needs a whole new wardrobe."

"Yes master Loki!"

"We does it right quick!"

"Good, all settled then. Get started on your homework. I'll be checking over it before I allow you to
hand it in, so do a good job. Stay put, don't poke around unless one of them are with you. I'm not sure if there's anything dangerous here, but one can never be too careful. I'll return when I'm finished. Oh, and before I forget, sign this."

"What is it?" Harry asked curiously, peering at the contract closely.

"Authorization for me to get your bank records. One would think even the most unprofessional of banks would have sent you at least a quarterly statement, or something. I'd like to see what you have to work with and if any unauthorized withdrawals have been made since your parents' deaths, see if you have any property, debts that need clearing, that sort of thing. If I get any such records I'll go over them with you at a later time."

"Uh, okay?"

"Excellent. Sign."

Harry went to do so, but Loki pulled the contract away and shook his head in disappointment.

"First lesson, child. Never ever sign a contract unless you know what it says. Read it first."

Harry did so. Loki patted him on the head. After he'd read through he signed. The contract popped to Loki's hand, where it rolled up and vanished a moment later. A few seconds later he was gone as well. Harry stared at the space he'd been for a moment, and then jumped when he realized one of the house elves was hovering around him while a measuring tape followed him.

"Put your arms out straight and stand still. Olaf is working here!"

"Right. Sorry?"

When the elf was done he vanished. Left with nothing else to do, Harry dug out his school books and settled down at the table to start in on the mountain of homework he had to complete.

"Argh."

"You growled, ickle Ronnikins?"

"Oh, shut it, you."

"So? What's gotten you in such a lovely mood?"

Ron just glowered, but the twins just grinned in return and draped themselves over each of his shoulders. Ron tried for several minutes to shake them off to no avail.

"Fine. I'm worried about Harry. Satisfied?"

"Has something happened?"

"Besides not getting any answers to my letters for weeks, besides getting a crazy letter about a mail-stealing house elf and him sending his owl away to safety? Nothing much, unless you count Hedwig suddenly getting all agitated and taking off like her ruddy tail was on fire yesterday! Something's wrong. I just know it. I know mum thinks he just forgot to write back and was trying to sound cool or something, or being dramatic, but I don't think so." he hesitated to speak further, but if Harry was in trouble it might be important. "I don't think his relatives' house is a good place
He glared at each of the twins in turn, waiting for them to make a joke or prank him in some way, but to his relief they were serious. They were sometimes. Sadly, not often enough.

"What makes you say that?"

"It's a feeling I have. I mean, it isn't like he told me they beat him or anything. It's just… Okay. It's like this. When we were heading back on the Express I said I couldn't wait to get home. He said he wished he didn't have to be stuck at the Dursleys house. I've never heard him call it home. Not even once. That's weird, don't you think? And he's skinny, and short and I know he's hungry but he eats like a ruddy bird. Well at first he did. He didn't seem to be able to eat much. It got better as time went on, he was able to eat more and keep it down… but he still hardly eats compared to everyone else, you know? And his clothes and stuff. The stuff he's got, it's, well it's all worn and stuff and none of it actually fits him. He didn't get any letters all year, and he didn't send any. He wasn't expecting presents for Christmas. He never calls them his family. He always says 'the Dursleys' or 'my relatives'."

The twins traded a look over Ron's head. He'd noticed more than they would have given him credit for, and they had to admit, put all together like that it didn't sound good.

"Well, it's obvious what we've got to do"

"Indeed, brother. We cannot leave icle Harrykins at the mercy of his cruel muggles."

"There is no choice"

"No choice at all."

"We're going to have to perform a rescue mission!" they concluded in unison.

"You'll help me?"

"Who said you were going along?"

"I have to! I'm his best mate! And if you don't let me I'll get you in trouble with mum."

"Ickle Ronnikins. Stooping to blackmail!"

"They grow up so fast!"

"Be serious! What's the plan?"

"You leave that to us. You just act like everything is normal. We can't do anything till mum and dad are out of the way in any case, which means we can't do much till tonight after everyone's asleep."

"We'll let you know when it's time."

"Boys! Breakfast!"

"Remember, act natural."

The three boys clattered down the stairs and found their mother loading down the table. Their sister, Ginny, was already there in her dressing gown chattering about something or other, and their brother Percy looking constipated as always. Moments after they sat down and began loading down
their plates their father came in.

"Morning all. Another busy night. More raids. Well, I shouldn't complain. It means overtime." he sighed as he took a seat as well. He glanced at Ron and seemed to remember something.

"Ronald...have you heard from Harry Potter lately?"

"No, not since he sent his owl here. She left yesterday. I keep telling mum something is wrong but she won't listen."

"Honestly, Ronald! You need to stop this! Harry Potter is fine! Dumbledore is looking after him. He's perfectly all right!"

"Why'd ya ask, dad?" George wondered.

"Well, rumor at the Ministry is that he's got a new guardian."

"He does?"

"Who though? He doesn't have anyone else! I wonder if that's why Dumbledore said we couldn't go get him...?"

"You were going to go get him?"

"Well, I asked if he could visit for the remainder of the summer... Frankly, I was getting tired of you nattering on about him day and night. I asked Albus if we could get him but he said he needed to stay where he was and it just wasn't possible. I told him about how worried you were, but he agreed that he was just being dramatic, like I told you, a hundred times no less!" Ron's mother, Molly Weasley, huffed irritably.

"He might not have known. There was no word around the Ministry about anything of the sort. In any case it's a done deal now. Loki Odinson is Harry Potter's new custodial and magical guardian. He also had the underage magic warning stricken from his record. He claims it was a house elf as well, likely sent by a classmate trying to get him in trouble."

"It was probably Malfoy. That's something he'd do, the prat."

"Who is this Loki Odinson, and who does he think he is just, just interfering like this?" Molly demanded.

"That's why I was hoping Ron had heard from the boy. I didn't get a chance to speak to him, but someone pointed him out to me as he was leaving the Ministry. He looked like a dark pureblood. He was even prancing around with a cane like Lucius Malfoy." Arthur growled "Not the sort of person who should have control of Harry Potter!"

Molly gasped in horror, imagining Harry in the clutches of an evil dark wizard, and began to weep quietly into her apron. "Oh, Arthur! The poor boy! Whatever shall we do?"

Ron stabbed his eggs angrily. "Oh sure, now you'll believe something's wrong, but when I tell you as much I'm just being silly!" Molly began weeping louder.

"That's enough, Ron."

"Is he even still at the Dursleys?"

"I wouldn't think so, not if he has a new guardian."
"So we don't even know where he is or anything?"

"I'm afraid not."

"So? You'll just see him at school." Ginny scoffed.

"What if this dark pureblood sticks him in Durmstrang or something, did you think of that?"

Ginny's eyes grew enormous. "DAD! WE HAVE TO FIND HIM!"

"Not to worry, Gin-Gin, I'm sure Dumbledore will get this Odinson fellow straightened out in no time."

"If this Mr. Odinson is his legal guardian, I don't see where Dumbledore really has anything to say about it, especially if the guardianship has already been approved by the Ministry." Percy objected. "And why is it anyone's concern in the first place? Maybe this fellow will be a proper guardian and shape Potter up a bit. I don't mind telling you he was a bit of a disappointment in many quarters. People expected a bit more for the so-called savior of the wizarding world" he added snidely.

"Shut your trap, Percy!"

"You take that back!" Ginny growled right on Ron's heels. The twins each threw a roll at him.

"THAT'S ENOUGH! NO THROWING FOOD!"

"Time to be getting up, young master. The master is awaiting you at breakfast."

Harry blinked at Brunhilde sleepily and then sat up. He peered around his new lodgings and couldn't help the giddy smile that broke across his face. His new room was a loft space in Loki's apartment. There were only three walls and no door, just steps leading down to the lower level, which suited him fine; he had a feeling he was going to be twitchy in locked rooms for some time. He jumped out of bed with a smile, eager to greet the new day, and found clothing waiting for him at the foot of the bed: a green tunic, black trousers and a pair of knee-high boots.

Harry got dressed, spent a moment trying to tame his always unruly hair, and clattered down the stairs to find Loki already seated at the table, going through a stack of old papers. Two scrolls, which looked like Harry's completed assignments from the day before, were waiting by his seat at the table.

"Help yourself. There's food aplenty."

Breakfast was weird-- there was a thick nutty porridge of some sort with honey in it, a selection of fruit, and then there was meat. There was a lot of meat.

"Breakfast meats are a true delight. Midgardians have so many of them! It does make a nice change. Take one of each!"

Harry also noted there was a couple of potions beside his plate.

"I'd suggest drinking those down first. They don't taste very pleasant, I'm afraid, but the taste of your breakfast should wash it away."

"What are they for?"
"Just a little something to strengthen you up and shore up any deficits. A child your age needs good food and plenty of it so you can grow up big and strong. You likely missed a growth spurt this summer from being kept on short rations and locked up as you were. I'm hopeful those will help rectify that."

That was really all Harry needed to hear. He'd been one of the shortest in his year last year; the idea that everyone else might have had a growth spurt and left him even shorter in contrast was a horrifying one. He shuddered and gagged at the taste and ended up downing a whole glass of milk to try to wash it off his tongue.

Harry took some of the porridge and ate as much as he could stomach--which sadly, wasn't much. He was still hungry, but he knew if he ate another bite it would likely just come back up. To distract himself from his nausea, he unrolled his homework from the night before and gaped at it in horror. The whole parchment was covered in red ink.

"What… Why?!"

"I did tell you I was going to look at it. It's just a few pointers to make your essay a bit better. Your handwriting is atrocious, by the way."

"I have to redo them now!"

"Yes, eventually. Do the rest first and then worry about it. I would suggest you give your first year texts a good read through when you get a chance. Even if you don't show the whole of what you are capable of to the rest of the world, you should still have mastery of the material for your own sake."

Loki didn't raise his voice, or yell at him or anything, and yet his quiet disappointment burned far worse than any screaming rage ever could. Harry squirmed in his seat in embarrassment. He really had been sort of coasting by, only doing the absolute minimum, and letting Hermione do most of his thinking and research for him. If he kept it up he was going to be as dumb as Dudley by the time he graduated Hogwarts--that's if he could even manage to graduate Hogwarts.

Loki just nodded, content that his point had been made and went back to what he was doing.

Harry gathered his books and got started on the remainder of his homework. After about an hour, he realized his nausea had passed, but he was still hungry. Happily, most of breakfast was still laid out, and still hot. He got himself some of the meats laid out and snacked on them while finishing his essay. An hour after that he had some of the fruit while finishing his second assignment. He had a bit more porridge after his third.

By that point Loki was done with whatever it was he'd been doing.

"I think that's enough for right now. You can finish the last two tomorrow. I think a bit of practical magic is in order. Let's see what you learned and see where it can be improved."

"I can't do magic over the summer."

"I got you a limited exemption just to be safe, but there's also the fact that we're in the heart of London. The Ministry's magic sensors can tell when magic is being used, but not who is actually performing it. There are enough adult wizards in London that any magic performed is assumed to be done by an adult wizard. It's only in a case like yours--you were the only wizard in that area and underage to boot--that a warning is sent out. Your classmates that are from wizarding families can, if their families allow it or just don't know about it, use magic to their hearts' content."
"That isn't fair!"

"No, but there is some logic behind the move. There is no one around to reverse or undo anything a child, like yourself might do, whether by accident or on purpose, and the only people in the area are all ordinary humans who are not supposed to know about the existence of magic in the first place."

"If that's the case though why'd you get an exemption? If they wouldn't know anyway…"

"Given what you've told me of your life and circumstances thus far, it seemed obvious to me that your headmaster was not going to take your change of guardian with any grace and will likely take some pains to discredit me in some way. Better to establish myself as a Ministry-loving, rule abiding sort from the get-go in order to avoid the annoyance. It also makes me seem rather naïve. Most wouldn't bother to get an exemption for tutoring purposes knowing the Ministry wouldn't be able to tell it was you doing it. Those who want to interfere will underestimate me because of it, or at least think I'm a different sort of person than I actually am."

"Oh. That makes sense, I guess. But that means I can do magic? Really?"

"Yes, though I'm afraid magic for fun will have to wait a bit. We're going to go over what you should have learned last year. Your studies tend to build on one another. If you don't have mastery of the basics you will find it much harder to master the material in later years." He slapped his thighs and stood. "Grab your wand and let us get started, hmm?"

Harry's smile was blinding as he ran to do just that.
Loki the slavedriver

Chapter Summary

Harry gets used to his new lodgings.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone who left kudos. Comments are welcome as well :D

"Better. Do another."

"Are you kidding me?!” Harry groaned. He flopped his head and arms dramatically on the table and made a pitiful whimpering sound. "My hand is going to fall off!"

"It will not. You may take a short break, but then I want that sheet finished. As you proceed in your magical studies there will come times when, believe it or not, the quality of your penmanship may actually make the difference between success and catastrophic failure. Beyond that, in a letter-writing society your penmanship is your first introduction to others many times. Though it may not make a huge impact in how others regard you, do not fool yourself that it does not make an impact. It does. There is also your schooling to consider. If you do not believe that you earn a lower grade than you might have otherwise because of poor penmanship you are an idiot."

"Fine, fine." Harry groaned, pulling the next worksheet closer to begin another round of training exercises. "I get it. My writing looks like chicken scratches"

"Or possibly the sight of a murder, given the many ink splotches."

"I'm not using red ink"

"So it was a blue blood that got whacked."

"Ha ha." Harry snickered. "Can we do something fun after this?"

"I was planning to teach you some basic self-defense now that your school work is mostly out of the way."

"What do you mean mostly? I finished all my essays."

"You really think you're not going to rewrite them all with your improved handwriting?"

Harry gaped at him in horror, but Loki just smirked back, quite unconcerned with his glare.

"After that then? Can we do something fun?"

"Hmmm… Well we do have a little bit of time before you need to return to your schooling. I suppose a small pleasure jaunt is not too much to ask. Did you have something in mind?"
"Um…well, not really. I've never really been anywhere or seen anything much. I don't even have any real idea of what people do for fun. Are you sure we can't go to Asgard?"

"No we cannot. Technically I shouldn't even really be here with you. We, the people of Asgard that is, used to come here quite regularly, but eventually the All-Father declared Midgard a Protectorate and laid down a no-interference law. That isn't to say no one actually visits anymore, just that everyone who does is technically breaking the law."

"Oh. You're not going to get in trouble, are you?"

"I have ways to keep my presence hidden. It would be a bit harder to do if I were flitting about Asgard with a Midgardian child in tow right beneath Odin's nose."

"Could we see one of the other realms?"

"The only ones it would really be somewhat safe to take you to are neither of them very inviting. The more populated realms are all out as word would get back eventually to Odin and that's something I would prefer to avoid."

"It would still be another planet. Not many people from Earth can say they've been on another planet. Only a couple have even ever been on or near our moon. Why are they uninviting?"

"Jotunheim is beautiful in its own way, I suppose, but it is a frozen wasteland floating in space. It's rather sparsely populated, so chances are we would be overlooked wandering around there, so long as we were careful. If that does not interest you, I suppose we could go to Svartalfheim. The dark elves died out long ago, or so the histories say. Again, it's a bit of a barren wasteland, and much like Jotunheim it is rather dim compared to Asgard or Midgard. The dark elves shunned the light; all their settlements are deep underground where the light never reaches."

"Have you been there before?"

"A few times. Asgard battled against them long ago. Their settlements were stripped of most of their technology. Most Asgardian technology is actually based on their work, the small bits of it our people were able to understand and reverse engineer. I was curious about them. There are still warehouses filled with the remnants of their civilization that Asgard has never been able to unravel."

"Could we go there and poke around the dark elves place?"

"It may not be possible this summer, but perhaps at some later date. It is a long trip, and it would be a slight strain to take another with me. I have only ever traveled the ways alone. Perhaps with some training…? Let me consider it."

"Okay. That was kind of it as far as my ideas went."

"Let me think about it. I'm sure we can figure something out."

"Okay." Harry sighed. The only sound thereafter was the soft scritch scritch of his quill against parchment until Brunhilde suddenly appeared with an owl on her wrist, who flew towards Harry when they appeared.

"Oh, it's my Hogwarts letter." Harry reached for it, but Loki held up a hand to stop him. He wriggled his finger and detached the letter from the owl's leg and held it suspended in the air. The owl hooted in offense and flew off in a flurry of feathers and flapping wings.
"Brunhilde, darling, bring me a small stone or a piece of junk, would you?"

Brunhilde vanished and returned with a small stone from outside. Loki wriggled his fingers again and a small glimmer of light detached from Harry's letter and wrapped around the stone before sinking in to it.

"What's going on? What's that?"

"That my dear is a bit of magic meant to lead someone right to you. I don't care to have any unexpected visitors, and I quite resent anyone thinking they could trick me." He held it out towards Harry. "Brunhilde, dear, once Harry touches this, take it and throw it into the ocean or a deep lake or something, would you?"

Harry's eyes widened and he snorted when he pictured Dumbledore trying to wade out of the ocean with his robes sodden and a fish caught in his beard. Even a few weeks ago he would have been aghast to even think about joking like that about Dumbledore. That was before he found out Dumbledore was the one who stuck him with the Dursleys, before he found out he was listed as his guardian in the magical world, or that he had himself listed as having total access to Harry's inheritance--including parts of it he didn't even know existed. He was still irritated about all of it.

He felt like he was constantly playing catch up and because he didn't know what he didn't know he didn't even know the right questions to ask to start making sense of things. He was tired of people keeping things from him 'for his own good', or 'because he was too young'. There were people out there who wanted him dead; what he didn't know could actually kill him. With that in mind, the thought of Dumbledore popping off to stick his nose in where it wasn't wanted and landing in the ocean instead made him very happy. He touched the stone with a smile on his face and waved cheerfully at Brunhilde when she vanished with it a moment later.

Loki checked over the letter a second time and then let it land in Harry's outstretched hand. Harry tore it open eagerly and read through the book list for that year.

"Wow… The teacher really likes Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Who is Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Dunno. A guy who writes books. We have like, seven books by him on the list." Harry explained, handing it over when Loki held out a hand for it. Harry seemed to be deep in thought while Loki looked over his school letter. "Something on your mind?"

Harry started and bit his lip in the way Loki had come to learn meant he was biting back his words.

"Speak."

"Can you show me how to do that thing you did?"

"It helps if you are more precise."

"Pulling the locator thingy off the letter. How'd you even know it was there?"

"I am very aware of my surroundings. If you continue to practice the exercises I've been having you do you might one day be nearly as aware. I am considerably more powerful than you…though you are actually quite powerful for a barely trained Midgardian child."

"Me? Nah. If you want powerful you'd want someone like Dumbledore…or even Hermione. She gets every new spell we learn on the first try most times, and she always seems to know
"Then your friend is learned and skilled… she is not necessarily powerful. I could be wrong, of course. I have no way of knowing for certain without being close to her. The mere fact that she has such ease with magic actually does point to her being less powerful, perhaps by a significant degree."

"That doesn't make any sense though. She's the one that's good at magic. How could I be more powerful than her?"

"More powerful, not more skilled, at least not yet. If you continue your exercises and your studies that should change. Now, how to explain it in a way you would understand. Are you familiar with fire hydrants?"

"Yeah?"

"You've seen the water gushing from them in a torrent? Fire fighters struggling with hoses attached to them as they battle a house fire?"

"Yeah?"

"Now think of a faucet on a sink. The water can be easily adjusted from a small trickle to a more robust flow…but even at the highest setting it never approaches the fury of the hydrant unleashed."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Think of doing magic as needing a precise amount of water to wet a particular item or spot and no other. For someone whose magic is a sink faucet this is easily done. The pressure is considerably less to begin with, and so it is more easily controlled, more easily doled out into small, precise amounts to do the required job. If someone has a fire hydrant that becomes considerably more difficult. Instead of filling the delicate china cup, the power overwhelms the cup and smashes it, or knocks it out of your hand. The more you practice, the more easily you will find it to pull what you need for a particular work and no more. I suggest you practice at least an hour each day just going through the various spells you know until you have mastered them, and once you have mastered them try to refine them further. The less magic you use for each spell, the more spells you can do, and the longer you will be able to last in a battle, or just in doing a complicated working that requires many spells in succession."

"Huh. You really think I'm powerful though? I know people have told me that before, but I never really believed them because they weren't talking about me, they were talking about "the-boy-who-lived"."

"You are, and with practice and study you will learn to utilize that power, and once you have, the world is at your fingertips."

Harry smiled happily at Loki's words, but his smile quickly faded. "It won't be though. Voldemort is after me. Dumbledore thinks he's just going to keep coming after me until one of us is dead."

"Silly child. That just means you need to make sure the one dead is him, not you."

"I don't want to kill anyone."

Loki sighed and reigned in his impatience. Being raised in a place like Asgard hadn't really prepared him to be a mentor to a pacifist child who feared to strike even the one who had wronged him so greatly. In Asgard it was a given that you would strike hard and fast at your enemies and
make sure they were dead, and then spend the night drinking and singing songs about it. A child like Harry striking down the man that murdered his parents would have been feasted for days for finally getting vengeance. He was not of as martial a bent as most Asgardians, but even for him the idea of not wanting to strike down the one who wronged you was a foreign one.

"Child, if what you told me of him possessing a teacher and only being 'mist and shadow' except when possessing another is true, you actually wouldn't be killing anyone. You'd be laying an unclean spirit to its proper rest where it can no longer trouble the living realm it is no longer a part of."

Harry frowned unhappily and rubbed at the scar on his head.

"Speaking of… I had meant to examine that scar of yours. There is a lot of magic tied up in it. I don't like the feel of it at all. I would like to dig the darkness out of it if at all possible. I don't think it's good for you, leaving it there. I won't be doing so today, however. I would like to take my time examining the structure of it before I make any decisions about what, if anything, to do about it. I suppose you want to do your school shopping?"

"Yeah. Wait…I can't. Hagrid has my key."

"Your old key. I had your headmaster's access to your vault cut off and had new keys made for you. They should be in the center drawer on top of your desk."

"You did? They are?"

Harry ran to his room and found a trio of small golden keys on a ring right where Loki said they would be. He tidied up and headed back out to find Loki waiting for him. Loki put his hand on his shoulder when they both were ready and did his travel trick. They found themselves in the alley just outside the entryway. Loki studied the wall a moment and tapped a couple of the bricks with his finger, activating the archway.

"Since you're my guardian now, do you have access to my vault?"

"No. I'm a prince of Asgard. I have business concerns in several of the realms. Even here on Midgard I have several lucrative business ventures. I have no need to rob an orphan child of his inheritance."

"You think Dumbledore was planning to rob me?"

Loki shrugged. "I do not know the man, so I cannot say one way or another…but one does have to wonder why else he would give himself such access. It was not necessary if his intention was to curb your spending while you were too young to be responsible with large amounts of money. He could have simply put a limit on how much you were allowed to draw out each year, like I did."

"You…what?"

"I was very generous. It is unlikely you will ever need to draw anywhere near five hundred galleons a year at your age. It allows enough for your school supplies, supplements to your wardrobe and enough for holiday shopping and a bit of mad money for non-essentials. Even with all that you're unlikely to overstep your limit. If you do it will serve as a reminder to be more mindful of your spending."

"Oh."

The alleys were somewhat busy, but it was nowhere near the crowded bustle that had been present
the last time he'd been there.

"I wonder why there's so few people?"

"The school letters just went out. Most parents are probably at work and will wait for the weekend or later in the week when they can make arrangements to be absent for a few hours."

"I'm glad we came early. I don't like crowds much."

"Neither do I."

As much fun as he'd had on his first school shopping trip, his second trip was magnitudes better. It was nice browsing the alleys at a leisurely pace and having a chance to look around and buy stuff that wasn't on his list. With Hagrid he'd been dragged from stop to stop, only allowed what was on the list and hurried along when he took too long. It was a lot less stressful with the smaller crowd and being able to take his time. It also helped having an adult around who was more concerned with making sure he had all he needed to be prepared for a year at school rather than just what was on his list.

Another difference was when they reached the book store. When he'd been there with Hagrid he'd tried to get a book that would teach him curses to use on Dudley the next time he tried to beat him up-- before he'd known he wouldn't be allowed to use magic when not in school. Hagrid hadn't let him buy any extra books. Loki insisted on it. They spent nearly two hours at the bookstore. Loki prowled through the stacks, perusing titles, subjects of interest and supplemental reading he thought Harry might find helpful.

"These aren't going to fit in my trunk. It's usually pretty packed just with the usual stuff. Now I've got a lot more clothes so it's going to be stuffed already…then there's the SEVEN text books for DADA this year. I'm not going to have room for all these."

"That's easily solved. Olaf."

"You is calling?"

"Yes, empty out Harry's trunk and take it to the trunk maker's shop. Have them add in a book compartment and an extra regular compartment."

"It shall be done."

"They can do that?" Harry asked curiously after Olaf left.

"Of course."

"Why didn't anyone tell me they could do that?"

Loki sighed and poked him in the nose.

"Read your books. Learn. If you don't seek out knowledge, or ask questions, or investigate the things you are curious about, how will you know what all is out there? If you do nothing else this year, child, promise me you won't let your mind, your curiosity, and your delight in magic wither on the vine."

Harry bit his lip and peered up at him through his eyelashes for a moment. Loki arched an eyebrow and waited.
"The first thing I ever learned was don't ask questions. I heard it at least a dozen times a day, every day of my life. Any time I asked a question, that was my answer. When Hagrid brought me my letter and told me I was a wizard, I thought I'll finally have someplace to belong, and things will be different now. They weren't though, not really... though it took me a little while to realize it, because it was a different kind of the same. I learned not to ask questions while I was with the Dursleys, but it didn't really matter because most of the time I was invisible to them, or I could at least make myself so. I couldn't ask, but I could listen, because half the time they forgot I was there and the rest they were content to mostly ignore me between insults. I can't do that here. I'm excessively visible. I can't walk down the hall, or eat in the great hall..."

He sighed quietly as a couple of witches murmured "Sweet Merlin, that was Harry Potter! Did you see the scar?"

"... or stand in Diagon Alley having a conversation without everyone marking my every word and move. No one told me 'don't ask questions', but they told me other stuff that pretty much amounts to the same thing. I learned to hear what wasn't said at a young age. It was the only way to keep myself relatively safe at the Dursleys. The hat told me I'd do well in Slytherin. I told it anywhere but, because I already understood that I was probably done for if I was anything but the golden hero they'd already decided I had to be. The only way it would be allowed was if I went into Ravenclaw. Ron and Hagrid, and even Hermione all told me Gryffindor is best, but Ravenclaw is an acceptable second choice. If I went there I would have been allowed to learn to my heart's content, but only if I kept my head down and stayed locked in the ivory tower. I like learning and all, but I don't love it the way Hermione does. I don't think I would have been any happier stuffed into the role of 'bookish nerd' than I am with 'golden hero boy'."

Harry looked away and watched the crowd wander by for a bit as he gathered his thoughts.

"Ron and Hermione would tell you I was crazy and imagining things, thinking like that... but then they didn't believe me that Dumbledore set things up so I would go down to face Voldemort either."

He looked back at Loki and he looked far too jaded and weary for one so young. "I know better... but I also know that if I don't toe the line things will go very badly for me very quickly. I have to be The Boy-Who-Lived...but he's a true Gryffindor. He charges off without a plan, hates Slytherins down to his bones, and prefers quidditch and exploding snap to books and homework."

Loki smirked at him almost fondly. "Ah child. You chose better than you knew when you called me. If anyone can teach you how to do survive in a house of brain-dead warrior types and run circles around them without them noticing, it's me. The difference between us is that I long ago grew tired of trying to wedge myself into the role of 'big dumb warrior' and chose to simply be myself, while you're still trying to play the game by their rules."

"I just turned twelve at the end of last month. I have six more years of Hogwarts. I have five more years till I'm of age. Up until just a few days ago I lived with the Dursleys, which meant that I had no one in my corner, except on paper, but that was enough to keep everyone convinced that everything was fine. That's kind of the problem with being a kid. You don't really have much choice but to play by everyone else's rules, especially if you're an orphan."

Loki grinned conspiratorially as he nudged him gently towards the exit. "Perish the thought, dear boy. You are a disciple of Loki now. The first rule is rules are for other people. The second is make your own rules."

"Keep your rules to yourself. I do what I want."
Loki laughed delightedly. "You're learning. Now, we just need to teach you to get what you want while at least seeming to play the game their way. You have me in your corner now, but I may not always be able to be there when you need me to be, and your point about your tenuous position for the next six years was well made."

"So…do you have any ideas?"

"Oh, dozens… I usually like to work big. How do you feel about a nice civil war?"

"Next."

"Not to your taste? A few tasteful riots?"

"Try again."

"Mass chaos and hysteria?"

"I'm trying to fly below the radar here, remember?"

"Indeed. I shall have to perhaps refine a few of my ideas for your age and particular circumstances… Never fear. I have lots of ideas."
"You have everything?"
"Yep. I went through the whole flat. I found my stuff in some of the weirdest places."
"Here. Young master is taking this for the train ride."
"Oh. Thanks, Brunhilde. And thank you for everything this summer. I'll miss you both."
Brunhilde and Olaf got rather teary eyed, though they continued to hold themselves with dignity. "It was our pleasure, young master. Have a safe trip."
He peeked in the hamper after they'd gone and blanched.
"How do they expect me to eat all this?"
"I would imagine they made enough for your friends as well."
"Oh."
"Well, let's get you to the train station. I should probably be getting back to Asgard. My brother has been by my quarters three times in the last two hours, banging on the doors and demanding my presence. Hopefully he was heading out on a quest of some sort and his stupid friends convinced him to go on without me. I shall have to figure out where I've supposedly been that I wasn't there to answer him."
"Are you sure you won't get in trouble?"
"I shall be fine child...and honestly, even if my presence here were somehow discovered, well, rescuing an orphan child from cruel relatives is hardly a deed worthy of intense punishment. Do not worry yourself. Now, come along. Let us get your to your transport."
Loki put a hand on his shoulder and they were suddenly in an empty space between two walls looking out onto the train platform. Unlike when he came by the muggle gateway, which let you out near the front, they seemed to be near the rear of the train. Loki urged him out into the throng. Moments later a sound like a large thunderclap sounded just behind them. Harry peered over his shoulder and saw a man and a little girl who was probably a first year where they'd just been.
"It's the apparation point. There's a floo over there."
The crowd shifted enough that Harry saw a trio of fireplaces in a wall that was nearest to the middle of the train. As he watched the middle one flared green and a wizard, a teenage girl and a younger boy popped out one after another, with a witch who was likely the kids' mum bringing up the rear.
"Oh. I came through the gateway from the muggle side last time. I wonder why the Weasleys came that way? I mean, I could see them not apparating--that would be hard with so many kids and all their trunks. Maybe they don't have a floo?"

Loki was already headed for the train, so Harry put it out of his mind and hurried after him.

"This one is free."

Harry's trunk appeared between his hands and was put into place on the rack.

It suddenly hit Harry at once that he wouldn't be seeing Loki again for months, if ever. He'd gotten himself named his guardian, but he didn't actually know if he intended to come back every summer to take care of him. The guy was a prince on another planet; chances were he couldn't just disappear for months at a time without people starting to ask questions.

"Goodness, child, why the long face? You were so excited just a moment ago."

"Thank you. For rescuing me, I mean. I had a great summer. The best summer, really. I think this is the first time in my life I'm sorry to see it end."

"You are very welcome, dear boy. Do not fret. I'll pop in from time to see how you're getting on. This is not goodbye, merely see you later, alright?"

"Right."

Movement at the door drew their attention.

"Hello, Harry Potter. Is there room in here?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah sure. My friends Ron and Hermione should be along at some point, but there's space for one more. How'd you know who I was?"

"Everyone does."

"It'd be nice if I got to introduce myself once in a while."

"Oh, sorry." With that the little girl left.

"Wha… Geez. I didn't mean to chase her off…"

She suddenly came back inside and peered at him suspiciously.

"Who are you then?"

"Huh?"

"Your name, good sir, what is it?"

Harry finally caught on and held out his hand with a bemused air. "Oh, sorry. I'm Harry. Harry Potter."

"Smashing to meet you, Mr. Potter. I'm Luna Lovegood." she replied, shaking his hand firmly.

"A pleasure."

Luna grinned happily. "There. Was that better?"
"Loads. Thanks."

"I like this one." Loki decided. He peered at the strange necklace she was wearing, which was made of butterbeer corks and then at the dirigible plum earrings she was wearing.

"Have there been nargle swarms? It's an odd time of year for them."

"Not that I've noticed, but better safe than sorry."

"True."

"What's a nargle?"

"I'll let your new friend tell you about them. I really should be getting back."

"Do say hello to the All-Father for me." Luna said absently as she took a seat by the window. Loki looked as bemused as Harry had a moment before.

"I would, my dear, but I'm not actually supposed to be here."

"Oh. In that case never mind."

"Have a good time at school."

"I will."

"Miss Lovegood, a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise, your highness."

"Bye, Loki."

Loki disappeared in a shower of green and gold sparks. Harry took the window seat opposite Luna and settled in to wait.

"So. You have a Norse god looking after you. How's that been working out?"

"Pretty good, actually. So… What's a nargle?"

"Oh where could he be? The train will be leaving any moment now!"

"Mum! I don't want to miss going to Hogwarts!"

"I'm a prefect, mother, they'll be expecting me for the prefect's meeting! I don't know why I have to be here to wait for some brat kid anyway…"

"Mum! The train is going to be leaving any minute!"

Molly checked the time and saw there was only ten minutes until the train was due to leave.

"Percy, you through first."

"Finally!"

"Fred, George"
"See you…"
"…on the other side!"
"Ronald"
"'bout bloody time"

"Language, Ronald! Hermione dear, you next…” Molly frowned as the girl darted through right on Ronald's heels.

She gave her daughter a glare that warned her not to follow in the older girl's footsteps. The youngest Weasley was practically dancing in place in impatience.

"Now…” The youngest darted through the gateway "you, Ginny. Why do I even bother?" Molly grumbled to herself as she followed them in.

The warning whistle was sounding as she came through. She barely had time to kiss everyone goodbye before the train was vanishing down the track. She still didn't know if poor little Harry had made it or if he was being held prisoner somewhere by the dark wizard who had stolen him from his rightful guardians. She was going to be in agony worrying over the poor child until she heard one way or another from her children, and that likely wouldn't be for a few days yet. With a heavy heart, she waved until the train was out of sight, searching each window as it rolled by for some sign of the lost boy.

Sadly, for Mrs. Weasley's peace of mind, the first empty compartment Loki had found was on the opposite side of the train.

"Potter? What are you doing down here?"

"Huh? Nott, right? What do you mean?"

"This is sort of unofficially known as the 'pureblood' side of the train. All the muggleborn and halfbloods like you usually sit at the front."

"My guardian apparated us here. What's it to you?"

"I'd heard you got a new guardian. Glad to hear he's a proper wizard."

"Who you talking to Theo? I thought we found everyone already?"

"It's Potter."

"Potter?"

A blonde girl and a brown haired girl he vaguely recognized from Slytherin peeked around the door.

"Wow. It is."

"What are you doing here?"

"Trying to get to school, same as you."

"Who's your friend?"
"Luna Lovegood. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm Daphne, that's Tracey. Maybe we'll see you in Slytherin."

"I'll probably end up in Ravenclaw, but thank you."

"Well, see you around."

Just like that the Slytherin kids left. Harry stared at the closed door for a long moment after they were gone.

"Wow… that was almost painless."

"Were you expecting it to be otherwise?"

"I don't usually get along with Slytherins. I guess Loki was right. I wasn't being fair hating the whole house just because Malfoy and his goons were always giving me a hard time."

"Of course he was… though he should have added that you shouldn't just go around hating people either. It twists you up inside. Makes your brain funny."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good."

"Hey, are you hungry at all?"

"I am a little bit. I was really excited this morning. I didn't eat much of my breakfast."

"Yeah. I remember that. I could hardly sleep for weeks waiting for it. I think that was the slowest August of my entire life."

The house elves had gone all out: there were sandwiches and little pastries—some filled with fruit, some with meat and vegetables, fresh fruit and little blocks of cheese, little bags with an assortment of candy—enough for several children to each have one—chocolate dipped biscuits, and thermoses filled with tea.

"Ooh, yummy."

The door slammed open. "HARRY! BLOODY HELL! WE SEARCHED THE WHOLE BLOODY TRAIN FOR YOU!"

"Hey Ron. Inside voice?"

Ron ignored him, he was shouting down the hall. "HERMIONE! I FOUND HIM! HE'S ALL THE WAY AT THE ASS-END OF THE TRAIN WITH THE BLOODY SLYTHERINS!"

"RON! LANGUAGE!"

"BUGGER MY LANGUAGE. I JUST HAD TO DRAG MY BLOODY TRUNK DOWN THE LENGTH OF THE BLOODY TRAIN!"

Ron stamped inside and heaved his trunk up into the rack.

"Is that food? I'm starving." He grabbed a handful of the chocolate biscuits and started munching on them, spraying crumbs everywhere as he began digging through the hamper to see what else
As Harry and Luna watched Ron devouring biscuits and candy at a prodigious rate, the door slammed open again.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER!"

"Hey, Hermio…"

"I don't believe you! You have some nerve, mister!"

"I…"

"Do you have any idea how worried everyone was?"

"I wrote a…"

Harry couldn't get a word in edgewise. Weeks of worried letters from Ron, plus the Weasleys assurance that Harry had been kidnapped by a dark wizard and spirited away to parts unknown had left her nerves frayed. The letter she'd finally gotten, complete with a ridiculous story about being rescued from imprisonment by a Norse god of all things had left her fuming and chomping at the bit to tear Harry a new one. Now that she finally had him in her sights she wasn't going to let him derail the bollocking he so richly deserved.

"…AND ANOTHER THING…"

"Would you shut the hell up, Hermione? I'd like to sit down before we get to Hogwarts! My trunk is heavy!"

Harry frowned in confusion at the unfamiliar voice. A tiny redhead, who had to be Ron's little sister, Ginny, shoved Hermione into the compartment and glared at her hard enough that she should have burst into flames.

"Ginny!"

She heaved her trunk into the compartment and slammed the door before flopping down on the bench next to her brother.

"For Merlin's sakes, Ron! You'd think you were raised in a barn! Close your mouth! What would mum say if she could see you now? In fact, I should tell her. Maybe she'll send you a howler. And you sit down and be quiet. Merlin, my ears are ringing. It sounded like there was a banshee convention in town!"

Ginny's face was as red as her hair and she seemed to be in a very bad mood indeed, but that didn't stop Luna.

"Hi Ginny."

"Luna?! What are you doing here?"

"Going to school, same as you."

Harry snorted, which set Luna to giggling. Soon they were both laughing, which left the rest of them looking at them both like they were crazy. Ginny especially looked dismayed.

The door slammed open again, this time revealing Draco Malfoy, with his thugs Crabbe and Goyle
looming behind him.

Draco sneered at everyone, but before he had a chance to start in on his usual harassment, Harry sighed and looked at Draco with pity.

"Still, Malfoy? Geez. I'd hoped you'd gotten this weird crush of yours out of your system. I was content to put up with your stalking, 'cause I figured you'd get over it and move on. It's been a year, man. I'm just not interested." he told him, his voice kind but firm.

Draco flushed pink and his eyes bugged out. "What? I'm not…I don't…!"

While he was spluttering, he didn't notice Ginny Weasley's face flush a darker red, nor did he see the cold, furious look in her eyes.

"BAT BOGEY!"

"GINNY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU'RE GOING TO GET US IN TROUBLE BEFORE WE EVEN GET TO SCHOOL!"

Draco shouted and stumbled back into Crabbe and Goyle who were then each hit as well in quick succession, even though by that point Hermione had leapt out of her seat and was trying to wrestle the wand out of Ginny's hand. The rest of the group in the compartment watched in disgust as the boy's noses began running, and the snot form into huge bats that clawed their way out before turning on their victims and attacking. The boys screamed and stumbled off down the hall, flailing and tripping over one another and crashing into the walls down the length of the train.

"Hmph!" Ginny said with satisfaction as she put her wand away and retook her seat.

"Well… I guess that's one way to make him leave."

"Harry! You're not helping!"

"Oh, lay off Hermione. 's just Malfoy."

"RON!"

"My. They're certainly a lively bunch, aren't they?"
Return to Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

School begins again. Because of events over the summer, Harry's year gets off to a rocky start.

Even if he had been sorry to see the summer end, Harry was happy to be back at Hogwarts.

"I hope the bloody firsties get here soon. I'm starving."

"Ron, that's disgusting! You were eating the entire train ride!" Hermione sniped.

"Well that was then, this is now, and I'm hungry."

Harry tuned out their bickering as best he could and ran his gaze along the staff table. There was Snape, as greasy and miserable as ever…though honestly he looked miserable even for him. Beside him was Gilderoy Lockhart--he recognized him from the covers of the seven books of his they'd been forced to buy.

"I guess that explains why we had to buy seven of his books. What a berk."

"Harry! Don't talk about the professor that way! You should be thrilled that we have such an accomplished man to be our teacher this year!"

"I'm with you, Harry. Hermione just thinks he's great 'cause she fancies him" Ron agreed, throwing an aggrieved, bitter look Hermione's way.

"Can you believe that bastard made us buy all his stinking books? Mum just about died when she saw the school lists."

"Even you have to admit that was a dick move, Hermione. He's supposed to be teaching DADA, not running the Gilderoy Lockhart reading hour, but instead of assigning a text book, he used his position to line his own pockets by forcing every student in school to buy every one of his books. If he really wanted to use his own books, he could have assigned one to each year. He's a berk. Being made a professor doesn't just automatically make you a better person or worthy of respect."

"Yeah, look at Snape."

"Exactly."

"Harry Potter! Don't speak about our professors that way! If you would just behave yourself in his class he wouldn't have to take so many points or…"

"Are you even in the same class the rest of us are? Snape went after me the very first class and he's only gotten worse. I never did a damn thing to that man. He takes points for breathing sometimes, Hermione. Don't you dare sit there and tell me that's my fault. That's all him and I'll thank you to remember that."

Hermione spluttered in outrage, not used to Harry talking back or questioning her wisdom.

"You have to admit he has a point, Hermione. Snape really has it in for him. Neville too. No
offense, but better you than me. I have enough trouble in that class without Snape breathing down my neck." Seamus agreed.

Beside him Dean nodded. "Yeah. At least with those two there he leaves the rest of us alone most of the time. In fact, maybe you and Neville should sit together right up front so he'll just concentrate on you and forget about the rest of us."

"That's a great idea. You two should definitely do that."

"Oi! And where am I supposed to sit?" Ron demanded.

"With Hermione right behind them. The rest of us will sit behind you. You two can be the buffer zone."

"Get bent. All of you." Harry told Dean with a smile.

"Oh good. Sorting's about to start." Neville interjected.

Professor McGonagall led in a long double row of first years.

"Blimey. Look at all of them! Their class is gonna be almost twice the size of ours!" Ron whined.

"No. There's only sixty of them. There's forty in ours."

"Either way this is going to take forever."

The Sorting Hat looked just as dirty and bedraggled as it had for their sorting the year before, but it's song was rather jaunty.

Harry listened to it with half an ear while looking around at the rest of the great hall. He spotted Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Someone had undone the curse on them, but they looked a bit worse for wear. Their noses were red and there seemed to be small scratches all over their faces.

His little gambit with accusing Draco of having a crush on him had worked far better than he expected. He'd hoped he'd just stay away for fear of letting him think he was right. He hadn't counted on hurricane Ginny, and seriously, what was that all about? Scary girl. Speaking of which, she was up there right now waiting her turn, staring at the hat as though she could make it work faster through sheer force of will.

Luna, by contrast, didn't seem to be paying much attention to anything. She was looking at the ceiling and seemed to be humming quietly to herself. There was a manic little fellow a ways down on the other side who seemed to be unable to stand still, and was busy taking pictures of everything. He caught McGonagall in the flash a time or two; she looked ready to kill him and seemed to be blinking spots out of her eyes.

Camera kid came to Gryffindor and continued taking pictures while talking a mile a minute. Note to self, keep him away from candy. If he was like this normally he'd probably be terrifying on sugar.

Luna had to be called twice since she wasn't paying attention. She was under the hat for a long time, swinging her legs and seemingly quite at ease. After a long couple of minutes she was sent off to Ravenclaw like she expected, and skipped to the table.

Ginny ended up in Gryffindor to no one's surprise.

Dumbledore stood and held his arms wide as though embracing all of them. Harry had never thought about it much before, but Dumbledore presided over the great hall in a golden throne, like
he was a king or something. "Welcome to another year of Hogwarts!..." Harry listened with half an ear; like Ron he was eager for dinner to start. Whatever potions Loki and the house elves had been feeding him all summer had done at least one thing—he was hungry all the time. Loki said it was a good sign because it meant they were working correctly and fixing whatever damage his relatives had done to him over the years he was in their care.

"You use up energy and bodily resources in repairing broken bones, cuts and abrasions, any injury or illness, actually, which is why you often feel sleepy while you are ill. I know for a fact that you have been sleeping deeply and well every night, that you are hungry as well means your body is repairing itself and seeking more energy and nutrients to continue its work. If you are lucky you might get a late growth spurt, or perhaps an especially potent one next summer—making up for lost time so to speak. We shall see."

"... Dig in!"

Harry got his arms off the table just in time. The tables were now filled to groaning with all manner of food, and every last bit of it looked and smelled delicious. Harry wasted no time in loading down his plate, fending off Ron's greedy hands with a fork brandished like a weapon and a complete willingness to use it. The jerk had already eaten half of Harry's lunch basket, leaving the rest of them to share the remainder. He wasn't letting him steal all of dinner as well.

"Argh. Too bloody early. Oi, you lumps, get up!" Seamus called out.

Harry woke and stretched.

"Back to the grind, eh lads?"

"Too right. I hope we have Flitwick or Sprout today, you know, start off on a friendly note." Dean replied.

"Yeah, let's hope so. Oi, Ron! Time to get up!"

"gimme more bacon" Ron muttered, before rolling over and continuing to snore. Harry hefted his pillow in his hand and considered it a moment. Seamus caught on to what he was about to do and grabbed his own pillow, as did Dean. Neville just shook his head at all of the and continued getting dressed.

"Count of three?"

"1...2...3!!!"

All three boys began beating Ron with their pillows, he woke flailing and cursing Fred and George, then scowled at all of them when he realized who it was.

"What the hell? Bloody prats!"

"Wakey, wakey, Ronnikins. Next time, if you like we'll just leave you up here, let you miss breakfast." Seamus warned.

"I'm up. Bunch of ruddy berks I'm stuck with..." he grumbled as he stumbled off towards the bathroom.
"I'll be in the common room, Ron. Hurry it up!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"There you all are! I was just about ready to go down without you!" Hermione huffed. She peered up the stairway over Harry's shoulder and stamped her foot in frustration.

"Where's Ron?"

"We had trouble waking him. He'll be along."

"Honestly! You're all like slugs in the morning!"

"In the future, if it bothers you that much, just go down without us." Harry cut her off, flopping on the nearby couch. Ginny was there, she'd obviously been waiting with Hermione.

Hermione looked rather hurt, though Ginny oddly looked pleased at his words. She was an odd girl.

"You don't want me to wait for you?"

"That's not what I said. I said if you don't want to wait for us you should just go, especially if it means you're going to be sniping at us all morning because of it." He spotted what looked to be the rest of the first years headed out the door.

"You'd best run along before you miss them. You'll be getting your schedule at breakfast." he told Ginny. Ginny's cheery smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

She looked at Harry mournfully, but he didn't notice as he was sprawled with his head back, staring at the ceiling and mentally urging Ron to hurry up so he could eat already. Ginny shot a glare at Hermione, which she also missed as she was glaring at the side of Harry's head, and stomped off after the rest of the first years.

Ron clattered down the stairs a moment later and started for the door, barely sparing either of them a glance. "Come on! Food!"

Hermione threw up her hands and began muttering under her breath about the evils of boys and stomped after him. Harry stayed a bit behind them as they headed downstairs. Sure enough they began bickering and sniping at one another and continued well until they were in the great hall. When they got like this it was best to just leave them to it. He'd learned the hard way that getting in the middle of their arguments just meant they'd both turn on him and verbally rip his head off before going right back to tearing into each other. It just wasn't worth it.

McGonagall was already moving down the table, handing out schedules as she went.

"Mr. Potter, here you are."

"Thank you, professor."

After she'd moved on, he took a look and blanched in horror. He looked up and caught Neville's eye; he looked every bit at horrified as Harry did.

"We've got Snape today, first thing in the morning" Neville whispered.
"And bloody Binns right after." Harry agreed, feeling ill. Potions and History of Magic on the same day? This year was going to suck!

"Wish I'd waited to look at this. I've lost my appetite." Neville sighed.

"Me too. I've gotta eat anyway though. I'll never last till lunchtime otherwise."

"Yeah, me either."

Harry glared at his housemates as the door to the potions classroom opened, they brushed past him in a rush and followed quick on the heels of the Slytherins. By the time he got inside he saw all the seats but the two nearest to the front and one right behind it were already taken.

Seamus and Dean shrugged apologetically. Ron looked at them and at the remaining two tables and seemed terribly torn for a moment, but then he shrugged apologetically as well and slid into the seat beside Hermione at the second table in, leaving the remaining spots at the front for Neville and Harry.

Neville turned grey as he stumbled to the table up front. Harry took the remaining seat grimly. Though they didn't realize it yet, all of the Gryffindor second years minus Neville had just signed up for a world of hurt. Throw him to the wolves with a smile on their faces, would they? Even his so called best friends? They had each earned themselves an extra dose. They'd done nothing but berate him and question his sanity and ability to tell the truth since he'd seen them again, and now this--especially Hermione who kept insisting Snape's behavior was actually Harry's fault. She'd just proved she didn't actually believe a word of what she was saying. Well, they'd get theirs.

"Assignments up front. I simply cannot wait to see what sort of inane, puerile scribblings you dunderheads have graced me with this year." he grumped sarcastically as he gathered up the summer homework and deposited it on his desk.

He spun back to affix all of them with a steely glare and began pacing slowly down the length of the classroom, looming over the Gryffindors and sneering at them while the Slytherins tittered. He allowed the tension to build then suddenly barked out "Mr. Longbottom! What are the ingredients of the standard boil cure?"

Class had barely begun, and Neville already looked about ready to pass out. He managed to name two of the ingredients, but that didn't stop Snape from berating him at length afterwards, insulting his intelligence, his parentage and abilities as a wizard in the process. He snapped out a few more questions, but Neville was so distraught he couldn't remember the answers, which of course brought on more of Snape's particular brand of disdain.

Once he'd reduced Neville to a quivering lump of dismay, he started in on Harry. Harry only managed to hold on to his calm by a hair, but Snape was still in a foul mood by the time he'd finished with him—he managed to answer every question put to him, all of which covered things they'd done the previous year. Loki's drills over the summer had been fairly effective at getting everything to stick in his head. It didn't matter though that he hadn't lost his temper or that he answered everything correctly. He still lost points: for cheek, for being a know-it-all, for not sitting still enough for his liking, and all the while the Slytherins tittered like it was the greatest show on earth, and Harry remembered why he hated them.

Finally Snape grew bored with his sport and put a potion up on the board and snarled at them all to get started.
Neville was still shaking slightly and Harry wanted to punch someone, so they both silently agreed to wait till the crowd thinned out a bit before getting their ingredients from the supply closet. As he was sitting there watching everyone, he noted the Gryffindors seemed relieved and in fairly high spirits--Snape had ignored them one and all in favor of focusing on his two favorite targets. Draco, Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle were all giddy and smirking at the two of them--they seemed to have really enjoyed the show. The rest of them not so much. If anything they looked faintly embarrassed and regretful.

Neville still looked nervy, so Harry hit him with a calming charm Loki had taught him.

"I'll get the ingredients, alright?" he told him after filling his cauldron with water and setting the fire beneath it.

"Thanks, Harry."

"We scapegoats have to stick together, right?"

That startled a bitter laugh out of the other boy. "Ruddy bastards, the lot of them."

Harry checked and saw most of the students were still at the supply closet and Snape was talking to Malfoy on the other side of the room.

"Want to help me get some payback?"

"On who?"

"The rest of our housemates, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson. Snape too if we can manage it."

The rest of them were coming back, and damn if they all didn't look downright cheery. Neville's eyes narrowed at the sight and he nodded to Harry.

"I'm in."

Harry patted him on the shoulder before heading for the closet.

"We'll talk later."

"What did you do to me? After a start like that I expected to melt my cauldron." Neville asked once class was over. "Instead it was almost right. The color was still a little off…"

"Calming charm. You looked like you could use it."

"Thanks."

"What's this? What's going on? What did you do?" Hermione demanded, pushing between them. "Do you mind, Hermione? Was I talking to you?"

"I asked a simple question!"

"Oi! Harry! What're you doing walking with him. We're your best mates!"

"So, Binns next. Joy. I hope I can stay awake."
"Aren't you going to answer me?"

"Or me?"

"No."

"What?! Harry!"

"You're being kinda rude, Hermione." Neville added quietly.

"Well! I never…!"

"Hello Harry Potter."

Harry glanced over and saw Luna trailing after a group of first years on the opposite side of the hall.

"Hello Luna Lovegood. You know, you don't actually have to say my entire name. Just Harry is fine. Good day so far?"

"What do you want, Loony?" Ron huffed. Harry and Luna both ignored him.

"Acceptable. We had transfiguration. Professor McGonagall wouldn't let me keep my needle though."

"I believe you mean toothpick." Hermione corrected.

"Not after I transfigured it."

"I highly doubt you were able to get it on the first try. No one does."

Luna stared at Hermione with her strange, unblinking stare for a long moment, which left Hermione shifting uncomfortably and looking at Harry as though to ask is this girl for real? Luna finally blinked and then tilted her head to the side. "Just because you couldn't manage it doesn't mean I couldn't. I was very disappointed. I have a pair of socks I need to darn. A needle would come in handy."

"So make another if you're so skilled." Hermione said snidely, still stinging from Luna's assertion that she was less skilled in transfiguration than she was. She was the brightest witch of the age. Everyone said so.

"I don't have any other toothpicks. Oh well. Maybe one of the house elves will do it for me. I should ask." For a moment she looked like she was about to wander off and do just that, but Neville put a hand out to stop her.

"You should probably go to your next class first. The teachers get a bit grumpy when you don't show up." Now Neville was looking at Harry strangely as well.

Luna sighed. "If I must. I might have been less excited to come to Hogwarts if I'd realized I'd be joining a fascist state."

"It's a school. They tend to be along those lines, even when they're a school of magic."

"Harry! Dumbledore is not a dictator!" Hermione sputtered, aghast.

"I shall see you later then. Goodbye, Harry Potter…bad-at-transfiguration-girl, Ronald Weasley"
who is still kind of mean, and nice-boy-who-states-the-obvious"

"That's Neville. Neville Longbottom."

"Hello Neville, Neville Longbottom."

"Bad at…! You know my name! We rode up on the train together!"
"Mean? Me? I'm a great guy! Shows what you know, Loony."

"You never bothered to introduce yourself, you just made a lot of pointed remarks about how Harry Potter should have encouraged me to sit elsewhere in between taking digs at the Quibbler and questioning his sanity."

Hermione pinked and seemed at a loss for words at Luna's rather pointed summation of the ride up there. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing; she seemed to have a talent for rendering Hermione speechless and off-balance.

"You should probably get going. You don't want to be late. What's your next class?"

"Potions."

"Ah. You really don't want to be late."

"Alright. See you."

"Bye, Luna."

They ended up being late for history, but as Binns usually didn't seem to notice the students on the best of days, they just walked in and took their seats when they arrived. Most of the class had already been lulled into a stupor, and so even the other students didn't raise a fuss. Hermione shot Harry a filthy look; she obviously blamed him for her lateness, which Harry thought was unfair. She could have gone ahead if it was that important to her.

Hermione sat and immediately started taking reams of notes. Harry sighed and dug out his notebook and listened for a few minutes to find out what the topic was. He flipped through his notebook once he had and looked for the relevant section. He listened with half an ear to Binns' lecture and added a few comments here and there while trying manfully to stay awake.

Hermione glanced over and scowled at Ron who had simply laid down his head for a nap and was already snoring, and then turned to Harry, probably to berate him for not paying attention. When her eyes fell on Harry's notebook she looked very confused and then snatched it from under his hand and began flipping through it.

"What… How? We didn't cover this yet!"

Harry glared at her and snatched it back--easier said than done as Hermione didn't seem to be of a mind to let go.

"Would you…let…go! What the hell, Hermione?"

"How do you have so many notes?"

"I did it this summer. Geez."

"We haven't even covered any of that yet!"
"So? We have the same text book as last year. I just took notes on the parts we hadn't covered yet."

"Since when are you so studious?"

"Loki's idea."

"Oh, right. Your Norse god" she sniffed. Harry just looked at her a long moment and then kicked the back of Ron's chair until he woke up.

"What the hell man!"

"Change seats with me."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it."

He could feel Hermione's angry gaze boring into the back of his head for the rest of the class period, but he ignored her. It left him feeling rather sick at heart. All summer, while at the Dursleys, the chance of seeing Ron and Hermione again was what helped him keep from going mad. Now, they were actually here and they had been at odds ever since. Nothing was ever easy, was it?

"Hey, Harry."

"Heya, Nev."

"What's the deal with Ron and Hermione?"

"Hermione's pissy because we got to history late, she's also mad that I already have notes for the year for history"

"How'd you manage that?"

"My new guardian made me read each chapter and take notes on the important points. I told him I couldn't stay awake in class. I just jotted down a few extra points Binns made during his lecture."

Neville frowned. "That's a really dumb thing to be mad about."

"Yeah, it is. She's being ridiculous. Of course, she was already mad at me to begin with. She thinks I'm a liar and possibly insane."

Neville began looking decidedly nervous. "Why's she think that?"

Harry sighed and told him about the lovely summer he'd had before Loki showed up.

"Wow. And you think he's the real deal?"

"There's supposedly all kinds of wards on my aunt's house that keep magical folks away. Even Voldemort isn't supposed to be able to get in. I was sitting alone in my room and I said a prayer to Loki, and the next day he just appeared in my room in a shower of light. I don't know if he's actually a god, or if that's just what people thought a long time ago. He lives on another planet. He said he almost didn't come, but he was curious because it's been a really long time since anyone down here called on them, so he came to take a look. Earth is a restricted protectorate of Asgard."
They're not supposed to come down here or interfere with our development."

"Wow. An ancestor of mine supposedly met Thor. The story passed down in my family."

"Yeah? That's cool. So see, I'm not a liar and I'm not crazy. She doesn't believe in Norse gods, and Dumbledore supposedly told Mrs. Weasley that I was just lying about being held prisoner to sound cool or get attention or something. He's got a lot of nerve, really. He wasn't there. He's never checked up on me in all these years, even though he's supposedly been my magical guardian all this time. Was. Loki made himself my legal and magical guardian when he rescued me."

"Wow. Why would he do that?"

"So he doesn't look like a deadbeat loser, probably. He made himself responsible for me and then dumped me off on a doorstep to be raised by a bunch of crazy, magic-hating freaks that think it's normal to keep kids prisoner and feed them through a cat-flap."

"That's rough, man."

"You don't have to tell me. I lived it. They weren't going to let me out. My uncle said so. He said he wasn't going to let me out or go back to Hogwarts." Harry trailed off into sullen silence. "If she thinks I'm going to beg her forgiveness she's got another thing coming. Between this and what everyone did in potions class… I'm beginning to wonder why I was so hot to come back here."

"Speaking of which…what are we going to do? Because of what they all pulled this year's potions class is going to be the worst ever. I'm not sure I can take it."

"Want me to hit you with a calming charm before we go in each day?"

"Would you?"

"Sure." He looked around the common room and saw all their roommates were down there.

"Let's go up to the dorm. Don't want to be overheard."

Ron saw Harry and Neville headed upstairs and thought about making his excuses, but Hermione's glare warned of dire consequences if he did. He grumbled under his breath and went back to staring at the blank parchment that was supposed to be his potions homework.
The Rift Widens

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione feuding. Neville is sort of scary.

"Ready, Nev?"
"Yeah. Let me just get my… do we have to bring all seven?" Neville huffed, indicating the pile of Lockhart books for DADA class.
"I'm not bringing any of them."
"Yeah. Maybe I won't either. Would have been nice if he'd said which one to read first or something."
The two boys started out, but Neville hesitated. "Shouldn't we wake up Ron?"
"Dean and Seamus are still here. I'm sure one of them will."
"Alright…"

Hermione sniffed very loudly when she spotted Harry, and made a great show of ignoring him in favor of her book, but much to her frustration and dismay, Harry ignored her. He and Neville were thick as thieves and whispering together--and just when had that happened?

Breakfast ended up being rather tense. Hermione made snippy remarks about Harry to Ron, who hunched in his seat and kept eating, while throwing apologetic looks towards Harry--though only when she wasn't looking. Harry continued ignoring both of them and chatting idly with Neville, who seemed no more happy about being stuck in the middle of Harry and Hermione's feud than Ron did.

Hermione urged Ron out of his seat moments before the bell rang signaling the start of the school day and they were out the door in a flash.

Harry waited until their yearmates left and then looked at Neville expectantly. "Well?"
"I only managed to hit Hermione's since she was right next to me."
"Probably for the best. If it was everyone's it would be obvious someone did something."
"True." Neville conceded as they started from the hall. "Why'd I have to do it though? You're the one fighting with her."
"She flung you at Snape as well as me…and plus, given that we are fighting, she'll probably run to McGonagall first thing and demand my wand be checked to prove I'm evil. I seriously doubt she's ever going to even consider that you might have done it. I'll do some of the others, don't worry."
"So long as you're not just making me your fall guy."
"In this case you're actually providing my alibi, which is completely different."

"You know, I was thinking, there's all sorts of stuff with vengeance and pranking potential in the greenhouses. I'm sure professor Sprout won't even notice a few leaves or a pod or seed missing here and there."

"Yeah? Excellent. We should probably look for more spells and stuff too. Most of the stuff in that book of hexes and jinxes was too showy and obvious."

"And known already. Remember? Malfoy did a leg locker on me last year and Hermione hit me with a petrificus totalis."

"Like I said, obvious. We need to come up with other stuff if we're going to get them and stay out of detention."

"I'm more worried about the others cursing us when we're trying to sleep."

"Good point. So, creativity and plausible deniability… But that will have to wait as we're here."

They boys hurried into the greenhouse and donned their workrobes, then took up the last two spots—in front of Malfoy and Crabbe, who both sneered reflexively when they saw them.

Harry saw Professor Sprout headed towards the greenhouse and smiled to himself.

"So, Potty… It must break your parents hearts that you're so bad in potions. Oh, I forgot…they're dead."

"Stop flirting, Malfoy." Harry sighed, shaking his head, just as Professor Sprout entered. Most of the rest of the students noticed her and quieted down just as Malfoy screamed "FOR THE LAST TIME POTTER, I AM NOT FLIRTING WITH YOU!"

Malfoy's already pink cheeks flushed a slightly darker pink as the other students started tittering, or in Pansy Parkinson's case loudly denying that Draco had any feelings for Harry at all.

"Oh, my. It's like that, is it? No need to be embarrassed, Mr. Malfoy, it's normal at your age. Does make it hard to concentrate though… Maybe we should move you… You there, Zabini, why don't you switch places with Mr. Malfoy…." the tittering got much louder. "That's enough. Quiet down now. Mr. Malfoy seems to be an early bloomer, but it'll happen to all of you over the next year or two. Now, you'll all see a pair of earmuffs at your spot. We'll all be putting those on in a moment--when you do, make sure they cover your ears completely. We'll be working with mandrakes all year and their cry can kill…oh, not at the size they are now, but it will still hurt you, and may knock you clean out. We'll be moving the specimens to larger pots for the next stage of their growth. When you do, make sure they're tucked in nice and snug, and completely covered! This is very important! As the mandrakes mature the sound of their cry, as I said before, can kill. You must make sure they are properly buried in the soil so that doesn't happen!"

When class was over, Neville held Harry back by his sleeve and let the rest of the students head out ahead of them so they could talk privately on the way to the castle—it was too chancy while inside with all the nosy portraits everywhere. It would be all over school before they really had a chance to get anyone.

"What's up?"
"Parvati and Lavender are taken care of…and will probably spend at least a little time in the hospital wing." Neville admitted, looking around to make sure he wasn't overheard.

"What did you do?"

"There were some snargaluffs near their station. I noticed when I went to get us more potting soil."

"What are snargaluffs?"

"The little plants with the long purple pods that were on the table near where the soil is kept."

"Oh, those things?"

"Yeah, we haven't covered them yet. I snagged a couple of the pods that had fallen off and cracked them and tossed one in each of their bags. They leak sticky fluid, and there's usually a whole lot more than it looks like a pod that size can hold. It smells sort of perfumy, so they probably won't be wary of it. It'll probably get all over all their books and stuff, and from there all over their hands. They're both pretty neat and always fussing to make sure they're clean and all. When they get all sticky they'll try to clean the stuff off—they both know all kinds of spells for cleaning skin and clothing and all. Snargaluff sap doesn't react well to magic cast directly on it. It'll become reactive and start itching and burning their hands. They'll have to wash it off with soap and water and wait for the rash to go away, because Madame Pomfrey won't be able to use magic on that either."

"Remind me to never get you pissed off at me, Nev."

"Now why would I do that? If you pissed me off, I want you to suffer…well, at least a little. Enough so you know I'm peeved, I mean."

"Note to self. Don't piss Neville off."

"Darn tooting."

"If that's the case though, why didn't you ever get Malfoy and them when they went after you?"

"Who says I didn't? You'll notice that though he still calls me names and stuff sometimes, he, Crabbe and Goyle don't actually bother me anymore."

"Huh." Harry murmured as his whole concept of the universe shifted slightly sideways. "How about that?"

"So…transfiguration next, then lunch then DADA. We'll have some time before dinner. More planning then?"

"Yeah. We'll need to find an abandoned classroom or something with no portraits so we don't get discovered. Maybe I'll ask the house elves for a good spot. We'll pick this up later."

As they entered the castle Neville asked him about the summer transfiguration homework, which he'd had trouble with. Harry actually felt like he could speak on the subject with some authority after Loki had put him through the wringer, made him re-read most of his textbooks and rewrite his essay three times.

Harry and Neville were the last inside the classroom, arriving just before the bell rang. Hermione and Ron had claimed the first table at the front of the room. Dean, Seamus, Fay and Sophie
preferred to be in the back in transfiguration. Lavender and Parvati were right behind Ron and Hermione, so the only seats left were dead center. That suited them both fine.

They dug out their summer homework, knowing McGonagall would likely collect it first thing. They could hear Hermione berating Ron at length over the state of his. Ron tended to be rather careless with his things for someone always complaining about how poor he was and how he and his family never had anything. Ron's scroll was wrinkled and there were some blotches on it as well--probably jam or ketchup, which were the usual culprits. He usually got points taken off right off the bat for messy work, but it never seemed to make him more careful with it.

Hermione's by contrast was crisp and clean…and at least three times the size of everyone else's. If he was a teacher he'd probably mark her down a grade for not following the guidelines until she kept it short and sweet and to the point, but if the professors were willing to waste their time reading through her epics when they had hundreds of other students' work to grade, he supposed that was their business. More fool they. Every time she got extra points for doing it she tended to add a few more inches to her already long essays. By the time they were seventh years she was probably going to need a hand cart to bring her homework in!

"Pass your summer assignments forward, everyone. Yes, thank you. I do hope you all had a satisfactory vacation, however vacation is now over and it is time to return to work….."

The kids sighed and got out their notebooks, parchment and quills and began taking notes. It was sort of annoying--McGonagall believed in long, theory-heavy lectures that required a lot of notes. They usually only had an average of fifteen minutes or so at the end of class for the practical portion. Looked at that way, it was really no wonder he hadn't done better last year--not enough practice, especially as he hadn't practiced outside of class. It was alright though; McGonagall was strict, and one didn't dare laugh or daydream while in her class, but at least you knew it wasn't going to be a couple hours of torture and intimidation.

"Man. My head is spinning. She does like to jump right in, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, well that's McGonagall for you. No rest for the weary and all that."

Lunch wasn't as tense as breakfast had been, though that was mostly because Hermione was distracted by the fact that their next class was with Lockhart. Ron didn't seem to appreciate Hermione's appreciation of their new professor. They ended up bickering most of the lunch hour much to everyone's chagrin. Soon enough it was time for DADA.

To the boys' disgust most of the girls in their year seemed as star-struck as Hermione was. There were a lot of starry eyes and blushing faces in evidence in the crowd as they waited for him to make an appearance. Harry looked around at the classroom and shook his head in amazement that anyone could be as vain as their professor seemed to be. There were pictures and paintings of him all over the walls. There was even a portrait of himself painting a portrait of himself!

The bell rang and the students stirred in excitement as the door to the upper level--presumably where Lockhart's quarters were--opened and revealed the man himself in all his smarmy, golden-haired glory. He smiled widely, revealing a dimple in his cheek and his very white teeth seemed to sparkle in the light. He was wearing a plum colored suit with a silver waistcoat and a matching cloak with a silver lining. A darker purple cravat secured his frilly collar.

He held up his arms while standing on the landing and several of the students started clapping excitedly. He smiled down at them like a beneficent god bestowing blessings, before sauntering
down the stairs and doing a little half-twirl so his poncy cloak would unfurl around him before settling down on the corner of his desk like he was posing for a photograph.

"Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts, with your teacher...ME!" He posed and smiled while the students clapped again. Harry rolled his eyes and sunk down in his seat. It was going to be a long year; he could feel it already.

"I thought, just to get us started, that we should have a quick little test to see how much of your textbooks you've managed to absorb. Don't worry, it won't be graded--this is just for my own use!" He handed a stack of papers to Hermione, who took them with due reverence.

"Hand those out, would you? Make sure everyone gets one." he told her before posing and smiling again. Hermione's cheeks were very pink and she seemed slightly dazed as she handed out the tests. Neville looked at him in horror when they saw how many pages there were.

"Did you read all the books?"

"Rifled through them."

"I'm going to fail."

"They're not being graded. Relax." Harry flipped to the last page and sighed. Sixty questions. Bugger. He got out his quill and read the first question. He then read it again, and then he began reading all the questions, getting more and more aggravated as he went on.

"Geez. This guy is really stuck on himself. What is this shite? What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? What is Gilderoy Lockhart's dream? The rest is just as bad. Looks like this class is going to be self study. Damn." The guy was working his last nerve already, and he found he didn't really care over much if he offended him, so he might as well have some fun with this farce of a test. "What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? Black, like the color of his soul. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's dream? To be the PlayWizard centerfold..."

"Alright, why don't you pass those up?" Lockhart said after an hour or so. He'd been amusing himself while they took their test by primping in the mirror, practicing his smile and indulging in a bit of mutual admiration with his portraits.

"Geez, what a complete prat this guy is."

"Ah, thank you Miss Granger." He flashed the girl another sparkly smile and she sighed before practically melting into her seat. Judging by Ron's violently red face, he was as disgusted by the display as Harry was.

"Now, let's see how well you all did! Question one: What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? Hmmm...no...not that one either... Well... definitely not that..." Lockhart trailed off uncertainly. He glanced up at the crowd of avid students and his gaze fell on Harry for a moment and he frowned, before his usual chirpy demeanor reasserted itself. "For the record, my favorite color is lavender. I happen to look smashing in it." He flashed another dimply smile and the girls all sighed dreamily.

"I think I'm going to be sick." Harry whispered. Seamus Finnegan, and several of the nearby girls turned and gave him a dirty look.

"Moving on... What is Gilderoy Lockhart's dream? Let's see what we have here... not quite, though admirable... no... Hmm. Well, if you re-read Magical Me, I'm sure you'll all see that my dream is to bring world peace... or to have my own line of hair care products."
The torture continued for another twenty minutes or so, until Lockhart either got bored, or was offended as the number of wrong answers, Harry wasn't sure which. He set the pile of tests aside and perched on the corner of his desk again.

"Well, now that I have some better idea of where you all are in your studies, How about we get onto the practical portion of today's lesson?" All the students, even Harry, stirred in interest.

"Before we begin, I suppose I should give you all my credentials. Order of Merlin, third class. Honorary member of the Dark Force Defense League…and of course five time winner of Witch Weekly's most charming smile award. I'm particularly proud of that one. Though of course I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at it after all!" He smiled another of his smarmy grins and he and his nearest portrait both preened like a couple of peacocks. "Now…be warned. It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizard kind. You may find yourselves facing your worst fears within this room. Know only that no harm can find you whilst I am here."

The whole class leaned forward in nervous anticipation as he moved to stand beside a covered cage and grasped the top of the cover. "I must ask you not to scream as it might provoke them!" he shouted as he whipped the cover off. A bunch of disbelieving titters travelled through the room when they saw the tiny creatures that were revealed.

"Cornish pixies!" Seamus Finnegan laughed. "Are you kidding?"

"Freshly caught Cornish pixies. Laugh if you will, Mr. Finnegan, but pixies can be devilishly tricky little blighters. Don't let their small size fool you."

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high. They also had high, shrill voices. They sounded rather like a bunch of budgies arguing.

"See what you make of them!" Lockhart said grandly before throwing open the door to the cage they were trapped in. The pixies flew en masse out of the cage screaming "WHOO HOO!" in their squeaky little voices and spread out through the whole room cackling madly and looking for trouble. In moments it was pandemonium. The pixies were everywhere, destroying property, pelting Lockhart and the students with books, bottles of ink, anything they could get their hands on. Within moments half the class was screaming and hiding under the desks while those who could made a break for it. They pinched skin, pulled hair. Two of them grabbed Neville by the ears and tried to hang him off the chandelier but Harry smashed them both with a book. Up front Hermione was screaming as several of them seemed to be yanking on her hair and pinching her when she tried to swat them. Ron couldn't help her, he was having his own troubles. Lockhart seemed to be equally beset by the pesky things. He brandished his wand and shouted "Peski Piksi Peskeromi!" But not only were the pixies not stopped or banished, they stole his wand and flew off cackling.

"Uh…just…OW…get them back in their cages! No! Not that!"

He wrestled one of his many portraits out of the hands of a few more and dashed upstairs into his quarters to hide. The remaining students fled screaming when the pixies broke the chains holding a large dragon skeleton to the ceiling, sending the whole array crashing down into the desks below. Hermione shrieked when her wand was stolen as well. Now beginning to panic, she grabbed Ron's arm and the two of them began making their way to the door, following the rest.

Harry looked at how much destruction the little blighters had caused in short order and smiled to himself grimly even as he and Neville continued to swat those bothering them with their books as best they could. Once the last of the other students was out of the room Harry whispered cover me and get ready to start grabbing the little pests.
"Huh?"

"Cover me! Immobilis!"

Neville took his words to heart and swatted two pixies that tried to rush him and steal his wand as he was casting his spell. All over the room the pixies froze in place.

Harry pulled a small bag from his satchel and began stuffing pixies into it.

"Quick! Before anyone comes to investigate!"

"Why didn't you do that in the first place?" Neville grumped as he began grabbing handfuls as well to stuff into Harry's bag.

"The last two who tried to do anything had their wands stolen. That's why I needed you to cover me."

"How are they even…?"

"Expanded space charm. Grab our stuff. We need to get out of here!"

Neville nodded grimly as Harry grabbed the last few pixies and stuffed the pouch into his pocket. He grabbed his satchel from Neville and they hurried to the door looking both ways.

"All clear…the portraits must have followed all the fleeing students."

"Lucky."

"I think I hear someone coming!"

"Quick! Hide!"

They managed to duck into a nearby classroom and duck behind the door just as Professor Flitwick and a gaggle of hysterical children rounded the corner.

Flitwick peeked into the ruins of the DADA classroom, noted the ominous lack of pixies and said the only thing he could.

"Oh dear lord. This is not good."

"This is pretty cool. Can you show me how to do this? It seems really useful."

"Sure, I guess."

The boys had made themselves comfy hidden behind some desks in the dusty classroom. Harry used a bit of an old blanket that was heaped in the corner to make a quick and dirty expanded pouch so Neville could hold on to half the pixies. He didn't know how long the immobilis was going to hold, and they had enough they could probably use them for several acts of vengeance. Neville had a good eye for opportunistic acts of vengeance, so it was best if they both had some of the things.

"Okay, now that you've got a bag too, you can take half of them."

Happily the creatures were still immobilized, so it was easy enough to transfer ten of them to
Neville's bag.

"I'm guessing DADA class is over for the day."

"Gee, Nev, ya think?"

"Prat, you know what I mean. We were going to look for a place to plot in."

"It's needs a cooler name than that. Bat-cave? Man-cave? Lair of Doom?"

"How about something no one will pay attention to if we mention it in the hall."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. The library? No one will try to follow us then."

"What if one of us actually has to go to the library? We'd sound pretty dumb saying no, the library library."

"Huh, yeah. If we call it the clubhouse or the man cave or anything like that, everyone's gonna want to go."

"We could sigh, look sad and tell everyone we have to go spend time with Filch. Everyone will think we've got detention."

"Yeah, except if anyone realizes we don't actually they'll start looking for us."

"You've got a point. This is much harder than it should be. Why do we know so many nosy people?"

"We're Gryffindors."

"Point. Eh, how about we find a place first. We can come up with an idea based on where it is and try to make it as boring as possible."

"Still want to ask the house elves?"

"Eh, we'll look around first. If we can't find anything good we'll ask them."

"WHERE WERE YOU?!"

"Around. How is it your business?"

"What?... You!... We're friends!"

"Could have fooled me."

Hermione reared back as though she'd been struck and then sat there looking small and tragic, sniffling and poking desolately at her dinner. Parvati and Lavender moved in to comfort her while throwing him affronted glares, and Ron glowered at him angrily.

Harry ignored them and concentrated on filling his plate.

"What's her problem?" Neville asked, indicating Hermione.
"All the rest of us went and got the other teachers and they made us stay in the great hall for the rest of class time with the ghosts watching us. You two were missing." Dean explained.

"We wandered off. We didn't realize we were supposed to be anywhere. We figured class was a bust, so…"

"It was very irresponsible." Hermione sniped.

"Whatever."

When dinner was over, Professor McGonagall marched down to their table.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom, the headmaster should like to see you in his office. The password is sherbet lemon."

"What's this about, professor?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Run along now. You mustn't keep the headmaster waiting."

Hermione looked vindicated and shot a smug look at the two boys before flouncing off, dragging Ron behind her. They were probably going to study. Ron seemed to realize this. The mournful glance he shot back at them over his shoulder seemed to indicate he'd much rather be getting called up to the headmaster's office to possibly get in trouble.

The two boys let the others get a bit ahead so they could talk privately before they hit the areas where the portraits were.

"You think he knows about the pixies?"

"Doubtful. I'd be surprised if he thought either one of us was capable of stopping them, especially since Hermione didn't--she lost her wand and got chased off with the rest. No, he probably just wants to know where we were. A fuss was probably raised given how Hermione was acting earlier. We'll just tell him the same thing we told her. We can honestly say we didn't know everyone was supposed to be in the great hall, and that we were wandering around. I know we passed a few portraits while we were though…makes you wonder why he wants to talk to us personally…"

"Which means he knows we've got them."

"Not necessarily. Don't admit to anything. If he does bring them up we'll just say we were wandering around and planned to release them outside after dinner or something. Just don't bring it up yourself. Now, be cool. Not being in a place we didn't know we were supposed to be is hardly detention worthy."

"Right."

They took a moment to compose themselves when they reached the gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's office. When Neville signaled his readiness Harry took a deep breath and spoke.

"Sherbet lemon."

Neville followed him onto the twisting stairway. Harry knocked twice on the wooden door at the top of the stairs and stepped inside.

"He's…not here."

"Rude. And after McGonagall told us not to keep him waiting."
He's really old. My gran said your bladder shrinks when you get old. Maybe he's in the bathroom.

Neville looked around curiously. He'd never been in the headmaster's office before…though for that matter neither had Harry. Every time he'd spoken to Dumbledore before it had been elsewhere— in an abandoned classroom after he'd found the Mirror of Erised, and in the hospital wing after the whole business with Quirrel and the stone.

While Neville was staring at the portraits that lined the walls, hundreds of them it looked like, going up the wall till they could hardly be seen, Harry's attention was caught by a sickly looking turkey crossed with a dust mop sitting on a golden perch across the way. The bird wheezed and gave a pathetic sounding cough. Harry stepped towards it--to do what, he wasn't sure. The bird was obviously on its last legs there likely wasn't anything he could do. When'd he'd gotten most of the way towards it, the bird burst into flames.

"Oh crap. Stop that! Water…water!" Harry began patting himself down and trying to find his wand, but it was too late--the bird crumbled to ash which sifted down into a pile in the droppings pan beneath the perch. Harry stumbled forward, horrified and then jumped as Dumbledore suddenly appeared at his side and hip-checked him away from the pan and the ashes contained within. Harry stumbled and caught himself on the cabinet nearby. Dumbledore wasn't even looking at him, he was dusting ashes off a tiny, featherless baby bird.

"There you are. It is about time." He set the baby bird atop the perch and finally turned to face them.

"I didn't do anything! The bird just suddenly caught on fire!"

"Yes, he does that sometimes. I've been telling him for weeks that he should just get on with it."

Seeing the two boys still looked a bit freaked out, he deigned to explain further.

"Fawkes there is a phoenix. They have a cyclical lifespan. They're born, grow old, go through a burning day, and then they're reborn from their ashes. I'm sure if you take care of magical creatures in your third year you'll learn all about them."

"Oh. Uh, good."

"Indeed. Now, could you gentlemen tell me where you both were this afternoon?"

"Wandering around. Everyone fled class, even the teacher, so…"

"I see. And, do you have anything to tell me, Mr. Potter?"

"Um…no?"

He stared at Harry a moment longer, looking disappointed, before switching his gaze to Neville. "Mr. Longbottom?"

"Um…no?" he echoed.

Dumbledore stared at him a moment longer, until Neville began to squirm in discomfort.

"I don't suppose you would happen to know what became of the pixies?"

"They're in our pockets." Harry admitted glibly. "We were going to release them into the forest after dinner but…well, we didn't exactly have a chance, did we?"
Harry's eyes narrowed slightly when Dumbledore looked troubled, rather than relieved or proud.

"I see. You'd best get on with that then."

The boys exchanged a bemused glance.

"Uh…sure thing, headmaster."
"Yeah. We'll uh, get right on that."

The boys stayed quiet until they reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"Is it just me, or was that kinda…weird."

"It's not just you."

Neville shook out his bag of pixies beneath the nearest tree. "What a waste. Oh well. We'll find something else."

Harry searched his pockets, and then began patting himself down more frantically and turning in a circle on the spot as he did so.

"Harry?"

"My bag is missing."

"Check again."

"I did! It's not here…" Harry mentally retraced his steps and blanched. "It might be in the headmaster's office. I was digging around looking for my wand, remember? And then the headmaster pushed me and I stumbled. It might have fallen out then."

The pixies began to twitch. The boys began hightailing it back to the school. Neither one wanted to get caught in another swarm. "And they're going to start moving soon. Oh man."

"Dumbledore's a powerful wizard. Everyone says so. I'm sure he can handle it."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's true. Just because Lockhart is useless doesn't mean everyone is." Harry frowned then. "Say…did you hear Dumbledore come in?"

Neville thought back and then his eyes widened. "No. He was just suddenly there, like he'd been invisible or something."

"He probably was. He said before that he can just become invisible without a cloak or anything."

Neville began to look slightly ill.

"You think he was following us invisibly? Is that how he knew about the pixies? Oh we are in so much trouble…"

"No we're not."

"We're not?"

"Think about it. If he was following us and heard us planning, he can't really say anything because then he'd have to admit he creeps around invisibly spying on people. He's going to have to go with our version of things."
"Do you think that's kinda, well…creepy?"

"Most definitely."

"Does he do that a lot, do you think?"

"I don't know, but now I really have to wonder. We need to find a way to find invisible people. It won't do us much to go to the clubhouse to plot vengeance if he's just lurking in the corner listening to everything."

"Yeah. If he's going to spy on people why doesn't he go bug the Slytherins?"

"Who says he doesn't?"

"That's just…"

"Yeah."

They hurried back into the castle. The nearby portraits stared down at them and a few 'tsked' at them for being outside while it was getting dark. The boys' eyes darted around the corners and nearby shadows suspiciously, wondering if there was an invisible man in any of them. Between that and the portraits, Hogwarts suddenly seemed far less inviting than it always had in the past.

"Luna was right."

Neville glanced at him curiously but then nodded in horrified realization. "She really was, wasn't she?"

They actually were living in a fascist state.

"Library?"

"Library." Harry agreed. He noticed the portraits watching them in avid curiosity. "Best get that homework out of the way. What a pain, huh?"

"Yeah. I hate books."

"That's right. Books, bah! Give me quidditch any day."

"Too right. Gotta focus on the important stuff."

"Yeah. Quidditch"

"Food"

"Sleep"

"Having a laugh with your mates"

"Days without potions"

"I'll second that."

The portraits grew bored and wandered off in search of more interesting people.
"Hey, Harry come here. I think we've found it!"

Harry and Neville had continued their search for the perfect hideout. Most of the places they found were abandoned classrooms, most choked with dust and full of old student desks and chairs and not at all suitable for their intended use. The few they found that might have been possibilities were all in high traffic areas and wouldn't work well as a hideout. With that in mind, they had expanded their search to the little used corners of the castle, where students and teachers rarely ventured.

The place they were currently in had probably been teacher's quarters once upon a time. They had spotted a dusty hallway that looked like no one had traversed it since the Founding. That hall had led them to another dusty passageway lined with tapestries rather than portraits, which was already a bonus. There were only a few rooms at the end, and they all seem to have once been living quarters as the furniture inside was more of the old moldy couch variety rather than the battered student desk variety.

"What is it, Nev?"

"There's a little garden off the kitchen!"

"Yeah? Let me see."

Harry followed the sound of his voice into the small kitchenette included in the suite of rooms. He was absolutely right; there was a small garden opening up off of it. It was bare, and the soil looked a bit bedraggled, but it was definitely a garden space.

"We're on the ground floor? How'd that happen? Last I checked we were on the third floor near the Charms corridor.

"Magic. You know what the castle is like."

"So... a garden. And we've got a kitchen if we need to brew anything, and there's plenty of space and even some furniture already here. I think we have a winner."

"We've even got our own bathroom. This place is perfect!"

"It really is. I wonder why no older kids snatched this place up?"

"Maybe they never found it. I don't remember seeing the hallway we took before. Which means we should probably find an alternate route to get here in case it disappears."

"Good point. We're agreed then?"

"Yeah. This is it."

"Alright. Let's claim it then and get to work fixing it up."

"Claim it how?"

"With this." Harry assured him, digging into his schoolbag and pulling out a folder. He carefully removed a square of parchment that was inscribed with runes. "It's a wizard repelling charm. It won't work on us because we already know the place is here."

"Which means if anyone else manages to follow us and ignores the charm they'll know about this place too."

"I have a couple of these. We'll put one on the path down here. Hopefully that'll turn away anyone
following us."

"Oh, okay."

It was a matter of moments to affix the paper to the door with a strong sticking charm.

"You still have that book on household charms?"

"Yeah, right here."

"Let's get to work then. We don't have a whole lot of time until curfew."

"Damn this fascist state."

"Scourgify." Harry watched in amazement as the spell shot across the floor, removing dust and grime as it traveled.

"Let me try. Scourgify!" Neville's spell hit the center of the nearest wall and traveled outward, taking grime and cobwebs with it.

"I wish I could have done this when I still lived with the Dursleys. It would have made my life a lot easier."

"You realize what this means?"

"Our clubhouse is going to be nice and clean?"

"That too... We won't have to smell Ron's socks and dirty underwear anymore!"

"Hey, yeah!"

They gave each other a high five and spread out. With the help of the book of household charms, the whole suite was clean in a few minutes.

"I need to get some fresh soil for the garden. This time of year there won't be much we can grow out there... I should look into winter plants."

"We've got shelves and stuff in the kitchen... and one of them is cold. We could stock this place with food, drinks and stuff."

"There's some bookshelves built into the wall over there."

"We should keep our library books and stuff in there, anything we're researching for vengeance."

"Yeah. It would make us suspects if we're reading books about hexes and then people get hexed."

"We should find some more furniture for this place too."

"Yeah, we've got a couch and a table, but that's it. Some cups and plates and stuff. Targets."

"Targets?"

"Loki was teaching me knife throwing. I'd like to keep in practice, but I can't really do it in the common room, can I?"

"Good point. The bedroom's empty. We could stick them in there."
"Maybe some pillows for the floor."

"Rugs too. It'll probably be cold in here when winter hits."

"Yeah. We'll probably have to wait on most of that till we have a chance to go home for the holidays. It's too bad Olaf and Brunhilde aren't…"

"Young master is needing something?"

"Olaf! Brunhilde! What are you doing here?"

"You is calling, is you not?"

"You is having new home now?" Olaf asked after looking around.

"We're still at Hogwarts. We found some empty rooms to make into a clubhouse."

"And you is needing help?"

"I don't think outside house elves are allowed to be here." Neville spoke up.

"We lives here when Master Loki is being gone. We checks up on hims places and gets rid of dust and then we works here. Our families is being here."

"So you were here all along?"

"Yes, but we is not supposed to be being seen by students usually."

"We don't want to get you in trouble or keep you from what you were doing."

"Is being fine. We is only part-timers. The others knows how it is being."

"Now…what is yous needing help with?"

"Well…we could use some more furniture…"

Neville scourgified the hallway leading back towards their new headquarters, while Harry affixed a second wizard repelling charm to the floor at the end of the hallway.

"Stupid curfew. I wanted to see what they'd do with the place."

"Yeah, me too. Oh well. We've got classes tomorrow, but after that it's the weekend. We can spend the whole day down there."

"That's right, isn't it?"

Mindful of the portraits, they ceased further talk of their clubhouse while they traversed the halls and stairways leading up to Gryffindor house.

They had no sooner stepped into the common room when they noted all eyes on them.

"What?"

As though Harry's surly question had opened the floodgates, everyone began talking at once. Hermione in her bossiest tone started with "HARRY JAMES POTTER, YOU SHOULD BE
ASHAMED OF YOURSELF!
At the same time, the Weasley twins began chanting 'WE'RE NOT WORTHY!', while their best friend, Lee, laughed and patted Harry on the shoulder as though congratulating him.

Harry pushed his way through the commotion and took a seat on a chair near the fire. Ron was seated on the couch nearby munching on a pile of chocolate frogs. Harry eyed the pile of empty candy wrappers and then eyed Ron suspiciously.

"That better not be the entire bloody box of frogs I had stashed in my trunk."

"I left you some."

Neville flicked his finger through the pile of empty wrappers, separating them, before taking the empty spot on the couch. "There's eight wrappers there."

"Two on his lap and one currently in his mouth. There's only twelve in a box, Ron. You left me a single piece of my own candy!"

He kicked Ron in the shin and swiped the two still wrapped that were resting on his leg.

"OW! What the hell?!"

"Greedy, thieving berk." Harry growled, tossing the second frog to Neville.

"HARRY! ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?" Hermione demanded, stamping her foot.

"No, not at all. So what's all this then? What's going on?"

"Oh, like you don't know. It's all over the school, mate. There's no hiding it."

"I actually don't know."

"What we want to know is how you managed it!"

"We've been trying to prank Dumbledore for ages"

"But we've never managed it."

"Can't even get anything into his office."

"So? Tell us!"

"What's the secret?"

"This about Dumbledore? What happened? No one has actually told me yet."

"As if you don't know! You set a swarm of Cornish pixies loose to trash his office! He has a lot of rare books of magic and one of a kind magical items up there! How could you!"

Harry snorted and glanced at Neville, who looked rather disgusted.

"Looks like you were wrong. Apparently Dumbledore's as useless as Lockhart when it comes to pixies."

"So you admit it! I don't believe you! Not only did you do something so irresponsible and awful, you don't even have the common decency to be ashamed of yourself!"
"Dumbledore brought that on himself."

"How dare you!"

"He piss you off or something?" Lee laughed.

"No. He called us up to his office after dinner..." Harry explained the events as they'd happened, and that he'd not discovered the bag of pixies was gone till they went outside to get rid of them.

"So, if he hadn't of shoved me like that, his office would be pixie free. Ergo, he brought it on himself."

"So...you had no intention of pranking him. That's how you got away with it."

"How do you get prank items into his office with the intent to use them and still get in? That's the real question."

"This is going to take some thinking about."

The twins wandered off, trading ideas. Ron laughed around his mouthful of chocolate. Hermione was still fuming.

"How did you even get them in the first place? Did you break into Professor Lockhart's office and steal them after he subdued them all?"

"What are you talking about? Lockhart didn't subdue the pixies. He ran off and hid. Harry subdued them."

"Oh, right!" Hermione scoffed.

"You did? How'd you do it, Harry?" Seamus called out from across the room. Harry looked around and realized most of Gryffindor was shamelessly eavesdropping on the whole conversation.

"Yes, Harry. How did you do it?" Hermione asked sweetly, though her smile was mocking.

"Immobilis"

Hermione froze in place, though her eyes were still moving frantically from side to side as she tried to figure out how to free herself. Harry tucked away his wand and climbed to his feet.

"Just like that."
Harry and Neville set up a secret plotting lair.

The next morning at breakfast Harry sat with the twins.

"Good morning?" Lee said with some surprise as Neville sat next to him.

"Not that it isn't lovely to have you, Harriekins…"

"…But what brings you here this fine day?" Fred and George wondered, finishing each other's sentences as was usual for them.

"I don't want to deal with Hermione this morning."

"Ah. We heard she got you stuck with a detention?"

"Yeah. It's set for Saturday. I had plans for Saturday!"

"Well, you shouldn't have cursed her then." Lee shrugged.

"She shouldn't have been a bitch."

"That seems a bit harsh."

"She's been being a brat since the train."

Fred and George exchanged a speaking glance. It seemed the little spat Ron's friends were having was more serious than any of them realized. Everyone in Gryffindor knew the trio had split--it was kind of hard to miss, really. Everyone had assumed it was something minor and would blow over eventually. It was beginning to look like it might not be that simple.

"Ah, you three are together, good. Practice tomorrow. 5 am." Oliver Wood announced without fanfare.

"WHAT?!!" Fred, George and Harry exclaimed together in horror.

"You did not just say that." Angelina Johnson said from nearby.

"Are you crazy?" Katie Bell agreed.

"5 am. We're winning that cup this year." Oliver repeated sternly before heading back to sit with his own yearmates.

"Five bloody am. That's just great. Crack of dawn quidditch practice and detention. That's just bloody perfect! I don't even have any chocolate left to console myself because your stupid brother stole it all. A whole bloody box of chocolate frogs! I was expecting those to last me for a couple of months, not have the whole thing gone before the first week was out." Harry let out a heavy breath and then began assembling himself an egg and bacon on toast sandwich.
"I'll see you in class, Nev. I'm too irritated to sit still right now."

Neville eyed him a moment and began making his own sandwich.

"I'll come with you."

Just like that they were gone. Fred and George exchanged another speaking glance and moved down the table to corner the other two thirds of the Gryffindor trio.

When the last class of the day was over, the two boys slipped out with the intention of seeing their clubhouse. They were both excited to see what the elves had done with the place.

"Harry! Harry! Oh, for goodness sake!"

A passing Ravenclaw poked Harry in the arm as they crossed paths in the hall. "I think that girl is calling you."

"I can hear just fine." Harry assured him as he and Neville ducked into a secret passage. They took a roundabout path to the Garden; neither one wanted to lead Ron and Hermione there. Finally they reached the warded hallway.

"Safe at last." Harry joked.

They both hopped over the runic array that was still stuck to the floor and started down the hall.

"Oh, this is lovely. Loki's work, I assume?"

The boys both froze and turned to see Luna Lovegood crouched at the end of the hall, examining the runic array. She smiled at them both rather vacantly and straightened, before carefully stepping over it and wandering down to join them.

"Where are your shoes?"

"I think nargles must have taken them. I left them next to my trunk last night, but they were gone this morning. So was my history book."

Neville frowned and Harry stiffened as his protective instincts began to kick in. Before he really had a chance to say anything further, they could hear Hermione complaining from further down the hall.

Neville and Harry exchanged a resigned glance; they were caught now, since the runic array didn't seem to be functioning correctly.

"They must be here somewhere. The portraits said they came down this way."

Ron and Hermione came into sight and looked around.

"They must have doubled back somehow. There's nothing interesting down here at all!"

"Can we go now? We've been all over the bloody castle. He'll show up when he's ready to stop being a bloody prat."

Hermione huffed in annoyance. "Fine. Oh! I'm am going to give him such a piece of my mind when I see him! Imagine, telling the twins that all this is my fault! He's the one who won't stop
lying, not to mention he hexed me! Ugh!

"You, what about me? He told them I was a thief! He's got some nerve, he does."

"Whatever. Let's go to the library. We can get started on our charms homework."

"Bloody hell, Hermione! It's not due for another week!"

The duo wandered off, bickering. Harry and Neville looked at one another, and then at Luna, who was humming quietly to herself and studying the stonework. Apparently the runic array was functioning just fine, it just didn't seem to work on Luna. Neville shrugged and Harry nodded.

"Say, Luna...you seem to have stumbled across our secret lair. Since it's a secret lair, we have to swear you to secrecy."

"I'm not allowed to make any unbreakable vows unless I ask permission first. Daddy said so."

"How about a pinky swear?"

"Oh? What's that then? Do your pinkies fall off if you tell the secret?"

"I never heard of that one."

"It's a muggle thing. We're working on the honor system here." Harry showed her how to link their pinkies together, which she seemed to find quite amusing.

"I Luna Lovegood pinky swear not to tell anyone about your secret lair"

"And to always call it the Garden when outside of it."

"And to always call it the Garden when outside of it. I suppose it would defeat the purpose if you told everyone you were going to your secret plotting lair. That was fun. Now you, Neville, Neville Longbottom."

"Just Neville is fine." Neville sighed, linking his pinky and repeating the swear.

"Now the two of you."

The boys shrugged and did their own pinkie swear.

"Alright, now that's out of the way, let's see the clubhouse."

Harry threw open the door.

"Cool!"

"Oh, this is very nice. I was expecting more cobwebs and torture implements though."

"Torture?"

"I think that sort of thing is standard in a secret lair...at least it always is in comic books."

"It's not that kind of secret lair."

"Yeah, we're heroes...or at least not villains. No torture."

"It's not that kind of secret lair."
"It is very nice."

The elves had scrounged up some thick carpets for the floor, and some large squashy pillows. They now had a couch and two overstuffed armchairs. There was a table and four chairs near the kitchenette.

A peek in the cabinets showed they’d been stocked with some butterbeer, the makings of hot chocolate, a plate of biscuits and some scones. There was a handful of colorful, mismatched mugs, plates, and cutlery in another cabinet, and a selection of small battered pans in another. The bathroom now had some hand towels and soap. The bedroom now had a line of targets down the far end, and the floor felt spongy underfoot. There was also a rack of wooden swords, a couple of small bows and some arrows against the wall by the door. Neville peeked out into the garden and found some fresh soil had been worked into the beds. The fireplaces had been lit, and there were even some slightly threadbare tapestries on a few of the walls.

"This place looks great!"

"Yeah. They really went all out. So…who wants some hot chocolate?"

"I want to sword fight."

Neville and Harry both looked at Luna in surprise.

"Or…we could do that, I guess."

"Yay!"

"Do you actually know how to sword fight?"

"I only got a few lessons, and that was mostly just forms. I hadn't actually moved up to fighting yet. Loki was mostly focusing on teaching me to throw knives and making me exercise so I'd be stronger and more flexible. I had to meditate a lot too. He said it would help my magic."

"Yeah? How so?"

"He explained, but I'm not sure I understood everything. It does work though. I have a much easier time doing magic now…though that might also be all the practice he made me do. We really don't get enough practical time in class."

"Show us what you know and we'll work from there," Luna said. She had already gotten herself a sword and was happily whirling around the room and stabbing the air.

Neville went and fetched his own sword and tossed one to Harry. Harry led them through the sword forms he'd been taught and then again and once more until they had it down.

"Good. Now do each of those moves a thousand times."

"Uh…"

"You have to build muscle memory and it also builds strength."

"But still… a thousand?! Can you show me how to throw knives instead?"

Luna was busy repeating the forms like she'd been told to, so Harry shrugged and dug out the set of small knives Loki had given him.
Once he'd gotten Neville positioned and had him do a few throws till he got the hang of it, he went and got one of the bows.

"I don't think I'm very good at this. I'm not even getting them near the target most of the time."

"You just need practice. I was doing it for a week before I regularly got them near the target, and it was a while after that before I got them to go where I wanted even half the time. Don't worry about it, just keep at it. You'll get better. I did."

Advice given, he let loose the arrow he'd had nocked, and frowned when it glanced off the edge of the target.

"Damn. I'd hoped this would be easier."

Neville collected the knives to try again, Harry nocked another arrow. Luna continued working through the forms.

"My arms feel all funny."

"You actually did it a thousand times. I'd have been more surprised if they didn't. Have a seat. I'll make that hot chocolate now."

The bell for dinner rang just as he was pouring out everyone's drinks.

"Olaf, Brunhilde?" he called quietly.

"Hello, young master. You is needing something?"

"Would it be possible to have our dinner brought here?"

"Oh, yes. We cans do that."

"Thanks." He spotted Luna staring into the fire with her usual dreamy expression. Her bare feet were a bit dirty, and looked rather red. Even at this time of year the stones in the castle could be rather chilly. It couldn't have been comfortable walking around like that all day.

"Could one of you look around the Ravenclaw first year girl's dorm? Someone took Luna's shoes and her history book. If you find them could you bring them and a pair of socks for her?"

"Don't yous be worrying none. We is taking care of this."

"Thanks again."

Plates heaped with a selection of foods from dinner appeared at the table a short time later. A while after that Luna's shoes, book and a pair of warm socks appeared in front of the fire. She took their reappearance in stride and donned the footwear without comment.

Harry slipped off into the training room and called the elves again.

"I see you found Luna's stuff. Where was it?"

"Was being in her roommate's trunk."

"Can you ward her stuff so no more of it gets taken? Maybe do something to warn off the girl from
trying again?"

"What you wants us to do?"

"I dunno…make her hands turn bright red and the word 'thief' print itself across her face? It doesn't have to be permanent, but it does have to last long enough for the teachers to see her and investigate…that's if they even bother. Lord knows no one in this school ever listened to my complaints."

"We cans do this."

"Thanks. Luna's a nice girl and I really don't like bullies."

"We understands."

"Say…speaking of bullies… do you know what happened to all the Cornish pixies that were in Dumbledore's office?"

"They gots tossed out a window."

"Oh. Too bad. I think they would have had a lot of fun in Snape's quarters. Oh well. I'll have to think of another way to get him. Hmmm. I'll have to think about that some more."

"Does you needs anything else?"

"No…actually, maybe. Would you be able to get me a bottle of alcohol? Like, firewhiskey or something?"

"What you is needing that for? You is being too young to bes drinking!"

"And if we gives you this we has to charms it so yous cannot open it."

"Me specifically, or any student?"

The house elves exchanged a look.

"You specifically." Olaf told him with a smile. "But you has to tell us a good reason why you is needing it."

"Oh, right. Oh, hey! John, the doorman at Loki's place, his birthday is coming up soon. I never had a chance to go shopping before school started. He mentioned once that he likes trying new alcohols. It's, like, his hobby or something."

"Oh, in that case we can definitely helps you!" Brunhilde said cheerfully.

"Just put it in my trunk. I'll handle it from there."

She and Olaf both winked at him and disappeared.
"This is our year! We will work hard, all day if we have to. This is the year when we beat those slimy Slytherins in to the dirt and take our place as the rightful quidditch champions!"

George's snore interrupted Oliver's passionate speech.

"WAKE UP!"

The rest of the team, who had also been half or completely asleep, woke with a jolt and stared at Oliver blearily.

"Whassat?"

"That's it. Get out on the pitch! How are we supposed to win the cup if you all insist on sleeping!?"

"Ollie, man, it's pitch black out, not to mention it's ass o' clock in the bloody morning." Fred groaned between yawns.

"Doesn't matter. Get out there!"

The team groaned and stumbled out to the pitch, stumbling in the darkness before warily mounting their brooms. The grass was damp, the air brisk and chill. It would have been a nice day for flying if only they could see, or were properly awake.

"Oliver…the snitch is hard to spot at the best of times. How exactly am I supposed to find it when I can't see?"

"Develop your other senses. Become one with the universe."

"Oh? And how do I do that then?"

"You're the seeker. You figure it out. Now find that snitch!"

For the next hour, practice was a bit futile. Everyone was too afraid to fly at full speed for fear of a mid-air crash. There were several injuries from glancing blows from the bludgers. The quaffle was dropped several times and had to be searched for on the ground in the dark. Harry strained his eyes staring into the early morning gloom searching for the snitch and hoping none of the bludgers targeted him.

Things improved drastically after the sun rose, but they were all tired and out of sorts by the time it happened.

"Hey, Ollie…breakfast is probably just about over…"

"Breakfast is for the weak!"

"But…"

"Keep going!"

The team exchanged disbelieving looks and went back to work.
When they heard the distant bell signaling the end of the lunch hour, Fred could be seen weeping atop his broom as he smashed at the nearest bludger. Harry noted Ron and Hermione trooping down towards the pitch after breakfast. They took up seats in the Gryffindor stands and seemed content to wait till the end of practice. He could only figure they were planning a confrontation or something.

They were going to leave unsatisfied; he wasn't any too happy with either one of them. They'd been badmouthing him all over school, saying he was a liar, an attention seeker, a prat. He knew they were both expecting him to apologize to them--for telling the truth and wanting to eat his own candy, apparently. Well, they were going to be disappointed. He'd been so focused on his erstwhile friends that at first he hadn't noticed who else was one their way to the pitch.

"What the hell are they doing here? I booked the pitch today! Those bastards! What are they doing, spying on us?"

Oliver was practically quivering in indignation as he flew down to land in front of the Slytherin team, who had all just arrived at the edge of the field. The rest of them followed him down.

"Get out of here! I booked the pitch for today!"

"We've got permission." Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team's captain explained, handing over a note.

"I hereby give the Slytherin team permission to use the pitch to train their new seeker?" Oliver read it out, sounding outraged. "He can't do that!"

"Oliver, calm down. Everyone knows I'm hardly Snape's biggest fan, but come on. You booked the pitch starting at 5 am. It is actually possible he didn't think it would be a problem to send them down here at 8. After all, only a crazy person would try having practice for longer than that."

"You've got a new seeker?" Angelina asked.

The team parted in the center, revealing Draco Malfoy. He was by far the smallest member of the team; they hadn't been able to see him when he was behind the others.

"Oh, it gets better. Mr. Malfoy was nice enough to gift Slytherin house with seven brand new Nimbus 2001s as well."

The Gryffindor team stirred in discontent. A whole team on brand new, top of the line brooms was no laughing matter.

"It won't do you much good, will it?" Harry heard Hermione sniff in her bossiest most know-it-all tone of voice. "Unlike you, no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way on."

"Oh, be quiet mudblood, no one asked you!"

Harry and Hermione both looked around in some confusion as the Slytherins all sucked in a shocked breath even as they kept their faces blank and maintained house solidarity, and the Gryffindors all started shouting and snarling.

"EAT SLUGS, MALFOY!" Ron snarled, pointing his wand.

Draco's smug little grin vanished as Ron's spell hit him in the stomach. He started gagging and sounded for a moment like he was choking on something. He heaved a few times and then a fat, slimy slug fell out of his mouth. It didn't end there. He continued coughing and gagging and more
and more slugs, some large, some small, came out of his mouth. The other Slytherins growled in anger and it was obvious everyone was moments away from a free-wheeling free-for-all massacre. Harry held up his wand and let off a loud BANG like a gunshot, which startled everyone enough that they halted in their tracks.

"Instead of everyone making things worse, how about you get him to the hospital wing before he chokes to death?"

"This isn't over!" Marcus Flint warned as the others grabbed Malfoy to haul him back to the castle.

"Ron's not part of the team. Don't blame us for this."

Flint glowered at all of them a moment longer and then nodded once. He was still angry, but they probably wouldn't be getting cursed in the hallways.

"WHAT THE HELL, HARRY! WHY ARE YOU STICKING UP FOR THE FERRET?" Ron finally exploded. "He called Hermione a-a you-know-what! What kind of a friend are you?"

"So he called her a name, so what?"

"It's a foul thing to call someone. It means she has dirty blood!"

"Well, she knows better, doesn't she? Cursing someone for calling you a name is kind of overkill, don't you think? Next time he says that, remind him he's an inbred, ferret faced pillock, that's all. Geez."

"Where are you going?"

"To get changed and get something to eat, obviously."

"We've still got the pitch!"

"We've already been out here three hours and I'm hungry!"

"Sorry man, we're with Harry."

"What about the cup?"

"Look at it this way, Ollie, we're still hours ahead of Slytherin practice-wise. Relax."

Ron and Hermione were gone by the time he'd showered and changed. He headed back to Gryffindor tower to drop off his broom and uniform. When he went into his trunk to grab a few books to take down to the Garden with him, he found a large bottle of brandy.

"Guess they couldn't get firewhiskey. Oh well, I'm sure this will be just fine."

He hit the bottle with a siren charm. Anyone other than himself that encountered the bottle would be drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Even better, the charm would transfer itself to whoever took the bottle and keep them focused on it and then would dissipate, meaning anyone that checked the bottle for tampering likely wouldn't find it. It wouldn't be as easy for Ron to get away with stealing from his trunk again after he was found passed out drunk.

He didn't mind sharing, he just didn't like being left with the crumbs all the time. It was too much like living with the Dursleys again. He also didn't care for how free both Ron and Hermione were...
with his trunk and things. He never went into Ron's trunk. If he needed something from it he would ask. He couldn't even get to Hermione's. Loki had told him he needed to learn to set some boundaries and to expect others to abide by them. Ron wouldn't dare rummage through the others' trunks. Heck, he wouldn't dare do it to Hermione, or she to him. Both of them felt perfectly fine with making free with Harry's things though. Well, it was going to stop. If he had to get Ron drunk, passed out and in trouble to make it stop, that was what was going to happen.

Dumbledore was good friends with Ron's family. He probably wouldn't be expelled.

Harry checked that all the books he wanted were in his satchel. He really missed his little bottomless bag, but so far it hadn't been returned to him, even though he'd asked for it. Typical. He closed his trunk and headed out to spend the day in the Garden. He never saw the pair of eyes that had been fixed hungrily on his trunk from the moment he cast the siren spell.

Acting on a whim, he swung by the hospital wing on his way. Malfoy was still there, looking quite miserable. He had a bucket clutched against his chest and was still choking out an almost non-stop stream of slugs of all sizes. If anything, he only looked more miserable when he spotted Harry.

"Come to finish me off, Potter?"

"Don't be more stupid than you have to be, Malfoy."

"Come to apologize then?"

"What for? I'm not the one that cursed you. Besides, you had payback of some sort coming. While Hermione had no business saying you had to buy your way on to the team, you had no call to trot out such uncouth language either."

"Just...bleagh...calling it like I see it."

"How the hell did you end up in Slytherin? That's an honest question. From what I've seen there isn't a cunning bone in your body, and you have worse social skills than I do, and honestly that's really saying something."

"I have bleaaagh exquisite manners, I'll have you know!"

Harry laughed; a ridiculous statement like that deserved nothing less.

"I do!" Malfoy insisted between heaves.

"Malfoy, at the rate you're going, you're not going to be able to shop anywhere, do business with anyone, get anything done at the Ministry, from getting floo maintenance to getting out of trouble with the aurors without running afoul of someone with a vendetta from your school days and it's only the start of second year! And before you try telling me that your name or your family's money will smooth over any difficulties, try again. We've only just finished the first week of school and you've been hexed twice by angry Weasleys. Their dad works at the Ministry. Their oldest brother works for Gringott's. Percy is headed for the Ministry when he graduates. Who knows where the rest of them will end up, and that's just one family--a family that hates your name and doesn't care about your money, except perhaps to resent you for it. There are more muggleborn in this school than just Hermione, past and present. In case you've forgotten my mother was muggleborn, and by all accounts she was smart, powerful, and beautiful to boot. There's more halfbloods in this school than just me as well. Unless you know their family tree inside out, you probably don't know which
of them have muggleborn relatives that they're fond of. Then there's all the Hufflepuffs you seem to like to torment. That is a dumb, dumb move. They're traditionally the largest house, which means they represent about forty percent of the British wizarding world. Their thing is loyalty--you torment one, do you honestly think that every Hufflepuff that ever was doesn't know your name and consider you an enemy of their house? They're everywhere--they're most of the shopkeepers, they're healers and aurors, working in the bank, in the Ministry, on the quidditch teams. You see where I'm going with this? You're a bloody Slytherin! You should be trying to foster connections, not making enemies every time you open your stupid mouth. Geez."

Malfroy glared at him weakly over the rim of his bucket. "What would you know about being a Slytherin? You're a stupid Gryffindork through and through."

"The hat was going to put me in Slytherin, though really it said I could go to any house. "A fine mind, plenty of courage too, not afraid of hard work and a thirst to prove yourself."

"How the hell did you end up in bleagh Gryffindor then?"

"I told the hat to put me anywhere but Slytherin, that's why."

"What!? Why would you do that?"

"A couple of reasons. Everyone I met, except you, warned me against the house. I was told every wizard that went bad came from there, including Voldemort, who murdered my parents and tried to kill me. I also realized people had a very particular image of what I was allowed to be, and going to Slytherin would guarantee pretty much everyone turned against me for not living up to their expectations. Thirdly, I'd met you."

"ME?" Draco sputtered, sounding insulted.

"You were the very first kid my own age that I met in the wizarding world, did you know that? I didn't know magic was real. I didn't know I was a wizard. I didn't know my parents had been in a war or had been murdered. I didn't know I was famous. I grew up with muggles, and that day in Diagon Alley was the very first time I'd been in the wizarding world. Everything was new to me, and I didn't know anything about anything. Then I met you, and you pretty much said I had no real right to even be there because of it. You didn't know who I was, you didn't know the first thing about me. They shouldn't let that sort, who don't know anything about magic in, don't you think?"

Draco looked rather mulish, but he was still listening, in between hacking up slugs, so Harry continued.

"Then I saw you again on the train. All of a sudden you wanted to know me, and the moment you found me you insulted the kid I'd been making friends with, told me my parents deserved to be murdered and threatened my life all in one breath, and then tried to have your friends beat me and Ron up. I repeat--you have no social skills whatsoever."

Harry shook his head, because Malfroy looked insulted and seemed to disagree with his summation of their second meeting. "Given an introduction like that, is it really any surprise that I preferred to go where Ron was, where my parents had gone, where people wouldn't automatically assume I was trying to follow in Voldemort's footsteps? Please. I'd have had to been an idiot to do otherwise."

Harry snorted and then smirked at Malfroy, who eyed him warily. "There's also the fact that you reminded me too much of my cousin. My spoiled, blonde, muggle cousin. I was happy to get away from him, I wasn't looking to replace him."

"How...hack...dare you...bleagh...I'm nothing like some...guh...stupid muggle!"
"He's blonde, spoiled rotten, likes to bully people along with his pet goons. True, he uses his fists, not a wand, but otherwise... And when things don't go his way, he threatens people with his parents. If the shoe fits..."

"What are you talking about Potter? What shoe?"

"It's a muggle saying. It pretty much means, yes you are a lot like my muggle cousin. Deal with it."

"Why are you even here, Potter?"

"Haven't the foggiest. Maybe I just wanted to talk at you when you were too miserable to be your usual pratthish self." Harry shrugged, and dug his last chocolate frog out of his pocket and tossed it to him. "I'd save that till this runs its course. Maybe it'll help get the taste of slug out of your mouth. Of course, you're French, aren't you? I could get you some garlic and butter sauce if you prefer..."

"Oh would you just die, Potter."

"See? No social skills. See if I bother giving you chocolate again."

When Harry eventually got to the Garden, he found Neville and Luna already there.

"Hello, Harry Potter."

"I told you, it's just Harry."

"Hey, Harry. How was practice?"

"Annoying, mostly." Harry replied while heading for the kitchen. He was pleased to find the elves had left him a plate of his favorite breakfast foods under a warming charm, and a glass of milk and a glass of orange juice in the cold cabinet. To his annoyance there was also a vial of potion. He downed that first and tried to wash away the taste with his glass of milk. The rest he took back to the table with him.

"It was still dark for the first hour of practice. We couldn't see through most of it, so it was a pretty lame practice. It got a bit better when the sun rose, but then the Slytherins showed up to use the pitch--Malfoy's the new seeker. Hermione started with him and he called her something nasty, so Ron cursed him. He's still choking up slugs in the hospital wing."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy." Neville snickered.

"I told Ron it was overkill for calling someone a name. He and Ginny are pretty quick to curse people, aren't they?"

"Malfoy's no better. Maybe it'll teach him to stop running his mouth."

"I dunno. He's pretty thickheaded from what I've seen. I mean, I told him as much, but I think it went in one ear and out the other."

Luna seemed to be painting one of the walls. She was coating the wall with a thick layer of white and humming as she did so.

"Why are you painting the wall?"

"I'm going to put up a mural. I need a nice foundation."
"Oh. Okay."

Neville was reading a herbology book and taking notes. He supposed he should get his homework out of the way too, but he didn't really feel like it at the moment.

He watched Luna paint for a bit, but it quickly got boring as she was still just laying a foundation for whatever she was going to do. He finished off his breakfast and washed up his plate and cup, then unpacked his satchel and got out the books he'd brought with him to study later. There was a recessed set of bookshelves built right into the stone wall. They were nice, but kind of boring, really. Plain grey stone just like the rest of Hogwarts.

"There was a charm to change colors…where did I see that?"

It took a bit of digging, but he found it in the book of household charms, in the section about sprucing up the house after you'd cleaned it. There were four bookcases with four shelves each, running along the upper half of the wall on either side of the doorway to the kitchen. Harry practiced the color charm until he got it to respond as he wanted and then went to work. He made the outer frame of each bookcase a different color: red, yellow, blue, green and then did the same with each shelf section in each case, alternating the order of colors. It was a bit loud, but it was cheerful and he liked it. He decided to work on the mantelpiece around the fireplace next, again using the Hogwarts colors to fill in the mantelpiece itself, the pillars to either side of the fireplace and the decorative embellishments. He was having fun, so he kept going: doors, doorframes, the squashy pillows on the floor, the table and chairs.

"Gee, Harry. I don't think the place is colorful enough." Neville remarked, his voice dry.

"Just trying to brighten the place up. I like it."

"Why all the house colors though? I would have thought you'd have done red…maybe some blue since Luna's a Ravenclaw."

"The hat told me I'd do well in any of the houses. The thing is, after I got sorted into Gryffindor, I just ran around trying to be brave, but I neglected my mind, and I started slacking off and I stopped being cunning and resourceful and just drifted along letting others point me where they wanted me to go and do all my thinking for me. It's a reminder to myself that I'm a whole person, not just bravery or a tool to fight Voldemort."

Neville shivered. "I wish you'd stop saying his name all the time."

"It's just a name…probably not even a real one. Who names their kid Voldemort? His real name is probably really ordinary, like Bob or Tom or something. No one would be afraid of a dark lord named Bob, so he made up something pretentious and French sounding so he'd sound snobbishly classy and sort of scary."

"Could be. It is kind of a weird name, now that you mention it…still gives me the shivers though."

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "Actual shivers?"

"Oh yes. A heavy feeling of dread fills the air around you and the air seems colder…and then it feels like cold, dead fingers are trailing down your spine." Luna agreed absently.

Neville shuddered at her description and nodded. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I certainly never felt anything like that. Does everyone feel that when I say Voldemort?"
"Stop saying it!" Neville squeaked.

"It's the taboo, of course. Strange that it's still in effect."

"The what now?" Harry looked to Neville for an explanation, but Neville seemed equally mystified.

"Daddy told me about it. During the war, there was a group called the Snatchers. Whenever someone said His name, they would pop out suddenly and grab them. They were usually never seen again. People learned pretty quickly not to say His name. That's why they say You-Know-Who, or He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named. It was dangerous to say it."

"And it's because of some taboo?"

"Taboo. It's a spell of some sort. It allows you to designate a word or a phrase, or a set of words as forbidden. The creepy feelings reinforce the ban, though not as much as having a group of people pop out to kidnap you."

"Well…that ruddy bastard."

"Huh? Who?"

"Dumbledore."

"The headmaster? What about him?"

"I don't go around saying His name because I'm super brave or anything stupid like that. The first time I said it, it was because it was his name, right? Everyone screamed and got mad at me for saying it and they were all freaked out. I just thought everyone was being silly, but everyone was so bothered by it, I started to say You-Know-Who, you know, following custom and all. I called him when Dumbledore came to talk to me in the hospital wing last year after all that business with Quirrel and the Stone and he kept interrupting me and saying "Lord Voldemort" every time I said You-Know-Who and told me there was nothing to fear in a name and I should call him by his proper one. I call him Voldemort because Dumbledore insisted I do so. I never felt anything like cold fingers or anything when I heard the name, and I don't feel it when I say it."

"You must have permission to hear it, but not say it."

"I don't feel anything creepy when Dumbledore says it, and he says it all the time."

"He must have permission then."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would Vo…Bob…"

"I like Tom better. Tom, Harry…you just need to find a Richard and the set would be complete."

"Richard? Oh, Dick. Tom, Dick and Harry. I get it. Why would Tom give Dumbledore permission to say his name? He was his enemy. His main enemy. You'd think he'd wanna know when he was trash talking him. Right?"

"Unless it's not His taboo."

"Why would Dumbledore set up a taboo on You-Know-.. Tom the Dark Lord's name? That doesn't make any sense."

"It makes perfect sense from a certain point of view."
"Yeah, it really does."

"How? I don't get it."

"It's like Pablo…the guy with the dogs."

"Pablo? What? What dogs?"

"Some muggle. He would ring a bell every time he fed the dogs and it made them drool or something like that, anyway. It was all about association. Look, it's like this… Dumbledore makes me say the name, and every time I do everyone feels bad. Over time they're going to associate that creepy feeling with me, not with Tom. It doesn't happen when Dumbledore says it, and so everyone associates him with safety from Tom, even though I'm supposedly the one that blew him up and I'm the one that went down to face him last year. Then there's also the idea that if I say it long enough it'll be such a habit it would be hard to stop. I'd have to make a conscious effort to not say it. If he ever gets a new body and comes back like he wants to and puts his taboo back up and has his Snatchers waiting, I'll be grabbed up in no time! It's like he setting me up to get kidnapped. He sure never mentioned taboos or snatchers or anything, he just insisted I say it without warning me about anything!"

"What does You-Know… Tom have to do with last year? You said you went to face him? What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean? Dumbledore said everyone knew."

"He said it was a test of courage, daring and stuff. He said you did a seeker challenge, and Ron beat a life-sized chess set and Hermione solved a complicated riddle and you all won your challenges and that you'd be getting rewarded for your success. Everyone figured you'd be getting a cup or something until we all got all those points at the end of the year."

"I never talked about it because I thought everyone already knew. There was a Philosopher's Stone here at Hogwarts last year. Remember the Gringott's break in? The stone was there. Hagrid cleared out the vault before Professor Quirrel broke in trying to get it…"

In fits and starts he told them about the trail of clues that led them to discovering what had been hidden in the third floor corridor, their run-in with the troll, with the monster eating unicorns in the forest, their desperation upon hearing Dumbledore was gone that had driven them down there to protect the stone.

"We thought it was Snape. I was really surprised to see Quirrel down there. He had a face on the back of his head…"

It was hard, talking about it. He'd never really talked about it, except for his brief chat with Dumbledore when he was still groggy from having just woken up in the hospital wing. He had tried not to think of it too much; he'd mostly blanked it out of his mind. He had killed a man by touching his face when he was eleven years old. Talking about it made it all too real and brought back all the horror of that night from where he'd buried it deep. Neville was pale by the time he was done. Luna, by contrast seemed to be taking notes.

"So…wow. The face really said he was You-Know-Who? And he was right here in the castle? All year? We had class with a guy possessed by You-Know-Who! How are we all still alive?"

"He was weak. Quirrel didn't seem to think he was even strong enough to talk to me. He said he was 'mist and vapor unless he shared another's form'. A black cloud flew out of Quirrel when he
was dying. He's less than a ghost."

"I wonder where the rest of him is?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well…if he's just a face…is there a phantom leg wandering around somewhere?"

"Huh… I don't know. I just figured his head had form because he wanted to talk and see…but he doesn't have a brain, does he? I wonder if there is an arm or something floating around and possessing rats somewhere? That would be weirder than a guy with two faces. How would he have gotten like that though? Did the explosion that night pop his spirit into pieces or is he just weak and lazy and can't be bothered to form anything but a face?"

"Those are all very good questions. I'll ask daddy."

"You do that. Tell me what he says."

"I will."

The three children stayed in the clubhouse for the rest of the day. When the dinner bell rang, all three eyed one another.

"We should probably go…or at least I should. With Hermione and Ron roaming the school looking for me every day, if I miss all three meals they're going to probably rouse the staff and say I'm missing. Ron and Hermione got fooled by the runic array; I'm not sure I want to try our luck with the staff, especially if they're looking with any determination. I'd like to be able to keep coming here."

As they got closer to the entryway, the sound of many students walking, talking and laughing at once went from a distant hum to a dull roar.

"Mr. Potter! A moment if you will."

The kids slowed as they spotted a thin-lipped professor McGonagall coming down the stairs towards them. Harry felt eyes on him and turned slightly to see Professor Snape paused in the stairwell that led down to the dungeons, arms crossed and glaring baleful death at the side of his head. Harry ignored him; that was pretty much par for the course with Snape--nothing unusual there at all.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Where have you been? We have been looking for you."

"Around. I was with Nev and Luna. Why were you looking for me, Professor?"

Her nostrils flared slightly; she apparently didn't appreciate such a vague answer.

"I would like to discuss the contraband in your trunk."

"Contraband?"

"The brandy, Mister Potter."
Harry didn't have to pretend to be upset. It hadn't taken Ron long, had it? He'd already cleared out his candy stash, what else had he been looking for?

"Ron robbed me again? What am I supposed to give John the doorman for his birthday now?"

"Who...? What are you talking about, Mr. Potter?"

"I had a bottle of brandy for a birthday present. I asked the kitchen elves if they could get it for me. They said I was too young to drink and that they'd charm it so I couldn't open it. I told them it was fine because it wasn't for me. What did Ron do? Did he drink it or did he just dig through my trunk and then run off to tattle on me?"

"Mr. Weasley has nothing to do with..."

"It was Dean or Seamus? Man...does everyone got through my stuff?"

"Mr. Potter! If you would cease babbling for a moment! There was an intruder in Gryffindor tower earlier."

"Intruder?"

"What kind of intruder?"

McGonagall seemed to be getting uncomfortable with all the questions, but she seemed to decide that she could get rid of them easier if she simply answered.

"It was a man who was a student in Gryffindor twenty years ago. He was believed to be dead since the end of the war."

"He's a zombie? They eat brains, right? If that's the case, why did he come to Gryffindor?"

"that's a good point. He would have been better going to Ravenclaw." Neville agreed.

"Gryffindors have brains as well, even if many of them choose not to use them." Luna tittered.

McGonagall huffed quietly and they fell silent under her gimlet stare."He is not a zombie. It was thought he'd been murdered by Sirius Black. They only found his finger.... There was an explosion...a dozen muggles died. It was thought that finger was all that was left of him. Instead...he's here ten years later, not a mark on him but for the missing finger." She trailed off, obviously displeased to be relaying such gruesome facts to a couple of second years and a first year. "It makes no sense for him to have hidden all these years..." She pulled herself together. "He was found in the second year boys dormitory, passed out. A bottle of brandy that identified you, Mr. Potter, was found on the floor next to him."

"How did he get in? The password changes every week."

"That has yet to be discovered. Some Ministry aurors took him off for questioning. The Fat Lady claims she let only students inside and saw no intruders. The students in the common room said they saw no intruders either."

"Maybe he flew a broom up to the window?"

"Climbed up the tower?"

"Or he was already there." Luna offered.
"Already…? That doesn't make any sense."

"Scabbers."

"Ronald's rat was missing a finger on one of its front paws, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. His left."

"You think he was an animagus?"

"How else does a grown man get into a school full of kids, up to the seventh floor, inside a protected house and up to the dorm to get drunk and pass out without any of the kids or the portraits seeing him?"

"He doesn't. He was there all along, brought in with the students."

"How long do rats live? Does anyone know?"

"Only a couple of years, I think."

"Percy found Scabbers when he was a kid. He had him for years before giving him to Ron last year when he made prefect. His mum got him an owl to celebrate. Even if Percy was eleven or twelve when he found him that's already an old rat. If he was younger…"

"Does the Ministry have anything to keep an animagus from transforming?"

"Yes… though chances are they wouldn't trot it out unless they knew or suspected the person was an animagus already… Excuse me."

McGonagall hurried off. The kids exchanged a glance and shrugged before heading into the great hall.

Luna headed towards Ravenclaw and the two boys towards Gryffindor. Harry didn't even have a chance to sit down before Hermione started in on him.

"Where were you?"

"Hey, mate. How 'bout that hobo, eh?"

"I just about jumped out of my skin when I saw him there." Dean agreed.

"Some nerve, eh? Breaks into our dorm room and doesn't bother to leave us any brandy." Seamus added.

"Yeah, that is weird. Uh, Ron? You see Scabbers lately?"

"No. Do you have him?" he added hopefully.

"That clinches it." Neville realized. "The hobo probably is Scabbers."

"What? That's ridiculous!" Hermione scoffed. "Surely someone would have noticed!"

"The guy and Scabbers are both missing a finger from what McGonagall told us."

"And another thing! What were you doing with a bottle of brandy in your trunk? You're lucky you weren't expelled!"
"It was charmed so I couldn't open it, Hermione. It was a birthday present, or was supposed to be. I'm going to have to get something else now since that stupid guy drank it all. What the hell is it with everyone robbing me? That's it. I'm putting up some security. The next person that goes digging around in my trunk, their hands are going to fall off."

"Are you going to answer me?"

"If you would actually listen when I talk, you'd notice I just did! As for the animagus thing, why would anyone have noticed? Who expects someone to hide out as a rat and pretend to be kid's pet for years? What kind of nutter would you have to be to even do that? Professor McGonagall took us seriously enough that she went off to tell the aurors to make sure he can't transform, so ha!"

The remainder of dinner ended up being unpleasant as Harry and Hermione continued sniping at each other. Hermione finally got so upset she left, teary-eyed and with her nose in the air.

"Blimey, mate. Would you just apologize to her already?" Ron whined as the tables cleared. "I can't take this anymore!"

"Apologize? Me?! Why should I? She's the one causing the problem! She thinks I'm a liar and possibly crazy, she's been badmouthing me all over school. If anyone needs to apologize it's her!"

"Come on, mate. You know that's never gonna happen!"

"And that's my problem how exactly?"

Ron huffed and tromped after him.

"See ya later, Nev."

"Yeah, good luck."

"Yeah." Harry snorted.

"Where are you off to?"

"I have detention, remember?"

"Oh right. Well, you deserve it. It was kind of a dick move, cursing Hermione like that." Ron said accusingly.

"She was mocking me."

"Psh."

"Why are you following me?"

"I got detention too. Bloody Malfoy."

Professor McGonagall met them in the atrium.

"If you'll both hand over your wands, you can head to your detention. Mr. Weasley, you'll be overseen by Mr. Filch. I believe you'll be working in the trophy room tonight." Ron groaned and began stomping his feet as they continued up the stairs. "Mr. Potter… you were originally going to be spending the evening with Professor Snape, helping him with preparing some ingredients, however Professor Lockhart asked to oversee your detention." Harry grimaced. "I believe they'll both be meeting you on the second floor. You can come see me when you are done to get your
wands back."

McGonagall continued on her way. The two boys sighed and continued upstairs.

"Lucky. You'll be hanging out with Lockhart while I'm stuck with bloody Filch cleaning. Wish I got special treatment."

Unnoticed by Ron Harry's hands clenched at his side and he slanted an annoyed glare at the boy beside him.

Filch and Lockhart were waiting up ahead. Lockhart preening like a prat as always. From the look on Filch's face, he thought as much of Lockhart as Harry did.

"Ah, boys, good. Punctuality is always a good trait to cultivate. Harry, dear boy, you'll be coming with me…"

"Actually, professor… You should take Ron." Harry chirped with the most innocent look he could muster on his face. "He's too shy to tell you himself… but ever since school started you've been all he's talked about. He really admires you, professor. Why, just this morning he was going on and on about your impeccable fashion sense. He said "look at me, I'm a mess. Why, my mirror practically gags every time I look into it! If only I knew how to make myself look good, the way Professor Lockhart does."

Ron by that point was staring at Harry in abject horror, but Lockhart was eating it up and preening like a peacock.

"Well! Far be it for me to deny one of my fans the benefit of my experience."

"Really professor, you don't have to!"

"Nonsense! Come along, dear boy, don't be shy!"

Ron looked over his shoulder at Harry, his eyes promising vengeance for sticking him with Lockhart for the evening. That guy was just never happy was he?

Harry gave him a cheery wave and turned to Filch, who was eyeballing him suspiciously.

"So… looks like it's you and me. Trophy room, right?"

"Awfully cheery. What are you planning?"

"I'm planning to get my detention out of the way so I can leave."

"You gotta scrub it. Top to bottom. No magic."

"I grew up with muggles. I didn't know I was a wizard till I got my letter. That doesn't scare me. Ron now, he'd of been crying about it for days. He was whining on the way up here about me getting to hang out with Lockhart instead of having to clean. Just between you and me I'd prefer to scrub trophies. Lockhart's a bit of a ponce." he added quietly.

"You're a strange 'un. None of your funny business. I remember your father. I'll be watching you."

"My father was murdered when I was a baby. I didn't even know his name till Hagrid came to get me. If I'm anything like him, it isn't like I'd know. I'd prefer it if people treated me like I was my own person."

Filch just grunted and pointed him into the trophy room. "You're to clean every one. If I don't think
you did a good job you get to do it all over again."

"Yeah, yeah. I know the drill. I should introduce you to aunt Petunia. You'd probably get along famously."

"Single, is she?"

"No…I didn't mean it like that. I could introduce you to Mrs. Figg. I think she's single, in spite of the name. She breeds cats, you've got a cat…"

"Arabella Figg?"

"Yeah… She's a witch?"

Filch suddenly looked shifty. "She's a squib. I actually got Mrs. Norris from her, matter of fact."

"What's a squib anyway? Neville said that before. He said his family thought he was a squib for ages."

Filch looked bitter for a moment. "Opposite of a muggleborn. Parents are magic, you're not."

"Oh. That's rough. I know Neville nearly got drowned, even dropped out a window once. It only stopped because he got a Hogwarts letter. I know my aunt's still bitter. My mum got a Hogwarts letter, but she never did. She says now she's glad. She thinks wizards are freaks and should be drowned or something, but I know she was jealous once. What little girl doesn't want to go to school in a castle and see unicorns? She should have become a scientist. Yeah, you can't do everything a wizard can do, but the muggles are getting closer every day, they just have to build a machine instead of waving a wand. That's what I would have done…that and become a helicopter pilot so I could fly. No sense wasting your life being bitter, right?"

"Right…” Filch agreed. He looked shifty again. "Enough chatter. Get to work. Bucket's over there."

"It's pretty dusty in here. Could I get a broom and a mop too?"

"Yer an odd'un."

Harry sighed. "So people like to tell me."

Growing up as he had, even a big job like cleaning the trophy room didn't really faze him. He just got to work and worked steadily till the job was done. He was an old hand at cleaning, and knew better than to leave the job half done. He wiped down the outside of each case, including the tops--aunt Petunia always checked that, and Filch was cut from the same cloth; he probably would too. Then it was time to remove the trophies, clean and shine the inside till it sparkled, then the trophies--each one buffed till it shone. There was a lot of history in this room: quidditch teams, prefects, head boys and head girls, dueling champs, smart kids winning awards for their classes. He found a Weasley, a Longbottom…even a Malfoy. He found his dad listed with the quidditch team…as was Sirius Black, the guy thought to have killed the Gryffindor hobo. His dad must have known them both; they would have all been in school together.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle, Special Services. Weird. It doesn't say what he did. All the rest of them do.
1943. I wonder what was going on then?"

He shook off his musings and finished polishing everything. He'd been at it an hour and a half already. He still had to sweep and mop the floor…maybe go at a few of the corners with the broom; he was pretty sure he'd spotted some cobwebs. "I'd like to go to bed sometime soon."

Filch came back to check on him as he was finishing up the floor. He peered into every corner, eyeballed all the trophy cases, glared at the corners--there had been cobwebs, though there weren't anymore.

"That'll do. Run along now."

"Goodnight, Mr. Filch."

"Yeah, get on wit'ye."

Filch's cat, Mrs. Norris was with him. Harry hesitated a moment and reached down to let her smell his hand. She let him scratch behind her ears, though she glared at him while he did so.

"She kind of looks like Mr. Tibbles."

"'E was 'er sire." Filch grunted after a moment. Harry just nodded and patted the cat one last time on the head before leaving.

As he made his way to McGonagall's office to retrieve his wand, it occurred to him that he'd never actually seen Filch with a wand. Every time he saw him cleaning, it had always been the muggle way--broom, mop, rag, bucket. "I wonder if he's a squib. It would probably explain why he's in such a bad mood all the time." He considered it and realized he probably was; it would also explain why he'd gotten so shifty about Mrs. Figg. He figured he'd keep his mouth shut. A lot of people disliked Filch--with good reason, but still. He wouldn't put it past some of the kids to start going after him with magic if they knew he couldn't fight back. Wizards were often too quick to strike out with magic. He himself was guilty of that. He could have told Hermione to piss off, instead he'd hit her with a spell. True, it hadn't hurt her or anything, and it did make his point that he was in fact capable of dealing with a pack of pixies, but still…

Maybe he'd tell Neville and Luna what he suspected about Filch. Neither one of them would go after him. They could take turns cleaning up the entryway when everyone tracked in mud and rain. He found he rather sympathized with the man. He himself would probably would be an old grump if he had to take care of a place this size without magic. He knew all too well how much work it took to keep a place a tiny fraction of its size clean and orderly; plus he'd only had to clean up after four people, not hundreds.

"Sooooo hungry…"

Harry stopped and looked around warily. He could have sworn he'd heard a voice… There didn't seem to be anyone nearby. Finally he shrugged and continued on his way. It was probably nothing important.
Harry goes boom

Chapter Summary

Confrontations, and plotting--but this time not by Harry and Neville.

Sunday morning was surprisingly peaceful; Hermione didn't sniff at him or flounce around, nor did she snipe at him at breakfast. She and Ron were up to something though--subtle they were not. They were whispering together and slanting looks his way and then looking away when he looked over at them to see what they wanted. He wished they'd either just apologize already or leave him alone. This ongoing nonsense was kind of irritating.

"Garden after breakfast?"

"I actually have herbology club after breakfast. I'll be there after."

"How long does the club run?"

"Two hours usually."

"Guess I'm on my own then."

"Luna will probably… oh, wait… she's got charms club this morning."

"I didn't even know we had all these clubs."

"You're usually at quidditch practice when you're not in class."

"I feel like I've been missing a lot."

"Shouldn't have joined the team first year then."

"I didn't."

"What are you… yes you did. You've been on the team since last year." Neville said, looking at Harry oddly.

"I didn't join. Remember our first flying lesson?"

"Hard to forget. I broke my wrist, remember?"

"Yeah, and your remember all fell out of your pocket. Malfoy found it and said he was going to put it up a tree. I flew after him. He wasn't so confident without his goons there to back him up, so he threw it. I dove after it and caught it before it hit the ground. McGonagall saw me do it. She came and drug me off, yelling at me the whole way. I was really freaked out, because Madame Hooch said we'd be expelled if we were flying while she was gone. I thought I was getting kicked out, but instead McGonagall took me to see Oliver and said I was on the team and then she told me to win the cup or she'd reconsider my punishment. I didn't join. I was pretty much told to be on the team or I'd be expelled… though I don't know if they'd actually expel us just for flying. I believed they would at the time. If it had been left up to me I don't know if I would have tried out this year or not."
That day at lessons was my first time on a broom, and I'd never seen a quidditch game. The first game I ever saw was the one I was in. I might have appreciated the chance to look around as see what was available, or just try out like normal this year. I wasn't really given a choice one way or another… and it wasn't really fair, was it? First years weren't supposed to be on the team, weren't supposed to have a broom. An exception was made for me, which wasn't fair to the other first years… and it really wasn't fair to me either. I mean think about it… first years aren't allowed because they think it's too dangerous, except when it's me, apparently, because no one here really cares if I live or die so long as I perform as ordered."

Neville just stared at him mutely; he didn't seem to know what to say. Much to his relief, the tense moment was broken when the morning owl delivery arrived.

"Hedwig! How are you girl? You've got something for me?"

Hedwig fussed with his hair as he untied the small note from her leg, then hopped down to the table to make off with Harry's bacon.

"Seems like I've got something to do this morning after all. Hagrid invited me for tea. I guess I'll pop down there after breakfast. Wanna come with me, girl?"

"Preck!"

"Alright then, stick around and we'll go see Hagrid."

Hedwig gave the little half bow that seemed to be her equivalent of a nodded head and flew off.

"Owls don't understand English, mate."

"Oh, she understood. She'll meet me when I go outside."

Ron and Hermione headed outside the same time they did. They settled down beneath a tree by the lake, a short distance from the greenhouses and Hagrid's hut. They looked rather smug. Hedwig flew down from another tree as he and Neville made their way across the grounds and soared alongside them.

"See? She's a very smart owl, and she does so understand English. I talk to her all the time."

"Could you talk to Trevor and tell him to stop running off all the time?"

"I could try I guess."

Neville split off to head to the greenhouse. There was already a decent sized group gathering there. Harry continued on to Hagrid's and knocked. He could hear Fang, Hagrid's boarhound barking excitedly inside.

"Back, Fang, dang it, back. Harry! Come on in! Oh, and Hedwig too!"

"Hey, Hagrid. Hi Fang." Harry laughed as he tried to wipe the doggy drool from his face.

Hedwig perched herself in the rafters and took the meat Hagrid offered her with the air of a queen accepting tribute. Harry settled at the table and patted Fang who laid his head across his lap and looked at him with mournful, hopeful eyes.

"I wanted ter see ye. I been hearing some worrisome things. What's this about you bein' absconded with by a pureblood dark wizard? Yer supposed ter be living with the Dursleys!"
Hagrid, Harry and Fang all jumped when the cups Hagrid had just laid out on the table shattered. Hagrid looked at the cups and then eyed Harry in concern.

"That ruddy dark wizard do sommat ter ye? I'll murder him!"

"Loki rescued me! I'm getting really sick of everyone badmouthing him without knowing anything about him! I'm also sick of hearing about the bloody Dursleys! They can rot in hell for all I care! I'm done with them and I am not going back there!"

"Dumbledore said…"

"Dumbledore can kiss my ass!"

"NOW SEE HERE!"

"NO! YOU SEE HERE!" Harry growled back. "They were holding me prisoner, Hagrid! There were bars on my window and six locks on the door! They put a flap in the bottom of the door to feed me through-- once a day! I'd lost about half a stone by the time Loki rescued me! He was dosing me with potions and feeding me 'round the clock to get me healthy again! I don't care what Dumbledore has to say about it being safe! It's not and it never was! He had himself made my guardian, did you know that? He had a lot of bloody nerve doing that and then dumping me with those sad excuses for human beings! Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, he apparently told Mrs. Weasley that I was lying about how bad it was because I was trying to get attention or something! HE'S A GODDAMN LIAR! He wasn't there. He was never there in all the long, long years I was trapped there. I'm free now. I don't give a damn what he says about it. I AM NOT GOING BACK."

Hagrid seemed to be rather taken aback by Harry's anger. He began running his fingers through his beard nervously as he took in the fuming boy. Harry took several deep breaths to calm down and then drew his wand to repair the cups when he felt a bit more in control of himself.

Hagrid took the peace offering for what it was and poured out the tea. The hut was quiet as they each fixed their cup to their liking.

Hagrid peeked at him a few times while mixing the honey into his tea, and decided to move on to his next line of inquiry.

"So…I been talking to Ron and Hermione… They said you've been being distant and kind of mean to them. Now, that's no way to be. They're your friends. You should apologize an'…"

"I should apologize…to them."

Hagrid either didn't notice, or simply disregarded the way Harry's voice went flat as he made his pronouncement. He simply beamed at him. "Tha's righ'. Don' let yer pride get in the way o' doin' th' righ' thing. Tell 'em yer sorry and ye'll try to do better from now on." he agreed cheerfully.

Harry's hands clenched on the table, but before he could say anything about Hagrid's orders, there was an imperious knock at the door. Fang began barking and jumping on the door.

"Hang on a sec! Down, Fang! Ah, I was wunnerin where you two was! Come on in!"

Harry turned and saw Ron and Hermione. They both smiled happily at Hagrid, patted Fang and then turned their attention to him. They were both radiating smugness. Harry's eyes narrowed at them as they smirked and Hermione stuck her nose in the air.
All the windows in Hagrid's hut exploded.

Neville and the rest of the herbology club screamed and hit the dirt when the sound of violently breaking glass reached their ears. It took a moment for them to realize it hadn't been the greenhouse shattering around their heads that they had heard, but something else.

"BLOODY BUGGERING 'ELL! WHAT WAS THAT?"

"Language!" Professor Sprout scolded absently as she hurried to the door. The rest of the students scrambled off the floor and hurried after her as the sound of someone screaming reached their ears, as did the enraged shrieks of an owl.

"What the hell?"

"Is that Harry Potter?"

"It is…what the hell did those two do?"

"I dunno but he's cheesed as hell."

"Him? Lookit 'is owl! It's trying to rip their bloody faces off."

"Granger looks like she about to wet herself."

"So does Weasley, actually."

"…it'll be a cold bloody day in hell you smug bastards before I EVER apologize to YOU! You have some bloody nerve even suggesting it! I HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WRONG! It was all you! You're the FUCKING DURSLEYS and I have HAD it! When you two eventually get off your high horses and come to apologize to ME you know where to find me…but know this. After THIS you're going to have to GROVEL!"

"Damn. What did they do?"

"I think we'd all like know that." Professor Sprout muttered as Harry stalked off. Hedwig finally stopped dive-bombing the two trembling second years and soared off after him.

"You're friends with Potter, right? What'd they do?"

"It was a bunch of little things that just kept piling up… and it all came on the heels of a really bad summer."

Professor Sprout tutted under her breath and bustled out to where a very pale-face Ron was staring off into the distance like he'd just stared into the abyss, and Hermione was sobbing hysterically. A few feet away Hagrid was standing looking confused and somewhat horrified while wringing his hands like he wasn't sure what to do. As she got closer she realized all the windows of his hut had shattered outward—obviously the explosion they'd heard earlier.

"Why don't you hustle those two up to Madame Pomfrey for some calming draughts. I'll get your hut." she told Hagrid, shooing him towards the two students. "Go on then."

Hagrid seemed relieved to be given some direction, and he nodded before hurrying towards Ron and Hermione to do as he was told. A few quick reparos set the hut to rights—though Fang was still
cowering behind the wood pile and likely would continue to do so for some time. Once that was done she hustled the herbology club back into the greenhouse to finish what they'd been doing.

Harry wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting in the Garden, trembling and feeling wretched when he suddenly felt a presence next to him and an arm about his shoulders.

"Loki?"

"I did say I'd be around."

"I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Well, that was quite an argument. I heard it all the way in Asgard!"

Loki snickered at how appalled Harry looked and ruffled his hair before tucking him a bit more into his side.

"Olaf and Brunhilde sensed you were distressed and checked on you and then came to tell me."

"Oh."

"So… do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Alright. If you change your mind I am willing to listen."

Harry sighed despondently and tentatively leaned into Loki's side.

"I don't even know why I got so mad… I kind of…exploded Hagrid's house."

"I believe one of the teachers took care of that. It was only the windows."

This didn't seem to make Harry feel any better if his cringe was anything to go by.

"It's just… They think I'm a liar or crazy and they're not listening to me"

Hesitantly, in fits and starts, he told him about how they'd been at odds ever since the ride up on the train and all the things that had added to his annoyance.

"I told them they were the Dursleys."

"Are they?"

"Not exactly, but kind of."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Aunt Petunia used to badmouth me all over the neighborhood. She always told people I was a delinquent and a liar. My teachers usually hated me before I ever started classes and the neighbors always looked at me like they were expecting me to kill their pets or something. Hermione's been going on and on about how I'm lying for attention and I must be traumatized and trying to psychoanalyze me and bossing me around… And then Ron… He ate half the basket of food Olaf and Brunhilde made me by himself. The rest of us had to share what was left. Then he ate all my
chocolate frogs. He took them out of my trunk without asking. He took eleven and left me with one. It was my stuff and he left me with the crumbs. The Dursleys didn't feed me half the time. Vernon and Dudley would eat enough for four people and I was lucky to get scraps most times. This whole week it was like I never left the Dursleys and…"

"You're not willing to put up with it anymore now that you've had a taste of freedom?"

"Yeah." Harry agreed quietly. "I still shouldn't have blown up like that. That's probably going to come back to bite me. I didn't mean to, it just kind of happened."

"You're still young and you haven't quite mastered your power yet. Less powerful children probably don't have outbursts like that once they begin school because what power they have has all been tamed for the most part. That you still have such outbursts is testament to your strength… and your temper. The exercises I had you doing should help keep such incidences from happening in the future. In fact, why don't we do that now? It will help settle you. Have you been doing them?"

"Um, not lately no. Between class, homework and practice I haven't had a lot of free time. I've barely had a chance to come to the clubhouse."

"Hmm. Well, try to make time."

"Yeah."

"Cheer up, little one. So, you yelled a bit. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. 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You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry. You were entitled. You are allowed to get angry.
"Yeah I guess."

"Man, you two are a special kind of stupid, aren't you?"

They both looked offended at Neville's words, but Hermione especially so.

"EXCUSE ME?!"

"What, exactly did you think you were going to accomplish with that stunt you pulled today?"

"Hermione figured Hagrid would talk to him and make him apologize already." Ron spoke up. He still looked pale and shaken from his earlier run-in with Harry.

"And what, exactly, do you think he needs to apologize for? From where I'm standing it's all been you two!"

"He keeps lying and…"

"Loki seems to have been good for him"

"Surely you're not going to accept his ridiculous assertion that he's a Norse god!"

"One of my ancestors met Thor. Harry said himself he's not sure he's actually a god; it might just be what the people at the time thought. Whether he is or isn't though isn't the point. The point is that he rescued him from his relatives and has been good for him, but instead of being happy for him…"

"Dumbledore said none of that was…"

"Dumbledore said, Dumbledore said. Why is the word of the school headmaster, who neither of you even actually knows at all well, and who wasn't there for any of it, so much more important to you than the word of a guy that's supposed to be one of your best friends? Especially when what he said was so stupid! Harry was lying to get attention?! And you believed that? He hates being the center of attention, and he's not a liar. Honestly! With an attitude like that I'm not surprised he blew up at you."

"Well, it's Dumbledore." Ron objected. "Leader of the Light, the only one You-Know-Who is afraid of. He's still out there, waiting to come back. We need Dumbledore if we're going to have any chance to survive."

"Is he really though?"

"Is who really what?"

"You-Know-Who. Is he actually afraid of Dumbledore? He's weak, and he only has form when he's possessing someone…but he was here all year, sitting right near Dumbledore every day in the great hall, hiding under Quirrel's turban. That really doesn't sound like he's too worried about Dumbledore…and it was Harry that destroyed him the first time, and Harry that drove him off last year. That sounds like a con job to me."

Neville shook his head at them both and climbed to his feet. "I think you both need to take a good hard look at yourselves and at your friendship with Harry and you need to decide if you're Harry's friends or Dumbledore's fan club. From where I'm standing you can't be both. And Ron? You keep
breaking in to Harry's trunk and robbing him, I'm going over Percy's head and telling McGonagall. He doesn't go in yours. If he needs something from you he asks. You need to show him the same basic respect in return. That goes for you too. In fact, you need to stop coming up to the boys dorms period. Yeah, there's no security like there is on the girls' staircase, but that's because no witch our age in her right mind would ever consider going up there otherwise. If you're upstairs, everyone just has to wait for you to talk to you. You can do everyone the same courtesy in return."

Hermione looked offended again, so Neville spoke up again, his voice stern.

"You really don't want me going to McGonagall about this Hermione, but I will if you push me on this. McGonagall's old-fashioned. I don't think you quite realize how much of her good opinion of you will shrivel up if I tell her you're always barging in while we're changing and stuff…. And that's nothing to how the rest of the school will see you if it gets around. Maybe they do things different in the muggle world, but this isn't the muggle world and you need to stop. Getting a bad reputation at your age will pretty much destroy most of your hopes for the future."

"I've only been up there two or three times!"

"And that's two or three times too many!" Neville took a deep breath and started again more calmly. "It is going to stop. You need to learn to accept when you're in the wrong and just suck it up already."

Down deep in the dungeons a meeting with the same topic of conversation was taking place.

"So…Potter, huh?" Theo Nott commented idly.

"He could have killed us all! I was right there!"

"You were about two hundred feet away, Pansy. You weren't in any danger. The glass didn't come anywhere near us."

"We could have been!"

"What's up with him this year? Potter's a pushover. He lets everyone walk all over him, especially those two. What changed that?" Daphne interjected.

"He got a new guardian." Nott reminded her.

"A proper wizard too. He apparated him to the platform and put him in with us, instead of up front with the muggle-lovers." Tracy told the others.

"He finally got a decent wardrobe. It's about time. Ugh! I just wanted to smack him every time I saw him in those horrid muggle rags he was always running around in!" Pansy added.

"Maybe that's part of the problem?" Olivia suggested.

"What? You think Weasley and Granger object to him dressing better?" Astoria asked, sounding confused.

"Maybe. No, hear me out. He isn't just dressing better, he's dressing like a wizard. Granger dresses muggle on weekends. So does Weasley. You'd never know that lot were purebloods. Maybe they're feuding because those two don't like that he seems to finally be embracing his wizard heritage."
"Took him long enough. Honestly! Running around looking like a poor muggle urchin, always walking around with that gormless look on his face. You'd think he didn't know the first thing about being a wizard!" Zabini sniffed.

"He didn't."

"What's that, Draco?" Pansy asked.

"Yeah, what's with you, Malfoy? Here we are talking about your favorite subject, your boyfriend, and you've been quiet all this time. I'd have thought you'd have been talking our ears off now that we actually want to hear about Potter!"

Draco smacked Blaise in the face with his pillow and scowled at him. "He is not my boyfriend! Just shut up, Zabini!"

"Boys! If we could return to the subject at hand?" Daphne interjected. "You said something, Draco?"

"I said he didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Know about magic. He told me he didn't know he was a wizard till Hagrid came and got him for school shopping."


"Yeah, why not his relatives or one of the teachers?" Astoria piped up a moment later.

"And when did he tell you this? You never mentioned it before." Pansy demanded, doing her best not to sound suspicious.

"The other day when I was in the hospital wing because of that ginger oaf."

Eyebrows rose around the room and Pansy crossed her arms and glared at all of them.

"Oh?" Tracy said leadingly. "He came by to visit you in the hospital wing?"

"Why the heck would he do that? You two hate each other." Millicent wondered.

Draco's face screwed up in an angry pout. "He said he wanted a chance to talk at me when I was too miserable to talk back."

"What'd he want?"

Draco related their surprising conversation. When he was finished, most of the kids sat back to ruminate on what was said, except for Theo who seemed angry.

"We could have had Potter. We could have had Potter. In Slytherin. We could have had Potter in Slytherin and you ruined it!"

"Who wants the stupid scarhead anyway?"

"You IDIOT! Don't you even understand what that could have meant for our house? He's the hero of the wizarding world. If he'd been one of us we could have used that to start turning the reputation of our house around! As it stands now, people pretty much think you're evil the moment
you put on a green tie! It would have been huge...and you ruined it! Because of you he didn't come
to our house, and now he pretty much hates the rest of us!"

"Does he? I mean...we all know he's not fond of Draco, Greg or Vince, but that's because you three
are always bothering him. I think the first time I'd ever really spoken to him was on the train on the
way here. And even with Draco...he went and visited him in the hospital." Tracy disagreed.

"He gave him a present too." Vincent Crabbe spoke up.

Blaise Zabini smirked at Draco's pink cheeks and started snickering. "Oh ho! He gave you a
present? Do tell!"

"It weren't nothing fancy. He gave him a chocolate frog." Greg Goyle replied.

"It had a Harry Potter Boy-Who-Lived card in it." Vince added.

"Lucky. Those are really rare. I heard they only made a dozen of them." Millicent Bulstrode said,
impressed.

"He gave you his own card?" Astoria said with some surprise.

"That's weird. He doesn't seem to enjoy attention." her sister added.

"He probably didn't know it was in there. He had a whole box of frogs. Weasley ate the rest of
them. That was probably the last one he had." Pansy agreed reluctantly. She glared when she saw
how everyone was looking at her. "What? I heard it from the portraits. They got into a fight about
it. He was complaining he took eleven of the twelve from the box."

"And he gave it to Drakie-poo. Well. Are you sure there's nothing going on between you two?"

"FOR THE LAST TIME, ZABINI! SHUT UP!"

"Yeah, Zabini. No one thinks you're funny." Pansy agreed, glaring at the still laughing boy.

"You know, I think we might be being too hard on Draco." Millicent mused.

"How so?"

"Potter might've still gone to Gryffindor even if he never spoke to Draco. You heard what else he
said. He was specifically warned from coming here."

"Here and Hufflepuff." Theo agreed.

"Exactly, and he got the message."

Theo got a dark look on his face. "You all realize what this means, don't you?"

"Dumbledore doesn't like Slytherins. Big surprise." Blaise said dryly, rolling his eyes.

"No... it means Dumbledore and his lackeys aren't satisfied with winning the war. They're trying to
destroy us and our house as well."

"That seems a little extreme." Olivia objected.

"Does it? Why else would so much trouble be gone to? He was packed off with muggles and raised
in ignorance. The moment he comes back he filled with a bunch of anti-Slytherin propaganda and
then a Weasley and that irritating Granger latch on to him and keep everyone else away from him.”

The kids exchanged grim looks around the room.

"So…what do we do? If we try to tell anyone, who's going to believe us? I mean, it sounds crazy…the headmaster trying to destroy Slytherin house by sending Harry Potter to live with muggles.” Millicent pointed out.

"Well…just because Potter didn't become one of us doesn't mean we can't get to know him, right?” Tracy replied.

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. It's the perfect time too. So long as he's on the outs with Weasley and Granger we could actually get within ten feet of him without Weasley having a fit and trying to drive us off.” Daphne agreed.

"We have to be casual about it or he's going to think we're up to something.” Pansy warned.

"We are up to something.” Goyle said with some confusion

"Yeah, but he doesn't need to know that."

"So…how do we go about it? I mean, it won't exactly be easy. We only have a couple of classes with Gryffindor, and we each sit on our own side of the room.” Millie wondered.

"Same with meal time. We're on opposite sides of the room.” Vince nodded.

"We can't really approach during quidditch practice or the rest will just think we're spying on them.” Draco sighed.

"After classes and before dinner seems like the best time.” Astoria pointed out.

"Yeah but how. We can't exactly just march up to him and say 'hey, hang out with us'. He'd never go for it. We need an actual reason to approach him.” Millie was quick to add.

"Wait…you said he thought his muggles were his only relatives. He doesn't realize he's related to most of us in some way. That could be our in.” Olivia mused

"I'll write to my mother. She could probably put together a Potter family tree without too much trouble.” Draco offered after a moment's thought.

"Your mum could?"

"She's the president of the Pureblood Ladies Association. That's pretty much what they do. They keep track of family trees. They're who you go to when your family is looking to make a match. They check to make sure the lines aren't too close.” Draco sighed.

"Alright, once we know exactly how he fits into our family trees we can just approach and tell him about the relatives we have in common and what we know about them.”

"I doubt that's going to do me any good.” Draco complained. "He already said I remind him of his stupid muggle cousin that he doesn't like! If I tell him I’m his actual cousin it will just make it worse!"

"Alright then, just have your mum send a copy of the family tree once she's done with it. You can give him that as a peace offering. If your mum knows any funny stories about the relatives you have in common ask her to send those too.” Theo said after thinking about it for a bit.
"We should all do that. Some of us don't have anyone in common for a few generations. We might not know anything about them to tell him." Olivia added in.

"Well, I haven't written gramma for a while." Millie shrugged.

"I'll try great-aunt Gertrude. She knows all the gossip." Pansy sighed.

"I'll just write mum and let her take care of it." Greg said.

"Yeah, me too." Vince was quick to add.

"Alright then. Operation Save Slytherin is a go." Theo announced grandly.

"I think it should be Operation Woo Potter. Right up your alley, right Malfoy?"

"Zabini, I swear to Salazar…"
Harry and Neville's quest for vengeance continues...

Ron and Hermione avoided Harry for the remainder of the weekend, what little was left of it.

Harry caught them watching him from the corner of their eyes a few times, but they were always quick to look away when he glanced over at them. The way they were acting, you'd think he'd eaten babies in front of them rather than just yelled at them. It made Harry irritable to say the least.

He and Neville, in their ongoing quest for vengeance had decided to move on to new targets.

So far only Hermione, Parvati and Lavender had been hit. He had tried to get Ron, but it backfired, and their plan to use the pixies for mayhem on the Slytherins had been foiled by Dumbledore. It was time to try something else. Ron, Crabbe, Goyle and Draco Malfoy were their targets today.

The Slytherin kids themselves made it almost too easy; every day they came up to breakfast as a group at the same time, which made picking a time a place to target them quite simple. Then there was Slytherin paranoia, which also made things almost too easy. There were no portraits in the dungeons once you got down close to where the Slytherin common room and Snape's quarters were, nor were there any beyond that point. All Harry needed to do was hide behind the large bust on a plinth that was along the route, covered in his invisibility cloak and a silencing spell and wait for them to pass by.

They were all in a group when they did pass, and he accidentally got Parkinson as well as his three actual targets. He shrugged philosophically once they were all past; he was hardly going to waste any tears on her--and besides, it just saved them from having to think of something to do to her later.

Once the coast was clear he crept out of the dungeons up the back staircase, inside the abandoned classroom who's door he'd left open for just that reason, removed his invisibility cloak and silencing spell, went back out and wandered along the hallway till he ran into Neville who had just come out of the boy's bathroom on that floor.

"Oh, there you are Harry" he said for the benefit of the portraits "I was beginning to think you left without me."

"Nah, I just wandered along the hall, looking around. You ready?"

"Starved. Find anything interesting?"

"A lot of dust, mostly."

"It's really strange, isn't it, that so much of the castle is just left to collect dust like that. Why aren't more of these rooms used?"

"Dunno. They should be. Lavender and Parvati are always complaining there's nowhere for them to go hang out and talk." "The common room." "Yeah, but then Parvati's sister can't be there 'cause
she's in Ravenclaw. We can't really hang out with Luna in the usual places. She's a Ravenclaw too and in a different year besides."

"Yeah. It really seems like a waste."

By that point they had reached the doorway to the great hall. They were about to enter when they were nearly bowled over by Goyle and Parkinson, and then nearly trampled by Malfoy and Crabbe who were hot on their heels. All four were clutching at their stomachs, which were gurgling rather ominously.

"MOVE POTTER!"

"OUT OF THE WAY!"

"Oh Merlin… I don't think I'm going to make it!"

"RUN!"

Harry and Neville turned to watch their progress, each doing their best to look confused and concerned, and not snicker like they wanted to.

"Gosh… I hope it's not catching."

"You think some of the food is off?"

"Well… if it was, you'd think there'd be more than just them, right?"

"Yeah, that's true. Maybe someone hexed them?"

"Could be. Tormenting people is practically their hobby. That's got to come back to bite you sooner or later, right?"

"I wonder who did it?"

"My money's on Ron Weasley. He's always talking about how much he hates Malfoy and wants to hex him. He hates the rest of them almost as much."

"It could have been Ginny, I suppose. She hexed Malfoy on the train, right?"

"Yeah, Crabbe and Goyle too."

"Somehow I doubt Ron knows a spell like that."

"Maybe he and Ginny were working together?"

"Yeah, could be."

As they made their way to the table they could already see rumors traveling down the table. Before long it would probably be all over school that Ron, Ginny or the both of them had hexed the Slytherins.

McGonagall wouldn't put them into detention without proof, which would piss off the Slytherins. By this afternoon Snape and the Slytherin kids would probably be gunning for Ron. Ginny was in a different year, so they would probably put it all on Ron since she'd be harder to get to--and he was older besides. They would likely figure that even if she helped it was probably his idea. Perfect.
Now they just had to get Dean and Seamus, the remaining Gryffindor girls and Snape and their vengeance would be complete. It was a good day.

Ron and Hermione kept their distance from Harry at breakfast and scurried off as soon as breakfast ended. They kept him in sight in the corner of their eyes though, as though they expected him to leap out and attack them suddenly.

"Geez. What a couple of wusses. All I did was yell at them. Heck, Uncle Vernon on an average day yells more than I did. If getting yelled at once effects them this bad, neither one would have lasted a single day in my old life."

While the continuing estrangement between the three of them bothered Harry greatly, he couldn't deny that it was in many ways easier being friends with Neville and Luna: they didn't constantly nag, or get jealous. They respected his privacy, and each had had a less than ideal childhood. Neville's parents had been tortured into insanity when he was a baby, and he had been tormented by his relatives for years when they feared he was a squib. Luna had seen her mother die right in front of her, and her father had been tied up in his own grief for years afterwards, leaving her to more or less take care of herself. Ron and Hermione with their intact, loving families couldn't understand the mark that sort of thing left on you.

He was shaken out of his musings when Neville suddenly grabbed his elbow and started propelling him a bit faster. He looked at him questioningly but he just tilted his head slightly to the side.

Harry slanted a look that way and saw Snape lurking just out of sight of the grand staircase looking murderous. That was when he tuned in to the conversation going on just ahead.

"…you really got them all good! I heard from Eddie Carmichael in Hufflepuff that it got all over the bathrooms. Where'd you even learn a spell like that?"

Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing hysterically. Poor Ron, youngest son with five impressive older brothers. His dearest wish was to stand out, to be lauded and admired by his peers. He wanted it bad enough that he was willing to agree with Dean and Seamus, who had heard the rumors as they made the rounds, that he had indeed hexed the Slytherin kids, if only to keep Dean and Seamus looking at him like he was the coolest person they'd ever met in their lives.

"Oh, well, you know Hermione's always reading old, dusty books. She finds all sorts of cool spells. All over the walls you said…?" he asked leadingly.

"Yeah, that's what I heard, all over them the walls and the floor."

"Funny as it was, did you really have to hit them with explosive diarrhea? I mean, you have to admit, that's pretty nasty."

"For them and for Filch. Poor bastard's probably the one that's going to have to clean it up."

Ron laughed long and loud, even as he wrinkled his nose in disgust at the mental image.

"Serves the slimy snakes right…though I guess we should start calling them the stinky snakes now!"

"Weasley. Fifty points from Gryffindor and detention with me. Tonight."

Ron's jolly mood disappeared like mist in the sun and his face went grey.

"No! NO! I was lying! I didn't do anything!"
Dean and Seamus scarpered before Snape turned his bad mood on them.

Hermione, who had been just ahead and trying to read while walking tuned in at the loss of points and spent the rest of the way to class loudly berating Ron, which he didn't seem to appreciate at all.

The boys didn't get to see the results of their first foray into vengeance until two days later during Herbology class when Professor Sprout handed back the summer homework.

Hermione beamed at the Professor as she took back her massive scroll, and her smile stayed in place until she unrolled the top to see her grade. Her smile froze and her eyes slowly widened. Mechanically she began unrolling the scroll to see the rest. It was covered in red ink and several question marks. She looked again at the grade but it hadn't changed. A big fat "A" stood out in bright red. She began to tremble and the blood began to drain out of her face, leaving her pale and ashen. That's when it began: she opened her mouth and began to scream.

"AAAAAAAAAHBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!"

From her spot further down the table, still handing out assignments, Professor Sprout cringed in horror, clapped her hands over her ears and spun in place, her eyes darting over the many potted mandrakes that filled the greenhouse.

"Oh, thank goodness… thought one of the mandrakes… MISS GRANGER! STOP THIS AT ONCE!"

Hermione wasn't listening, in fact, judging by the blank look in her eyes she had gone bye-bye. She just continued to scream.

Ron, who was right across from her, put on one of the sets of earmuffs lying about and then yanked the paper out of her hand while she continued to scream.

An amazed, disbelieving grin split his face as he held it up to show Faye who was right beside him.

"Lookit that! I got a higher grade than Hermione did!"

Apparently Hermione hadn't completely lost her mind, because at Ron's words her scream reached new crescendos of anguish and despair. Finally, wild-eyed, sobbing wildly, stumbling like she was drunk and tugging at her already wild hair until it resembled a wild-growing thicket of brambles, she fled the classroom, still shrieking between sobs and hurried back to the castle.

Professor Sprout hurried after her, but upon seeing she was heading for the castle, decided to leave well enough alone. With all the racket the girl was making someone was sure to hear and come investigate.

Harry warned Neville with his eyes to stay put; coming clean now would be so much worse with Hermione having a break-down like that. It might even be considered expulsion-worthy.

He peeked down the table at her homework, which was still strewn across the table. She had gotten an "A", not a (D)readful, not a (T)roll, she'd gotten (A)cceptable, which was still a passing grade, even if it meant you were just average. He'd gotten plenty of A's, Neville too…and Ron. Hermione usually told them to suck it up, that they weren't trying hard enough or they needed to study more. She would have been truly scathing had any of them acted like she just had. *Geez.*

He had no intention of letting himself or Neville get expelled because Hermione was a diva.
Herbology seemed to drag on and on amid the other students whispering about Hermione and her bizarre break down. It was a relief when the bell rang and they were let go. Neville was still looking rather shell-shocked about the whole thing. Harry checked their surroundings carefully as they started back towards the castle.

"I didn't put a lot of effort into the spell. I wanted to get her for the Snape thing, but I didn't want to completely destroy her homework. I know how hard she works, how much she studies..."

"I didn't want to completely ruin her homework either. I'm not a monster. I just knew this was something she wouldn't just brush aside or ignore. That said, we are not going to throw ourselves on the non-existent mercy of the staff just because she really, really overreacted."

"I wasn't going to suggest it. We're in this together, we both thought it was a good idea and went through with it. We should probably go check on her though. She was really upset."

"I heard. My ears are still ringing."

"Mine too, truthfully. She has a really shrill voice."

"Don't have to tell me. I spent most of last year being regularly nagged by her."

"We'd better hurry or we're going to be late for our next class."

"Yeah. McGonagall doesn't take tardiness well."

The boys hurried their steps, only just making it inside the doorway as the bell rung. McGonagall regarded them both with thin lips.

"So good of you to join us, gentlemen."

"Sorry professor" they chorused as they hurried to their seats.

Hermione wasn't in class. Ron was, though he seemed distracted...though whether it was worry over Hermione or him just relaxing because Hermione wasn't there keeping him focused he didn't know.

The professor handed back their summer homework. Ron took Hermione's, went to put it away then reconsidered and checked her grade-- an 'O'. He practically melted into his seat in relief before tucking it away.

There were a few snickers around the room, but McGonagall's unimpressed glare silenced them with little trouble. McGonagall began her lecture. Ron was staring off into space and occasionally doodling on his parchment. Having seen the quality of his notes before, Harry was not at all surprised; Hermione however, was going to be furious. Bad enough she was missing class after missing most of herbology because of her meltdown; if she didn't even get the notes for what was covered in her absence she was going to be impossible to live with.

Harry and Neville traded a glance and each privately agreed to give her a copy of today's notes as a sort of apology for how badly she had taken their vengeance. It was kind of a relief when class ended. It was hard to concentrate when you were feeling guilty. The sooner they saw her and gave her copies of their notes the better; maybe they could all just move on and forget this whole business.

They didn't need to discuss going to check on Hermione before heading to lunch. Happily the hospital wing wasn't all that far from the transfiguration classroom. They realized they could hear
Hermione's voice as they approached the doors to the hospital, but what she was saying didn't properly register until Neville had swung open the door in preparation to enter.

"I get O's! In everything! I'm by far the smartest student in my year! I don't get A's! Ever! It's impossible! Only losers and stupid children get A's, not me!"

Hermione and Madame Pomfrey both turned to look at the two boys frozen in the doorway.

"Hello, Hermione. We were going to bring you our notes from Herbology and Transfiguration since you missed class…but we wouldn't want to burden you with the notes of…what was that, Nev?"

"Losers and stupid children." Neville said quietly.

"Yeah, that." Harry agreed.

They left the hospital wing without a word.

They could hear Hermione sobbing again behind them, but oddly the sound no longer made them feel guilty.

Ron and Hermione continued to avoid Harry for the next several days, though Ron seemed to spend a lot of time staring at Harry and then looking at Hermione with obvious confusion.

If Harry had to make a guess, he thought the plan had been for the two of them to apologize to him for their bad behavior, but Hermione had put the nix on that idea after that business the other day. It was equally apparent to him that she hadn't told Ron about the confrontation--which really wasn't at all surprising, considering that Ron had gotten a lot more A's than Harry or Neville had.

Neville, for all that he lacked confidence when it came to magic, had always been diligent in finishing his assignments; Ron tended to put things off till the last minute when he could get away with it, and then threw together something half-assed at the last minute.

If one went only by Ron's grades you might make the mistake of assuming he was stupid; Harry had never made that assumption. Ron was actually quite intelligent, he just didn't see the point of the endless parade of essays the teachers liked to pile on them every class. He saw having fun and hanging out with friends as a more worthwhile use of his time, which Harry had always happily agreed with. They both maintained grades good enough to keep them passing, that was the important part.

Now, while that was true, that wasn't quite the same as saying he wasn't a bit insecure about his grades even so--he caught enough haranguing from his mum, from Percy and Hermione that they were a constant source of insecurity that he was actually really dumb. All three of them tended to run roughshod over Ron's feelings and never seemed to notice the harm they did in the process by reinforcing his sense of inadequacy. Yeah, he bounced back and threw off their criticisms by getting surly and telling Hermione and Percy at least that they were barmy (he wouldn't dare do the same to his mother).

That didn't really matter, small damage was still damage and it added up--you could die of blood loss from paper cuts if you got enough of them.

He knew Ron was intimidated by Hermione's intelligence and her single-minded drive to succeed no matter the obstacles in her way. Even if Hermione cried and swore up and down that she 'didn't really mean it', Ron would never quite recover from knowing that, deep down inside Hermione apparently considered him a "loser" and a "stupid child".
He knew it had shaken Neville's confidence pretty badly. Harry had tried to cheer him up by pointing out that he got a lot more E's than A's, and his grades had been improving with their practice and extra reading, but it had still shaken him and it would probably take him a long time to completely throw it off.

For himself, it stung, there was no denying that… but the Dursleys had taken special delight in knocking his intelligence, or lack thereof, for his entire life. Being called stupid was nothing new. He'd always borne up under it because he knew full well he'd had to work to keep his grades as low as they were so he wouldn't outshine their lard-assed son, who actually was as dim as they thought he was. When one added in that uncle Vernon and aunt Petunia were neither of them intellectual giants, well, he'd been able to slough off the criticism for the most part. He'd be lying if he said it hadn't done any damage anyway.

He was distracted from his musings as the morning owl delivery came in.

Hedwig must have been out hunting or sleeping as there was no sign of her. He really needed to widen his circle of acquaintances; the poor thing was bored more often than not since he didn't write to anyone. Neville got a letter from his gran, carried by a cute brown barn owl. Hermione got a letter delivered by the London owl mail center--they forwarded mail sent by muggles through the regular post so their children at Hogwarts could receive it, and sent letters they received back through the regular mail so the parents didn't have to answer too many awkward questions.

Judging by how she tore into the letter, she'd been waiting for it for a while. If he had to hazard a guess she'd asked her parents for advice on how to clean up her mess. He was rather curious what their advice was going to be.

Malfoy's eagle owl made an appearance as well. It was about time for his weekly delivery of sweets from his mother. As there was no mail for him, he turned back to his breakfast, only to be startled a few moments later when Malfoy's eagle owl landed in front of him and hooted before imperiously extending his leg. Harry stared at the owl blankly and then turned at the sound of a commotion further down the table.

"BLOODY MALFOY!"

"STAND BACK, HARRY, I'LL DRIVE IT OFF!"

"PROBABLY CURSED! POISONED!"

"DON'T WORRY, WE'LL PROTECT YOU!"

Harry turned away from Ron and Hermione and traded a disbelieving glance with Neville, before taking the small package and accompanying letter from the owl, who ruffled his feathers, cast a disdainful look at the loud humans and flew off.

"HARRY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" Ron shouted, sounding on the edge of despair.

"I'm reading my mail, if you don't mind." Harry huffed in return.

He chanced a peek at the Slytherin table across the way and found most of them glaring at Ron--especially Malfoy, who looked downright murderous.

After taking a quick glance over the letter, he understood why. It had been sent by Malfoy's mother, whose name was apparently Narcissa. He obviously didn't appreciate Ron and Hermione accusing her of poisoning and/or cursing him.
Harry might have been sympathetic, except Malfoy made a bad habit of trash-talking other people's mums. As was always the way with bullies, he could dish it out, but not take it.

Harry could feel the eyes of the whole of the great hall on him as he read through the letter. When he was done he said "Huh.", folded it up and put it in his pocket.

It was almost funny, the way practically everyone sagged in their seats in frustration.

Feeling bizarrely impish for once while being the center of attention, Harry decided to have a bit of fun with the overly-nosy denizens of Hogwarts. He saluted Malfoy with his pumpkin juice. "Cheers, Malfoy." Draco gave his best approximation of a regal head nod in return. The second year Slytherins then went back to their breakfasts like nothing had happened, easily ignoring the curious eyes of the hall.

Harry opened the tiny box next after tapping it with his wand. The box expanded, becoming quite a bit larger than it had been.

"HARRY!" Ron shrieked in bewildered anger.

Harry ignored him and removed a second shrunken box which he stowed in his pocket. He then grinned and pulled out one of the fancy chocolates that filled the rest of the box and offered some to Neville.

"Whoa. These are really good. No wonder the git always looks so bloody smug."

"Mmmm" Neville agreed.

Ron and Hermione were still spazing out further down the table.

"Since when are you buddy-buddy with bloody Malfoy?" Seamus asked aggressively.

"I'm not."

"Doesn't look that way."

"Are you best friends with everyone you speak to?"

"No, but…"

"But nothing."

"What was in that box? Why are the Malfoys writing to you? How could you be so reckless?"

"Yeah! There could have been anything on that letter!"

"Right, because the Malfoys are going to curse, poison or kidnap me, with a package sent by their owl…which stopped at their son first…using a letter clearly addressed to me and signed with their name…because obviously they're stupidly diabolical like that."

"You should still take it to Dumbledo…"

Harry just looked at her until she trailed off and miserably dropped her eyes. Ron stared at her like he'd never seen her before, which was easy enough to understand--the Hermione they knew was relentless when she wanted something, or decided to do something for your own good.

Ron turned back to Harry and his eyes fell on the box of chocolates still open on the table.
"I don't suppose I could…"

"NO." Ron looked offended, but Harry ignored him and packed up his candy, dropping it into his pocket--made larger on the inside since he still hadn't gotten his expanded bag back and went back to his breakfast.

He could still feel eyes on him. He glanced up and saw all his year mates looking at him expectantly.

"Yes?"

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"The letter! What did it say?"

"How is that your business?"

"What?! You mean you're not going to tell us?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"You shouldn't be keeping secrets."

"What's your letter say, Hermione? Why don't you read it out to us. I'm sure it's fascinating."

"Don't change the subject!"

"Piss off."

"Language, Mr. Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance (out of sight of the teacher) as Professor McGonagall sniffed at him reprovingly.

"The headmaster would like to see you in his office. The password is ice mice."

"What is this about, professor? In case you've forgotten class is about to start."

"Then I suppose you'd best run along if you don't want to be late."

"Ice mice."

The gargoyle hopped aside, revealing the twisting staircase. By his count he had about ten minutes tops till class started, and it would likely take almost that long to get there if he left now. Whatever Dumbledore wanted, Harry couldn't help but wonder at the inconvenient timing. Couldn't whatever it is have waited till classes were over for the day? As it was, he'd already had to cut his breakfast short--he couldn't say he much appreciated that either. In the past, he'd gone without eating often enough that he was mostly able to ignore if he was hungry, and couldn't actually eat all that much even if there was food to be had. Since the summer, with Loki and the elves feeding him up and stuffing him full of potions, he was hungry all the time it seemed and couldn't ignore it as easily as
he used to. He'd gone without enough meals in his life.

Harry knocked brusquely on the door twice and let himself inside. Unlike last time, Dumbledore was seated behind his desk. Another change was the phoenix; unlike last time, a beautiful scarlet bird with golden feet and dark black markings around its eyes stood upon the golden perch. It no longer looked like a turkey/dustmop, but more like a really fancy, long-necked pheasant. He had a fluffy crest on his head, and a tail of long, trailing scarlet feathers tipped in gold. The phoenix preened under Harry's inspection and let out a musical trill that made him feel warm and happy inside.

"Hello. You look a lot better than you did last time. No offense."

The phoenix let out another trill that made it sound like it was laughing. Harry wandered closer and gently petted it, which prompted another burst of song.

"Ah, Fawkes seems rather fond of you, dear boy. Phoenixes are amazing creatures. They are creatures of the light. They cannot abide those that are Dark. Their song strengthens the pure of heart and weakens those who are evil. Their tears can heal as well, though they are a gift that they do not give lightly."

"Cool."

"Harry, my dear boy, I did call you up here for a reason…"

"Yeah? Where's the fire?"

"Fire? I'm afraid I don't…"

"What was so urgent that it couldn't have waited until after classes were over? I'm missing potions right now."

Dumbledore peered at him over his half-moon glasses, and though he didn't say anything, Harry had an overwhelming sense that the man was both terribly disappointed in him, and appalled at his rudeness. Normally that feeling might have left him quite abashed, but he was already in a bad mood, which would likely only get worse when he got to class. Even if Dumbledore gave him a note, he had no doubt it wouldn't matter to Snape, who would go out of his way to make the remainder of his time in class miserable. He hoped Neville was okay; he hadn't remembered to cast the calming charm on him before he left the great hall.

"I couldn't help but notice that you seem to be in contact with the Malfoy family…"

Harry didn't bother answering; he hadn't asked him a question, just stated an obvious thing that everyone in the great hall already knew. Dumbledore waited a moment for him to say something in his defense but he remained quiet.

"…"

Harry made a point of looking at his watch. Dumbledore frowned minutely.

"Harry, my dear boy, can I ask what prompted the Malfoys to start corresponding with you?"

"You can ask."

Dumbledore waited, then frowned when no explanation was forthcoming.
"Well?"

"I said you could ask. I never said I was going to answer, and frankly, headmaster, I feel you're rather overstepping your bounds here. My personal correspondence falls outside of your authority as headmaster and is frankly none of your business." Harry replied, keeping his voice mild.

The old man seemed rather thrown, not to mention aggravated, by his refusal.

"I am sorry you feel that way…I'm also sorry to see your new guardian has been such a poor influence on you"

"I happen to disagree"

"but I must insist." Dumbledore concluded, ignoring Harry's objections.

"I refuse."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that, my boy."

Harry was aware then of a strange feeling-like he'd walked into a hanging cobweb, or had ants crawling across his face. That's when something odd happened.

Dumbledore's bright orange and fuchsia robes and matching jaunty cap changed to a court jester's costume, complete with belled hat and collar. His long white hair was now bright orange and was in long ringlets, and his long beard was braided and full of ribbons. His face was painted white and there was a red circle on each of his cheeks above his beard. He looked completely ridiculous.

Harry blinked at him in astonishment and then began backing away towards the door.

"I don't know what exactly you had in mind, sir, but I think I'll pass."

He was out the door and halfway down the hall a moment later.

"I did not dismiss you!" Dumbledore roared, but Harry was already gone.

He leapt to his feet which set his bells to jingling. He looked down at himself in disgust and flicked his wand over himself to restore his usual appearance, only to see his spell have no effect.

"Tsk. Tsk. I did warn you. You don't listen very well, do you?"

Dumbledore spun in place, wand out and ready, to spot Loki perched on the cabinet nearby next to the Sorting Hat.

"Mr. Odinson. I do believe I warned you against coming into my office uninvited."

"You tried to rummage through my ward's mail and his mind. That's all the invitation I need."

"Undo this nonsense at once!"

"No, I don't think I will. Someone told me once confession is good for the soul." He smiled then. "If you want to change back, you'd best get on with it. I believe you've run unchecked for too long. A little reminder that you are not above the law will be good for you."

He vanished then, in a cloud of green and gold sparkles, leaving only the sound of his mocking laughter behind.
"So nice of you to finally join us, Mister Potter!" Snape snarled the moment he walked into the classroom.

Everyone had already begun that day's potion. He was going to have to hurry.

"Sorry, sir. The headmaster wanted to see me."

"Get started!"

Harry tried to keep his eye-rolling to a minimum as he got out his equipment, copied down the instructions and got set up. To his relief, Neville seemed perfectly fine.

It wasn't until he was coming out of the supply closet that he noticed Ron had a black eye, Seamus' nose was suspiciously red, and Dean had a split lip. A quick glance at the Slytherin side of the room showed Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle sporting similar injuries. Hermione's hair seemed wilder than usual, and she was radiating cold, indignant fury.

He spotted Pansy levitating something into Ron's cauldron while he was messing with some of his ingredients. From where he was, he could tell Snape saw it as well and chose not to comment.

"Great. He's right behind me. If his cauldron goes 'boom' I'm the one most likely to get hit by it. Damned greasy git. Damned Slytherins."

He worked as quickly and efficiently as he could, keeping one ear trained to Ron's cauldron behind him. Even with his watchfulness he almost missed it when it happened. Ron's cauldron began to hiss and rattle. Harry yanked Neville down off his stool and under the desk and put up a shield they'd found in their extra potions reading.

Neville fumbled out his own wand and copied him. BOOM. The two boys yelped as their shields were impacted by great globs of greenish-yellow slime. They were immensely grateful for the shields when the slime slid off them and to the floor and began to hiss and make pockmarks in the stone.

"WEASLEY! YOU IDIOT! TWENTY POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR! CLEAN THIS MESS UP!"

Neville and Harry carefully climbed out from under their desk after cleaning the slime on the floor and grimaced at the amount of slime everywhere. It was splattered along Dean and Seamus' desk, Ron and Hermione's and Harry and Neville's as well. The boys checked, but both their potions were a bust for the day. Their cauldrons had been contaminated with slime, as had their unused ingredients, their bookbags and their books.

"Give me the cauldrons."

"I'll clean up over here."

Harry hauled the cauldrons over to the sink to start scrubbing while Neville did the rest of their work area. Seamus joined him a few minutes later with his and Dean's. Ron was trying to clean up his area, but Hermione was hissing at him the whole time as well as not helping. She looked fit to
be tied.

"What's the damage?" he asked Neville when he returned.

"Pretty bad. You're going to need a new potions book and your history homework is ruined. I'm going to need a new bag. Look, the bottom's all falling apart."

"Just bloody great."

"Hand in your completed potions. All those who fail to do so will receive a zero for today's lesson."

He and Neville both flinched when Hermione growled.

The boys headed to the garden rather than to lunch. Neville wanted to write to his gran about getting a new bag, and Harry had to copy his history homework onto new parchment and it would be hard to do either in the great hall.

"That didn't take long."

"Copy charm. I just copied it onto fresh parchment and filled in the parts that were missing because of the slime."

"Oh, good idea. I'm going to take this to the owlery."

"Alright."

When Neville was gone, Harry called the elves and sent one to Gringott's to check his vault to see if any of his parents' old school books were there; hopefully they'd used the same textbook and he could just use one of theirs instead of having to buy a new one. After that he got started on the lunch they'd left for them.

Neville returned a short time later to gather his stuff for history. He was rather surprised to find Harry sprawled out on the pillows in front of the fire rather than on his way to class.

"What are you doing?"

"Relaxing."

"But what about class?"

"I don't feel like going. It's not like Binns will notice."

"Hermione will. You know she'll have a fit and report you."

"Eh. If it happens it happens. I asked Brunhilde to take my homework and put it with the rest when he collects it. Yours too. If she does complain I'll just look confused and insist I was there. If my homework's with the rest, she's going to have a hard time convincing anyone I wasn't there. Everyone else will be asleep."

"Mine too, you said?"

"Yup."

"You'll give me a copy of your notes?"
"Sure."

"Oh. In that case… Is there any strawberry tarts left?"

"Yeah. Bring me one too?"

"Here."

"Thanks."

"So what was that business earlier with Malfoy?" "He told his mum I grew up with muggles and didn't know anything, so she sent me a family tree, what she was able to reconstruct of it through records and the relatives we have in common. Apparently my grandmum was her father's younger sister."

"Yeah, Dorea, right?"

"How'd you know that?"

"I'm related to the Blacks too. My great-grandfather Harfang Longbottom married my great-grandmother Callidora Black, and they had my grandpa Carson Longbottom, who married Gran, who was a Rookwood before, and they had dad, Frank Longbottom who married my mum Alice who was a Fawley."

"Wow. You just rattle that all off like you've memorized it."

"I did. Everyone does. You have to memorize your family tree up to fifth cousins. All purebloods are interrelated to some extent, so it's kind of necessary so you know who you can marry. While it does happen that first, second or even third cousins marry, it's generally considered better to go further afield. Don't muggles do that?"

"No. I don't even know my grandparents names…heck, I didn't even know my parents' names till Hagrid told me. I figure most people know who their grandparents are, in some cases they might know the names of one or more great-grandparents…first, maybe second cousins if they see them regularly, aunts and uncles, but that's probably it. No one really has extensive family trees laid out to memorize except the royal families. I mean, some people pay to have it researched for them, I think, but it's not really that common."

"Really? Weird."

Harry dug the package he'd received earlier out of his pocket and tapped it to enlarge it. Inside was a good-sized scroll, a handful of pictures, an old tattered book and another letter. Harry opened the letter first.

"She wrote a little bit about all the people on the trees she knows something about. She said the book was something her husband remembered seeing in an old book shop. It was written by an ancestor of mine. He was a magizoologist, and apparently traveled a lot for his work, and had a lot of adventures."

"A magizoologist? So he studied magical creatures? I guess you would have to travel a lot to do that."
"Cool." Harry chirped rather cheerfully.

He supposed having statesmen or ministers in the family would be more respectable, but a travelling magizoologist was much cooler...more interesting at least.

"She says I should take a look at second hand shops and see if I can find anything else. Apparently looters stripped the house after it blew up..." Harry trailed off, feeling indignant.

"This doesn't make it any better...but some people probably thought any stuff they took would act as a good luck charm or something, you know, taken from the site that You-Know-Who died and all."

"Probably, but still."

Harry laid the letter aside and carefully unrolled the scroll. There was two family trees there, carefully rolled together. One for the Blacks, one for the Potters.

"I wish I knew more about my mum's family, beyond aunt Petunia, I mean. There's probably witches and wizards on it if you go back far enough."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, her magic had to come from somewhere...plus aunt Petunia said their parents were happy to have a witch in the family. Somehow, I don't think that's the usual reaction. I mean, yeah, some of them probably think it's pretty cool, but I still doubt they're actually happy that their eleven year old son or daughter has "strange powers" that they don't, and will be taken off for most of the year to a place they can't go to or really understand."

"Yeah... I guess if you had some names you could search them against the squib register and see if there's any matches there. Beyond that, I don't know of any way to do it."

"I suppose I could try writing to aunt Petunia and asking, but somehow I can't see her bothering to answer. She made it very clear she was happy to get rid of me."

"Still couldn't hurt to try. She might be more inclined to help since you're not living there anymore."

"There is that. Huh,... Sirius Black."

"Huh?!" "Sirius Black. He's on here. Actually there's a couple of them on here, but I'm going to guess this is the one that supposedly killed Pettigrew."

"Yeah. Looks like he's a second cousin."

"There's Malfoy."

"Second cousin once removed."

"There's a couple people in red...one of them's a Weasley. Does that mean I'm related to Ron?"

"And his dad, and his grandparents and his siblings." Neville nodded.

"Why are they red?"

"Cedrella was disowned for marrying a Weasley."
"What? Why?"

"It comes back to the reason they were declared blood traitors"

"I thought that was because they like muggles. Ron said it didn't mean anything."

"It does to some, and it isn't because they like muggles, it's because they often side with muggles against wizards. Then there was the spell they did on their family."

"What spell?"

"Ginny is the first girl that's been born to their family in seven generations."

"So?"

"Well, it's mostly about the dowries"

"Dowries?"

"Do muggles not do that either?"

"I dunno. What's a dowry?"

"It's money, or property or something that a family gives a girl when she's going to get married. It all balances out because the girl takes part of the family's wealth with her when she leaves, but her brothers wives bring more in when they marry. The Weasleys, seven generations ago, did a spell on their family so they'd only produce sons. You know how big Ron's family is. His dad had four brothers, all of whom have families as big or nearly. Their dad Septimus had eight brothers, all of whom had two or three children, and so on. Families looked around and saw everything getting sucked into a black hole, and nothing coming back, not to mention there was so many of them each generation that there was a shortage of pureblood girls to go around, and what ones there were all were helping produce another really large generation of Weasleys, to the point where even large families like the Blacks were about a tenth of the size of the Weasley clan. When everyone realized what they'd done they were declared blood traitors, and a lot of families disown any of their daughters if they marry into the family. Ginny being born was a big deal because it means the spell has finally run its course, but they have so many children every generation that even the clan as a whole probably can't muster up even a token dowry for Ginny when she's old enough to marry… and there's still only one of her, and six sons, just in Ron's immediate family. Once again there's a whole lot more pure blood boys than girls to go around."

"I don't see why that's even an issue. Ron said all that pureblood stuff doesn't mean anything to them."

Neville snorted. "So they say, but they're counted among the 'sacred twenty eight'."

"Who or what is that?"

"The twenty eight families that are considered wholly pureblooded and without any muggle blood. That means there's been only pureblood marriages in all this time."

"Are the Potters on this list…before my dad, I mean? I was told he was a pureblood."

"No. They've married a few half-bloods over the years. Your mum was the first muggleborn, but even with that they didn't make the cut."
"How does that work then?"

"If a pureblood marries a halfblood their children are considered purebloods so long as both the half-blood's parents were magical. If one of them was a muggle the child would be considered a half-blood. Generally one is considered pureblooded if all four grandparents are magical. Your mum was magical, but muggleborn, so you're a halfblood because half your grandparents are muggles. If you married a pureblood and had a child, that child would be pureblooded because all its grandparents were magical. See?"

"So…if Ron marries Hermione their kids will be half-bloods?"

"Yeah, if they actually allow it."

"You really think they wouldn't?"

"I don't really know. Like I said, for all they're all real pro-muggle, the entire Weasley clan has only ever married other purebloods, mostly from other sacred 28 families, and a few that weren't as pure but still pureblooded back several generations. If Hermione's family ends up being a squib line they might, but otherwise I don't really know."

"If there's so many of them, why isn't half the great hall filled with red hair?"

"Arthur Weasley's brothers are all older than him, so their broods have already gone through. From what I've heard, the extended cousins can't really afford to go to Hogwarts. Ron's family is struggling to manage, and their dad has a good-paying job at the ministry. The ones that don't have that just don't have the money. That's why families like the Malfoys think they're a disgrace. They married into the prominent families for generations, gathered up a good portion of the wealth by collecting dowries, and they have nothing to show for it, even with none of it going back out for dowries, because they have so many children, to the point that the majority of the Weasleys are home-schooled and have few prospects."

"They're a big, happy family…at least Ron's seems to be. Personally, I think he's lucky to have so many siblings."

"I didn't say I agreed, just that that's how some people feel about them."

Harry just nodded, a bit taken aback by the whole discussion.

"I wonder why he never mentioned we were related when I told him the Dursleys were my only relatives?"

"Hmmm. Ron and them would be your third cousins. Maybe because of Ginny?"

"Ginny? Who, Ginny Weasley?"

"Well, yeah."

"I don't get it."

"Maybe they were afraid you'd look elsewhere if you knew she was within the five generation range."

"Look elsewhere? What?"
"Don't tell me you haven't noticed she fancies you. I know I've heard Ron say you should marry her so you two could be brothers."

"He was joking."

"I doubt it."

"I'm a halfblood. You just got done telling me they only marry purebloods."

"She'd become a Potter, so it wouldn't change the Weasley's pureblood status any, and her kids would still be purebloods."

"That's crazy. I've barely spoke a dozen words to the girl."

"You really don't realize, do you?"

Harry just looked blank.

"Even though there was no official contract announced or anything, a lot of folks pretty much take it as a given that you two will probably get married. Dumbledore let everyone know you had to go through him for anything to do with you, and well, the last few years my gran said the Weasleys kept reminding people that they and Dumbledore are pretty tight. Then, since you arrived back in the wizarding world, well, they've kept pretty much everyone but Hermione away from you, and it's pretty obvious Ron's the one that fancies her. Some folks took it that they were letting everyone know their daughter had a claim on you already. I heard gran and some of her friends talking about it once."

"That's… I'm twelve! I'm not thinking about anything like that! And, geez, don't I get any say in things?"

"Well, you've got a new guardian now, so if there was any kind of unofficial arrangement, that's all done with, unless Loki decides for some reason to make it official. Had Dumbledore remained your guardian then it certainly wouldn't have surprised anyone."

"What if I never liked her like that? Or we didn't get along?"

"That sort of thing is up to individual families in how they handle it. Some families would just agree to dissolve the arrangement, others would just be more persuasive, or just make them go through with it anyway."

"What do you mean by more persuasive?"

"Potions, mostly."

"What? They'd just drug you up?"

"Not permanently. Most families would really look down on that, mostly because they'd worry about what effect it would have on any kids, but there's a few I'm sure would do just that, just until they were married and it was too late to change things."

"Couldn't the one that was drugged just get divorced? It shouldn't count if they're drugged."

"Divorce is a muggle thing. Witches and wizards don't get divorced. They can be widowed, but that's about it."

"So even if you're drugged you can't undo it?"
"No. There's a spell involved that creates a bond between the married couple. It's permanent after the wedding night, so if there was potions involved they just have to keep the couple dosed up until then."

"And they would do that to me?!"

"Calm down. Like I said, nothing official was ever announced, that was just how some people took it. Plus, just because some people might do that doesn't automatically mean the Weasleys or Dumbledore would."

Harry didn't say anything, but it was clear Neville's words weren't as comforting as they were meant to be.

"Look, like you said, you're only twelve and Ginny is only eleven. If they were going to drug you, they wouldn't bother doing it until you were old enough to be married. You don't have to worry about it till you're seventeen or eighteen… and actually, given you're the last of your line, there may actually be some protections you can invoke to keep something like that from happening."

"At least there's that. Geez. Maybe I should have Loki look into that…"

With difficulty Harry shook off his worries about being married off against his will as he remembered something he'd wanted to ask about.

"Oh, hey, why was everyone so beat up looking earlier?"

"That would be because they got into a brawl in front of the potions classroom."

"Ron?" Harry sighed.

"Yeah. He started yelling and went after Malfoy, then of course Crabbe and Goyle started cracking their knuckles. That was when Dean and Seamus waded in. The rest of us backed up to get away from all of them…except for Hermione. She kept yelling at all of them to stop, but no one was listening to her. She ended up in the middle of things too. She started whacking everyone with one of those big books she's always carrying around. I think Parkinson was about to go in after her, but that's when Snape showed up. He yelled at everyone and gave out detentions. Hermione was pissed when he gave her one too, and she started arguing with him. He totally went off on her and took points on top of the detention." Neville paused then and looked torn. "I'm even going to say he was right to do so. The truth is, Hermione actually dealt most of the damage. The rest of them were just yelling and grappling. Everyone started getting bruised when she started whacking them--us and them. She should have stayed out of it like the rest of us did. Then she started arguing with Snape…"

"More Hermione hypocrisy. She always told me 'don't argue, Harry. Be more respectful, Harry. He's a professor!'"

"You don't have to tell me. I thought Snape was pissed about the explosive diarrhea. He was even madder this time."

"Snape's probably still mad about the other thing. This would have just made it worse, because now it's more people attacking his Slytherins. Geez. What were they even thinking?"
"I really want to punch a Slytherin? I mean, come on. They're pretty uncomplicated guys, really."

Harry and he both laughed.

"Yeah, that's probably just what they were thinking."

Harry gathered up the pictures and letter again and laid them out alongside the Black family tree.

"Let's see who we've got… Damn. I think if I was older I'd be drooling, or saying *humina humina.*"

"What's that mean?"

"I'm not sure exactly, except maybe 'I don't remember how to not act like a pervert because there's a girl over there.'"

Neville snorted and took the picture. It showed three very pretty teenage girls. The first, who looked to be the eldest, had a mane of black curls, dark eyes and full lips. The middle sister had chestnut brown hair and grey eyes, the youngest was blonde with blue eyes. They couldn't be anything but sisters given how alike they all looked, even with their very different coloring. Neville flipped the picture over and froze, his eyes going wide as his face paled.

"B.B.B…"

Harry snatched the picture from him and read the back.

*Bellatrix, Andromeda, Narcissa ages 17, 15, 13*

Harry stared at the names a moment longer and blanched.

"Ah, crap, I was ogling Malfoy's mum!"

Neville choked and it seemed to bring him out of his shock. That's when Harry realized he recognized another of the names.

"Bellatrix? As in…"

"Yeah. She was one of the bastards that tortured my parents."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. You didn't realize who any of them were."

"Wait…they were your relatives?"

"Yep. Her through the Blacks, the Lestranges through marriage both to her and one of my great-great uncles, and the last was Barty Crouch who was also a cousin, both through the Blacks and my own family the Longbottoms."

"I…" Harry trailed off. He really didn't know what to say.

"There's a reason no one wants to think about the war. We're all related. Every person who was killed or tortured was taken out by one of their relatives…except for the muggleborn, and if any of
them are descendants of squibs then they were as well, just much further back."
Ministry matters

Chapter Summary

Surprising news. Harry and the others decide to turn the Garden group in a new direction.

"I wonder where the headmaster is?" Seamus wondered idly at breakfast.

"Yeah. He wasn't at lunch or dinner yesterday either." Dean nodded.

"Maybe he's at the ministry?" Hermione suggested.

"I heard he's locked in his office." Lavender said with some relish.

"Locked in? Why?"

"Padma heard from Sally, who heard from Hannah, who heard from Susan who overheard Pansy Parkinson say that the teachers were talking about how the headmaster has been in his office since early yesterday and no one can get in. The password doesn't work on the door and they can't get in by floo--not even Madame Pomfrey, who should have a medical emergency override. They even tried sending portraits in with messages, but none of them ever came back!"

"Oh no! You don't think he's ill do you? He could be unconscious or something!"

"I know! He's really old and stuff." Parvati agreed. "Though if that were the case, control of the wards should have jumped to Professor McGonagall. There's usually a failsafe so the wards don't just crash if the warden suddenly dies or something. That obviously hasn't happened, or she would have been able to get into his office."

"I wonder why then? Harry! You went to see Dumbledore yesterday right after breakfast. Did he seem alright?"

"Define alright."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean he demanded to know what my letter said, I told him it wasn't any of his business and that he was overstepping his bounds.."

"HARRY! You didn't!" Hermione moaned. How had he not noticed how dramatic she was before?

"I most certainly did. I was very polite about it, but I did. He told me it didn't matter if I refused… then something weird happened."

"What did you do?" Hermione demanded, sounding both horrified and suspicious.

"I didn't do anything! He said my refusal didn't matter and then he turned into a court jester."

"A court…what?!" Ron spluttered.
"Just what I said. He had bells on his collar and his hat, his hair turned orange and was in these long curls, his beard was orange too and braided up with ribbons and there was paint on his face… He looked ridiculous, but I was too weirded out to laugh. I told him I didn't know what he'd been planning, but I wanted no part of it and I left. That was the last I saw him."

"Blimey. Ron muttered. "That's weird. I wonder why he did that?"

"Dunno. I didn't stick around to find out."

"I don't understand though. Why didn't you just let him read your letter?" Hermione was quick to demand.

"Because it was my letter. If I chose to share what was in it, that's one thing, but for the school headmaster to simply demand that I hand it over or tell him the contents, when it's none of his business is something else altogether. It's way beyond his authority as headmaster."

"But it's Dumbledore!" Ron protested.

"So?"

"Isn't he sorta like your grandpa or something?" Seamus asked with some confusion.

"Hardly. I had no idea who he was, for all that he was apparently my magical guardian since my parents died. I'd never even heard his name till I got my Hogwarts letter."

"If he's your magical guardian, he is allowed to demand to see your correspondence if he thinks it's something he needs to deal with." Parvati explained.

"WAS. He WAS my magical guardian, not that I had any clue about that until he wasn't anymore. He certainly never bothered mentioning it. I don't see why he even did it. Up until I was eleven I didn't have any business with the magical world that needed dealing with, and once I was here it should have been Professor McGonagall, my head of house, who took on the role, like she does for the muggleborn. I have a new guardian now, and he's a wizard, so he had the ministry grant him magical guardianship since my aunt had already signed over legal guardianship. So no, he actually doesn't have the right. He was being nosy and highhanded… Don't forget he told me my refusal didn't matter. As if. Ruddy bastard."

"HARRY JAMES…"

"ENOUGH." Harry snapped. Hermione's mouth snapped shut and she jumped in her seat, probably fearing another bout of screaming, but Harry's voice went back to conversational level after that one outburst. "Don't call me by three names. You are not my mother. I had a mother, she was awesome. I neither want nor need a replacement."

"Don't let mum hear you say that. She already considers you another son!" Ron chortled.

Neville gave Harry an 'I told you so' look. Harry's insides squirmed uncomfortably. Seriously… who in their right mind plots to marry off a couple of kids?

"Ron…while I'm sure that's very…nice…of her, I've spoken to your mum ONCE, and that was just to ask how to get on the train platform. She sent me some fudge last Christmas, which was also quite nice… but neither one comes anywhere near enough to make her my replacement mum… which I'm not looking for anyway."

Ron looked offended for a moment, but then he shrugged philosophically. "Whatever, mate. 's not
like she's gonna give you any choice in the matter."

Harry looked at him in horror.

"Ron…you should probably know that my guardian invoked the line protection act on my behalf. Before I can legally be married I have to be checked over for love potions and mind control right before the ceremony begins to be sure there's no coercion involved."

Ron just looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "Blimey! What are you on about, mate?"

"I'm just saying."

"Yeah, whatever." he scoffed and went back to eating.

Neville was watching Ginny rather than Ron; he'd noted she was straining to listen in to the conversation from where she was at. She didn't look mad or disappointed, quite the opposite, in fact. She smirked rather triumphantly, glared at Malfoy, Luna and a couple of other girls, and then dug out a little black book which she began writing in rather furiously, in between sending soppy glances Harry's way.

"Mail's here. No Hedwig today?" Lavender asked curiously.

"Huh? Oh no, she's out delivering a letter. She'll be around again in a day or so."

Hermione froze in the act of getting her morning paper.

"She's carrying mail?"

"She is? To who?"

"I'd think that's be obvious, Narcissa Malfoy." Neville sighed.

"WHAT?! WHY THE BLOODY HELL…"

"Ron."

"What? You can't expect me to be okay with this!"

"Why would you be writing to her?" Hermione demanded.

"Because she sent me a gift, quite unexpectedly, and it's only polite to say thank you. Normal people, with manners, wouldn't find that a difficult concept."

Ron continued muttering and casting dark looks at both Harry and the Slytherin table, but Harry tuned it out as the volume of the great hall suddenly increased as those with papers began reacting to whatever was on the front page. He glanced over at Hermione, who was devouring her own paper, and then scooted closer to Lavender and Parvati instead.

"Hey…What's going on?"

"Sirius Black is innocent! That poor man! He's been in Azkaban for…"

"A decade…almost eleven years now. Ever since the war ended!"

"That hobo actually killed all those people and framed him!"
"And he was right there! In our house!"

"He was in our dorm." Harry felt the need to point out. "I think if anyone should have a case of the heebie-jeebies it's us."

"No kidding." Neville agreed.

"You must be so happy!"

"Uh…not particularly no." Harry said with some confusion.

"But your godfather is free!"

"My what now?"

"Your godfather."

"I have one?"

"Yeah…Sirius Black. Didn't you know?"

"My parents are dead, and I grew up with muggles who don't know anything about this world. How would I? Who would've told me?"

"Oh. Well, he is."

"Poor guy. Didn't kill the muggles, didn't betray your parents, and everyone thought he was guilty and hated him all this time!"

"Betrayed…? Can I see that?"

Lavender gave him her paper and scooted closer to Parvati so she could continue reading over her shoulder.

"Hey, Nev?" Harry said quietly after he'd finished reading.

"Yeah?"

"They mention your parents in here too."

"What?! Why?"

"'cause she was a Black too, and they were all related through the Black family. They mention it to explain how he got thrown in prison without a proper trial. The Ministry must be taking a lot of heat about this." Harry explained while handing over the paper. Neville took it and looked around, cringing into his seat when he realized a lot of people were looking at him in horror and pity.

"Great. That's just… great."

Harry gave him a sympathetic smile and went back to his breakfast, lost in his own thoughts.

He wasn't sure how he felt about all this. The whole thing was so sordid-- a group of friends, torn apart by war and betrayal. From what the paper said, Sirius Black should have raised him. He was his godfather, chosen by his parents to be his guardian if anything happened to them.

Had this happened just a few short months ago, he would have been over the moon. Now…he
could only wonder what did it mean for him? He had Loki now. Then there was the question of whether this guy even wanted to raise him. He was also expected to be in the hospital for the foreseeable future, recovering from 'frostbite, malnutrition and dementor exposure' whatever that was.

From the sound of things, he hadn't had an easy time of it in prison--what kind of hell house was the wizard prison that you had to be hospitalized after getting out? Was he even well enough to take him in if he wanted to? How would Loki feel about all this? Would he just be glad to wash his hands of him? He'd even told him he wasn't originally planning on answering him, and only did because he was curious.

The whole thing left him feeling very unsettled.

He felt eyes on him and realized the whole of the great hall was gaping at he and Neville and whispering about them. Poor Neville wasn't used to it like he was--though even for him it was still uncomfortable. Harry nudged the other boy with his toe and tilted his head towards the doors. Neville nodded and began gathering his things.

"Thanks for the paper."

"You're welcome."

"Do you have a headache or something?" Neville asked Harry curiously.

"Huh?"

"Well…the last couple of days I've noticed you've been rubbing your eyes a lot."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I do. I'm sure it'll go away on its own."

"You should probably let Madame Pomfrey take a look at you. Maybe your glasses need adjusting."

"I've always had the same pair. It's fine."

"You should let her take a look. No sense making your eyesight worse when she could just adjust them for you."

"I don't want to be stuck in the hospital wing for a week like last time."

"When? The end of the year? You almost died from what you said. She shouldn't keep you if it's just for an adjustment."

"Fine. But if I'm stuck there for a week I'm blaming you."

The hospital wing was empty when they arrived there. Madame Pomfrey came bustling out from the back looking harried.

"Fighting already? It's just after breakfast!"

"Um, we weren't fighting." Harry protested.
"Harry needs his eyes checked. He's been getting headaches and rubbing his eyes a lot." Neville explained.

"Oh. Well good. Something simple. Some days I can barely keep up with all the nonsense you children do to each other. Have a seat there and I'll take a look. Give me your glasses, would you?"

The matron scanned his glasses and then pointed her wand at each of his eyes in turn. When she was done, she looked rather suspicious.

"Have you been doing spells on your eyes?"

"Huh? No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Hmmm." she muttered to herself as she began transfiguring the glasses she held to a slightly new configuration.

"Why do you ask? Is there something wrong?"

"Wrong, no. Strange, definitely. Your prescription now is weaker, not stronger that it used to be."

"That's...good?"

"It doesn't usually work that way." Madame Pomfrey informed him dryly. "I need to know what you did to your eyes. It's very important, child. If whatever you did goes wrong you could blind yourself or cause some other problem somewhere down the line."

"I didn't do anything to them, I swear!"

"You said your guardian was stuffing you full of potions the last weeks of summer. Could that be why?" Neville pointed out.

"Potions? What kind of potions?"

"I dunno what they were. There was just potions waiting every couple of days with breakfast. He said they were supposed to undo any problems my relatives years of neglect had done. I was sleeping like a log each night and I started getting hungry all the time. He said that meant they were working."

"I see." She waved her wand over him again from head to toe.

"I want you to come back in a month. If you get any more headaches or anything come sooner, but barring that come back in a month for a checkup."

"Okay."

"Here. See how these work."

Harry grinned once his glasses were on his face. Everything looked sharp and clear again. He hadn't quite noticed how things had started to fuzz at the edges before.

"Perfect. Thanks, Madame Pomfrey."
"You're very welcome."

She summoned a potion from the back and handed it to him. "That should help with the headache."

When they arrived at the Garden, they found Loki inside with Luna who was serving tea for them both.

Neville blinked at him in astonishment. While he had believed Harry when he told him everything that had happened that summer, it was still a shock to walk into their secret clubhouse and find the very tall, armor-clad man inside.

"Loki! What are you doing here?" Harry's face fell then. "Are you going to get rid of me?"

Loki gasped rather theatrically and put his hand over his heart. "Really, child! You wound me. I actually came here to tell you about your…brother." the man laughed then like he'd just told a particularly funny joke.

"My brother?"

"You'll understand in a moment. You've heard by now that Sirius Black is your godfather?"

"Yeah."

"Your delightful headmaster seemed to be making an effort to get the word out that he was supposed to raise you. It was a rather obvious ploy. Mr. Black at the moment can barely take care of himself, let alone be a responsible guardian for a young boy."

"You think he was going to…what? Declare him incompetent or something?"

"Yes, and then reluctantly agree to take over your guardianship again--for your own good, of course. I'm still not exactly certain why he's so very keen to get his hands on you again, but I don't trust it in the least. But, no worries. I've already sidestepped that all neatly by convincing the courts to make Mr. Black my ward for the time being. He, of course, is not at all pleased about it. Last I saw him he was having a bit of a tantrum at the hospital and shouting that he wasn't a child, but I'm sure he'll calm down eventually. So, no, as you can see I am not here to get rid of you. Quite the opposite in fact. Now what do we say?"

"Thank you, Loki. You're the most awesomest guardian ever."

"Yes, that's what I like to hear."

Harry's wand started buzzing and he grimaced.

"What's that?"

"I set an alarm to remind me I had quidditch practice. Again. I swear Oliver is going to kill us all before the year is out."

"Have fun."

"Yeah. See you all later." Harry sighed before trudging out.

Neville fidgeted slightly when Loki focused on him after Harry had gone.
"Hello. You must be Mr. Longbottom."

"Um, yeah. Uh, hi."

"Well met. Tell me, dear boy, do you have a knack for weather magic by any chance?"

"Um, no…At least I don't think so?"

"Hmm. Healing, perhaps?"

"No. I'm good at herbology, but that's about it."

"You're always too hard on yourself, Neville. You've improved a lot since you've been practicing more. And you shouldn't sell your talent for herbology short either. He planted the little garden out back here. Given how much everything has grown already, you'd think the garden had been there for months, not just a few weeks."

"I'm not surprised." Loki smiled wryly.

"You know, one of my ancestors supposedly met your brother." Neville said, changing the subject. He always felt rather awkward when receiving compliments--probably because it happened so rarely.

Loki gave another wry smile. "Believe me, child, I'm already aware of that. In fact, I would say he knew her very well."

"Oh. I hadn't realized they were friends, just that they'd met."

"Have you children been keeping up with your training?"

"Um, sort of. I can kind of throw knives… I don't really hit much. I'm a bit better with the bow, but not by much. I really don't think swords are my thing though."

"You just don't want to do a thousand repeats."

"Perhaps another weapon would suit you better. Perhaps a nice warhammer? I have a feeling you'd have a knack for that."

"Albus?"

Professor Snape peeked his head in the door. "I got your mess…age. What on earth are you wearing?"

Dumbledore glared at him and took his seat behind his desk.

"Harry Potter's new guardian left a trap for me." the old man admitted sourly.

"What did you do?"

"I demanded to know why he was corresponding with the Malfoys. The wretched child refused to tell me."

"So you legilimized him."
"Of course. Then this happened."

Dumbledore fell silent and seemed to be waiting for something. When nothing happened he snarled angrily. "Lying bastard!"

"Albus?"

"Not you! That Odinson. He said the only way to undo his little gift was to tell someone what I'd done!"

"If it was meant to teach you a lesson, I doubt telling me would suffice. I had already figured as much. What I don't understand is why. It was rather foolish of you to drag the boy off moments after receiving that letter. Between that and how the Weasley boy and Granger were acting, my Slytherins are feeling a bit put upon. It was quite unnecessary as well. Draco was bragging about how his mother was helping 'educate' Potter on the things he didn't know by supplying him a copy of his family tree."

Dumbledore didn't seem to like that at all, but a moment later his face was smooth and unconcerned once more.

"If that's all it was, why wouldn't he just say as much?"

"Because he's a surly, obstinate little shit who thinks he's above the rules." Snape scoffed. "You really haven't been able to remove it?"

"Or cover it up. No matter what I do I go back to looking like this." Dumbledore admitted, gritting his teeth. "I tried telling a muggle, but it came back as soon as I obliviated them."

"I'll fetch Minerva, shall I?"

"No!"

"She's loyal to you. Filius and Pomona won't be as forgiving. Even if rummaging through a child's mind isn't illegal, I've no doubt they'll consider it unethical at the very least."

Dumbledore grimaced, but he nodded. "Best get this over with then. I've been tied up dealing with this for too long already. I need to get back to the ministry to deal with all that Pettigrew business."

"That's already been taken care of. It was in the papers this morning. Black has been cleared of charges and was transferred to St. Mungo's."

"I would have preferred to be there, but no matter. There is still time to be certain everything remains on track. Call Minerva. I've lost enough time to Mr. Odinson's interference."

"Oi, Potter, wait up a moment."

Harry stopped before he left the castle, and turned to find several of the Slytherin second years coming towards him.

He kept his face impassive. He would always be wary when a group of Slytherins approached, but as they didn't seem hostile, he was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

"Draco told us his mother sent you a copy of your family tree. You really didn't know it before?" Daphne said curiously.
"No. Why is that so hard for everyone to believe? I grew up with muggles, who pretty much felt about wizards the way I'm told Death Eaters felt about muggles. They wanted to 'squash the magic out' of me, so they weren't exactly inclined to go educating me on my wizarding heritage--and that's even if they actually knew any of it, which I'm pretty sure they didn't."

"I guess it's just hard to fathom that one of the most famous wizards in Britain was left floundering like that. It's an outrage." Blaise Zabini shrugged.

"Yeah well, what's done is done. Look, what is this about? It's just, Oliver's been more insane than usual this year. As it stands I'm probably going to miss lunch. I'd prefer not to miss dinner as well because he keeps me out longer for being late."

"We'll make it quick then. Have you had a chance to look over them?" Tracy asked.

"Yeah, a bit."

"Then you know we all have relatives in common. We grew up with stories about most of those people, either from other relatives or from portraits. We thought you might like to hear some of them." Daphne offered.

"I would, just not now."

"We won't keep you then. Are you free after dinner?" Theo Nott asked.

"Yeah, I should be."

"We'll speak further then."

"Alright. See you then."

Neville and Luna both sighed when Harry trudged into the Garden after missing lunch. He had showered and changed before heading back, but he still looked like he'd been put through the wringer.

"Man. Oliver is really working you guys hard this year, huh?"

"Everyone is really worried about Slytherin's new brooms. I don't know how Malfoy is as a seeker, since I haven't seen him play yet, but the rest of the team is solid. Their team is usually the hardest to beat of the three. The new brooms are going to give them a definite advantage. Gryffindor is the better team, but we're just not sure it will be enough, and so Oliver's quidditch mania has skyrocketed, and it was bad enough before." Harry sighed.

He trudged to the kitchen and was cheered to see the elves had left lunch for him. He felt sorry for the rest of them. If they were lucky they might get a goodie basket from the kitchen, otherwise they just had to stick it out till dinner time.

"So…you're going to go hang out with Slytherins later?" Neville asked curiously.

"Heard about that, did you. Yeah, that's the plan. They want to talk about our common relatives. Weird, huh?"

"Not really. Most purebloods take such things pretty seriously. Knowing your family tree isn't just about knowing who you can or cannot marry, it's your history, your legacy. It's a burden and honor
both. On the one hand, many young heirs feel quite pressured to live up to their ancestors' ideals, on the other hand, many of them want to do so, because your history and lineage tells you who you are and where you belong." Luna explained.

Harry thought about all the times he'd tried imagining who his parents were, before he'd been told anything about them. It was like he hadn't known who he was or who he could be without knowing. After he had learned about them, he'd felt the need to try to live up to their example. He'd also felt pressured by that legacy. His parents were heroes and had died for him. How could he justify anything but the same? It would be like spitting on their sacrifice.

"You want company?" Neville offered.

"Sure. You seem to know a lot about the folks on the family tree. You can probably add stories of your own."

"Alright then."

"So, what were you two doing?"

"Well, remember you were saying about how you'd been looking into space travel because you wanted to travel the galaxy and all?" Luna began.

"Yeah?"

"Well, we've been looking in the library to see if there was anything on the wizard side about it. You said you'd been reading up just on muggle stuff, right?" Neville continued.

"Yeah. That was all I had over the summer. Once we got to school I was a little preoccupied with vengeance."

Luna sighed and shook her head.

"They had it coming." Neville defended.

"So? Did you find anything?" Harry asked curiously.

"Well, there was a couple of early broom experiments. They tried to fly straight up into space, but they just ended up circling the earth till they came back down."

"Early brooms didn't go very fast. They probably couldn't achieve escape velocity. If they had, well, that would have been a problem too. There's no air in outer space and it's like, really cold too. They would have suffocated and froze solid."

"Huh. And muggles know this? How?" Luna wondered.

"They sent balloons up with equipment to test the upper atmosphere, later they sent out satellites. They also sent people to the moon. They filmed it and everything. Brought back moon rocks."

"But…how? They're muggles." Neville said, sounding equally shocked.

"Their science is a lot more advanced than wizards give them credit for."

"Even if that's the case… It's kind of a disgrace, isn't it? It used to be that we were so far in advance of them that there was no comparison. I mean, they used to die of pretty much everything, they were kind of dirty, and most of them didn't even know how to read until pretty recently…. And yet you're saying they just jumped past us so far that they're going to the moon?" Neville said,
"Pretty much. The thing you have to understand about muggles is that they study everything. There's so many of them that they can do that. They're also big fans of innovation and technology. Wizards kind of aren't. Wizards like tradition and seem kind of wary of anything too "new-fangled". When you add in that wizards can already heal most hurts and don't have to worry about most diseases, and always have enough food to get by and can do most things by waving their wand around, well, there just isn't a whole lot of pressure on wizards to do new stuff. For muggles there is. They can't just clean a room, so they invent machines to make it quicker and easier. They can't just pop to a new place, so they made planes, trains, automobiles, ships….and then once they did that they work on making them faster, cheaper and easier to make. Making food was very labor intensive, so they made machines to help in food preparation, to help cook it faster--and then they work to improve the stuff they made. There's a whole bunch of diseases that muggles die from every year, so they've got big groups all over that do nothing but study those, trying to figure out how they work, how they spread, how they can be stopped, and how the symptoms can be treated. On and on. In fact, they've gotten advanced enough that there's probably a lot wizards could learn from them. It's no longer so one sided. In fact, from what you're saying, if I want to start a wizarding space program, it looks like I might have to get most of the information from muggles."

"We only just started looking. Don't give up on wizards so easily. There might be more to be discovered. I mean, yeah, nowadays with secrecy and all there isn't a lot of big magic being done, or any real innovations, but that wasn't always the case. I'm sure we'll find something." Luna chided before continuing. "That's your goal though? You're going to start a space program? Can I help? It sounds like fun."

"Sure. I'm going to need help if it's going to succeed. There's sure to be a lot of work to be done. We've all got magic, so we can cut a lot of corners the muggles couldn't, so we should be able to do more in a shorter period of time… the thing is, it will probably still end up being expensive. We can't just conjure working space ships…be nice if we could…so that means we're going to need materials, and we'll have to pay the folks making stuff and… Yeah."

"Well, it still sounds pretty cool. Count me in too." Neville offered.

"We should give ourselves a name." Luna mused. "How about the Explorer's Club?"

"I guess that works. Exploring magic, science, and eventually the galaxy."
Halloween

Chapter Summary

Harry and friends go to a ghost party. There's a strange attack against Filch's cat. Percy gets the wrong idea about why Hermione is in the boys' dorms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October blew in cold and blustery. A bout of wizarding flu swept through the halls of Hogwarts soon after. It became quite commonplace to see students with great billows of steam coming out of their ears from all the pepper-up potions Madame Pomfrey was handing out. Oliver Wood's quidditch mania continued unabated; if anything it got worse the closer their first game of the season got.

"What the hell Johnson! That's the third pass you fumbled!" Oliver howled.

"It's raining buckets and I can't feel my fingers!"

"Me too. I'm frozen through!" Alicia was quick to agree.

"Don't tell me, tell Potter. He hasn't gotten the snitch yet."

"Wrong! I got it five minutes ago!" Harry objected, trying to will his teeth not to chatter.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I did! You told me to release it and try again because I took too long!"

"We can't go in without it! Don't just hover there, go find it!"

"It's right here!" Harry scoffed, brandishing the snitch.

"You got it again? Good work. Try again and …"

"OLIVER!" the whole team shouted.

"The game is only two weeks away! The Slytherins on their new brooms look like green and silver blurs! We need every advantage we can get!"

"That won't do us any good if we're all half-dead from flying in the rain for hours!" Katie exploded.

"Think of Gryffindor!"

The murderous glares he received from the rest of the team finally got through to him.

The team landed one at a time and then grimaced in disgust as their feet sank into the sodden ground.
"The hell with this. I'm not walking in this." Fred announced, before hopping back on his broom and heading back towards the castle.

Angelina tossed the quaffle to Oliver and took off after him, as did the rest of the team.

"OI! You bastards left the bludgers out!" Oliver shouted after them. They were already far enough away that none of them seemed to hear.

Harry handed Oliver the snitch and then sighed before heading back up to corral the bludgers, which were both still flying free.

For all that Harry was both the smallest, and the youngest member of the team, he ended up being the last one back in the castle. He was completely drenched, half-frozen, stiff and exhausted from being on his broom for so many hours in such conditions.

The front hall showed signs of the rest of the team's recent passage when he arrived. There were muddy footprints and puddles everywhere and heading up the stairs. Harry himself was dripping and adding to the mess.

"AAAH! Little brat! Look at ye! Befouling the castle! I'll have ye in chains for this!" Filch howled when he spotted Harry and the mess.

Harry sighed tiredly and drew his wand, tapping himself on the top of the head. He squirmed as the moisture squeezed itself out of his hair and clothing and landed with a splash on the floor below.

"AAAAH!" Filch screamed, tearing at his hair.

"Don't worry, Mr. Filch. I've got this."

A few quick spells cleaned up the mud and dried up the puddles.

"I'll get the stairs on my way up. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go thaw out."

Filch nodded stiffly. "See that ye do!" he sniffed before he stalked off, muttering. Harry just rolled his eyes.

He spotted the Gryffindor House ghost, Nearly-Headless Nick on the mezzanine overlooking the entryway as he ascended the stairs, cleaning as he went. The normally upbeat ghost seemed rather down. Curious, Harry headed towards him once he reached the second floor.

"Ah, young Harry. I couldn't help but see. That was well done of you, really. Honestly, that man. No common courtesy. Would a simple thank you have been so hard?" Sir Nick said disapprovingly.

"I wasn't really expecting one, to be honest."

"Shameful behavior, even so." Nick said absently.

He then held up the letter in his hand and sighed mournfully and stared out into the entryway with a tragic look upon his face.

Harry got a sinking feeling in his stomach, but his own politeness had him asking "Something wrong?" before he could second guess himself.

"Oh, I don't wish to trouble you…"
"It's no trouble, really."

"Ah, a matter of no importance…. It's not as though I really wanted to join…. Thought I'd apply, but apparently I 'don't fulfill requirements'".

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

"But you would think, wouldn't you," he erupted suddenly, brandishing the letter, "that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?"

"Oh - yes," said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

"I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean, and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However -" he began to read furiously: "We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not fulfill our requirements. With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore."

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

"Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most people would think that's good and beheaded, but oh, no, it's not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore!"

"That's…terrible. Really. I wish there was something I could do."

Nick smiled at him. "Actually… I mean, I don't want to impose or anything, but you did offer…"

"Well, yes. I suppose I did."

"It's just…you see, my 500th death day party is coming up, this Halloween, in fact. It will be the biggest event of the season, I've no doubt. Ghosts are already making their way towards Hogwarts from all over the country. It's just, well, a celebrity would really be a bit of a coup, especially as you're still living. I don't think a ghost in deathly memory has had anyone still living come to one of their parties. It could be just the thing to stick to old Delaney-Podmore, him and his stupid, smug face."

"Halloween you said?" The sinking feeling was back in Harry's stomach. "Around the same time as the Halloween feast, I'm guessing?"

"Ah, yes."

"Will there be food? Living people food. I mean, no offense, but I'm a growing boy…"

"Think nothing of it! But sadly, the answer is no. Food fit for the living does nothing for us. If it's rotted enough though, and we drift through it at just the right angle we can almost taste it."

"Would you mind terribly if I were to attend the feast first? I could be fashionably late."

"That would be fine! And perhaps…you might maybe see yourself clear to telling Sir Patrick how menacing and scary you find me?"

"I can try…though as I don't actually find you frightening I'm not sure how much good it will do. I'm actually a very bad liar."
"Oh."

"Oh, hey, can I bring others? I know a girl whose father runs a paper. 500, it's a pretty big deal, right? I'm sure she'd love to come."

"Oh, my! That would be a coup! I'm certain no other ghost has ever had one of their functions make it to the society papers! That would be marvelous!"

"Hey, could I ask you a question? How do you guys write letters anyway? I mean, do you haunt places filled with rotted parchment and broken quills and stock up or what?"

"Oh, no, we just do this" Nick explained, pulling a ghostly wand and flicking it. A ghostly letter addressed to Harry that said "You are Invited" popped out of the end.

"You have the ghost of your wand with you?"

"I have my sword as well, so I don't know why that's so surprising."

"If you have a wand, why haven't you ever just done a cutting charm to get rid of the last bit of skin, if you want in the Headless Hunt so bad?"

Nick's face went slack with shock and then he became quite sheepish. "Honestly, I never thought to try. I don't know how much we can actually change the manner of our death once it's final."

"Maybe you should try. If it doesn't work, you're no worse off than you were, but if it does, well, they have no reason to turn you down again."

"You have given me quite a lot to consider."

"Glad to help. Well, I guess I'll see you on Halloween. I want a hot shower. I'm still half frozen from practice."

"Oh, well, then don't allow me to keep you. You should probably stop by the hospital wing; don't want to end up with that nasty flu going around."

"Actually, I might do just that. I was supposed to show up for a check-up anyway."

Nick nodded and drifted off, lost in thought. Harry's innocently offered suggestion seemed to have triggered a bit of an existential crisis in the ghost. Honestly, it rather surprised him that no one had offered similar advice in the 500 years he'd been dead. It seemed a perfectly reasonable thing to suggest-- ghosts drifted through walls, furniture and living people like they weren't there, but they never seemed to do it to each other, ergo, Nick should be able to finish his botched beheading, or barring that, another ghost could do it for him. Come to think of it, the Bloody Baron had a sword as well.

Oh well, Hermione did always say that witches and wizards hadn't an ounce of logic. For a moment he debated pointing out the next time he saw her that was pretty much the same as saying she had no logic, unless she was saying she wasn't a witch, but he decided against it. Hermione never had taken criticism well.

He slipped into the hospital wing and dodged Percy and Ginny Weasley who were on their way out. Ginny had obviously just gotten a dose of pepper-up. The great billows of steam coming out from under her bright red hair made it look like her whole head was on fire. It didn't help that her whole face turned bright red as well when she spotted Harry. Percy was busy lecturing and dragging her along behind him, taking no notice of how she'd begun to drag her feet.
"… should have gotten one weeks ago. You've been looking pale and a bit peaky for a while now. Are you sure you're settling in alright?"

Ginny shot a mortified glance Harry's way before glaring daggers at her brother's back. Harry wondered if she'd be hexing the oblivious prefect later; she was kind of a violent girl, he noted.

"Mr. Potter! It's about time! You should have been here last week. If you hadn't of shown up on your own I was going to have Minerva drag you up here by your ear."

"Sorry. I haven't had a free moment since then. Oliver, our quidditch captain, has gone mad or something. He's had us practicing pretty much every free moment since I saw you last. I've barely had time to do homework, let alone eat and sleep."

"You do look a bit peaky. Let's take a look at you. Glasses."

Harry handed them over with a sigh and looked around the room idly while the matron did her scans. His eyesight had improved a lot from whatever Loki had given him. Where before he saw just vague colored blurs without his glasses on, now he could see almost as well as with them on, except that things were still blurry.

"Face forward. Let's take a look at your eyes. Any more headaches?"

"Um, yeah, for the last week or so."

"I told you to come back sooner if that happened."

"I really meant that I haven't had a chance. I've been running on about four hours of sleep a night because I've had to stay up to do whatever homework I didn't manage to finish after classes and before practice. I'm still better off than the rest of them. They're all older, so they all have more classes than I do. Fred and George don't care about their grades so long as they don't flunk out, and Oliver and Angelina want to go into professional quidditch so they care more about the upcoming game than their grades too. I'm not sure how Katie and Alicia have been managing, to be honest."

Pomfrey frowned as she adjusted his glasses again.

"I'll have a word with Minerva about keeping an eye on the team's practice schedule… Though, on second thought, I'll drop a word with Madame Hooch. Minerva's as quidditch mad as anyone… As for your check-ups, whatever potions regiment your guardian gave you seems to be fixing your eyesight, however, if you are then inflicting more damage by wearing a mismatched prescription on your glasses then your undoing its work as it's being done. For the next week I want you to stop by on your way to breakfast. I'm not sure how quickly your eyesight is changing, but I'd prefer to stay on top of it from here on out. If the damage from your poorly fitted glasses hasn't already sabotaged your progress irreparably, you might actually be able to discard your glasses altogether at some point."

"Huh." Harry frowned worriedly. "You think by not coming in quick enough I might have ruined things?"

"I hope not, but we'll see. Before breakfast. Every day."

"Yes'm."

She summoned a pepper-up potion from her swiftly depleting stores and made him drink it before allowing him to leave.
He was still trailing steam out of his ears as he began making his way from the hospital wing towards Gryffindor tower.

"Hey, Potter. You got that nasty flu bug too, huh?"

"Might have done. I was out in this weather for a couple of hours for practice. I still feel half-frozen."

"Your own fault for joining the team. I like spectating just fine. If the weather's bad, I can leave." Blaise Zabini (fifth cousin through the Potter side of the family) teased.

"Ugh. You couldn't pay me enough to go out in this weather." Daphne Greengrass (third cousin on her mother's side, fourth on her father's through the Potter's) agreed with a shiver.

"On days like this, I can't help but agree. Oliver would have kept us longer if he could have."

"Damn. I thought Flint (ironically enough, Harry's cousin through both the Potters and the Blacks, though not particularly close in either case) was bad."

"They're probably equally as bad as each other. I get the impression sometimes their quidditch mania is mostly about beating each other more than anything else." Harry sighed.

"It probably is. I heard they butted heads on the train their first year and they've been rivals ever since." Daphne explained.

"On days like this, I really wish they'd leave the rest of us out of it."

"I can imagine."

"Look, I'll talk to you both later. There's a hot shower with my name on it."

"Yeah, see ya Potter."

Halloween seemed to arrive with uncommon swiftness. The great hall looked amazing-- there were what looked to be hundreds of bats flapping around overhead, dozens of jack o' lanterns carved with eerie faces dotted the tables, and a trio of dancing skeletons were gyrating in the corners. The food looked amazing as well-but then the feasts at Hogwarts were always spectacular; they had to be to top the normal everyday fare which was pretty impressive itself.

"Hiya, Harry! Hiya Neville. So, when are we leaving? Did you bring your cloaks? I don't see them. You'll probably be cold without them. I had a ghost go through me once. It wasn't very pleasant. I told my brother about the party we're going to go to. He's really jealous. He can't wait to come next year; he wants to go to a ghost party too."

Neville and Harry traded a glance as Colin Creevey, the kid with the camera from this year's sorting, popped up beside them and started talking… and talking.

"Uh, hi, Colin" Harry said kindly when the kid finally took a breath. "You're coming with us, huh?"

"Yeah, uh, didn't Luna tell you?"

"She said she was bringing someone to help her with a story for the Quibbler. You're going to be
taking pictures?” Neville asked, gesturing to the camera that was always around the kid's neck.

Colin nodded cheerfully as he began loading up his plate.

"Do you have to do anything special to take pictures of ghosts?” Harry wondered as he began filling his own plate.

"There's a charm that you can put on the lens to give you sharper images of them. Professor Flitwick helped me with it. You can get a picture without the charm but the ghosts are kind of blurry. With the charm you should be able to see them clearly."

"Oh. Good."

"Are you going to have to run back upstairs for your cloaks? It's just, Luna told me to bring mine…"

"We've got them. The inside of our pockets are enlarged."

"Yeah? You can do that?"

"If you know how. I used to have a bag with an expanded inside, but Dumbledore stole it."

"He did? Why? Doesn't he know how to make one?"

"I think he was mad about the pixies that destroyed his office."

"Oh, right! I heard about that."

"Uh…what the hell are you all talking about?"

"Yeah, mate…and what are you doing here, midget? Go back to your own part of the table.” Ron added to Seamus' interruption.

Colin's face fell and he hunched in his seat under Ron's glare. Neville's hand on his shoulder kept him in his seat.

"Since you were apparently listening in to our conversation you should already know." he told Ron and Seamus with some asperity.

"Eat up, Colin, we'll be leaving soon.” Harry added, taking his own advice. His plate was piled high and he was steadily working through it; he had no intention of going hungry tonight just because he was too nice for his own good. "You too, Nev. There's fashionably late and just showing up whenever. We don't want to be rude."

"But where are you going?” Hermione burst out after watching them eat for a moment. That girl; she really couldn't stand not knowing something.

"We're going to Sir Nick's death day party.” A dreamy voice answered her.

"You eat?” Neville asked Luna, owner of the dreamy voice.

"Yes. No one talks to me at my table so I was able to just eat and go. I also stopped by the kitchen earlier and got snacks for later. We don't know how late the party will run.”
"Good thinking." Neville said, after choking down a mouthful of ham. Harry and Colin both grunted their agreement and continued working through their own dinners.

"Why are you going to Sir Nick's death day party?" Hermione demanded, turning her full attention to Luna once she realized the boys weren't going to stop eating so that she could properly interrogate them.

"We were invited, of course."

"Why were you invited and we weren't? He's our house ghost, not yours!" Ron said with some affront.

"Yeah!" Dean and Seamus echoed.

"Harry invited me, and also I'm covering the event for the Quibbler. Daddy was very excited when I told him. Living people don't usually get invited to such events, so I'm sure we'll learn a lot about the social habits of ghosts that we didn't know before. It's always important to add to the body of existing knowledge when the opportunity presents itself, don't you agree?"

"Why, yes I do" Hermione suddenly chirped, her eyes wide and smile strangely triumphant. "Which is why we're going with you. Right, Ron?"

"EH?" Ron shout was garbled by the food stuffed in his mouth, but his lack of enthusiasm was evident nonetheless. Hermione glared him into submission, nodding her head once and looking pleased when he slumped sulkily into his seat and started shoveling his food in faster. If he had to leave a perfectly good feast to go to a stupid ghost party for a stupider ghost that hadn't even bothered to invite him, he bloody well wasn't doing it on an empty stomach.

The boys finished and rose to join Luna. Behind them they could hear Hermione impatiently chivvying Ron along. Ron, still muttering under his breath, and Hermione, who seemed like a girl on a mission, caught up with them before they'd made it to the entryway.

"So…a ghost party. Very exciting. I'm sure we'll learn lots." Hermione said brightly.

"I guess. I'm really just going because Sir Nick asked me to. He wants bragging rights to show up his rival, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore. He won't let him join the headless hunt because his is still attached, see? He figures between having living guests and a spot in the paper he can brag about how awesome his party was and show him up."

"I…see." Hermione said, sounding dubious.

"Ginny? What're you doing here?" Ron said suddenly.

The group looked up and saw Ginny Weasley coming down the stairs. She froze like a deer in the headlights when they all looked up at her.

"I'm heading to the feast… Don't tell me it's over already! I didn't mean to fall asleep! My stupid roommates didn't bother waking me…"

"No, it's still going on. We're just going to a ghost party instead."

She hurried down to join them. "A ghost party? That sounds really cool. I'll come too." she announced, her gaze flicking to Harry for a moment. Harry wasn't really paying attention; he and the other three had already continued on their way.
"OI! Wait up!" Ron called. The three of them chased after.

By the time they caught up with them again, they were deep in the dungeons, and the others had put on their cloaks and scarves. Ron was going to question this, but then he and the others realized it was in fact getting rather chilly.

"It should be just up here."

"Do you hear something?"

"Sounds like a bunch of people shouting." Ginny muttered as she rubbed her arms. Honestly, the things she went through for that boy!

"In here!"

The kids gathered in the doorway and gaped at the sight beyond. There were a dozen ghostly horses with headless men riding them, all of whom were tossing their heads to one another in an intricate, choreographed display. There were at least a hundred or more other ghosts gathered around the edges of the room, all of whom were clapping and cheering at the display.

Luna spotted Sir Nick, standing forgotten at a podium off to the side, watching the headless hunt do their thing with a look of bitter resignation on his face. Harry recognized that look; he was pretty sure he'd worn it on his own face more times than he could count while growing up, stuck in the cupboard while Dudley was showered with gifts and affection every birthday and holiday. Before he had a chance to really think of what he was doing, he was already striding across the room to greet him.

"There's the man of the hour! My condolences, good sir, on this, the five hundredth anniversary of your death, and a gruesome one it was!"

Nick visibly brightened when he spotted him, and seemed quite surprised by the number of people he'd brought with him.

"So sorry we're late, Sir Nick, but you know us living people, we've a lot of stuff to do before we can go everywhere. A few more may stop by before the evening is through. I'm sure the rest of Gryffindor house will be along to pay their respects to you, after all you are our house ghost. For now, I'm afraid we'll have to do. Oh, and before I forget, I should like to introduce you to Luna Lovegood. She and Colin here will be covering the party for the paper. Colin, my good man, do be sure to get a good shot of the guest of honor!" Harry ordered, although Colin had been pretty much been taking pictures of the ghosts and the party nonstop since they'd arrived.

"Our condolences." Luna stepped in smoothly. "If it's not too much trouble, I'm hoping you would consent to a short interview a bit later, just to add a personal touch to our coverage, of course."

"It would be my pleasure, dear lady!"

"Oh, but do excuse us! Here we are, barging in late and chattering away, when you've hired entertainment for the evening! Do pardon our rudeness. Don't mind us, fellows. Do go back to your little show." Harry added.

"Yes, don't want to keep you from earning your keep." Neville added with a disarming grin.
Neville had probably recognized that look on Nick's face as well. That plus the little Harry had told him about Nick's rivalry with the leader of the headless hunt made it pretty clear what was going on here.

Hermione seemed to realize as well as she added her own bit. "Oh, Sir Nick…our condolences… um, I was wondering…could you sing the story of your beheading? It was really quite clever as I recall, and Ginny here has never heard it! Colin either, I would imagine." she said brightly, shoving the first years forward.

Ginny, for all she was rather scary and temperamental, could play the innocent winsome girl like a champ. "Oh would you please, Sir Nick? If it's not too much trouble?"

"Oh, please do, Sir Nick! We'll even give you a beat to work with!" Luna added. "I've never heard it either."

Harry and Neville, followed by Ron a moment later, began to clap a steady rhythm. The headless hunt had tried to resume their act, but they were distracted by the living folks, and their host, ignoring them, not to mention most of the crowd was paying more attention to the podium than to them as well. The kids kept their backs firmly to the crowd and the huntsmen and kept their attention on Sir Nick who smiled at them all gratefully and began to sing:

It was a mistake any wizard could make  
Who was tired and caught on the hop  
One piffling error, and then, to my terror,  
I found myself facing the chop.  
Alas for the eve when I met Lady Grieve  
A-strolling the park in the dusk!  
She was of the belief I could straighten her teeth  
Next moment she'd sprouted a tusk.  
I cried through the night that I'd soon put her right  
But the process of justice was lax;  
They'd brought out the block, though they'd mislaid the rock  
Where they usually sharpened the axe.  
Next morning at dawn, with a face most forlorn,  
The priest said to try not to cry,  
"You can come just like that, no, you won't need a hat,"  
And I knew that my end must be nigh.  
The man in the mask who would have the sad task  
Of cleaving my head from my neck,  
Said "Nick, if you please, will you get to your knees,"  
And I turned to a gibbering wreck.  
"This may sting a bit" said the cack-handed twit  
As he swung the axe up in the air,  
But oh the blunt blade! No difference it made,  
My head was still definitely there.  
The axeman he hacked and he whacked and he thwacked,  
"Won't be too long", he assured me,  
But quick it was not, and the bone-headed clot  
Took forty-five goes 'til he floored me.  
And so I was dead, but my faithful old head  
It never saw fit to desert me,  
It still lingers on, that's the end of my song,  
And now, please applaud, or you'll hurt me.
"Bravo! Bravo!" The kids made sure to clap loudly and cheer. Nick tilted his head to show the flap of skin that still attached his head to his neck. The kids clapped a bit louder and tried to hide their grimaces at the gruesome sight.

"You're really unique, aren't you, Sir Nick? I mean, anyone can be headless, just look at the entertainers here tonight. It takes a special bit of luck to be nearly headless."

"You know, you're right. It really does. Bravo, Sir Nick!"

"Bravo!"

"Bravo!"

"Hah! Entertainers! Gate crashers, more like." Nick muttered resentfully.

"Well, you did say this was going to be the event of the season. Looks like you were right." Harry replied.

"Yes, you know you've arrived when whole crowds are hopping on horses desperate to be at one of your parties." Luna nodded.

'I've never… I never thought of it like that. He's been doing it to me my whole life…and death. All this time and I…"

Sir Nick seemed to be having a revelation of some sort. The kids backed up as he began to glow slightly golden and then little golden sparks began to flow off him as though he'd suddenly become a merry campfire in the woods.

"All this time and I've been looking at things all wrong, haven't I?" he murmured and then he began to laugh.

The golden glow grew brighter and he vanished in a cloud of golden sparkles.

The kids looked at one another in confusion and turned to see all of the ghosts staring at the space where Nick had been a moment ago in shock. Some of them seemed quite shaken by whatever had just happened.

Suddenly, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore, who had hopped off his horse earlier to go give Nick a piece of his mind about ignoring him, fell to his knees, while his head, which was tucked under his arm at his side wailed "Noooooooooo!"

"Um, what just happened?" Ron wondered.

It was the Fat Friar who answered them. He seemed especially shaken.

"He's…moved on."

"So…he's gone then? For good?" Ginny questioned.

"Yes." The Friar agreed. "I didn't… We thought we were just echoes. But he…"

Luna set down her basket and dug out a thermos filled with hot chocolate. She handed out cups to the rest of the children and gave them each some. She raised her cup high.

"To Sir Nick, on this the five hundredth anniversary of his death. May he rest in peace."
"Sir Nick!"

When they were done toasting she turned to Colin. "Tell me you got pictures of all of that."

Colin just smiled and patted his camera.

Luna and Colin wandered off to talk to and get pictures of the rest of the guests before they all began drifting off. The remaining five stayed where Nick had vanished and were joined by the other three house ghosts.

"We're sorry for your loss." Neville told them quietly. "The four of you have been together a long time, haven't you?"

"By your standards, yes, I suppose we were. The baron and I have been here the longest. Our dear Friar joined us about two hundred years later, if I recall correctly. Nick was a relative newcomer compared to the rest of us. And now he's gone."

"Gryffindor is now without a house ghost. I'm sure we can depend on all of you to find a suitable replacement."

"Maybe that headless guy. He seemed pretty upset."

"He was a Slytherin, and that would also leave the headless hunt without their leader." The Friar sighed. "Not to worry, I'm sure we'll find someone."

The ghosts still seemed rather shaken and they began to get the feeling they would like them to leave. The rest of the ghosts were starting to drift off back to wherever they'd originally come from, so Luna and Colin joined them before they'd gone too far.

The walk back up towards the great hall was made in silence until Ginny's stomach gurgled. Her face went scarlet and she looked at Harry in mortification before trying to laugh it off. "Gosh. I hope the feast hasn't ended."

Her hopes seemed to be in vain as the great hall was empty when they reached the surface. Oddly, the students all seemed to be clustered around the second floor. They could hear someone shouting, and the gathered students seemed to be trying to see over each other's shoulders.

"I wonder what happened?"

The seven of them dashed up the stairs and used their small stature to wriggle through the crowd towards the front. Colin, of course, started taking pictures once there was something to see.

There was a big pool of water on the ground, that seemed to be seeping out of the nearby girl's bathroom--the same one where the troll had nearly killed all of them, oddly enough. That didn't seem to be what the commotion was about though. Written on the walls in red letters several inches high were the words "THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR BEWARE."

Below the ominous words, hanging from a torch sconce, was what looked to be a statue of Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat, except…
"...killed my cat! One of these wretched little brats must of done it!"

Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall and Lockhart were all there as well. Dumbledore was trying to calm Filch down and examine the cat. Lockhart was making things worse.

"It's obviously the transmogrifying torture curse. I've seen it before on my travels!"

"AAAAAAHHH!" Filch began wailing louder.

"There, there, Argus. Do pull yourself together." McGonagall tutted while patting him bracingly on the back.

'Ooh, look. Our wayward children have arrived. Come back to the scene of the crime, have you?" Snape sneered at Harry distastefully.

"You leave him be. It weren't him." Filch spat. "'e's not half bad for a wretched brat, and M-M-Mrs. Norris liked him." Filch began sobbing harder, while everyone gathered looked at Harry in astonishment. If asked, everyone in the castle would have said Filch and Mrs. Norris didn't like anyone but each other. It was rather surprising to discover that wasn't true.

Dumbledore ended the awkward moment by straightening from his examination of the cat. He gently untangled the statue from the sconce and handed it to Filch. "I am happy to report your cat is not, in fact, dead. She's been petrified. Most unusual. It would take very advanced dark magic to enact such a curse on a living creature. I doubt any of the students here are capable of it."

"It was probably 'im then! 'E said he knew what it was that was done to 'er! Transmogrifying torture curse! You heard him, same as me! I 'eard 'im complaining the other day that she'd gotten fur on one of 'is poncy outfits!" Filch shouted angrily, pointing at Lockhart, who froze and smiled nervously while holding up his hands. "Me? No, certainly not! I'm an animal lover! Ask anyone!"

"Besides, he can't even round up pixies." Someone further back in the crowd whispered. The students began tittering.

"That will be quite enough. Students, return to your dormitories. Argus, why don't you take Mrs. Norris to Poppy. It will take some time until the mandrakes are ready for harvesting, but once they are, a quick restorative draught and she'll be good as new. Yes, yes, run along now."

Before they all split to go their separate ways, Luna looked back at the water thoughtfully. "What?" Harry wondered. "Oh, nothing…it's just…it's rather odd that the bathroom is flooded."

"I was thinking the same thing." Hermione agreed. "Myrtle does that when she's upset, you see."

"Who's Myrtle?" Neville asked.

"She's the ghost that haunts the bathroom there. All the girls usually learn pretty quick their first year not to use that bathroom. She hides in the u-bend of the toilets sometimes. I was in there once because I had to pee and had her head pop out through my lap!"

The boys all sniggered.

"What's strange then? I mean, if she does it a lot…" Neville wondered.
"She was at the party." Hermione explained.

"She was also in a good mood." Luna added.

"She's actually been in a good mood for a few days now because she had the party coming up to look forward to." Hermione agreed.

"So…who flooded the bathroom then?" Ron wondered.

The kids exchanged puzzled glances and went their separate ways.

Harry looked at Ginny as they made their way upstairs. Ron seemed to notice the same thing Harry had. Ginny was pale as milk and her eyes looked too big for her face. She was also being rather quiet. She hadn't joined in when the other girls were talking about the bathroom. Ron slung an arm about her shoulders and gave her a little shake.

"Ah, don't worry about that old cat, Gin. You heard Dumbledore. She'll be fine. No worries."

"No worries." she echoed faintly.

Ginny headed straight up to her dorm as soon as they entered the common room. Ron frowned after her.

Colin left as well. "Gotta get these developed. Thanks for inviting me!"

"No problem. Maybe you'll win an award for photo-journalism. Do they have those here?"

"Yeah, I think so." Neville nodded.

"Wow." Colin breathed excitedly. "Make sure you invite me next time you go somewhere cool."

"Sure thing."

"Poor kid. You'd never know it because she's usually so bad-tempered and violent" Ron began thoughtfully.

"RON!" Hermione huffed at his description of his sister.

"Huh?" Neville and Harry asked, confused. "Who… Oh. Ginny?"

"Of course Ginny! Like I said, you'd never know it, but she's actually really sensitive. She really likes cats, but after that whole business with that bastard Pettigrew, mum's been kind of twitchy at the idea of more pets in the house."

"Millicent's cat just had kittens. I can ask her if they've all gotten new homes yet. There's little chance any of them is an animagus, though Professor McGonagall can check it out to make your mum feel better. I'm sure a cute little kitten will perk her right up."

"Millicent?"

"Bulstrode. You know, dark hair…big-boned. Slytherin."

"That cow?" Hermione spluttered just as Ron scowled and bellowed "slimy snake!"
"Oi, what's wrong with Millicent? She's actually really funny."

"Her mum makes really excellent fudge too. Practically melts in your mouth." Neville agreed.

"She's also pretty lethal with a sword. Her and Luna have really taken to it." Harry added.


"Why the hell have you been talking to Millicent bloody Bulstrode?!"

"My paternal great-grandmother was a Bulstrode. She's like my fifth cousin through the Blacks, and a tenth cousin through the Potters. I don't have that far on my family tree that Draco's mum gave me, or I didn't. I've been adding to it as people have been telling me stuff."

"Family tree? That's what Malfoy's mum sent to you that time? Why didn't you just say that!" Hermione huffed, stamping her foot.

"Because you two were being ridiculous and then later went and attacked Draco for his family supposedly trying to kidnap or poison me." Harry reminded them.

Hermione scowled angrily at the reminder. She'd gotten detention and lost points on top of getting no credit for her potion that day because Ron's cauldron mysteriously exploded.

"Enough of all that. What's the chamber of secrets? Does anyone know? Hermione?" Neville interjected.

"What do you mean enough? I wanna know what the hell you think you're playing at hanging out with a bunch of snakes!"

"I'm sure I've heard of it before. Oh! I wish I had time to go to the library! I left my copy of Hogwarts: A History at home to make room for Professor Lockhart's books!" Hermione wailed.

"You should get a book compartment added to your trunk like I did."

"You what?" Ron said aghast.

"You did? I didn't even know… Why did no one tell me?!" Hermione wailed.

"I'm kind of surprised you didn't already know. I would of figured you'd asked the shopkeeper a dozen questions at least."

"I would have if I had known! I went shopping with Professor McGonagall, Dean and Justin Fitch-Fletchley. We barely had a chance to look around anywhere. Professor McGonagall seemed to be in a hurry. When we got to the trunk shop she just pointed us at the pile of Hogwarts trunks and told us to grab one and then we paid and left. I didn't have a chance! Was it very expensive?"

"Actually, I don't know… Loki had it done when we were getting my books. I told him I wasn't going to have room for any of it. He just had my trunk sent off to get extra compartments. I don't know how much it actually cost."

"We might have a catalogue around somewhere." Neville pointed out.

"Huh, yeah. We'll have to take a look. If we don't have one I'm sure they'd send us one no problem."

"if we don't have one for the luggage shop we could check Dervish and Banges catalogue and see
if they say anything about doing that kind of work. They specialize in magical items, so I'm sure they could do it." Neville added.

"Good point."

"I want to see it." Hermione interjected firmly.

"See what?" Ron asked.

"The book compartment! I'm probably going to have to talk my parents into it. I need to be able to make a good argument for how useful it will be." she huffed as she marched up to the boys' dormitories.

Ron scowled and hurried after her. Neville's face was red when he turned to Harry.

"We really need to have a talk with her about going up there."

"No time like the present, I guess."

When they entered the dorms, Harry's belongings were scattered across his bed and Hermione was scowling angrily.

"What is this? Some sort of trick?"

"Do you bloody well mind!" Harry growled. "I'll thank you both to stay the hell out of my trunk! PACK!"

Harry's clothing shook itself out, folded itself and flew into the trunk until it was neatly packed once more.

"How…?"

"Magic, Hermione. Do try to keep up." Harry snapped before stomping towards the trunk. "You need the key to get into the book compartment." he added.

Hermione sniffed at him for yelling at her, but her attention was all on the trunk as she practically danced with impatience. Harry glared at her once more and dug a small ring of keys out of his pocket. He flipped through them and chose the middle key.

He closed the lid, inserted the key into the lock and turned it. When he opened the lid again there was a handle sticking out of a bunch of wood, rather than the clothing that had been there before. Harry gave a pull and a book shelf rose out of the compartment. Once it had risen to full height he pulled on each of the sides until they unfolded. The shelves in the center were only six deep. The two side flaps had seven shelves altogether as the last shelf slid down to rest on the ground when the wings were unfolded.

Hermione let out a lusty sigh and rested her hand against her heart as she stared at it.

"Oh, Harry" she moaned breathlessly "it's magnificent!"

All four of them jumped and yelped when the door suddenly slammed open, revealing a wild-eyed, red-faced Percy in the doorway, brandishing his wand.

"SCARLET WOMAN! WHORE OF BABYLON!"
They could hear people running all of a sudden and soon a bunch of shocked looking Gryffindor boys were all clamoring at the doorway trying to see over Percy's shoulders. The kids just stared at him.

Percy blinked and looked at the four of them, who were by now looking at him like he was quite insane, and then his eyes darted to the bookshelf in all its glory. His face flushed a darker red, which none of them had thought possible. He straightened, put away his wand and adjusted his tie before clearing his throat uncomfortably.

"Ah, yes. Nice, uh, bookshelf there, Potter. Carry on." He then fled down the stairs, chivvying the now sniggering boys ahead of him.

"Yeah, nice bookshelf Potter!"
"Never saw one that big before!"
"Bwahahaha!"
"Yeah, good work there, detective Percy!"

Hermione, who had at first simply been startled was quickly growing enraged.

"Did he just call me the *whore of Babylon*?"

Chapter End Notes

Sir Nick's song was, of course, lifted directly from the books. I take no credit for it, that goes to JK Rowling.
The first quidditch game of the year. Ron and Hermione have a talk, and then Ron and Harry do. Hermione searches for proof that Loki is lying.

A rather annoyed Hermione greeted them all at breakfast the next morning by slamming several large books down on the table before seating herself.

"Argh! I'm so irritated! Every single copy of Hogwarts: A History has been checked out of the library!"

"Is there something about the Chamber in those?" Ron wondered, pointing at the large books.

"Hmm? Oh, no. I just picked these up for a bit of light reading. What?" she said off his look. "I have to have something to occupy myself! There's no class today and I'm already done all my homework."

"Come on, you lot! Practice!" Oliver called from further down the table.

"Lucky you." Harry sighed under his breath, grabbing his broom. "See ya later." he told Neville.

"He has practice again? Man, Oliver's really been working them this year." Ron complained around a mouthful of eggs.

"Yeah. It's alright though. Madame Pomfrey asked Madame Hooch to keep an eye on their practice schedule. She's been keeping Oliver reined in somewhat."

"Huh? Madame Pomfrey? Why would she do that?"

"Harry complained that he was missing sleep trying to do his homework when he went in for one of his check-ups."

"Check-ups? Why is he going for check-ups? What's wrong with him?" Hermione demanded.

"Nothing. Well, not anymore. That's kind of the point."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why's he need check-ups if there's nothing wrong?" Hermione huffed.

"She's been keeping an eye on how his healing is progressing and altering the prescription on his glasses as needed. Have you noticed he's gotten taller?"

"Yeah, so? Growth spurt. It happens." Ron shrugged.

"Not for Harry. Not until Loki stuffed him full of potions at the end of summer. He's recently had three small growth spurts which put him closer to the same height as the rest of us. Those blasted muggles of his didn't feed him, so he wasn't growing like he was supposed to. He also had brittle bones and his organs were weak from those wretched people. Madame Pomfrey's been keeping an
eye on him to make sure the potions do their work. We're all hoping they'll keep fixing all the
damage so that come next summer he can start fresh and start growing normally."

"But that… It doesn't…"

"Dumbledore said he was safe." Ron cut in to Hermione's spluttering.

"Yeah? Well, he lied, didn't he?" Neville said, the DUH implied but unspoken.

"But…but he's Dumbledore." Ron objected.

"Yeah, so? He's still human. He still makes mistakes. He has three important jobs. My gran says
he's always complaining about how busy he is. Against the whole world, the troubles of an eleven
year old boy are pretty insignificant and so he just waved it away and told you what you wanted to
hear."

"He's the greatest wizard in the world. Everyone says so. He wouldn't just lie" Hermione sniffed
disdainfully.

"How exactly did that get decided?" Neville mused. "I certainly didn't vote for him."

"He's done so much for our world. He killed the dark lord Grindelwald." Ron began.

"How does that work exactly?" Neville grumbled, suddenly sounding irate.

"How does what work? You're not making any sense." Hermione demanded.

"Well, it's just you two. Dumbledore took out a dark lord, and so you two think he can do no
wrong. Harry took out a dark lord, one I might add, that Dumbledore wasn't able to defeat, and yet
you two think he can do no right."

"That's not true! We're his friends." Hermione huffed, sounding quite indignant.

"You don't respect him. You think he's stupid and incompetent and can't do magic, no matter how
many times he proves otherwise. You both act like he needs you to take care of him, even though
he can take care of himself just fine, and by the sound of it has been doing so for pretty much as
long as he's been alive. If that's how you treat your friends, I'd really hate to see what you do to
your enemies."

Ron glared at him, though he looked stricken. Hermione started weeping. Neville rolled his eyes,
sighed, and left the table.

The air of nervous tension from the odd events on Halloween continued as the week wore on, but
as there was little to be learned about the Chamber of Secrets, even in Hogwarts: A History, and no
further attacks happened, by mid-week it had begun to wear off. That was, until Hermione decided
to do something unprecedented during history class on Wednesday--she raised her hand.

Professor Binns didn't seem to notice at first; this was unsurprising as everyone was usually too
busy sleeping to actually be aware enough to try to ask questions about the material. The students
did notice, and watched her in interest as she sat there, hand grimly raised in the air. From the look
on her face, she was trying to get him to notice her through sheer force of will. Binns did
eventually notice that his class was awake and then noted the raised hand with surprise and
confusion.
"Yes…uh, Miss…?"

"Hermione Granger," Hermione replied crisply. "I was wondering if you knew anything about the Chamber of Secrets."

"It's just a myth, and has no real bearing on…"

"Well, the myth has been opened. I wasn't able to find out much about it at all, so I was hoping you could tell us what you knew."

"It's a silly story, nothing more."

"So tell us the story, professor."

Binns seemed rather bewildered by it all, but after a few more objections, he finally consented.

"Much isn't really known. Like I said, it's a silly story and nothing more. People have searched for it, but nothing was ever found."

"But what is it?"

"Supposedly Salazar Slytherin built it to house a monster, one meant to cleanse the unworthy from the school."

Hermione's face grew frosty and her eyes glinted with suppressed outrage.

"The unworthy?" she repeated coldly.

"The muggleborn, supposedly. He didn't trust them, you see. One really cannot judge the man by modern standards though. He lived in a very different time and…"

"So no one ever found it?" She cut him off. She didn't care to hear any justifications for his anti-muggleborn bigotry, thank you.

"It was said it could only be opened by the heir of Slytherin."

"If it can only be opened by Slytherin's true heir, wouldn't that mean no one else could find it?" Seamus Finnegan interjected.

"Nonsense, O' Flaherty. If a long line of Hogwarts Headmasters and Headmistresses haven't found a thing…"

"But professor! You probably have to use dark magic to find it!" Parvati Patil objected.

"Just because a wizard doesn't use dark magic doesn't mean he can't, Miss Pennyfeather. I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore…"

"But maybe you have to be related to Slytherin, which would mean Dumbledore couldn't…!" Dean Thomas was the next to complain.

"That is enough! It is a myth! There is no evidence that Salazar Slytherin ever constructed so much as a secret broomcloset, let alone a chamber to house a monster!"

The students all loudly protested, but Binns went back to his lecture rather determinedly and refused to be sidetracked again.
By dinnertime, word of Binns surprising lecture was all over. The muggleborn students were both angry and uneasy, and speculation and rumors were running rampant. Only one thing could really take the students minds off their worries---quidditch. Luckily for everyone's peace of mind, the first game of the season was that Friday.

Harry suffered his usual case of nerves before game time; he was barely able to choke down a piece of toast and a small glass of juice. He knew he'd be fine once they were in the air, but the before game jitters always got him nonetheless. There was a lot riding on this game. If they didn't manage to win, the Slytherins on their new brooms would just plough over the rest of them like an unspeakable tsunami. There was also Oliver's mental health to consider. He'd been having fits since Hooch started interfering in his endless practices. He'd gotten around her interference by bullying them down to the pitch for unscheduled practices when the pitch was empty. He'd even tried to get them to ditch class to do so, knowing the pitch would definitely be empty then. If they didn't win, there would be no talking him down from round the clock practices.

Draco Malfoy looked as sick and nervous as Harry felt, though he was putting a good face on things. No matter what, someone was going to lose and be disappointed and have to deal with a disappointed team and an angry house. He might be getting along better with Malfoy these days, but when it came right down to it, he had no intentions of being that person. Malfoy would just have to deal.

Before he knew it, a grim and focused Oliver called them all down to the field to get ready.

The day was clear and crisp with a small breeze; it was a perfect day for quidditch. Oliver, manic and wild-eyed gave them a pep talk which mostly boiled down to 'win or die trying' and marched them out to the field with the air of a man heading out to slaughter the enemy.

Madame Hooch called them to line up and had the captains shake hands. Oliver and Marcus Flint glared at each other and did their best to break each other's hands with their handshake, and continued glaring as she shrilled her whistle and told them to 'mount up'.

The box with the snitch and the bludgers was kicked open and she tossed the quaffle into the air. Angelina was off like a shot and smacked the quaffle to Alicia who took off with it. It was a maneuver they had practiced. They all knew the only chance they really had was to get possession from the outset and keep their momentum going from the get-go.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession! A smooth opening by the amazing Angelina and Ugh! Slytherin in possession...and he scores...but only because their seeker's rich daddy decided to..",

"JORDAN!!"

"Sorry professor...and it's ten-zero Slytherin and...damn it...Slytherin scores again... twenty-zero for Slytherin...and YES! Gryffindor in possession again... and some fine teamwork from the Gryffindor chasers..."

Harry got himself high up above the rest of the team and wasted no time looking for the snitch. By the sound of it things weren't going well. The Slytherin's new brooms really did make a difference, allowing them to swoop in and steal the quaffle every time Gryffindor managed to get hold of it. Harry wasn't worried yet, but the longer things went on, the more chance they had of not only winning, but winning by a very large margin.
Surprisingly, Draco was focused on finding the snitch as well. It was strange; he'd started off more focused on Harry, taunting him and being a nuisance like he used to, but then he seemed to shake it off and got focused as though he'd just realized he needed to get his head in the game.

Harry was both relieved and annoyed at the same time. On the one hand, he'd been getting annoyed at Malfoy bothering him; on the other hand, a very focused Draco with a faster broom would be harder to beat.

Some instinct warned Harry of incoming danger and he rolled out of the way. A bludger had crept up on him while he was lost in thought and nearly taken his head off. He straightened from his roll and the damned thing came right back at him and tried again, and then again. Harry took off, trying to shake it, but the thing followed him no matter how he tried to shake it off. He dove down through Slytherin's chaser formation in hopes the thing would focus on one of them, but it stayed on Harry like it was on a leash.

Fred and George noted his difficulties and came to his rescue, batting the thing away, but it would always turn right back around and go back to chasing Harry once more. Their chasers were being beset by the other bludger, courtesy of the Slytherin beaters, which was making it more difficult for them to score than it already was.

"Go back to the girls. I'll just try to stay in motion."

"Harry!"

"Go! I'll be fine!"

Harry took off once more and tried to use the amorous bludger to Gryffindor's advantage. He disrupted plays wherever he could and tried to get the Slytherin players between him and it wherever possible. It worked to some degree--their chasers were able to score a couple of goals in quick succession, bringing the score almost even.

"Keep it up, Harry! We've finally got them on the ropes!" Angelina said fiercely as she made another goal.

Harry nodded and took off, but soon had to roll again to keep from being brained and took off again to see what more damage he could do. That's when he finally spotted the snitch.

Malfoy noticed at the same time, so the race was on. The snitch took off as soon as they focused on it, but they were on its tail. To Harry's relief, the odd bludger backed off and went back to menacing everyone, not just him. Up, down, side to side they went, through the other players, under the stands, weaving through the struts. Malfoy's broom showed its mettle by constantly pulling ahead, but Harry managed to stay mostly neck-in-neck by coaxing every dribble of speed out of his broom that he could.

The snitch was just ahead, so close they could hear the flutter of its wings, even over the wing rushing past their ears. They were shoulder to shoulder now, snarling and straining as they reached.

"Just a little faster….just a little more!"

Their hands clamped around the struggling golden snitch at the same time, just as the bludger once again came hurtling out of nowhere and smashed into their grasping arms. Both of them screamed as their forearms snapped, and began spiraling downward, only to plow into the ground, still entangled. They rolled apart, groaning, only to freeze in fright at the sight of the bludger hurtling towards them.
"BOMBARDA!" a girl's voice called from the edge of the field. Harry and Draco looked over and saw Hermione, wand pointed at the bludger, which exploded overhead before it reached them.

Malfoy slumped in relief, before groaning and clutching at his arm. Harry carefully maneuvered his own in front of him. It was definitely broken. The snitch fluttered gently on the ground between them--they had lost it as they crashed. Their respective teams and Madame Hooch landed around them as the teachers began making their way onto the field where they lay.

"You got the snitch! Which one of you got it?"

"Yeah, who won?!"

"Don't know. We grabbed it at the same time."

"Potter, pick it up."

Harry did so. The snitch began flapping its wings in agitation.

"Malfoy, now you."

Harry handed the snitch to Malfoy, who reached across with his good arm. The snitch stilled and went quiet.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!" Oliver Wood wailed while falling to his knees. Draco stared at the snitch and slowly began to smile. Hooch sounded her whistle.

"SLYTHERIN WINS! 480 to 320!"

There was a moment of silence and then the Slytherin stands exploded in excitement; the students jumping up and down, hugging each other and screaming their elation to the skies. The Slytherin team grinned and began patting each other on the back, and moved as though to lift Malfoy up for a victory lap on their shoulders, but he paled and hid behind Harry.

"Maybe save it for the common room, yeah? After his broken arm is fixed?" Harry sighed, eyeing Malfoy over his shoulder with some bemusement. "What am I? Your personal healthcare consultant?" he added to the blonde.

"Never fear! I happen to be quite skilled at healing charms! Why, I'll have you boys fixed up in a jiffy!" Harry paled and looked at the cheerfully smiling Gilderoy Lockhart the way most people would view a dementor bearing down on them and about to devour their soul.

"NO! That's quite alright, professor!" Harry yelped, waving his good arm in front of him as though trying to ward the man off, while he tried to get to his feet--a difficult process with only one good arm and a similarly wounded Slytherin hiding behind him.

"Nonsense! It won't take but a moment!" Lockhart chirped, completely undaunted.

"Uh, professor, maybe we should just take them to Madame Pomfrey."

"Yeah, It is kind of her job and all." Marcus Flint and Oliver Wood said uneasily, eyeing the second-year's panic with a sinking feeling.

Lockhart drew his wand with a flourish and smiled widely so his abnormally white teeth would glint in the sunlight. Harry tried to roll out of the way, but Malfoy yanked him by the back of his uniform so he would continue to provide cover for himself.
Lockhart's spell went off like a shot and Harry cringed, closing his eyes. A moment later he opened them to see what the damage was--his arm still felt broken, and he didn't seem to have any extra appendages…

Lockhart was dangling a foot of the ground, suspended by his wand arm, with his wand pointed to the sky, courtesy of Loki, who was eyeing Lockhart like a scientist eyeing a butterfly pinned to a board. Harry slumped in relief, only to jump and gape in horror a moment later when a bird-shaped blob of rubber with feathers landed with a splat at his feet.

"I do believe my ward told you no." Loki said conversationally. "And judging by the state of that poor bird, which seems to be missing all its bones, it would seem he was right to do so. Are you, by chance the school's mediwitch?"

"Ah…no?" Lockhart laughed uneasily, while trying to look dignified while hanging in mid-air like a kitten in its mother's mouth.

"I see. Are you perhaps a licensed healer?"

"Not as such…um, could you perchance put me down?" he added in a quiet voice, looking around at the crowd watching the whole spectacle.

"Not until I am sure that you understand my point of view. My ward told you no, and yet you proceeded to try to perform a medical procedure that you are obviously in no way qualified to perform anyway. Had I not intervened when I did, you not only would have perhaps gravely injured my ward, but you would have opened both yourself and this school to liability. Liability, I feel I should add, that I would have quite gleefully pursued until you daren't show your face anywhere in the British Isles for at least a century. Do you understand?"

"Just trying to help."

"In the future, you should perhaps quell those urges." Loki chided, before letting go.

Lockhart dropped a foot to the ground and staggered. He made a hasty attempt to draw his wounded dignity around him like a cloak. Loki had already dismissed the man from his attention so thoroughly that it was in some ways more insulting than the gentle dressing down he'd just given him.

Harry beamed at him happily, his pain and disappointment vanishing like mist. They'd still lost, and he still had a broken arm, but they seemed rather insignificant in the face of having an adult claim him and guard him so zealously before all and sundry.

"Hi Loki."

"Hello, child. Good game."

"I guess. Still lost."

"It happens sometimes. Your vehicles were outmatched, but you all still played a solid game, whose ultimate outcome was in doubt till the very last moment. I would not count it a failure." Loki said dismissively, extending a hand to pull him to his feet.

Madame Pomfrey finally appeared, bustling towards them and giving Lockhart the stink-eye as she did so. Both Harry and Draco's arms were healed with little fuss after all the drama that preceded it.

Harry extended his hand to Draco, who was still clutching the snitch. "Congratulations. Good
Draco shook his hand and then yelped when Harry pulled him forward to get him in a headlock and proceeded to noogie his highly-gelled hair till he yelped.

"That's for holding me in place while Lockhart was trying to remove my bones, you prat. Geez!"

"All right, child, that's enough. Catch!" he added with a smile to the bemused Slytherin team. Malfoy let out a rather girlish shriek as he was lifted with little effort and tossed to his team.

"Okay. You can do your victory lap now." Harry said airily, waving a hand at them.

The Slytherins grumbled, but they hoisted Malfoy and obediently began trotting towards their house, who was milling around watching all the drama with some amusement.

"SLYTHERIN!" Marcus Flint bellowed.

"LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE GREEN!" the rest of the team yelled a moment later. House Slytherin cheered and headed back to the castle in a green and silver mass, chanting happily all the way.

The field slowly began to clear. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw wandered off in a mixed group, chatting about the game and all that came after. Gryffindor trailed after them, angry and dispirited. Harry noted that a lot of them were glaring at him like he'd done something wrong as they did so. He really couldn't win. He'd won every game he'd played last year, risked life and limb doing stupid stunts to do so, nearly got flung to his death from Quirrel's curse and not only managed to hold on but still win the game, and he'd gotten little credit for it, and now that he'd lost everyone was pissed off at him. Typical.

The rest of the team seemed as emotionally wiped out as he was. Oliver still looked ready to throw himself prostrate and weep. He wouldn't be surprised if he did just that later.

"Cheer up, Oliver. Yeah, we lost, but we weren't that far behind. All things considered, if there were scouts out there watching, we made a good showing. Our brooms were outmatched and we still managed to hold our own. I'm sure it's clear to anyone that matters that if we'd had the same brooms we would have easily blown them away." Fred finally said bracingly.

"He's right. What's more, their fancy brooms might still bite them in the ass. We know full well that we're the best team skill wise. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw each have a few decent players, but overall they're not going to be much competition. If they win their next games too quickly because of that, we can still win the cup on points and you know it. We just have to make sure we rack up plenty so we're still in the running." George added.

"Flint knows this as well as we do." Oliver refused to be cheered.

"Yeah, he does, but their team is arrogant. Their win today is going to make them more so. If they let their arrogance take the lead they might just go for the quick, brutal win, just to really rub everyone's face in the fact that they're no competition so long as they have their new brooms. If they do, we still have a chance, and if we win when all is said and done, everyone will know we won on skill." Angelina objected.

"Maybe we should get in some more…"

"Oliver, I swear to god, if you even think of suggesting we practice not even an hour after a brutal
game like that, I think I speak for all of us when I say"
"That we're going to hang you by your shorts from the goal post." Katie Bell finished Angelina's
threat.

"Hey now…!"

"Not a word." Katie growled, chivvying their captain towards the changing rooms.

Harry watched them go and turned back to see where Loki had gotten to. Ron, Hermione, Neville
and Luna had stayed behind.

Hermione was, no surprise, interrogating Loki, who was eyeing her with bemused interest. Judging
by the constipated look on her face and the way her hair was bushing out more than it usually did,
he could guess Loki had been giving her flippant answers, or else talking in riddles so she didn't
actually get what she wanted from him.
He seemed to be enjoying himself, so he left them to it.

"Hey, everyone."

"Hey, Harry."

"Hello."

Ron scowled at him half-heartedly when he joined them.

"I can't believe you let bloody Malfoy win."

"I just broke my arm and ploughed into the ground while tangled with bloody Malfoy while trying
to get the snitch. He had a faster broom, but they still had to check it to see who won, or did you
miss that part? If you think you can do better, then by all means…" Harry snapped.

"I didn't mean it like that." Ron protested uncomfortably. "I just meant, he's going to be more of a
prat than usual now."

"If you would just stop fighting with him…"

"He's the one that…"

"Last year, definitely. This year he hasn't been the one starting things."

"Yes he has!"

"He didn't get a chance to open his mouth before your sister hexed him on the train. Yeah, he was
there to mess with us, we all know it, but at the time she cursed him he hadn't actually done so yet.
Hermione started things at the quidditch practice. The team was bragging on their new brooms,
and it was Flint talking, not him. Hermione said he had to buy his way onto the team"

"He called Hermione a you-know-what!"

"After she started with him, but yes I know, and I had words with him about it. I reminded him that
my mother was also muggleborn and that I didn't appreciate it."

"You did? When?"

"While he was in the hospital wing from you cursing him. Then there was that big brawl in the
corridor outside Potions I heard about. You attacked him, not the other way around. He hasn't been
bothering me at all, and your fights with him this year were all actually started by you, by your sister or by Hermione. If you stop maybe he will as well."

"And just let him get away with it!"

"Get away with what?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Being Malfoy!"

"Ron…he can't help being Malfoy any more than you can help having red hair. If you're bound and determined to keep up this family feud of yours, be my guest. I'm out of it."

"You'd let him win?!"

"It's not a contest! There is no winning or losing, there's just annoyance and detention!"

"But it's Malfoy!"

"Whatever, Ron. I'm going to go hit the showers."

"I should probably be running along myself."

Loki announced, extracting himself from Hermione's clutches—the girl was relentless; more suspicious than Sif, but with a mind that thought of more than battle.

"Already?"

"I'm afraid so."

Harry's next move surprised Ron and Hermione: he threw his arms around Loki's waist and buried his face in his chest for a moment. Loki smiled down at him with bemused affection and rubbed his back lightly.

"Thanks for the save earlier."

"My pleasure. That fellow is a menace. He reminds me of someone. They call him Fandral the dashing. He told me once if he had been fool enough to take up with sorcery that he was bound to be far more skilled than I. His reasoning was that sorcery is a woman's art and so could not be too difficult, or the poor dears would never be able to manage it. I can now tell him what I always knew but now have proof of. I can say truly that I saw what he would be like as a sorcerer and it wasn't pretty."

"What do you mean it's a woman's art?"

"What do you mean the poor dears couldn't manage it?" Hermione demanded at the same time Ron asked his question.

"I didn't say I agreed."

Loki chided her mildly. "My mother is a powerful sorceress. It was actually she who trained me in the arts. She is of the Vanir, and they are more accepting of sorcery and male practitioners than those of Asgard. Amongst my people, sadly, though they're all capable of learning, few choose to do so. It is considered a woman's art, and amongst the Aesir even women who practice are regarded with some suspicion. For men it is practically, though not completely, unheard of. My father is knowledgeable in the arts. He is the king, so none would dare criticize, but he has always been a warrior first and foremost. Being a warrior and having skill and might in battle is what is valued. It has ever been thus. It is not so on all the realms. Here on Midgard amongst your people both witches and wizards are held in equal regard. There are male practitioners amongst the Ljósálfar, and amongst the Vanir, amongst the Jotun as well, I've been
told, and amongst the Dökkálfar when they were still counted amongst the living. The Aesir scorn it for battle and it has been ever thus."

"So...you're like, considered a weirdo back home?"
"Ron!"

"You could say that. My father despairs that I will not forsake magic and content myself with whacking things with swords, but he allows it nonetheless. My brother has always been supportive for the most part, but even he wonders why I will not forsake my tricks for more honorable battle. The wider populace probably does consider me a weirdo, as you say, but as I am a prince they are very careful not to express such thoughts too boldly. In fact, the only one who truly dares do so is, ironically enough, a woman. She chose the path of a warrior and scorns all things womanly for all that she is a woman herself."

"Is she given a hard time like you are?"

"My brother, Thor, is the crown prince. She has his support and so any who still feel she should go back to the kitchen dare not say it, and truly her choices were always less scorned then mine because she chose to be a warrior, which is valued, and I chose sorcery, which is not."

"Sounds awful. Trapped in a world of muggles." Ron grimaced.

"Trapped in a world of chauvinist pigs, you mean." Hermione grumbled. "Get back in the kitchen indeed!"

"Oh, goodness, I almost forgot. I was supposed to give you this before I left." Loki suddenly exclaimed, before pulling a letter from nowhere.

"Who's it from?"

"Your little brother. He's getting out of the hospital today."

"Little brother? You have kids? What's wrong with him?"

"He means Sirius Black." Harry laughed. Neville and Luna snickered along with him.

"Harry... He's your godfather. He's older than you." Hermione said carefully while looking at them with some alarm.

"Merlin, you're barmy Hermione. It's obviously a joke." Ron huffed. "I swear, no sense of humor, that girl."

Harry grimaced at her. "Thanks for the help with the bludger earlier. Please stop questioning my sanity. It's gotten really old." He looked around at Neville and Luna. "I'll see you later. I'm going to go shower."

"The usual place?"

"I'll be there."

Loki had disappeared shortly after Harry left in a showy cloud of green and gold sparkles. The four children trooped back to the castle together. Neville and Luna slipped off unseen while Hermione was contemplating all she'd learned from Harry's guardian.
"Damn it. Where do they keep going? We've been to every bloody garden on the grounds and still haven't found them!" Ron griped.

"Never mind that now. I need to get to the library."

"The library! What for?"

"I want to read up on tracking charms." Hermione said smugly.

"Tracking charms?" Ron repeated "Why?"

"I've been trying to track Loki, but all of my charms have yet to find him. It stands to reason that as he's a wizard he could have rendered himself unplottable. It seems suspicious to me. You don't hide from everyone unless you've got something to hide. He may be a wanted criminal."

"Hermione… I don't want to believe Dumbledore just lied to us and to my mum any more than you do, but come on… Don't you think this is starting to get… While he's slightly scary… did you see him just pick Lockhart up like he was nothing? He seems an okay bloke. More importantly, Harry seems pretty keen on him…and more'n that, he seems to have been good for him."

"How can you say that? Since Harry's been with him he's been avoiding us, and don't forget him going crazy on us at Hagrid's…"

"Believe me, that was hard to forget" Ron scoffed "but you know what? I've been thinking about that since it happened. Harry never used to get angry"

"Exactly!"

"But…maybe that wasn't a good thing? I mean, not that I want him screaming at us all the time and all but… He's always had a temper, and got angry and got annoyed, but, he used to suck it down, except when it was Snape, and even there he used to just glare a lot. He sucked it down, every time. It wouldn't be gone though. He'd get broody and distant, and he'd lose his appetite-- and he really couldn't afford to. He already ate like a bird, and when he was angry he would go off his feed altogether."

"No he didn't."

"He'd push his food around and make it look like he was eating. He'd take a few bites but it'd make him sick. He also used to have trouble sleeping on nights after. I mean, he got kinda intense sometimes-- remember him ranting about Voldemort before we went down after the stone? At Hagrid's was the first time I really saw him just let his temper out without sucking it down, and yeah, he went off and hid, probably to brood, after…but then he was fine. He was able to eat, he was able to sleep, and he didn't just ignore us like he would have in the past. He has gotten taller, Neville wasn't lying about that. The house elves keep making his pajamas a little bigger. He has an actual appetite now and eats as much as Dean, Seamus or Neville do." Ron looked at her then, his gaze intent. "He hugged Loki."

Hermione bit her lip. That had startled her as much as Ron. Harry didn't hug people. He put up with it if you hugged him, but that was about it. Harry didn't pat people on the arm or playfully jostle them. There had always seemed to be an unspoken wall of distance around him. When people patted him on the back, or jostled him or smacked his arm, or leaned into that space, Harry had always gotten tense and his smile grew strained until they stopped. He never actively tried to prevent people from touching him, but he certainly had never invited it either, let alone initiated first contact. Seeing him do so had rocked their worlds just a little.
"But that's the thing, don't you see? Harry's changed so much in such a short period of time. It's not natural! He must have done something to him to win his trust so easily."

"Hermione… look, I let you talk me into that business with Hagrid. I told you it was the wrong way to approach Harry. He gets prickly when he feels cornered, not that you ever seemed to let it stop you" He huffed when she glared at him. "But I let you convince me, and look where that got us. Why don't we just try and, I dunno, be happy for him or something."

"He told him he was a god from another planet, Ron!"

"Yeah, and? Maybe he is, I mean, we don't know he isn't."

"Of course we do, because it's completely ridiculous! If you ever stayed awake in history of magic, you would know that all the so-called ancient gods were just witches and wizards that used their magic to confound defenseless muggles so they would worship them. One of his ancestors could have been one of those wizards, but that doesn't make him a god, nor does it make him the same Loki the ancient Norse worshipped. It was well over a thousand years ago! Do try to use your brain, Ronald! I was trying to plot him so I could prove to Harry he was lying, but he took precautions."

"How would plotting him prove anything? Even if he is from another planet he's here on Earth now."

"But now I have someone new to plot. Fandral the Dashing. He's a friend of Loki's, and he's not a wizard. I can find where Fandral lives and then show Harry he's just some guy from some little village somewhere and he's lying."

"You need to let this go, Hermione. Whatever he is or isn't he's been good for Harry. Why are you trying so hard to ruin it for him?"

"I'm not trying to ruin anything! I'm trying to protect him!" Hermione huffed, before sticking her nose in the air. She turned then, ready to flounce off, but Ron grabbed her arm and turned her back around to face him before she could do so.

"Hermione…he's already annoyed at you acting like he was mad for a little joke. If you come at him an hour later waving a map around and saying "I told you so", the only thing you're going to do is drive him further away…even if you're right. In fact, if you're right it might just make things worse."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"You and I…we've got families. We've always had them. What did you do after Harry yelled at us? You wrote your parents for advice…you didn't use any of it, but you did, and you felt better knowing they had your back. Harry's never had that. He never had one single person before Loki who just took care of him. If you're right, the only thing he's going to see is that he's happy, that he had a family, and you simply would not let him just have it. So far, even with us fighting, he hasn't completely frozen us out. If you keep on with this he'll hate you. And seriously, you can tell yourself that you're trying to protect him…and at first, I'm sure that's all it was… but now? He's fine. He's healthy. He's happy. We haven't seen a single thing that actually points to Loki doing anything bad to him at all. If that's not enough, you did see the guy, right? He has to actually be Harry's family. They look like they could be father and son. Maybe his mum was actually a half-blood and didn't know it and he's his uncle or something, I don't know, but whatever he is, he's family. Even if he did actually lie for some reason, it's not going to matter at all. Harry will hate you, because at this point it's not about protecting him at all. It's about you being right. I know it,
and I can guarantee he will too. He'll know that you did your best to take away the only thing he's ever wanted because you just cannot stand being wrong about something. Let it go. I'm serious about this."

Hermione stared at Ron aghast, her face pale and her eyes wide and wounded. The hurt vanished to be replaced by fury. She tore her arm from his grasp and stormed off.

Ron's shoulders slumped and he rubbed his face tiredly.

"Yeah. That could have gone better."

"Alright, Ron?"

Ron stiffened and turned to see Harry by the door leaning against the wall.

"Uh…heh…hey, mate. When'd you get here?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Oh. You heard all that then?"

"Yup."

"Yup."

"Alright."

"Alright, Ron?"

Ron fell into step with him as he headed deeper into the castle. He had missed his best mate so far this year; it just figured that now, when he finally had him to himself again he couldn't think of anything to say. To his confusion they headed off into the depths of the ground floor rather than heading up to the tower like he'd expected. He recognized the hallway they were in as one of the many he and Hermione had lost him in when they'd attempted to find where he kept disappearing to.

"What are we doing down here? There's nothing interesting down here at all!"

Harry just smirked, grabbed his arm and yanked him into a side corridor he hadn't noticed.

"What the hell? Where are we?"

"Hogwarts."

"I don't remember this place." Ron objected.

"Before you can go further, there are some conditions. You have to make a solemn oath not to reveal this place to anyone that doesn't already know about it. You cannot talk about this place out where portraits, teachers or other students who don't already know about it can hear you. You also have to be nice to cousin Millie."

"Cousin…? Wait, you don't mean bloody Bulstrode!"

"Yep. Sure do. You don't even know her, Ron. She's cool. Also, I don't care if she's a Slytherin, you will not, under any circumstances call her a death eater in training, do you hear? She's a halfblood. Her mum is muggleborn and she grew up in a muggle village. Got it? Oh, and you also can't bring in anyone new without the approval of the other members, and upon approval they have to swear the same oaths of secrecy. If you won't take them I'll obliviate you from knowing about
this place. Word of warning, I don't actually know how to perform the spell, so most anything could happen…but I'm not losing my secret clubhouse because you have a big mouth."

"What is this place?"

"The garden."

"Don't look like a garden to me, mate."

"There is a garden, but yeah, it's code, because it's secret."

"Oh. Right."

"So? What's it going to be?" Harry asked, drawing his wand.

Ron eyed the wand askance before smiling with only a bit of unease. "So…oaths, right? Let's do it. No unbreakable vows though."

"Nah. Pinky swear. Luna's not allowed to make any unbreakable vows without her dad's permission."

"Good thinking. Those things'll kill you, you know. The twins tried to put me under one when I was two. That was one of the few times I ever saw my dad really mad." Ron confided. "How'd you hide this place anyway?" he then asked as they started toward the clubhouse.

"Loki. He gave me a runic array. There's one on the floor there and another on the door." he pointed. "It distracts people and makes them think there's nothing of interest nearby."

"Wow. Your dad's a lot cooler than mine is. Mine would never give me stuff so I could set up a secret clubhouse."

"Well…having the god of mischief for a guardian comes in handy sometimes."

"Alright, here we are."

Ron blinked as a door he hadn't noticed was suddenly right in front of him, festooned with a paper with a complicated runic array scrawled across it. He followed Harry in, not sure what to expect.

"Looks like a rainbow exploded in here…whoa! Lookit that!"

Luna's mural had been completed. The wall across from the door showed the deep black of space, festooned with galaxies and asteroids and supernovas. Amidst the field of stars flew a spacecraft, and in the foreground the edge of a planetary disc that the ship was about to make landfall on. Luna had quite the talent. As many times as any of them saw it they couldn't help but be entranced upon first laying eyes on it each time, and feeling for a moment that they were going to go tumbling into the void of space if they looked too long.

"What the…"

Ron's face scrunched up and he wandered forward like he was in a trance for a moment and stared at the mural more closely.

"What?"
"I must of imagined it. For just a sec…I coulda sworn I saw some poor bloke tumbling around out there. Probably just one of the asteroids."

Harry's eyebrows rose, but he just shook his head.

The sound of wood clacking together could be heard coming from the other room.

"Millie and Luna must be practicing."

"GRRAAARRRGGGHH"

"Neville too." Harry corrected himself with aplomb while Ron's eyes got big in his face. He hurried over to the doorway and peeked inside.

"Why are they all wearing blindfolds?"

"It's to train us to use all our senses, not just our eyes while in battle. They've got a supersensory charm on."

"I see. You do that too?"

"Yeah. Not today because I just finished a game, but when I have time to. You can train with us too if you want. We'll have to get you caught up to where the rest of us are, but that won't be too hard since we've not been at it for long."

"So, where's the garden?" Ron wondered once he'd collected himself.

"Out there, past the kitchen" Harry waved a hand in the indicated direction as he flopped down on the pillows in front of the fire.

Ron took a step towards the kitchen and Harry suddenly sat up and shouted "WAIT!"

"What?!"

"Pinky swears first."

"Oh. Whatever. What do we have to do?"

"Link our pinkies like this. Do you, Ron Weasley, solemnly promise to keep this place secret from anyone who doesn't already know its location?"

"I do."

"Do you promise not to discuss it anywhere that teachers, other students, ghosts, or portraits can overhear?"

"I do."

"Do you promise not to lead anyone here?"

"I do."

"Do you promise to only ever call it the Garden and refuse to elaborate if you must discuss it outside this room?"

"Sure."
"Do you promise not bring house rivalries into this room, or call any Slytherins by derogatory names?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on…"

"Obliviate it is then…"

"Fine! Geez. I promise!"

"Do you promise not to eat more than your fair share of any snacks, and not to touch or eat anyone's personal candy stash without first getting permission?"

"There's snacks here? This place is great!"

"Ron."

"Sure, sure. Fair share."

"You have to promise."

"Come on, mate! I'm hungry!"

"Ron."

"Fine. I promise."

"Good. Go ahead. The garden is through the door in there. I'll go get the others."

"Okay…what for?"

"You have to swear the oaths with them too."

"You're joking! That's barmy!"

Harry raised an eyebrow at him and began to slowly pull his wand.

"Okay! Okay! Put that thing away!"

Hermione gathered up her things and started upwards towards Gryffindor tower. She hadn't been able to find any Fandral anywhere on the map. Either Loki had made him unplottable as well, or there was no such person anywhere on Earth. She was frustrated, as well as still smarting from her argument with Ron earlier. Lost in thought as she was, she still noted the portraits chatting nearby when she heard a familiar name.

"And it was just hovering there? How strange. Does anyone know this Fandral the Dashing?"

"Can't say I do."

"Excuse me." Hermione interjected. "I couldn't help but overhear. What's this about Fandral the Dashing?"

"Know him, do you?"

"Not as such, though I do know of him… I was trying a plotting spell earlier and…"
"Oh. How many times? Was it three? Because it appeared three times."

"What did you see, exactly and where was it?"

"It was Sir Cadogan who saw it, actually. He was conversing with Archimedes, up in the astronomy tower. He saw something suddenly appear and leaned in to get a better look. It was a hovering dot with the name Fandral the dashing attached to it. It disappeared after a moment and then reappeared and then again. Sir Cadogan was certain he was being challenged to a duel. He's charging through the castle right now looking for the fellow."

"I see." Hermione murmured. She bit her lip and changed direction, heading down to consult with Professor Flitwick. None of it made any sense; why would Fandral the Dashing's name appear in the astronomy tower when she was down on the second floor in the library on the other side of the castle?

On her way downstairs she remembered she needed to stir the potion she'd been working on.

"I'd best stop by and check on it after speaking with Professor Flitwick. I wish Ron could be trusted with such a complicated brew..." thinking about Ron made her aggravated all over again. "He's such an idiot sometimes. How is leaving Harry with his delusions in the care of a lying con-man good for him? He'll see. I'll show him my proof, and Harry may be upset at first, but in time he'll realize I was right and he was wrong and he'll thank me for saving him."
The heir of Slytherin

Chapter Summary

A second attack rocks the school. The Garden group investigates and gets a lead on the Heir of Slytherin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following morning brought frightening news to the students of Hogwarts. There had been another attack, and this time it was a student.

"It's all my fault. She ran off all upset because of me. I didn't even notice she was gone." Ron whispered. He'd been pale and brooding since word of the attack had spread that morning.

"You can't blame yourself, Ron. You had no way of knowing something was going to happen to her." Neville tried to console him.

"Yeah, and none of us knew she was missing. We didn't get back to the tower until curfew. Hermione never misses curfew. We all figured she was just up in her dorm, not just you." Harry added.

When nothing more had happened in the days after Filch's cat was petrified, everyone had started to relax and figured it was just one-off (very mean) prank. A student, a muggleborn student, being laid low was something else.

"They're saying the heir of Slytherin is some bloke named Fandral the Dashing." Lavender informed them breathlessly as she and Parvati slipped into their seats.

"The portraits were all saying she was asking questions about the guy just before she was attacked and she'd been trying to plot him. He's been hiding up in the astronomy tower!" Parvati added, sounding giddy.

"Fandral the Dashing is not the heir of Slytherin. He's not even a wizard." Harry cut them off. "So I'm pretty sure someone would've noticed him hiding in the astronomy tower, that's if he could even actually find Hogwarts in the first place."

"He's a muggle? Then how…?"

"He's a friend of Loki's, which doesn't really explain why the portraits think it's him... Is he being set up?"

All of breakfast was spent speculating and trying to come to terms with the fact that Hermione was currently in the hospital wing, frozen solid like a stone statue.

As breakfast was nearing its end Ron suddenly paled and he looked around nervously.

"Ron?" Neville asked.
He leaned in and spoke quietly. "It might not be that Fandral bloke, but she still might've gotten attacked because she was investigating. The heir must've found out about the polyjuice potion!"

"Polyjuice potion?" Harry repeated suspiciously.

"What about polyjuice potion? That's restricted, you know." Luna pointed out as she drifted over to join them.

"Who's making polyjuice potion?" Millicent demanded as she joined them as well. By this point most of the great hall had cleared out, so it was just the five of them.

Ron glanced at Millicent and frowned, but finally decided to answer.

"It was Hermione, naturally. I never heard of the stuff before. She had this idea that she could make it and we could disguise ourselves and question...uh, anyone we thought might know something about the chamber. She got a pass to the restricted section by pretending she wanted Lockhart's autograph and she got this big potions book. She just started the potion Friday night. It takes a month to brew. I guess the heir wasn't taking any chances." he concluded miserably.

"I don't know, Ron. If that was the case, wouldn't they have taken you out too?" Harry disagreed.

"I wasn't where anyone could find me. They might just be waiting for a chance to take me out."

"Maybe they just decided not to. You're a pureblood. It would be hard to sell that it was the heir of Slytherin if you were attacked." Neville mused.

"He didn't have to be petrified. He could have just been obliviated and sent on his way." Millicent scoffed.

"Hmm. True." Luna nodded.

"Maybe it's actually Lockhart... I mean, Filch said so, and if Madame Pince confronted him about letting second years in the restricted section, he might have investigated and knows about the polyjuice." Ron said in a sudden burst of inspiration.

"Or someone could be framing him. Just throwing that out there. So far the evidence is mostly circumstantial. After what happened to Sirius Black I'm not too keen to just go condemning someone without proof." Harry sighed. He really didn't like that guy, but that didn't automatically make him a criminal.

"Maybe we should continue making the polyjuice?"

"Ron, if that's a NEWT level potion, chances are none of us could manage it right. Harry and I have been getting better with studying on our own, but the stuff still doesn't come out perfect. Who knows what could happen if we mess it up and still try to use it." Neville disagreed.

"Who were you planning to investigate anyway? I noticed you kind of hesitated on that point."

Harry asked suddenly.

Ron began looking shifty and Harry sighed.

"You were going to pretend to be Neville, weren't you? It was never about the heir at all!"

"No! We were going to do that too. She said we'd have a whole cauldron full and could do multiple investigations. It was just really bugging her that she couldn't find you. She tried plotting you once,
but it said you were in Hogsmeade. We saw you right after, so she was convinced she was doing something wrong. That's why she ran off to do research before trying to plot that Fandral bloke."

"Hogsmeade? Why would I show up in Hogsmeade?"

"Dunno. That's where you showed up though."

"You must have a mail drop there." Neville suggested.

"? Oh, really, that's nice of Dumbledore to tell me about it. Geez."

"I suppose it's just as well with the polyjuice. We won't have to rob Snape now." Ron mumbled.

Harry and Neville both blanched and Millicent looked at Ron in horror.

"What? Hermione's idea. There's some restricted ingredient in the potion."

"Alright. We're going to go get that book and return it and clean up any evidence of what she was making. You two have a bloody death wish, I swear." Harry grumbled.

"She wasn't doing it in her dorm, was she? That could be a problem…" Luna asked.

"No. Second floor girl's bathroom. No one ever goes in there."

The five kids hurried up to the girls bathroom.

"Lucky that there's no portraits down this whole end of the hall. It really does make this the perfect place to brew a restricted potion." Neville noted.

"Yeah. That's weird, isn't it? The portraits completely cover the walls in most parts of the castle, but down here there's nothing. You'd think they'd have put something up to let them see the girl's bathroom since this is where we ran into that troll last year." Harry agreed.

"And it's right by where Filch's cat was petrified too." Millicent added.

"Yeah, that's true, isn't it?" Neville agreed. "Did we ever find out why there was water all over that night?"

"I only had a chance to go there once, but Myrtle wasn't around. Sorry." Luna replied.

"Not us either. We haven't seen Myrtle. We left the toilets alone, so she never came up to see what we were doing; she just stayed hidden in the U-bend." Ron added.

"Weird."

They peeked inside and then headed in once they saw the coast was clear. There was a cauldron set up on a tripod towards the back of the room, between the sinks and the stalls full of toilets. An array of potions ingredients were set up as well, each in jars, ready to be added when the time came. A massive book sat on a transfigured book stand a few inches off the ground, opened to the recipe for polyjuice.

"I guess gather everything up and we'll take it with us to the garden."

Neville vanished the starts of the potion in the cauldron and headed towards one of the sinks to
rinse it out.

"Not that one. It's never worked." Millicent called.

"Oh. I guess they don't bother fixing it up since no one really comes here."

Ron and Luna gathered up the rest of the ingredients, loading them into the cauldron, which Neville stuffed into his expanded pocket. Harry was going over the recipe, with Millicent reading over his shoulder. He flipped idly through the pages. Some of the mishaps warned about were pretty gruesome. He and Millie both shuddered at the picture of a guy turned inside out by a mistake made in a potion. "Yeah, I'm definitely not trying to make anything in here. This is way above my skill level."

"Mine too." Millie agreed.

"This thing is something else." Harry said to the rest of them. "There's all sorts of weird potions in here. I guess I should return it to the library."

"Alright. We'll meet you in the garden then." Neville nodded.

"Yeah." Harry agreed. He gathered up the book stand, taking his time so they wouldn't question him not leaving with them. Once they were gone, he called Olaf.

"You is calling, young master?"

"Do you know a way to make a copy of a book?"

Olaf snapped his fingers and there were now two copies. "Humans is using gemino. Is being non-magical copy of book."

"Non-magical. Huh. I wonder if…" he patted his pocket and smiled. "Got my cloak. Could you just put that on one of my shelves in the garden? I need to take this one back to the library and do an experiment."

Olaf nodded peaceably, took the book he'd made and the book stand and disappeared.

Harry sauntered down to the library and found himself an out of the way spot out of view of students, Madame Pince and any portraits that was in close reach of the restricted section and donned his invisibility cloak. He looked around to make sure no one was watching and carefully stepped over the velvet rope separating it from the rest of the library, wary of anyone seeing his feet or legs while he did so. He made very sure not to touch any of the shelves or the books on them----he'd learned that lesson the hard way last year while trying to learn about Nicholas Flamel. It would be a lot harder to escape this time if all the books were to start screeching. He let his eyes wander, looking for books that looked old enough to pre-date copyright charms; he didn't know if that would interfere, and wasn't willing to take chances. Students kept passing by the edges of the restricted section, so he headed towards the back. He didn't want anyone to question why a wand was moving around back here on its own.

"Gemino" he whispered quietly, while focusing his whole will on making it work. A second book appeared in mid-air and started to fall towards the ground. Harry cursed quietly as he scrambled to catch it and pull it under the cloak before anyone saw, then froze when he heard two girls nearby.

"Gemma? Something wrong?"

"No. No…it's nothing. I must be studying too much. I could've sworn I saw a book falling through
Harry stuffed his ill-gotten gain in his pocket and waited till the coast was clear. Might as well grab what he could while he was here. Who knew what kind of stuff was kept back here? Even the NEWT students didn't get many chances to rummage in this part of the library from what he'd seen. All last year he'd never seen anyone back here, and when he'd tried to investigate the place himself there hadn't been any empty spaces on the shelves.

He managed to work out a system to grab the rest without making a spectacle, and grabbed four random books in all, but by that time his pockets were full. He snuck back out, doffed his cloak and pulled out Most Potent Potions, the book Hermione had borrowed and took it up to Madame Pince to return.

"Harry! I thought you were going to return that thing!" Ron pointed to the book shelf.

"I did. That's a copy…and since we're in here you can't talk about it outside this room."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Fine, whatever." The rest all nodded agreement.

"What took you so long anyway?" Millicent wondered.

"I returned the book and Madame Pince said she had other books out that were due soon and gave me a list. I went and found Lavender and Parvati and asked them to get them since I can't go into their dorm and they said they would. They told me one of us should ask Madame Pomfrey if her bag was with her when she got attacked, because her homework for this week that is due and some more library books might be in it and I said I would." he turned slightly and they saw he had a massively overstuffed book bag hanging from his shoulder. "I haven't gone through it yet. Also, I'm beginning to wonder if Hermione has super strength or something, because believe me this thing is heavy."

The boys both shook their heads when he dropped the bag to the floor and it went down like a ton of bricks. Their winces turned to confusion when he started pulling books out of his pocket.

"What's this then?" Ron questioned.

"More copies. Non magical copies. I began to wonder if the copy spell would work on books in the restricted section…. Remember all that trouble last year?"

"These are from the restricted section?" Luna asked, peering at them in interest.

"Yup. I just copied four at random. I don't even know what I've got, most of them don't have titles on the spines or anything." he explained as he put them away on his bookshelves. "Oh, and Ron? No telling Hermione about this spell, or that I copied stuff from the restricted section. She'll rat me out and have them confiscated and then do it herself."

"Don't worry. She'd make me carry them all. I'm not having that." He eyed the books in Harry's section of the bookshelves idly. "Since when are you such a book nerd?"

"I like learning stuff, I just don't like hanging out in the library. If I can just make copies of stuff and read them in my own time, hell yeah that's what I'm doing."

"Whatever floats your boat, mate."

"Why's Hermione's bag like that? I know she always carried a lot of books, but that seems excessive even for her." Neville commented.
"I don't know. Maybe she expanded it and the spell wore off when she got petrified?" Luna said idly.

"Huh. I'd better keep an eye on my pockets then. That would kind of suck if it just wore off and my pockets ripped…though I guess it's good to know the stuff wouldn't just stay lost in a pocket dimension somewhere."

"Oh, yeah. Good point."

Harry started pulling out books and making piles.


"Damn. That girl's crazy." Millie said with some bemusement as the pile kept getting higher.

Once he was done he made copies of the personal and library books and added them to his shelves, and put the library books by the door so they'd remember to return them.

"Hmmm… homework. Here Ron, I guess just make sure they get handed in. She's going to be pissed enough about missing most of the year as it is…." Neville started handing over scrolls.

"What is this?!" Millicent suddenly demanded.

"I don't know, what is it?" Harry asked her. She was peering into a small box she'd just taken from the bottom of Hermione's satchel. It was a small vial that had been held within that seemed to be upsetting her.

"It's hair."

"Hair?"

"Specifically MY hair. And yours. And Neville's, and LUNA's… Sally Ann Perks… VINC!?
What the hell!"

"That's not hair…snake skin, it looks like. I don't think that's hair either."

Millicent took the vial and held it up to look at more closely.

"Cat hair, I'll bet. I should know. My cat likes to leave hairs all over. I'm always cleaning them off me."

"Why would she have all that? And where did she get it?" Luna wondered.

"I don't know. Just what all were you two planning to do with that polyjuice?" Harry demanded.

"What are you talking about?"

"You need a hair or nail clippings or something of the person you're going to turn in to. It said so in the recipe. She's got hair from a girl from each of the three houses--Millie's a Slytherin, Luna's a Ravenclaw and Sally-Anne Perks is a Hufflepuff. I know you were planning on investigating me by pretending to be Neville, but why's she have my hair too? Crabbe I could see being for you to question Malfoy with, but it still doesn't explain the others."

Ron just continued to look confused.
"Well... looks like you didn't know even the half of her plans." He emptied the vials one by one and vanished the hair, fur and snake skin then set the vials and box in the sink to be washed out later.

"Is there anything else in there?"

"Um... homework planner and a notebook." Neville replied.

Ron pulled the homework planner towards himself and began flipping through it, while Neville pulled one of Hermione's books towards himself.

"This is Hermione's? It's her own book, not from the library?"

"Yeah, why?" Harry asked absently, looking up from her notebook. "Nature's Nobility? What's that? Some kind of herbology book?"

Neville and Millicent both snorted in amusement, and Neville shook his head. "No. It's wizarding genealogy. It's all the extinct wizarding families--well, the names died out in the male line, but the blood continues. I was just surprised she had it all. Most pureblood families have a copy of it, but she's muggleborn, so it's just names to her, whereas for a pureblood it's the history of their families to some extent."

"Yeah? Are there Potters in there?"

"Well, no. You're still alive..." Luna pointed out.

"Well, actually there would be Potters, just ones that married into these extinct families, but there isn't an entry just for the Potter family, and won't be unless you die without having a son. It's self-updating." Millicent explained.

"No pressure then. Let me see it?" Harry asked, already making plans to swap his non-magical copy with Hermione's. Neville pushed the book towards him and turned his attention to Ron who was looking pale and worried.

"Problem?"

"There's a project due for Professor Flitwick next weekend? Since when?"

"I don't know of any project. It might have just been something she was doing on her own for extra points." Millicent said hopefully.

"I don't know of any project either. It probably is something that's just her." Neville agreed.

"Thank Merlin. I was really worried there for a second. If that's the case... it's no wonder her grades are so bloody high. She seems to be doing special projects for a lot of the teachers."

"Yeah?" Neville asked, taking the planner.

Neville continued working his way through Hermione's planner--it was scary the level of scheduling she had for herself, and the amount of work she had blocked off for herself to do pretty much every day.

Ron headed off to make himself a sandwich.

Luna wandered off as well to start prepping one of the walls in the training room for another mural.
Millicent scooted over to help Harry look through Nature's Nobility.

"Are you looking for something in particular? If you're just looking for Potters, try Peverell. They were a big family, and they're way back so they're actually related to a lot of people."

"Peverell? Ah, here we are. Yeah, just like you said. Right at the bottom. Eugenia Peverell, daughter of Ignotus, married a Potter. Damn, Iggy's mum had a heck of a name Lokka Friggasdottir. That's a mouthful. He had two brothers, Antioch who died when he was still fairly young, he'd have been about what twenty five or so? And Cadmus…left one son, who had a daughter who married a Gaunt."

"And that was the end of the Peverell line. Only daughters in the last generation. There's a Bulstrode." she pointed to another spot on the tree.

"Her name's Millicent too."

"Yeah." Millie agreed with a grin. "She was a pirate queen for a while. She got betrothed to some old fossil with a lot of money by her parents and decided she wanted no part of it. She ran away before the wedding and was going to sail off somewhere or other, but she got captured by pirates to be sold. Sadly for them, they didn't know she was a witch." her grin widened. "Before they quite knew what had happened, she had taken over. See, she realized she'd been handed a tremendous opportunity. She started taking over other pirate ships and adding them to her fleet. She was the terror of the seas for seven years." her smile turned sad. "She was burned at the stake. She told them she didn't regret a thing, and if given a chance she'd do it again. "Better to live life on my own terms and go out in a blaze of glory, than to die by inches over long years playing nursemaid to a toothless lecher." My mum admired her spirit when she was told the story, so she named me after her in hopes I'd have the same spirit."

"Cool."

"I always thought so."

"It's a lot to live up to."

"No worries. I've already got plans."

"Yeah?"

"You were talking about a space program before. I thought about it and realized, why settle for a regular old pirate fleet when I could maybe just have my own planet of space pirates!"

"Seems like that would be a lot of bother, running a whole planet."

"Hmm. Yeah, it actually might be. Alright. I'll have a pirate cove on a moon somewhere. That should be much more manageable."

Millicent eventually wandered off to go see if Luna needed any help. Neville got coerced into a game of chess with Ron. Harry kept reading 'nature's nobility'.

"Marvolo."

"Hmm? What's that?" Neville asked absently. It looked like Ron was going to beat him in two moves no matter what he did at this point. The smug bastard knew it too.
"There's a Marvolo on the Gaunt family tree…a couple of them, actually. In fact, the last Marvolo died in 1926. He had a son and a daughter. Morphin Gaunt, who died in 1943, no children, and Merope Gaunt who died in 1926…she had a son, but it doesn't give his name."

"Well, yeah. He wouldn't have been a Gaunt."

Luna and Millie wandered out to see what was going on.

"You found something?" Millicent wondered.

"The child of the last Gaunt, Merope, might have been a Riddle. Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was here at school in the forties, which would make the timing right. The Gaunts descend from Slytherin. There's a Slytherin up at the top of the tree if you follow the trail back… Yeah, here it is. The Slytherin family died out and became Peverells, which became the Gaunts and the Potters. Tom Marvolo Riddle is the heir of Slytherin."

"He is? Why's he creeping around the school and attacking Hermione and Filch's cat then? What'd they ever do to him?" Ron demanded.

"Not to mention he'd be almost seventy. It seems kind of childish and mean for a guy that age to be doing." Luna added.

"I thought You-Know-who was the heir of Slytherin? That's what he said, anyway, or so I heard. That's a big part of why Slytherin has such a bad reputation. You-Know-Who claimed he was Slytherin's heir and most of his nutters were from Slytherin." Neville interjected.

"Maybe he's his son…or grandson. How old was he supposed to be?" Harry wondered.

"Dunno. S'not like I ever saw the bloke or asked him." Ron scoffed.

"Something on your mind?" Neville asked Harry when he got lost in thought.

"I was just thinking about what Millie told me Draco's dad said about the Chamber the last time it opened…"

"I knew he was behind it!" Ron snarled.

"No. He asked him if he knew anything about it, and he told him it opened fifty years ago. There were a bunch of petrification attacks, and then the last one the girl died." Millicent said firmly.

"Fifty years ago was back in the forties…right around the time that Tom Marvolo Riddle won an award for special services to the school. Hagrid was expelled around the same time."

"He was? What for?" Luna asked curiously.

"He won't talk about it. He'll just pretend he can't hear you until you drop the subject. In fact… I was just thinking and…what if they're connected? We know Hagrid likes big, dangerous creatures, and he will not accept that they're dangerous to anyone who isn't him. Binns said the legend was that Slytherin made a chamber with a monster for his heir. He tried to say something about how we couldn't judge him by modern standards because it was a different time, but Hermione cut him off and he didn't get a chance to explain what he meant. What if the monster wasn't left to kill students, but to protect the school against outside threats…sort of a weapon of last resort?"

"I think you're reaching, mate." Ron scoffed.
"It was a thousand years ago. Who knows how often the stories, and how those stories are interpreted, have changed over that time? I read somewhere that Slytherin was gathering parselmouths. What if that was why?" Luna disagreed.

"You think the weapon was some kind of snake?" Millicent asked.

"Actually, it would make sense if it was." Luna nodded. "His symbol was snake, he was a parselmouth himself and gathering others."

"Okay then. So, we have this guy, and he's got a muggle name. He looks for connections, but he can't find any wizarding Riddles anywhere... but then he finds "Marvolo" and he has a possible connection to Slytherin, one of the Founders of the school. The thing is, having a matching middle name isn't proof. But then, he hears that Slytherin left a chamber for his heir, and that people have looked for it for centuries and never found it. If he managed it, it would be undeniable proof that he was in fact Slytherin's heir. So he goes looking. Somewhere else in the castle, Hagrid has a very dangerous pet, and it's petrifying people. Meanwhile, Tom Riddle finds the chamber, and there's a monster inside, but it doesn't attack him or anything--he's fine. He gets the bright idea to bring the monster out to show off. "Oh, don't mind this, it's just my pet, left to me by my famous ancestor, Salazar Slytherin" Harry mused.

Neville nodded along thoughtfully. "Except... if it actually was a weapon of last resort, being brought out means there's enemies afoot."

"Exactly! He brings it out and BOOM! A girl dies. He panics. A girl is dead, he's responsible... and with the attacks all year, it looks really bad. People might think he just kept trying till he got it right... but there's Hagrid, and his dangerous pet. He confronts Hagrid and just tells him "I know your pet did all the attacks and killed that girl" and Hagrid of course doesn't take it well. While they're arguing, the pet escapes into the forest... but it's big and dangerous and tears up the floor and knocks the doors off the hinges on its way out... there's no hiding it, and people see it and scream and the portraits go running off to tell the teachers... and then they decide that yeah, Hagrid must've done it, because, really, what're the odds of there being two monsters in the castle at the same time with no one the wiser? He gets expelled. Tom Riddle gets an award."

The other four exchanged a glance and shrugged. It sounded plausible.

"You know Who claimed he was Slytherin's heir." Harry mused, pulling some paper and a quill out.

"What are you doing, mate?"

"Answering a question, I think. Nev, Luna, remember how we were talking about how "Lord thingy" wasn't his real name?"

"Yeah, and we were joking his name was something common... like Tom."

"The Dark Lord Tom?" Ron snickered "Doesn't exactly send chills down the spine."

"I was just looking at his name, specifically his middle name-- MarVOLo."

"You think it's an anagram or something?" Luna wondered.

"That's what I'm trying to find out.... And guess what?"

Harry turned the paper around and showed them the words Tom Marvolo Riddle, with each letter lightly crossed out. Below that were the words "I am Lord Voldemort"
"So…You-Know-Who's name is actually an evil anagram? Huh." Millicent said numbly. "That's… so lame."

"When I rearrange the letters in my name I just get stupid stuff." Luna pouted.

"Too bad Hermione's not here. We could plot this Tom bloke and give him what for."

Harry and Neville's eyes widened.

"Ron! You're brilliant!"

"Well…yeah. I swear, you two and Hermione. Always with the tone of surprise."

"We need to head to the library…" Neville began.

"No need. Hermione's library books are all about plotting charms."

"That's right. She was looking for that Fandral guy." Ron nodded.

Harry brought the library books back to the table and handed one to each of the boys, keeping the last for himself. "Start reading, everyone. We need to learn how to cast a plotting charm."

The bell rang.

"And we will. After dinner."

"Ron…this is kind of important."

"Exactly. We'll all work better with a full stomach. Come on. The school is full and everyone is awake. How likely is he to strike again now?"

The kids headed down to dinner and split up once in the great hall. The mood there was frenetic. Rumors and wild stories had been flowing like wine since Hermione's body was found, and a hefty trade in protective amulets and talismans had started up amongst the students. Hufflepuff house was in clumps up and down their tables. Each clump seemed to be centered on a muggleborn student, each of whom looked torn between embarrassment and gratitude.

Seamus Finnegan was plastered against Dean's side and glaring around the room as though daring anyone to so much as look in his direction.

Ravenclaw was too busy discussing the chamber of secrets, ways that someone could be petrified, and running the protective amulet market to be worried.

Slytherin house seemed quite relaxed for the most part, something that had been noted and was causing angry, disdainful mutters up and down the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables.

The empty space where Hermione should have been sitting seemed to send a silent reprimand to all of them for not taking the attack on the cat more seriously. It seemed to hit Ron especially hard, as he only had seconds at dinner that night.

When dinner was nearly over and they were preparing to head back to the garden to learn about plotting spells so they could find the heir, Dumbledore rose and signaled for silence.

"Students, in light of the most grievous and unwarranted attack on our own muggleborn second
year, miss Hermione Granger, it has been decided that we will be instituting an early curfew until
the source of these attacks can be apprehended. When dinner is finished you will proceed back to
your common rooms post haste. When classes resume in the morning, we would caution each of
you to travel in groups, be aware of your surroundings, and if you should either spot something
strange or note one of your classmates acting oddly or out of character, tell the staff at once so we
may investigate. That will be all. Goodnight."

"Bloody hell." Ron grumbled with real heat as the food disappeared. "How're we supposed to learn
plotting charms now?"

"I guess we'll just have to wait till tomorrow. But yeah, this is a setback." Neville sighed.

"Or… we could ask Professor Flitwick to plot him for us before he leaves."

"Why not McGonagall?"

"He's the charms teacher, and he might actually listen to us. McGonagall will just tell us children
should be seen and not heard and send us to bed."

Dumbledore was already gone when they reached the head table.

"Professor Flitwick?"

"Oh, hello boys. You should all be heading back to your common rooms."

"We will, but first we were hoping you'd plot someone for us."

"Is this about Fandral the Dashing again? I was going to look into that, but with what happened to
Miss Granger…"

"No, not… We know who the heir of Slytherin is."

"Excuse me?"

Harry dug out the paper with the anagram and handed it over. Flitwick looked it over and blanched
and then raised a confused gaze to the boys.

"What is this? Tom Riddle disappeared years ago."

"You knew him?"

"He was a few years ahead of me, and in a different year, so not well… I don't know what sort of
nonsense…"

"At least hear us out."

"Make it quick."

They filled him in as quickly as they could, detailing their findings from Nature's Nobility,
combined with the anagram and their intention to plot the guy so they could prove their theory.

By the time they finished Flitwick was shaking his head, but he did the plotting spell nonetheless,
and then froze.

"Professor?"
Flitwick didn't answer, instead he did the spell again, and then again.

"Professor?"

Flitwick ignored them and ran towards Snape, McGonagall and Sprout who were conversing quietly on their way to the teacher's lounge.

"Severus! Minerva! Pomona! Quickly! There's another hobo!"

"You have got to be kidding me." Snape snarled.


"Tom Marvolo Riddle, in the Gryffindor girls' dorms!"

"WHAT?"

"Come quickly! We just sent all the students back to their houses!"

The teachers cursed and hurried after him, drawing their wands. Ron, Neville and Harry took off after them.

By the time they got to the entryway the teachers were already out of sight.

"Damn. They're pretty quick for old folks."

"Come on, come on! You heard him! He's in Gryffindor, in the girls' dorms! Ginny might be up there!"

Ron tore up the stairs. Neville and Harry hurried after him.

They found most of the house milling around in the common room when they arrived.

"What's going on?" Ron demanded, scanning the crowd for Ginny. He spotted Fred and George first. They pushed their way through the crowd to them.

"Fred! George! What's going on?"

"Dunno. The teachers came tearing out of the floo with their wands out and told us to stay put and went charging up into the girls' dorms."

Percy joined them.

"Ginny's up there. She went up just before they got here."

"Maybe we should have waited till everyone was in class or something."

"What are you talking about?"

"We found the heir of Slytherin. We asked Flitwick to do a plotting spell."

"What the hell is that sick bastard doing up in the girls' dorms?"

"Guess we'll find out when the teachers catch him."
The sound of many footsteps drew everyone's attention, but it was just some of the girls who had been upstairs when the teachers arrived. Ginny wasn't among them.

The Weasley boys pressed forward to question everyone.

"Where's Ginny? Is she alright?"

"The teachers are questioning her and that guy."

"What did he do to her?" Percy demanded in a cold voice that no one had ever thought to hear from the nerdy prefect.

"More like what she did to him." Lavender said, eager to share the sordid details. "It was a boy transfigured into a book fifty years ago. He's been trapped like that all this time! Ginny was using him as a diary. She's been writing in him all this time!"

"Ginny's diary..."
"...is the heir of Slytherin?"

"He is?"

"He can't be. If he was trapped up here all this time he can't have been behind the attacks."

"Maybe he was controlling Gin...!" Percy covered Ron's mouth and gave him a warning look. "Do you mind, you idiot. We don't want even a whisper connecting Ginny to any attacks on the school!"
"If she was being controlled it wasn't her fault!"
"Shut up!"

Lavender was still busy holding court and filling everyone in on the thrilling saga of the poor, trapped boy, who was, had she mentioned, really dreamy?

It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time for the teachers and the mystery boy to finally come downstairs.

When someone finally appeared on the stairs, the whole house quieted and sat waiting to see the interloper finally...but it was only Ginny Weasley, looking pale and twitchy with eyes too big for her face. She flinched violently when everyone stared at her, and then shrunk in on herself when her brothers surrounded her and all started scolding her at once.

"What will mother say when she finds out you've been carrying around a transfigured boy in your pocket?"
"Was he answering you back?"
"Well...yeah."
"He was?! Idiot! What has dad always told us?"
"Don't trust something"
"If you can't see"
"Where it keeps its brain!"
"Did he do anything to you? Filthy heir of Slytherin!"

Harry and Neville withdrew a bit, leaving the Weasleys to reprimanding Ginny, and the rest to their wild speculation. When Ginny finally had a chance to get a word in edgewise, it began making the rounds that the teachers had taken the book-boy to the Ministry, as they found it all rather
She'd been sent down to tell everyone the coast was clear and they could return to the dorms. No one took her up on her offer; everyone seemed far more interested in what she could tell them about the book-boy. No one was really paying much attention to the two of them, so they were able to converse quietly.

"It's weird, huh. It all seemed to fit so well. I mean, that guy is the heir if he is who he says he is, and the anagram is too convenient… If he's actually been trapped as a book for fifty years, he can't have actually been you-know-who though."

"Yeah, it is weird."

"You think someone stole his identity? I mean, if whoever it was had always planned to raise a dark army… he gathered so much support because of his claim as the heir."

"If that's what happened, why take over his identity while still in school? Why not wait till he was an adult? If it happened fifty years ago it was the forties. The war didn't start until, what, sixties or seventies?"

"Maybe so he could learn about the folks he'd mostly be recruiting from? If he came in as an adult, everyone would be off living in their own homes and all. In the dorms, you're right on top of each other. It's a good place to learn everyone's quirks and all. Plus, as a prefect he'd have a chance to network with people from other houses in a position of authority and win their trust."

"Yeah, you make a good point. It just seems so odd though. I can't help but feel we're missing something."

"Well… hopefully they'll sort it out at the Ministry."

"Yeah."

Chapter End Notes

I read somewhere that because a horcrux has a piece of a soul in it that it would register as a person under a 'hominem revealio' spell. The teachers don't know what it is, so they make the assumption it's a transfigured person… and transfigure him back. I know there was going to be questions about what exactly happened there at the end, so I figured I'd answer up front. Before anyone complains that Harry figured out too much too quick, remember he has another soul piece in his head that he gets subconscious feedback from. Having names and dates to go with his speculations just makes that subconscious stuff come more to the forefront, and he interprets it based on things he knows.
"Ah, Albus. I'm glad I caught you." McGonagall said with some relief as she spotted Dumbledore leaving his tower.

"Something amiss, my dear? I was just heading to breakfast."

"It can wait for a bit. I need to fill you in on a few things."

"Oh?" Dumbledore said in interest as he led the way back up to his office.

"We have a new student."

"A new…? I wasn't informed of…"

"It's Tom Riddle."

Dumbledore gave a long, slow blink and looked rather stupefied.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I didn't quite believe it myself, and I was there."

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning."

McGonagall filled him in as best she could on the order of events from the point the three boys had approached Professor Flitwick up until they'd all returned from the Ministry in the wee hours of the morning.

"After transfiguring him back to human form, we subdued him and took him to the Ministry for questioning. It seems you were right. He was responsible for Myrtle's death all those years ago."

"He's in Azkaban then?" Dumbledore said hopefully.

"It was an accident. Hagrid's pet was responsible for the attacks, he was inadvertently responsible for the death. The Ministry ruled it an accidental death, and decided being transfigured into a diary for fifty years was punishment enough and called it time served. Given that Hagrid was blamed unfairly for Myrtle's death, they also decided to allow him to get wand rights if he could pass his OWLs. Mr. Riddle offered to help him study for them. In exchange we asked him to teach Riddle all he knows about "inneresting creatures" so that hopefully no other tragedies like what happened with poor Myrtle will be forthcoming."

"He's not in Azkaban getting his twisted, blackened little soul sucked out?"

"No, Albus. He's down in Slytherin house being introduced to his new housemates, I should imagine." McGonagall answered, subtly moving for her wand.
They had all dismissed the boy's rant about how much the current headmaster hated him, thinking it just teenage angst. It would seem they had been wrong to do so.

"Given that he is an orphan and fifty years displaced in time we and the Ministry all agreed it was best to just allow him to rejoin the student body and finish his education. He'll have to be taken for supplies. He has a wand at least..."

"He does?"

"Yes. Whoever the monster was that took over his identity and became You-Know-Who kept his wand. Peter Pettigrew had it all this time. Oddly enough the Ministry didn't snap it...I suppose they didn't bother because You-Know-Who is dead."

"He is not. He's here. In my school."

"As it was originally Tom Riddle's wand he was allowed to reclaim it." she continued without pause.

"He was? What is wrong with all of you?! You all just let the bloody dark lord waltz off with his wand and brought him here! I won't have it."

"I thought we could send him to Diagon Alley for supplies. He was always rather independent from what I remember, and he's old enough he should be able to manage on his own. He'll need to dip into the scholarship fund." she gritted her teeth and continued.

Dumbledore looked terribly affronted by the very idea.

"Really, Albus. The boy has nothing but the clothes on his back!" she huffed, holding out her hand.

"Did you not hear me? I won't have him in my school! Send the wretched little guttersnipe back to the slums of London where he belongs!"

"He's a student, as well as a Founder's Heir. Hogwarts is open to all magical children. You, as Headmaster, are required to see that all the children of Magical Britain receive an education." The Sorting Hat spoke up. "We've had words about this before."

Dumbledore's face twisted up as though he'd just eaten a rotten egg.

"I'll need the key for the scholarship fund, Albus."

"I'll contact Gringott's and have them set aside a small sum." he snapped. "You are dismissed."

McGonagall drew herself up in indignation and huffed, insulted. "Your small sum had best be the usual amount, Albus. You do not want me raising a fuss with the bank." she sniffed before striding out, still bristling.

McGonagall jumped as the gargoyle closed behind her. It sounded like the headmaster was throwing things at the wall. More disturbed than she cared to admit, she made a mental note to inform Severus that the Riddle boy was not to be left alone with the headmaster, and to inform him that, if summoned, that both his head of house and she herself were required to be there. She would normally leave it to Severus, but he tended to run roughshod over him at times as well.

Though still disquieted, she drew her composure back around here like armor before striding into the great hall. As had become habit since he'd arrived last year, she glanced over quickly to the Gryffindor table to where Harry Potter sat.
She was rather torn. She'd been as upset as Dumbledore was when he'd told her some unknown dark wizard had stolen the boy away from his relatives like a thief, been indignant on Albus' behalf that the Ministry had dared to find his guardianship lacking. She was also, though she was slightly ashamed to admit it, quite furious with the boy himself for his ingratitude after all the man had done for him. After the unpleasantness she'd just left, she found herself wondering if she had been too quick to judge the situation. She had never actually spoken to the boy about it, hadn't asked him what events led up to the change in guardianship, whether he was pleased with it, nor anything about Mr. Odinson's character so far as Mr. Potter could discern it. In fact, she hadn't spoken to the boy at all that year, except to give him his schedule and scold him about contraband and send him to the headmaster's office.

Remembering the boy's last trip there made her remember the week their esteemed headmaster had spent as a court jester for rummaging through Potter's mind--trying to anyway. She hadn't spoken to the boy about that either. If anything, it had only deepened her grudge against him, for all that Albus had admitted it was something the guardian had done without the boy's knowledge. She had scolded the headmaster thoroughly for violating a student's mind with such casual disregard, but she'd held a grudge against the boy and not Albus for the whole affair. She would have to try to do better in the future.

She waited till she had taken her seat at the head table before taking a peek at the Slytherin table. Tom Riddle was holding court amongst the fourth years. There were a number of silly girls from the other three houses gathered nearby, amongst whom there seemed to be an inordinate amount of hair flipping and eye-batting going on. Sadly, it was a familiar sight from her own school days. He'd always been bizarrely popular with the girls…though oddly, she couldn't remember him ever taking them up on any of their (often shamefully blatant) offers. She put it out of her mind. He had been two years behind her in school; chances were she just hadn't been aware of his love affairs.

"Uh oh. That could be trouble brewing." she sighed internally. The four Weasley boys were glaring across the hall at Riddle and seemed to be only just holding themselves back from violence.

"It's going to be an adjustment, I'm sure. Hogwarts is the same, but the people are all different. That will take some getting used to. It seems like yesterday for me, but the last time I sat at this table I was probably here with most of your grandparents." Tom's gaze fell to the table and he seemed overcome for a moment before mustering a small, but brave, little smile to reassure everyone. The girls' hearts went out to him. Several of them sighed and blinked sympathetic tears out of their eyes.

"I've heard I have... Harry Potter, was it?"

"Yes, that's his name."

"Harry Potter to thank for rescuing me from my cruel imprisonment. I suppose I really should thank him."

"You seem to be done eating. I can introduce you, if you like, before classes start." Draco offered, preening a bit.

"If you like."

"Let's go then. We haven't much time until breakfast is over."

Draco practically pranced as he led the new celebrity over to meet the old one. The eyes of the whole great hall were on them as they crossed the distance. The enigmatic Tom Riddle seemed
perfectly at ease with the attention.

"Oh, bother. Weasleys."

"The feral-looking redheads? What is their problem?"

"Who knows? It's not like they need an excuse, stupid blood-traitors."

He stuck his nose in the air as they passed them and stopped before Harry, who was finishing off the last of his breakfast.

"Potter, a word?"

"Sure. You've got…hmmm…ten minutes."

"I'd like to introduce you to Tom Riddle. He's going to be a student here again, now that he's not a book anymore. Riddle, Harry Potter."

Tom studied the boy that, according to the girl who'd been writing to him anyway, had defeated a dark lord while still an infant. He didn't look like much. The other boy patted his mouth with his napkin before finally deigning to look up at them. It rather irked him to be left waiting like a penitent.

Finally, a pair of vivid green eyes met his. It was a cool gaze, and surprisingly impassive for a child his age. He flicked his gaze over him head to toe, lingering for a moment on his wand, before meeting his gaze once more.

"Have a seat."

Tom's smile might have been slightly stiff as he did so, but no one seemed to notice but Harry.

"Your wand. 13 1/2 inches. Yew. Phoenix feather core?"

"Yes… How do you know that? Was it in a book somewhere?"

"No. Mr. Ollivander told me when I went to get mine."

"Why would he do that?"

"We have cores from the same phoenix. He thought it was interesting. I got one, its brother gave me this scar. May I?"

"Rather bold of you to ask, considering we've only just met."

"Hmmm. True. Fair trade then."

Harry pulled his wand free, set it on the table and pushed it halfway across. He kept his hand on it.

Tom's eyes narrowed just a pinch, but under all these expectant eyes, he couldn't exactly say no. He drew his own wand, slid it halfway. They kept their eyes on each other as they grabbed each other's wands and sat back.

The students gathered around to watch all felt vaguely uncomfortable watching the exchange, though none could say why.

"Holly?"
"Yeah. This is some handle. You ever gouge yourself on it?"

Tom gave him a dirty look. Harry smirked slightly in response, but didn't say anything.

The surrounding students confusion mounted when they each twirled the new wand through their fingers, getting a feel for it, then each transfigured a goblet in mirror image of one another.

"Hmm. Surprisingly friendly, considering this was the wand that killed my parents." Harry said quietly.

"Yes. That man has a lot to answer for." Tom remarked, his voice neutral.

"Yes he does. It makes us wonder what Ollivander was smoking. He told me we can expect great things of you. Mr. Potter. You-Know-Who did many great things. Terrible, yes, but great." Let's look at what he accomplished. Dozens of old pureblood lines that stretched back to the dawn of time and magic. Gone. Ended. Where there used to be dozens of magical villages, there's now only Hogsmeade."

"Wait…what?"

"Oh yeah. Giants and trolls and other magic-resistant skinned things were out rampaging around, knocking down wards, endangering secrecy. All that's left of those villages is a few witches and wizards stuck in the middle of new-muggle villages. Can't put up wards, the muggles might notice. Can't have magical plants or animals--no wards, the muggles might notice. Can't do magic. There's no wards, and apparently the muggles in these villages are nosy buggers--always peeking in windows and snooping around. So yeah…whatever that guy might have told people he was looking to accomplish, it's pretty obvious in retrospect that what he was actually doing was trying to eradicate magic and the magical world. At least here in Britain."

He pushed Tom's wand back to him and took his own back, inspecting it briefly before tucking it away. The bell rang, signaling the end of breakfast.

"Yeah. Obviously Ollivander and I have a very different idea of what great is. See you around, Tom. Later, Malfoy."

As though his leaving were a signal, the rest of the students began clearing out. Tom took his time climbing to his feet, his gaze still latched on to the unruly head of black hair quickly disappearing into the distance.

"So…that was Harry Potter was it?"

"Yeah, that was him."

"He's…interesting."

"I suppose. If you like stupid scarheads." Draco said sourly. "He's known you for five minutes. Why are you Tom and I'm still Malfoy?"

"I guess he thinks I'm interesting too."

When the last of classes let out for the day, Neville, Ron, Harry, Luna and Millicent headed to the Garden to talk.
"So...what now? We were right about that Tom bloke being the heir, but he couldn't have done it if he was book at the time, so we're just right back where we started." Ron said with some frustration.

"Yeah." Neville sighed.

"It looks like I might have been right that it was a frame up job, but now I have to wonder; who was being framed? Him or me?" Harry muttered.

"Why would you think the attacks had anything to do with you?" Millicent asked curiously.

"A couple of things. Last year there was that whole philosopher's stone thing that ended with me facing the face on the back of Quirrel's head that claimed it was You-Know-Who. You-Know-Who was supposedly the heir of Slytherin, and so this whole bit with the Chamber seemed like another You-Know-Who related thing, which would automatically involve me, whether I want it to or not. Then there was the house elf, Dobby that was stealing my mail this summer. He said bad things were going to be happening at Hogwarts this year and I was in danger. All the stuff he did was to try to convince me to stay away. He said he didn't have permission to come see me and was going to have to punish himself when he got back home. As far as the elf was concerned it was me, specifically, that was in danger. I wasn't attacked, Hermione was and Filch's cat were, so the danger he was speaking of was something else. Then, don't forget, Snape accused me of being the culprit when we went to go see what was going on. The first human victim was Hermione. Had this been last year that probably would have meant I wouldn't be a suspect at all. This year though, I've been feuding with her almost since school started. What happened just before? You and she argued, over me. " he added as an aside to Ron. "You and I made up and she got attacked. There's one other reason, though I'm a bit hesitant to speak of it..."

"Don't be silly, mate. You can tell us anything." Ron said confidently.

Harry looked around at the four of them, who were all watching him expectantly.

"I hope you still feel that way when I tell you."

"No worries." Ron assured him.

"Go on, Harry. It can't be that bad." Luna added.

"I might be a parselmouth."

Neville and Ron both paled and traded an uneasy look. Millicent looked torn between curiosity and worry. Luna just looked curious.

"That's the sign of a dark wizard." Ron said, his voice sounding a bit strangled.

"Nowadays."

"Always!"

"Nope. See this? It's one of those books I grabbed from the restricted section. I was reading it last night when I went to bed. It turns out most of the magical gifts in old families actually were from magical creature blood in the line. The family lines that parselmouth run in all seem to have naga blood mingled in there somewhere, and in spite of what people nowadays seem to think, Slytherin was not the only one, which makes perfect sense. People say he 'was gathering parselmouths' but no one seems to think about the fact that it meant there were others, who weren't his descendants. If they were they wouldn't need to be gathered up. It turns out the Peverells had some naga blood and popped out a parselmouth once in a while. Tom Riddle and I both descend from the Peverells,
"Wow. Maybe someone is framing you." Millicent mused.

"We need some way to test this. Maybe you just need to be looking at a snake?" Luna offered, trying to be practical.

"That's what I figure. We don't have one though."

"Sure we do." Neville scoffed. He drew a sloppy snake on a bit of parchment and held it up in front of Harry's face. "Go on, stare at it and answer my questions."

Ron shrugged and gestured for him to comply. "It's worth a shot." He still looked a bit peaky, but he seemed to be calming at the others' non-reactions.

Harry stared at the badly drawn snake and tried not to sigh.

"What's your name?"

"Harry Potter."

There was only silence, so Harry glanced up and found the other two boys looking pale and uneasy once more. Even Millicent looked a bit creeped out.

"No offense, mate, but that sounds really creepy." Ron said. Neville shrugged agreement, but he looked apologetic.

"I am then?"

"Yeah."

"I couldn't tell."

"Maybe you just need practice? You did say it was the first time you'd ever encountered a snake. We'll keep asking questions. This time, when you answer, try to concentrate on what you're doing." Luna chided.

"Fine"

The four of them alternated asking questions, both serious and inane, while Harry talked and tried to figure out what he was doing different. After a few minutes he discovered if he listened closely he could sort of hear hissing, but it still seemed removed from him. He concentrated harder and tried to feel his magic, to see if it was doing something odd. After a while, he realized he could feel something deep inside that seemed to be…stuck? Bound? It felt odd, whatever it was. He concentrated on that weird feeling, and the more he concentrated on it the more clearly he could feel it. He tried to prod at the feeling, pushing and pulling and then…
Harry's breath caught and the others all shivered.
"What was that?" Millicent demanded, rubbing her arms.
"I think… I think someone did something to me. That's why I couldn't tell."
"What?!"
"Let me test something." He focused back on the snake picture, and yeah, he could feel it now.
"SSSSssSsSSSS"
"You're hissing again." Ron pointed out helpfully.
Harry held up a hand to quiet them, kept looking at the snake drawing.
"My name is Harry Potter"
He then looked at Ron and started hissing, then at Neville and said in English "My name is Harry Potter."
"You can control it!" Luna said happily, clapping her hands. "See? You did just needed practice."
"Yeah. Something was done to me. That's what the feeling was. I felt something go 'pop' and then I could feel it, the difference."
"Who would do that though? And why?" Millicent asked, sounding confused.
"I don't know. But I'll bet you whoever did it is behind the attacks."
They all sat there lost in thought, until Harry suddenly sat up straight.
"We need to go talk to Myrtle."
"Yeah. She looks like she's about our age. She's wearing a Hogwarts uniform. The bathroom she haunts is right next to the first attack! What if she was the girl who died?"
"Actually…that makes a lot of sense. It seems pretty obvious now that you've said it. Why didn't we realize it before?" Ron wondered.
"Yeah, really." Neville suddenly had a thought as well. "Hermione. Where was she attacked?"
"They said they found her on the first floor somewhere, peeking around a hallway." Luna offered.
"What if her body was moved? Why would she be on the first floor? She argued with you, Ron, and went to the library to research plotting charms. Either she had no luck or got a reading she didn't like. We know she went to talk to professor Flitwick, he mentioned Fandral the Dashing. His office is on the fifth floor, and his classroom is on the third. There's nothing on the first floor. What if she got petrified in the bathroom? If Myrtle died in that bathroom, the entrance to the Chamber is probably in there. No one goes in there, but someone might have if they were searching for her." Harry said slowly as he worked it all out in his head.
"So she's in there, checking on the polyjuice, she sees something she shouldn't have, gets petrified, and they move her so no one realizes." Millicent nodded. "Yeah, that would make sense. Maybe
Myrtle heard something.

The five of them jumped to their feet and were out the door like a shot, only to run into Colin Creevy in the hallway that connected to the hall the Garden was down.

"Luna! There you are. I was beginning to wonder if I had the right hallway! So…where is the secret…." Luna glared at him reprovingly, so he dropped his voice to a carrying whisper. "The top secret clubhouse?"

"Right. I had forgotten we'd agreed to let Luna bring you in." Harry sighed. "Everyone back to the Garden. Luna, bring him through. Let's get you sworn in. We need to go do some investigating as soon as we're done."

"Really? Cool!"

"What on earth?"

"Problem, Minerva?" Professor Sprout asked curiously.

"There's a bunch of people headed this way."

"Really, who?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

McGonagall left the teacher's lounge at a brisk walk and arrived at the front door just as several people came inside.

"Madame Bones? Head Auror Scrimgeour… What brings all of you here?"

"Upon further consideration, we thought it might be a good idea to check and make sure the basilisk is indeed dead. Not very much is known about them, after all. It could be on its last legs, but still deadly, it could already have passed on. Either way, we want to be sure." Bones explained.

"Especially with a new wave of attacks beginning that mirror those fifty years ago." Scrimgeour added.

"Our department is hoping we can take the basilisk's remains with us for study." Said a man in purple standing behind the others. He had his hood up and his face remained in deep shadow, enough so that she couldn't ascertain his identity.

"Our department should get dibs!" objected Amos Diggory, from Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. He was holding a crate with a rooster in it in one hand.

"Your job is to dispose of the creature. It's our job to study it." the Unspeakable objected.

"If you could fetch Mr. Riddle so we can get started?" Madame Bones cut in before an argument could break out.

"Of course." McGonagall agreed. She drew her wand and a silvery cat leapt out and vanished into the dungeons.

A few minutes later they all saw Tom Riddle hesitantly peek around the corner of the staircase at them.
"There you are Mr. Riddle. You certainly took your time. Well, come along. We haven't all night."

"So sorry. I just wasn't sure I should obey the talking ghostly cat that suddenly popped into my dorm room." he replied, his voice dry.

"If you would, lead us to the chamber of secrets. We want to be sure the basilisk is dead, especially in light of the recent incidents."

"Of course. If you'll follow me."

The group, including McGonagall, followed the boy up the stairs to the second floor. As they drew closer to the girls' bathroom they could hear a commotion coming from it.

"What on earth?!" McGonagall muttered, hurrying forward. The rest hurried after her.

"What are you doing!" she demanded as she stalked inside. They were all rather surprised to see several boys and a couple of girls, peek their heads out of the stalls.

"Oh, hello Professor." Luna said calmly.

"What are all of you doing in here? And gentlemen, this is a girl's bathroom!"

"We know. That's why we're here. We're looking for Myrtle, but she seems to be missing." Neville defended.

"Yeah. We all called her and flushed all the toilets and not a peep. Usually just being in here is enough to bring her around." Millicent agreed.

"Maybe one of us needs to pee. I kind of have to go if you all think it will be any help."

"Miss Lovegood! Really!"

"What? It's a bathroom."

"Why are you looking for Myrtle? I do hope you weren't planning any mischief." McGonagall tried to get everyone back on track.

"No, we just wanted to question her and see if she saw or heard anything." Harry explained.

"We think Hermione was petrified in here and then moved later." Neville added.

"That's ridiculous. All of you children need to go to bed!"

"It's not even dinner time!" Millicent spluttered, looking at McGonagall like she was mad. Head Auror Scrimgeour held up a hand for silence when all the kids began to howl in protest.

"Why do you think the girl was moved?"

"Because she had no reason to be on the first floor…" Harry tried to explain.

"Oh, for goodness sakes! Enough of your nonsense!" McGonagall huffed before proceeding to try to hustle them from the room.

"If you would let us finish!"

"Let them finish." Madame Bones ordered after glancing at Scrimgeour.
"Her and Ron argued and she went to the library to work on plotting charms to find Fandral the Dashing..." Harry began again.

"Who is Fandral the Dashing?"

"He's some guy Loki knows. She was looking for him so she could prove Loki doesn't live on another planet... but that's not important right now. The point is, she either had trouble with the charms or she didn't like what she found, because she went to talk to Professor Flitwick about it. He mentioned it yesterday. The library is on the second floor, the charms classroom is on the third and his office is on the fifth. There's nothing on the first floor that would draw her there, but there was something in here that would."

"She...had a bladder problem?" Diggory suggested hesitantly.

"Huh? No."

"She was making polyjuice. Trying to anyway." Ron explained.

"That's a restricted potion."

"Yeah, well... She's been weird this year. Last year she was a rule-abiding, homework-obsessed bookworm, who thought being expelled was a fate worse than death. This year she's like... a criminal mastermind or something. And yeah, she was going to, but she didn't actually have a chance, and so you really can't arrest her or anything. That wouldn't be fair." Ron added stoutly.

"But the point stands. If she swung by to check up on the potion she was petrified here." Harry interjected before they could get sidetracked again.

"Why are you so certain she was petrified here?" Scrimgeour wanted to know.

"Because this is where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is." McGonagall stiffened and looked at all of them suspiciously. "And how do you know that?" she demanded.

"Duh. Myrtle is the girl who died fifty years ago." Harry huffed.

"Filch's cat was petrified right outside." Millicent added.

"There are portraits everywhere else. How could she have been moved down a storey without anyone seeing?" Tom Riddle interrupted.

"House elf. Made her invisible. Wait till late at night when the portraits are asleep. I don't know. For the moment I'm more concerned with Myrtle. We flushed and we yelled and made a ruckus, but there's no sign of her." Harry said dismissively.

"Can ghosts be petrified?" Luna wondered.

"I don't know. I don't believe it's ever come up."

"They can." said the man with the purple robe. He didn't bother to elaborate.

"Can you plot a ghost?"

Madame Bones drew her wand. "We can certainly try.... She's in the lake."
Tom Riddle pushed off the wall he'd been leaning against while watching the proceedings and went to one of the windows and opened it. He pointed his wand outside and shouted something, though what was lost to the wind.

"I see her."

It took several minutes, but eventually a faint silvery mass could be seen outside the window. The man in the purple robes went and joined Tom by the window and studied the ghost a moment.

"Petrified."

"HA! We were right! Hermione was moved and Myrtle was either flushed or tossed out the window."

"That's so mean. Poor Myrtle." Luna sighed.

"I'd feel sorrier for her if she wasn't so miserable all the time. I mean geez. So, some bint laughed at your stupid glasses. Make fun of her back or punch her in the nose. Don't sit around crying about it." Millicent said with some disgust.

"As fascinating as all this is…we are actually here for a reason. Maybe we should concentrate on the basilisk, you know…magical snake, inimical to all life. Remember that?"

"Ah, yes. Amos is right. We can look into the rest of this business at our leisure once we're sure the basilisk has been dealt with. Mr. Riddle, if you would?"

"The rest of you run along. You're not needed…here." McGonagall began, only to trail off in annoyance.

Colin and Luna had each pulled out and pinned on a press badge. They were bright yellow. One said "Luna Lovegood Ace Reporter" while the other said "Colin Creevey Award-winning photojournalist".

"You cannot keep out the press. That's the first sign of a fascist regime." Luna told her firmly.

"I made a solemn vow with Colin to bring him along if I went anywhere cool. It goes both ways. You don't want anything bad to happen to him, do you?" Harry was quick to add.

Bones and Scrimgeour both seemed to be biting their lips to keep from laughing.

"I'm going too! Somehow that bloke ended up in the hands of my baby sister. He owes my family satisfaction." Ron growled, pointing at Tom Riddle.

"I'm a Slytherin. We're completely outnumbered by Gryffindors here. I need to be along to even out the numbers somewhat. It's Slytherins chamber. It's only right." Millicent added stoutly. She even crossed her arms to show them she would not be moved.

"I'm not going to be the only one left behind." Neville said sourly.

Mr. Diggory's shoulders seemed to be shaking a bit as well as he sent the cage with the rooster down the exposed pipe that was revealed after prodding it with his wand and hitting it with a sonorus.

A commotion outside the bathroom drew McGonagall's attention just as the Ministry folks and
Tom Riddle began sliding down the pipe to get to the Chamber. By now, word that there were strangers in the castle had spread. That, combined with the rooster crows echoing from the bathroom on the second floor had brought the students, and the rest of the teachers, to investigate. While McGonagall was busy trying to shoo off the new influx of students, the kids in the bathroom seized the moment and slid down the pipe, one after the other.

Far down below the school, the children, who had all donned the blindfolds and supersensory charms they used during their blind swordfighting practice so the adults would stop trying to send them away, were clustered at the base of the pipe listening to the argument they could faintly hear drifting down from above.

"Did…Did Dumbledore just call McGonagall an insolent wench?" Ron squeaked.

"SHHH!"

The adults and Tom Riddle had halted before going further. The children looked like some sort of strange cultists, gathered in a circle beneath the pipe, with their blindfolded faces tilted to the sky like they were awaiting orders from on high. Whatever was going on above seemed to end, because the children all said variations of 'damn' and 'bloody hell' before wandering back towards the rest.

"Want to tell us what that was all about?" Scrimgeour asked.

"Dumbledore was having a screaming fit about McG not bringing all of you to his office so he could decide if you had permission to be here, McG said he left running the school to her, and if he wanted to be more involved he should retire from his other responsibilities, otherwise to stay out of her way because she thought insuring our safety and well-being was more important than his ego."

Millicent chuckled.

"He called her an insolent wench!" Ron squeaked again.

"Professor Sprout backed McGonagall up and said she and the other heads of house supported her decision, especially because he apparently got upset when he found out Tom's soul hadn't been sucked out. None of them want him anywhere near him and thought it for the best he be kept out of things." Luna added, her voice dreamy.

Bones and Scrimgeour blanched.

"We had assumed that was just panic speaking."

The kids all sighed and Harry and Neville patted Tom on the shoulder in commiseration.

"Adults suck, don't they? They never believe you when you tell them stuff like that." Harry mused.

"After Sprout stood up for McGonagall he became enraged and told them they were traitors and needed reminding that any authority they had was only whatever he deigned to give them, that this was his castle and his school and he made the rules, and neither they nor the ministry had any say on what went on here...and there was something about messing with things they don't understand."

"And then Professor Flitwick knocked him out." Neville picked up the explanation.

"He wins every time for coolest head of house." Millicent said admiringly.
"They took him off to see Madame Pomfrey to examine, to see if he's insane or senile or something." Ron concluded.

Bones and Scrimgeour looked torn, but the fellow in purple interrupted.

"Enough delays. We have a murderous beast to find. The staff seem to have things well in hand. The senile headmaster can wait."

"Whoa! Cool!" they all suddenly heard Colin exclaim. His shout was accompanied by several camera flashes.

"Child, please stay behind us until we've inspected the area and are sure it's clear." Amos scolded.

"Sorry. But look what I found! It's HUGE!"

The rest of the kids peeked out from under their blindfolds, and Amos whistled in shock.

"Good lord!" Bones said in horror.

Colin had found a shed snake skin that was about ten foot long. Most of it was poisonous green, but for a patch of scarlet near the head.

"No… This is wrong." Tom Riddle said in confusion.

"Mr. Riddle…your testimony stated the basilisk you found was female, correct?"

"Yeah. She didn't have any red on her. She was all green. She was also bigger. A lot bigger."

"The scarlet crest indicates a male. Someone made a new basilisk." the Unspeakable announced.

"Wait, bigger? Define bigger." Diggory interjected.

"She was about forty or fifty feet long at least. She could have swallowed any one of us easily. Two or three at a time for the smaller kids."

"We know so little about their life and growth cycles. Basilisk breeding has been illegal for centuries. We have no idea how old this one is nor how much bigger it is likely to get, nor how long it will take to reach its full growth."

"Actually" Harry mused "I think we can take a pretty good guess as to when this one hatched."

"Explain" Scrimgeour barked.

"Basilisks need a black toad to hatch, don't they?" Neville answered. "I have a black toad, Trevor. He disappeared for the first few weeks of school. I didn't think much of it at first, because he's always running off. He doesn't really move all that fast though, so I would usually find him before too long. Always by the end of the day. The thing is, he disappeared the first day of school. He was gone for weeks. One day he just showed up back in the common room. I was really surprised…not to mention relieved. He was gone long enough I was sure something had eaten him."

"That night is when all the chickens got slaughtered too, remember?" Harry added.

"That's right. We were eating chicken for days." Ron nodded.

"The chickens were slaughtered?"
"Yeah. We saw Hagrid bringing in a whole bunch of dead chickens when we were heading down to breakfast that morning. He said it was a flesh-eating bugbear" Ron recalled.

"Though…now that I think of it, that really doesn't make any sense, does it? Animals don't act like that. If it was a flesh eater, a carnivore, of some sort…it might have broken into the chicken coops and killed a couple, but then it would have carried them off somewhere to eat them, wouldn't it? That's what animals do. It wouldn't have slaughtered all of them. What was it supposed to eat the next time it got hungry?" Harry mused.

"Yeah. The rest would have rotted away before he had a chance to eat more of them." Millicent agreed.

"Even if it was a carrion eater it wouldn't make sense. Carrion eaters don't attack things, they eat the parts left behind by others." Luna pointed out.

"When was this?"

"October 1st."

"Are you saying it's that big and it's only two months old?!" Bones said with horror.

"You know there's something else weird…" Harry mused. "I heard a voice coming from the walls the first week of school. Once we all figured out I was actually a parslemouth and didn't just meet an intelligent, talking snake that one time, I had kind of wondered if it was the basilisk I'd heard…but if we're right about when it was born, that can't have been it."

"Unless someone really was setting up a frame-up job on you." Millicent muttered darkly.

"Come again?"

"You're a parslemouth? How could you not have known? I've always known…well, not what it was called, but that I could talk to snakes." Tom interjected.

"Someone did something to him. He couldn't tell when he was doing it. He'd only ever met that one snake, so he didn't know any better." Ron explained.

Scrimgeour sighed and told Diggory and the Unspeakable "You three go ahead. We'll catch up." he shooed Tom along to follow them. He was needed to open the chamber and the basilisk's lair.

Bones and Scrimgeour transfigured themselves each a seat. "Alright. Why do you think you're being framed?" Scrimgeour sighed.

"Well… after that whole thing with the face on the back of Quirrel's head last year with the philosopher's stone and all…"


The kids all sighed.

"Okay. Wow. This is going to take longer than I thought…"
"Stupid detention. Way to ruin a Saturday." Ron grumbled.

"I still can't believe Professor McGonagall gave us all detention just because we went down to the Chamber." Colin agreed. "Oh well. I got great pictures out of it."

"At least we were just set lines. Had it been Snape we'd have been stuck preparing yucky potions ingredients or scrubbing cauldrons" Millicent shrugged.

"What I can't believe we haven't heard anything more about their investigation. It's been a week." Luna mused.

"Know what I can't believe? Dumbledore flipped out on everyone and might be senile, but he's still here. If we hadn't of gotten detention, I'd have wondered if any of that actually happened of if I was just imagining things." Harry grumbled.

It was a Hogsmeade weekend. All the students third year and up were down in the village for the day. All of them had planned to do stuff in the Garden earlier, but the detention they'd all just served had kind of gotten in the way of that.

"Oh well. We lost a good portion of the day, but we're here now. Let's make the most of it." Neville said firmly.

The kids gathered around the table, books were handed out, as were snacks, courtesy of Ron, who was apparently hungry.

So far, their security measures had worked quite well, and they'd all made sure no one followed them when they'd come down here, therefore it came as a great surprise to all of them when the door suddenly opened and Tom Riddle peeked his head in, only to look around in bemusement.

"What is this place?"

"A better question is how did you even find us?" Ron huffed indignantly.

"I wanted to talk to you" he nodded to Harry "so I went where my feet took me." Tom gestured carelessly as he sauntered in, looking around in interest.

"And you didn't get lost or confused or anything?" Harry demanded.

"Was I supposed to?"

Harry and Neville traded a sour look. It seemed this Tom Riddle had whatever immunity to runes Luna seemed to.
"You didn't lead anyone here did you?" Harry asked then, sounding resigned.

"…No?"

"Excuse us a moment."

Tom crossed his arms and tapped his foot in annoyance as the kids went into a quick huddle and began to whisper furiously. Finally they broke apart and Potter approached alone while the others gathered behind him.

"Since you're already here you're going to have to swear the oaths. This is non-negotiable."

"What oaths?"

"It's nothing onerous. We've all done it."

Tom eyed him a moment warily. "I'm not doing any unbreakable vows."

"Pinky swear."

"Are you joking?"

"Nope. Come on."

Tom rolled his eyes and linked his pinky with Harry's. His whole posture screamed that he felt ridiculous and was just humoring all of them. He swore the oaths, looking rather amused at the injunction to not take anyone's candy without asking first or taking more than his fair share of snacks. He seemed rather annoyed when he was then forced to complete the same ritual with everyone there.

Order restored, the rest went back to whatever they'd been doing when he interrupted.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"This," he said, brandishing a scroll. Harry held out a hand and read through it quickly. "Loki offered to adopt you?"

"Yeah. Is this guy for real?"

"Probably."

"What's he like?"

"He's brilliant. He's the only adult I've ever met that isn't completely useless. But you should see that for yourself. Just go meet him. You can always say no. If you do, he won't push it, and if you change your mind later he would probably still do it. Personally, I suggest you go for it. I was completely at everyone's mercy till Loki came along. There's really only so much you can do when you're an underage kid forced to live with muggles that hate you and have a conniving headmaster that seems to be plotting against you for a magical guardian." Tom frowned pensively, though his eyes widened very slightly in surprise and confusion as he continued.

"That was the case with me till Loki came along. My life has gotten better in every respect since then." He handed back the scroll and started back towards the others. "In the end it's up to you. Just do whatever's best for you and the rest will work itself out."

"We'd be brothers of a sort. Does that bother you?"
"I'm your nearest magical relative. It's not that different." Harry shrugged. "I'll admit I was kind of digging being an only child, but as long as you don't gather a gang to beat me up all the time or throw crybaby tantrums to get me in trouble, I'm sure we'll be fine."

Tom stared at him searchingly for a long moment before leaving with far less fanfare than when he'd arrived.

"Tough luck, mate." Ron said once Tom was gone. "Now you'll be stuck with hand-me-downs all the time."

"I'm already wearing hand-me-downs. These were Loki's when he was a kid. Tom will probably get more of the same." Harry laughed.

"Hey, Colin, do you have the pictures of the kittens ready? There's only a few weeks of term left. I'd like to find homes for them before we leave." Millicent stopped Colin before he headed back to his dark room.

"Yeah, I've got them right here." he told her, flipping through a box he'd been storing finished photos in that he'd left on his bookshelves. He withdrew five pictures and handed them over.

"Come on, Patches. Let's go find good homes for your babies."

Patches let out a sad little 'mew', but rose to follow anyway.

"You're letting the cat pick people?" Ron asked curiously. "Didn't you already make everyone who wanted one of the kittens fill out an application and a questionnaire?"

"Of course! She has to make sure they're trustworthy. Everyone who put in an application has to sit through an interview with me while she tests their character. We're not going to just hand them over to any old person who won't treat them right! Geez" Millicent huffed before she and her cat Patches disappeared out the door.

The kittens were still in a little sectioned off part of the living room; they weren't yet big enough to get out and wander the halls like their mum was.

Ron stared at the kittens for a bit and sighed. "I think I'm going to miss the little beasties. Don't know why. They're just teeth, claws and fluff."

"Well obviously we should play with them while we still have a chance to." Luna said firmly.

Ron held firm for only a moment. "Yeah, alright."

"Yay!"

Neville and Harry turned back to the books they had spread out all over the table, while Colin headed back to his photo lab--an expanded closet they'd set up for him as a workshop.

"You know, I was thinking. I might have a solution to the problem of funding our space program."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Asteroid mining. It'll mean slightly changing the direction of our research thus far, but I think with a bit of work we might actually have a viable operation by the time we graduate. We'll probably have to make a deal with the goblins to fence whatever we manage to get, but that should be fine."
"Asteroid mining?" Luna said in interest from her spot near the kittens.

"Yeah! No, no listen. It's all in here. For a while I really thought wizards had nothing to teach us about space, because the only account of space travel we found was that guy who claimed he flew to the moon and brought back a moon toad. Even the most generous folks are pretty sure he just got drunk, flew into a reflection of the moon on a lake and caught a toad while he was trying to figure out what happened. It turns out I was very, very wrong."

"How so?" Neville wondered.

"Have you seen those galaxies in a globe they sell on Diagon Alley?"

"Yeah?"

"It's more than just a pretty picture in a globe. The witch that worked on the thing actually figured out how to make the thing a real-time reflection of our galaxy. If there's a star going supernova while you're looking at it, you can zoom in and watch it happen! It's more than even that though. Because it's a representation of the real thing you can actually poke at the different stars and planets and such and get information about their composition, their atmosphere if they have one, all kinds of stuff! It took her twenty years to get it to work right. This book here was written by her, detailing some of the stuff she found while working out the bugs. It turns out a lot of asteroids are full of stuff like platinum, gold, titanium, silver, and all kinds of other stuff besides. If we can figure out how to get a little ship to some asteroids to do mining for us we would have plenty of money to fund all kinds of projects. The other stuff in them is all stuff muggles use a lot of, which means we could sell some of it to them for more money."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I think I heard somewhere that muggles want to do this, but they don't have the technological capabilities yet. We do, or we will once we get our mining operation up and running. Plus we have a leg up on the muggles beyond even being able to make a viable ship with magic. The galaxy in a globe. We can find the asteroids that actually have useful stuff and go right to them, whereas the muggles would probably have to poke at each of them even once they manage to get up there."

"Wow. That's a great idea. I don't know anything about mining." Luna admitted.

"Me either. I'm headed to the library again to see if they have anything on it."

"I'll come with you." Neville offered.

"This is ridiculous!"

"QUIET!"

"Sorry, Madame Pince."

Harry poked Neville, who Madame Pince was still glaring at sourly until he moved away from the card catalogue and followed him to an out of the way corner of the library, away from students, portraits and stern librarians.

"It's ridiculous! Everything useful seems to be in the restricted section!"
"Yeah, I'd noticed that. I'm starting to build quite a collection. That book about the galaxy in a globe was in there too. Pretty much all the stuff we've been looking at lately is, with the exception of the story about the moon toad. That was in the regular stacks. It's very frustrating. Every time I go in there to grab more I'm always afraid that will be the time I get caught."

"It doesn't make any sense though! Why would stuff about mining be in the restricted section?"

"I don't know. Ask Madame Pince." Harry nodded to himself. "In fact, yeah. Go do that. Don't talk about mining or space though. Ask why stuff about plants outside Britain are in there. Keep her distracted while I make a run. After you talk to her as long as you can manage, come stand in front of the restricted section and dig through your bag or something. I've got a long list to fetch. I'm going to need your pockets. I can't fit them all in mine."

"Geez. The things I do for you."

Harry grinned, hit himself with a disillusionment charm and donned his cloak--less chance of anyone spotting a foot or hand that way--and crept off while Neville steeled himself to talk to the librarian.

When they returned to the Garden an hour later, Ron just shook his head at them.

"Ooh! New goodies!" Luna chirped, heading over to rifled through the new books.

"What weird kids I'm hanging with. It's the weekend and you're all off stealing library books."

"I beg your pardon! I haven't stolen anything. The library books are right where they should be. These are copies and they're mine fair and square."

Harry tapped each of his new hoard on the inside cover and left a bookplate behind that said "I belong to the Library of Harry Potter. If found Please Return Me."

"See? Mine."

"Yeah, whatever mate. Why'd you steal books about mining of all things?"

"I acquired books about mining because we need to know more about it so we can go mine asteroids, become super rich and fund our space program."

"We've got a space program?"

"Not yet. That's what we're going to be working on."

"Yes, Ronald. Weren't you listening earlier?"

"And it will make us super rich?"

"It should. Muggles seem to think the first trillionaires will be made from asteroid mining."

"Count me in!"

"We already had. You're expected to read some of these." Neville scoffed.

"And help design a viable remote mining drone we can send to space to do it for us." Luna added cheerfully.
"What?!

"What do you mean what? If you want to be super rich you're going to have to work for it like the rest of us are. Now get reading." Harry ordered.

"Aw man." Ron grumbled as he pulled one towards himself.

"You know, exams are just a couple of weeks away. We're not going to have a lot of time to devote to all this." Neville mused.

"So we'll pick it up when we come back from the holidays. The books will all be with me anyway. I'm going to put all my stuff that's down here into my trunk the day before we leave, just in case. I suggest the rest of you do the same. I don't know yet whether or not Tom is going to take Loki up on his offer; if he doesn't, well, he knows about this place, and the rest of us are all leaving. He's older than us. I don't want him stealing our ideas and doing stuff with them two years before the rest of us are out of school."

"Yeah, that's a good point. See what I meant though? Older brothers are a pain. If it was Percy, I'd guarantee he'd do that if he thought he'd make a fortune at it. He's the sort of guy who would then turn around and tell me I could work for him at the usual workman's rate while he's raking it in. Bastard. Glad he's going to the Ministry. He's so busy working on his acceptance speech for when he thinks he'll eventually become Minister of Magic, he hasn't bothered to worry what I'm up to. That's all to the good to my mind. Same with the twins. They want to open a joke shop and they're busy working towards that. I didn't know that until recently. I just figured they were off goofing around all the time. If they weren't so focused on doing their own thing, I've no doubt they'd tried to weasel into all this too. Ginny's been trying to find out where I go all the time, but she hasn't had any luck so far. I wouldn't be surprised if my mum orders me to take her with me from now on if she complains about it. She was really who I hung out with before Hogwarts started, not to mention she's been a bit peeved that the only time she ever sees you is at meal times."

"We agreed the next person brought in was going to be a Hufflepuff, a Ravenclaw or a Slytherin." Neville interrupted Ron's monologue after a quick glance at Harry's hunched shoulders. The poor guy was still spooked that he might be drugged and married off against his will.

"We just got a second Slytherin, so the next is either a Hufflepuff or a second Ravenclaw."

"I was going to try to recruit Hannah Abbot, but she won't go anywhere without Justin Finch-Fletchley or Ernie MacMillan, which means we'd have to take all three of them, plus none of them like astronomy and they're not interested in space exploration." Neville grumbled.

"What are we talking about?" Millicent asked as she and Patches returned.

"The next pledges. Neville's first choice was a bust."

"Abbot, right? She's sort of high strung. I don't think she'd be a good fit."

Neville sighed.

"I have a suggestion. Theo Nott. He's a bit of a loner. He's smart. He gets O's in astronomy. He had a bit of a rebellious streak a few years back. He used to sneak out into the village to watch muggle movies. There was a cheap, hole-in-the-wall third-run movie house there. He likes sci-fi. He snuck some muggle sci-fi books from the local library as well. It's his deep, dark secret. If that's not enough, he will probably be forever loyal to this group if it gives him someplace to hide out when Malfoy's in one of his diva moods. He already thinks about this kind of stuff. He might already
have some ideas. Really, we should snatch him up before someone else does."

"More Slytherins." Ron sighed.

"We're still outnumbered, even if Riddle comes back."

"I'll give him a yes." Harry offered.

"Me too." Neville agreed. "We've both talked to him a few times. He's cool."

"I will have to meet him before I will agree. I don't believe Colin knows him either." Luna decided.

"You'll both have a chance. We won't be approaching him till after the holidays in any case."

Millicent nodded, happy her choice hadn't just been dismissed out of hand, and in fact already had three of the six votes needed…no, wait, Riddle had been sworn in. He was a Slytherin; getting his vote shouldn't be a problem.

The last weeks of term flew by. Before everyone knew it, it was time to leave for the Express back to London.

"Ugh. Free at last!" Millicent said dramatically, throwing her arms wide.

"Those exams were brutal. I don't even wanna know what Hermione's going to be like when she finds out she missed the whole year. Gosh…You don't think they'll make her repeat the year, do you?" Ron asked, sounding worried.

"Knowing Hermione, she probably has been working at least a year ahead. She could probably pass the exams at the end of the year with just a bit of studying. I doubt they'll make her repeat the year regardless. She's already almost a year older than some of us. If she's left behind she'll be two years older, obsessive about her grades… Yeah, I can't see that ending well." Harry snorted.

"How do you all think you did?" Neville wondered.

"I passed. Mum can't complain as long as I passed." Ron muttered.

"I think daddy will be very pleased."

"I think I did okay." Harry shrugged.

"Same here." Millicent nodded.

"Did everyone get their stuff?" Harry asked a moment later.

"I didn't have anything there except Patches. I handed out all the kittens last night, made sure everyone had carriers and knew to bring food on the train for them, made sure they knew the charms to tidy up after them…"

"Didn't you already do all that when you interviewed people who wanted one?" Ron wondered.

"No harm in double checking." Millicent defended herself.

"I think I was there last. Everything was cleared out. Did Tom accept Loki's offer?" Luna noted.

"I don't know. I haven't really seen him since he came to talk to me that time."
"Loki didn't say anything either? You've been getting letters."

"The last couple were actually from Sirius Black. He's out of the hospital. He said Loki's been helping him get his affairs in order, and there was a lot to go through. He's the last Black with the name. His mum left her estate a bit of a mess. His one grandfather died not long after he got out of prison. The other one is expected to not last much longer. He said when he's not doing that he's had regular visits with a mind healer to try to help him bring back and reintegrate his happy thoughts--apparently the dementors don't eat them, they suppress them and if it goes on long enough you can end up with holes in your memory. They actually feed on your misery. Sounds awful. I can't even imagine being trapped in a place like that for ten years and knowing a guy who used to be your friend was the one responsible…"

"Yeah. That Pettigrew was a real piece of work. I'm glad his mum died before it all came out. She died thinking he was a hero, instead he was nothing but a miserable cowardly rat that betrayed all his friends." Neville shook his head.

"Would of served her right! She's the one that raised the bastard. 'was probably her fault he turned out that way." Ron scoffed.

"We never knew the woman. My parents and Sirius thought he was their friend for years, trusted him enough to put our lives in his hands. Chances are she thought he was a good, decent and honest person as well."

"Well, she'd have been wrong, wouldn't she?"

"Let's change the subject." Neville sighed.

"We're at the carriages anyway. Look, I'll see you all later. I'm going to ride with Pansy and the rest of the girls. She's been complaining that I haven't been around much."

"Alright. See you, Millie. Good holiday."

"Goodbye, Millicent."

"Where's Colin at anyway?"

"He's riding with his roommates too."

"Ah. Guess it's just us then."

Luna wandered to the front of the carriage to pet the skeletal horses that were hitched to the front. Harry wandered over to pet them as well.

"It's funny… I could have sworn the carriages didn't have horses last year… or when we arrived, though I wondered if they had invisible horses pulling them." he laughed. "I wonder why they changed that? Did the charms on the carriages break down?"

"They were probably there last year, you just couldn't see them yet. They're thestrals. You have to have seen death to see them. Because of that they have a bit of a bad reputation. People think they're a bad omen. They're really quite gentle creatures."

"My parents died in front of me when I was a baby. If that's the case I should have seen them last year."

"You were too young to really understand what happened. You're older now, and you've seen more
death since then. You must have finally internalized what it meant."

Harry frowned at the reminder of Quirrel and the events of the last year. If he was honest with himself, he really hadn't internalized it until he'd told the story to Luna and Neville. When he'd woken in the hospital wing it had all seemed like it had happened a long time previously, and wasn't important enough to dwell on. When he'd told the story it had all come rushing back, and it had really hit him; a man had died under his hands. He was gone, wasn't coming back. He couldn't bring himself to feel at all guilty about it--he'd been trying to kill him, after all.

"Oi! Come on, you two. The train won't wait forever."

The four of them piled into a carriage, but before it had a chance to take off Ginny popped up in the doorway.

"Ron, get my trunk."

"You get it. I know for certain you learn the levitation charm first year."

Ginny glared at him, so Neville levitated her trunk for her. She smiled and climbed in after it. She had a carrier with her, with a fat, fluffy ginger kitten inside.

"Mum know you got that?"

"I figured I'd tell her when we got home."

"Damn it, Gin. If you'd have told her a week ago you were gonna have it she couldn't have gotten all the wailing about animagi out of her system before we were around to listen to it! Now we're going to be stuck!"

"I've got a certified letter from Professor McGonagall that she was checked over and is a perfectly regular cat! Stop worrying!"

"What did you name her, Ginevra?" Luna asked, petting the kitten through the mesh.

"I was going to call her Pigwidgeon, but she refused to play with me until I took it back. I ended up calling her Marmalade. She seems to like that much better."

"We were just calling her Pounce. She was always jumping on everyone's feet and trying to attack them."

"You all knew her before?" Ginny asked, sounding suspicious for some reason.

"Yes. Patches didn't want to stay in the Slytherin common room when the kittens were born; there were always too many people always coming and going. She was off in an out of the way corner of the castle-- which was probably a good thing. She and the kittens didn't get petrified like so many people's pets did. We'd play with them sometimes after they started walking around. She was Pounce, the grey one was Ghost--he blended in with the stonework and liked to sneak up on people. The two that look like Patches were Mischief and Mayhem, and the striped one was Dignified. I named that one. He really was, too." Luna explained.

Ginny frowned. "You four spend a lot of time together?"

"Now and then." Ron said evasively. "So...how was your first term at Hogwarts anyway? Everything you'd hoped it would be?"
Ron's inquiry opened the floodgates, metaphorically speaking. Ginny chattered non-stop for the rest of the ride down to the station. They found out that most of her roommates were "bloody wenches" who liked frivolous things--like make-up and fashion. She, however, wasn't like other girls; she liked quidditch and defense against the dark arts. Harry's eyebrows climbed into his hairline when she said this, as while she was doing so, she stared intently into his eyes, her voice forceful and laden with significance.

"Um… Good for you?"

Ginny sat back in her seat looking disgruntled for some reason.

"Herbology's my favorite class. I like quidditch too. Not to play; I'm afraid of heights, but I like watching." Neville interjected.

"I like playing. It'll be a couple of years till I can though, other than at home during the summers, I mean. Oliver Wood'll be graduating in two more years. I can try out for keeper then. Not everyone gets special treatment like Harry here." Ron added.

"You say special treatment like it's a good thing." Harry muttered.

"I like charms and astronomy, and I'm quite looking forward to care of magical creatures. I've already gotten a bit of a head start there, since it doesn't start till third year. I've been visiting the thestral herds, and the hippogriffs. There's a whole herd of them as well. Sometimes I visit the owls too." Luna explained.

"You should go to the headmaster's office one of these days. He's got a phoenix up there. He burned up when me and Neville were there before. He's rather pretty now that he's not all old and grey anymore."

"I like animals!" Ginny interjected.

"Well, yeah…we kind of figured. Especially since you got one of the kittens. Millicent and Patches were very picky." Harry replied, looking at her oddly.

Ginny frowned again.

"You don't know the half of it! I had to fill out an application, and sit for an interview with Bulstrode while her cat stared at me!"

Ron shrugged. "None of us wanted to see the little balls of fluff go to a bad home."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ginny growled.

"That…we wanted them to go to good homes?"

"You act like I'm going to be mean to her!"

"You do realize Millie made everyone do that, right? You weren't singled out or anything." Neville inserted.

"Oh look! We're at the train!" Harry added, throwing open the door as soon as the carriage rolled to a halt. The two Weasleys looked about ready to start snarling at each other. Harry didn't want to be in the middle of it.

Once the train was underway, the ride seemed to pass with uncommon slowness. Ginny's presence
meant they couldn't discuss anything to do with the Garden, and so they were left with small talk about classes, events at Hogwarts unconnected to the Garden and the upcoming holidays.

Ginny seemed to sense there was something going on that she wasn't privy to, and she didn't seem to appreciate being left out. Ron seemed to realize it too, and in fact looked rather gloomy about the prospect of having to fend her off for the holiday alone.

They got a bit of elbow room when Harry unpacked the lunch the elves had given him. There wasn't much talking while everyone was stuffing their faces. Once the food was gone, Ginny went right back to (trying) to ask subtle, probing questions about what they all got up to together and where they were hiding most of the time. It was rather a relief when the train pulled into the station.

"Oh, good we're here! Well, have a good holiday, everyone. See you next year!"

"Bye, Harry."

Harry waved vaguely over his shoulder; he was already doing his best to high-tail it out of the compartment and off the train. He hadn't realized when they first did it how stressful their pinky-swear secrecy would be when around non-club members. Why did people have to be so damned nosy, anyway?

He spotted Loki chatting with Mr. Lovegood and Neville's gran. Ron and Ginny's mum was at the other end of the platform near the muggle entrance. Ron waved glumly as he passed by to go meet her. Ginny was trudging along behind him, looking very put out to have to drag her trunk such a distance while already carrying her kitten.

Neville and Luna vanished with their respective guardians not long after.

Tom came sidling up after the others left. Though he didn't look it, Harry had a feeling he was rather nervous, but also tentatively hopeful, though he seemed to be doing his best to squash that down deep. Harry could understand; he'd spent the last part of the summer feeling that way. He was thrilled to be away from the Dursleys, and had wanted to believe the thing with Loki would work out, but through it all he'd kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Ah, Thomas, there you are. Well, grab on, children."

"Are we going back to where we were before?" Harry asked curiously.

"Actually we'll be staying at your godfather's house for at least part of the holidays. The house was rather a fright, but he and his little friend have been slowly fixing it up. He didn't really want to go back there at all, and from what I understand, even with the work they've put in a lot of it is still in frightful condition. I told him we could just find someplace else, but the mind healers seemed to think it would do him some good, help him reconnect with his past and put it in proper perspective or something. We'll still be in London, just another section of the city."

"Whereabouts?" Tom asked.

"Islington."

Tom wrinkled his nose. "That's a slum. Lot of it got bombed."

"It was once quite the fashionable district, and I believe Remus has said it's been becoming so once more. From what Sirius has told me the house of Black was in that area for centuries, but it got swallowed up by the surrounding developments."
"That seems to be a recurring theme. So I'm guessing no broom rides?" Harry sighed.

"I'm afraid not, at least not while we're there."

Loki gripped each of their shoulders and they were suddenly elsewhere, standing on a stone porch before a highly decorated archway that held a massive black door in its center. There seemed to be no handle, just a snake door knocker. Loki simply touched the door lightly with his fingertips and it swung open, revealing a smallish portico just beyond, lit with scarlet sconces with gold fastenings. Loki sighed when he saw the lamps.

"Welcome to no. 12, Grimmauld Place. I've been trying to convince him not to just replace everything with red and gold, but as yet I've had little success."

"The Gryffindor common room is red and gold. If that's a place he was happy, he's probably trying to recreate it."

"I realize that, but this place needs a more delicate touch to show it off to its best effect. Ah well; it isn't my house. I don't really have any say in the matter, but still…"

He led them into the atrium and Harry winced while Tom made a gagging sound behind him.

"Okay, I see your point." Harry sighed. There was a sweeping staircase to the left that wound upwards out of sight, and there were open doorways past it and to the right. There were bright red velvet curtains hanging on the wall to the left, just before the staircase. Overhead was a massive gold chandelier with golden lion-heads with ruby eyes holding the clusters of glittering crystals in their mouths. There was a red rug covering the floor with gold designs worked into it, and red and gold wallpaper on the walls. The overall effect was too bright, too busy, and it didn't really flow with the surrounding architecture at all.

"Maybe if we all work on him… Even Gryffindor doesn't go this far."

"Harry!"

The three of them turned to see Sirius, who looked much better than his mugshot, or the photos right after his trial had led him to expect. His face had filled out, the elbow-length, greasy, tangled mop of grey-streaked hair had been cut, washed and styled. The dark circles were gone from his eyes and his flesh didn't look waxy anymore. He had shaved off the long, scraggly beard as well, which made him look far younger than he had in the papers, though the world-weary eyes and the streaks of gray still present would never let you mistake him for a young man.

"Sirius. St. Mungo's seems to have done something right."

Sirius gave a self-deprecating smile in return. "Yeah, I've stopped making small children cry when I walk down the street. Well, come here, let me get a look at you." he shook his head. "You look a lot like your father did when he was your age. I can see a lot of your mum as well. You got her eyesight; that's good. Your dad always hated that he had to wear glasses."

"I did too until about two weeks ago. I think you're the first person to ever say I looked like my mum. It's usually just 'you look just like your dad, but you have your mother's eyes.'"

"I guess it was harder to see past the glasses and the crazy hair."

He seemed to recall then that there was another kid standing in his atrium feeling awkward.

"You must be Tom. Welcome to my…” he seemed to dither for a moment on the choice of words
before settling on "house." He waved a hand to encompass all of it they couldn't see. "I'm afraid you and Harry will be sharing a room the first day or two. It's been taking a lot longer getting this place cleaned up than I was expecting. The front parlor over there" he gestured to the door leading to the right "and the kitchen are done, as are four bedrooms, and a bathroom over there and one upstairs. The rest of the place is still kind of a dump. Don't either of you go in the bathroom with the warning sign on the door. There's a murderous ghoul in there. He seems content to stay where he is, and the door is locked, but best not to take chances. I'm not sure yet if there's any more creepy crawlies lurking around here, but it wouldn't surprise me. Be careful handling anything in any of the uncleaned rooms; a lot of it is cursed, poisonous, and the like. It would probably be best to look but not touch until we get a chance to check everything over."

"Do you have a library?" Harry wondered. Tom perked up very subtly as well.

"Why do you want to know that?" Sirius asked, sounding rather perplexed.

"We have holiday homework." Tom answered smoothly. "I usually just stayed at Hogwarts each holiday. I just realized I won't have access to the school library."

"Same here. I stayed over last year. I've been trying to bring my grades up." Harry nodded.

"Oh… Uh, yeah, there is one. It's around here somewhere. Again, we should probably look it over before you try venturing in there. I wouldn't be surprised if most of the books were cursed. It'll give me a chance to burn all the dark arts books too…probably won't be anything left of the library once I do" he added bitterly.

"BURN THEM!!" Loki, Tom and Harry all yelped in horror.

Sirius cringed, hunched his shoulders and began desperately shushing them, but it was already too late. The three of them nearly leapt out of their skin as the red velvet curtains on the wall parted suddenly, and a shrill, mad voice began to shriek.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHH! Shame of my flesh! Betrayer of blood! Mudbloods and halfbloods, here in the house of my fathers! How dare you! I should have ripped you from my womb…"

Tom, Harry and Loki all turned to stare at the crazed, cackling portrait in horror.

"Who the hell is that?!!" Tom demanded.

Sirius sighed tiredly and stomped over to try wrestling the curtains back across the portrait, but the woman within--who looked as deranged as she sounded, and seemed to be chained to the wall, cut off her shriek and stared at Tom in astonishment.

"It's the dark lord!!" she said reverently before becoming confused. "Why are you a boy? You should be a man in your prime!"

Tom stiffened and looked at the woman with horrified distaste.

"I am Tom Marvolo Riddle. I do believe you have mistaken me for another. I've been transfigured into a book the last fifty years, and had my identity stolen by a madman that seems to have nearly destroyed the magical world by using my status as heir of Slytherin for nefarious purposes." he said stiffly.

Harry looked at him in envy. "You do that so well. If I made a speech about nefarious purposes I'd just sound silly."
Everyone just looked at him.

"What?"

The portrait seemed to process what Tom had said and almost seemed to pale, in spite of being just animated paint on a canvas.

"Destroyed? What do you mean destroyed? The movement was meant to save us!"

"SAVE YOU? Save you? From what? FROM WHAT, YOU BITTER OLD HAG! There wasn't anything wrong until he and his band of nutters went running amok!"

Sirius and the portrait began screaming at each other, neither one seeming to notice or care any longer that they had an audience. Loki sighed and chivvied the boys towards the doorway at the rear of the room.

"Come along. They obviously have things to discuss."

Harry spotted a man with greying brown hair at the top of the stairs as they left the room. He didn't seem to notice the three of them, his attention was all on Sirius and the portrait. He looked rather tired and dismayed, but unsurprised. Harry could only guess it must happen a lot.

Loki led them down a rather dusty hallway filled with doors, all of which were closed but one, which seemed to be the downstairs bathroom Sirius had mentioned. At the end of a hall was another doorway that led downstairs. At the bottom was a kitchen with a long wooden table and chairs. Sirius' mad urge to make everything red and gold didn't seem to have manifested there. Everything was dark wood, slate tiles underfoot, warmly gleaming copper pans and a cheerfully burning fire. There were three house elves bustling around down there--Olaf, Brunhilde and another one with white hair that he didn't recognize.

"Oh! Yous is being just in time! Dinner is being ready! Yous is being hungry we hopes!" Olaf said cheerfully.

"Starved."

"Where is wretched blood-traitor master who broke his mother's heart? Kreacher is not doing this for his health you knows." the white haired fellow, Kreacher apparently, muttered to himself.

"I think they're coming now." Loki assured them. "Everything smells delicious. Wonderful job, as always."

"This wizard is thanking Kreacher. He is being a strange one. Such odd people in mistress' house. Oh, how she would weep if she could see Kreacher now."

"What smells so good? When did we get food… who are…Kreacher? You're still alive? How are you still alive?"

Sirius asked as he stepped into the room, followed by the grey-haired fellow from earlier.

"Kreacher is alive because he did not die. Blood-traitor master who broke his mother's heart has gotten even stranger in his absence from the family."

"Makes sense to me." Harry offered. "Look! I'm doing the same right now."
"Come along, Kreacher." Brunhilde said kindly. "We is being finished here for the moment. Let's find something else to do for now."

The three elves disappeared, and there was a moment of silence until Tom wondered "So…elves get dementia?"

"So it would seem. Does he even realize he's speaking out loud?" Harry wondered.

"Given the state of the house, I would say he's been here alone for quite a long time. Elves don't do well without a family bond to sustain them. If you make an effort to be kind to him I'm sure he'll recover in time."

"The little rat can go crawl back to whatever hole he crawled out of and stay there."

"Should we do the same to you?" Harry asked quietly. "He doesn't seem to have had any easier a time than you have the last few years." He sighed at Sirius' stricken face.

"I just meant that a little kindness would go a long way. If you don't feel capable of that, perhaps you should see if one of your cousins wants him. It would be kinder to him. I know too well what it's like to be trapped in a house where no one wants you and goes to great lengths to make sure you know it. It doesn't make for a happy existence."

Sirius settled heavily into the nearest seat and seemed to collapse in on himself, and appeared to be settling in for an epic, bitter brood… At least he was until a roll bounced off his head.

"OI!"

"Stop that. All I was saying is that you should try to be nice to him. He's obviously not well."

"You don't understand. We have history. He was always tattling on me to my mother and getting me in trouble."

"You were a notorious trouble-maker, and he was probably under orders." Tom pointed out. "Plus, if you hadn't of been doing something you shouldn't he wouldn't have had anything to report."

Sirius glared at all of them and bit savagely into the roll that had hit him. He looked down at what was left in his hand with an odd look on his face.

"What?"

"Huh? Oh… it's nothing, really. It's just this. Kreacher's onion rolls. I haven't had one of these in years. He used to make them all the time for dinner because Regulus liked them. He was an odd kid, my brother."

He sighed then, suddenly tired. "I should probably apologize. This wasn't the welcome I intended."

"Don't worry about it. It's late. Let's eat and start over in the morning. We can help you redecorate the house. Starting with the atrium." Harry said cheerfully.

"That's already been…" Sirius began to sputter.

His friend bit his lip and seemed to be trying not to laugh.

"Yes. I can understand why your poor mother was driven mad. Living all alone in a dirty bordello with a senile house elf. It would do that to anyone." Tom added, his face innocent. Harry nodded.
"How the heck do you know what a bordello looks like?" Sirius demanded.

"There was one not far from the orphanage. They'd give you pennies to run errands for them sometimes." Tom shrugged.

"What about you?"

"They're in muggle movies a lot." Harry answered. "Everyone's always hanging out in bordellos. That's what they usually look like. Everything's red, there's lots of curtains everywhere. If you had a bunch of girls laying around in their underwear and a corset you could film a movie in there."

"That would certainly brighten up the place."

"Perhaps when the children return to school." Loki laughed.

"But you shouldn't be watching those kinds of movies."

"What's wrong with cowboy movies?" Harry asked confused.

"Cowboys?"

Loki whispered in his ear for a bit and his face cleared. "Oh. Nevermind."

"What kind of movies did you mean?"

"Never you mind."

Everyone settled down at the table and began filling their plates.

Sirius dug in right away, a look of bliss on his face. "Ah, that's good stuff. I was getting sick of beans on toast and scrambled eggs." Beside him his friend nodded.

"Why were you…?"

"Can't cook. Him either."

"I usually just make a lot of sandwiches." Remus agreed.

"Oh. So…who are you then?" Tom asked.

"Oh, sorry. Boys, this is my old friend Remus Lupin. We were in Gryffindor together."

"Hello."

"Nice to finally meet you."

"Hello, Tom. Harry, it's good to see you as well. Goodness. You do look a lot like your father when he was your age… though I can see a lot of your mother as well. You got her eyesight. Your dad would be happy about that. He… What's so funny?"

"That's exactly what he said."

"Oh." Remus chuckled as well.

"So… I was thinking we could decorate tomorrow. Do either of you need to do any Christmas shopping or anything?"
"I do."

"That sounds an excellent idea. Thomas and I need to go to Gringott's in any case."

"Alright. We can head to Diagon tomorrow and then decorate after. How's that sound?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Same here. Hey. I had an idea I wanted to try, but I don't have the first idea how to go about it."

"Oh yeah? Shoot."

"Collaborative project notebooks. People could put stuff in, other people could see it in their own book, comment on it or make alterations for everyone to see."

"Protean charm. What goes in one shows up in the other too."

"Not for two, for more than that. Enough for a group of seven, say, or twelve."

"Big project. What are you doing?"

"That's classified."


"You'd have to do each page, both sides and link them to the same page in all the others. That would be unwieldy to say the least."

"You could have a master book and link a dozen slaves to it."

"Yeah, but shared changes would only be able to be made in the master book. It would be all one way. Everyone would get a copy, but having them able to share back would get back to unwieldy protean charms that just wouldn't be feasible."

"Maybe a chalkboard or something similar, but one with memory that could be retrieved? Connect the books to that?"

"Or you could just make chained pairs." Tom offered.

"Chained pairs?" Remus asked in interest.

"Twelve books. Six pairs protean charmed together. Split each pair and do the same with one of each from the next two pairs, repeat."

"The layered protean charms would interfere with each other." Remus objected.

"I don't see why. It would just make them all show the same thing. Someone makes a change, it would spread to its partner and each half would spread it to the next two pairs in the chain. You wouldn't have to charm each page because each pair of books would just know they had to be the same."

"That's a good idea, actually. We should try it. I want to see how it works." Sirius decided. "Let me get some paper. We can do a trial run."

"Finish eating first." Remus chided.

"I can multi-task."

"Sirius."
Dinner was delicious, and ended up being quite entertaining. Sirius and Remus had been great pranksters in their youth, as of course had Loki. The boys were kept entertained by tales of pranks until dinner was finished. By then all of them were getting quite sleepy.

They were led upstairs and shown to a largish bedroom with two beds installed inside, one to either side of the room. The only other piece of furniture in there at the moment was a wardrobe, upon which Hedwig was already snoozing.

"What a surprise. It's red and gold. Don't you know any other colors? Do you really want your entire house to be red?" Loki sighed.

"That's it. When we're out shopping tomorrow we're getting you some decorating ideas." Harry muttered. He noticed a bunch of boxes piled up against one wall. "What are those?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I forgot those were there. It turns out your mail has been re-directed the last ten years. Loki made some inquiries and found out where it was all being stored. There was a lot of thank-yous, a few birthday cards, and the like, best holiday wishes, that sort of thing. There were also some presents. It's mostly toys for a toddler/preschool age kid."

"All those were presents? For me?"

"Indeed. We already took care of sending thank you cards and acknowledgments for everything, and explained about you not getting any of your mail all this time, so you don't have to worry about that. It took us all a few weeks to get through everything. The elves are going to pick up anything new from your mail drop once a week from now on, so you'll have to take care of anything new yourself. The post office will scan incoming letters for curses and hexes, so you don't have to worry about that. There was only a few over the years that had any in any case." Loki explained.

"If it's all baby toys, what am I supposed to do with them?"

"That's up to you."

"Are there any wizarding orphanages?"

"No." Tom Riddle grumbled.

"Oh. Is there a pediatric ward in the hospital?"

"Yes, though I don't know how many children are likely to be there. Most hospital stays are for a day or two at most."

"Aunt Cissy does charity work and stuff. I'll ask her if she knows any poor kids who could use a few extra presents this year." Harry nodded to himself.

"Aunt Cissy?" Sirius repeated, he seemed not to know whether to sound amused or horrified.

"Pleasant dreams, boys." Remus interjected.

"Yeah, goodnight." Sirius echoed. "Aunt Cissy." he muttered again as they wandered off to find their own rooms.

"There's a portrait in here." Tom commented.
"Yes, a rather droll fellow by the name of Phinneas." Loki agreed.

"As in Phinneas Nigellus?" Harry asked. "Former headmaster of Hogwarts, whose portrait still hangs in the office there? Right next to Dumbledore's desk?"

"Hmm…you know, I do believe it is."

"Kreacher?"

The wizened house elf from earlier popped into the room and looked at all three of them suspiciously.

"Hello, Kreacher. Could you put this portrait in the attic, please? While you're at it, could you put Sirius' mum's portrait up there too."

"Mistress wants to be there so she can be keeping an eye on the house."

"While it was empty that was probably a good idea, but it's not anymore. Sirius still isn't quite recovered from his time in Azkaban, and I don't think the regular arguments with his mother are helping at all. I'm sure they're no good for her either." he added when he saw Kreacher seemed unmoved. "Put her in the attic for now. Maybe later, once Sirius has recovered, you can put her back, but for now it would probably be for the best if they had some distance."

Kreacher glared at all of them and began muttering to himself as he disappeared. The portrait on the wall of the boys' room went with him. They'd have to check in the morning to see if Mrs. Black's portrait was gone as well.

Loki smiled at them both. "Sleep tight, children. I shall see you in the morning."

Once Loki was gone, Harry started levitating the boxes out of the corner to rest between the two beds.

"What are you doing?"

"Aren't you curious? I am. I never got presents for Christmas before last year, never for my birthday either. Apparently people were sending me stuff and…" he trailed off after opening the first of the boxes.

A child sized broom, brightly colored building blocks, toy soldiers that waved and tried to get his attention, stuffed animals, brightly colored and soft to the touch. Harry picked up the white teddy bear that was near the top. He was holding a heart on its lap. When squeezed, the heart began to emit a gentle light and a soothing feeling. Harry smiled sadly at it. This little fellow alone would have made the long years in the cupboard bearable.

"… I would have killed for even one of these when I was little." he finished his earlier thought quietly.

He set the bear aside and peeked in the other boxes. More of the same, as well as several brightly colored children's books. He opened one curiously. Each page had a different animal, which you could hear when you looked at the page. He ran his hand across the picture and laughed in disbelief.

"Touch it. You can feel the fur."

Tom ran his finger over it curiously and laughed. "So you can."
He flipped through and found a picture of a snake, which hissed at them. Tom and Harry both started giggling. Though the snake looked and sounded fierce, he kept saying "Mayonnaise! Mayonnaise!"

"Why do snakes even have a word for that?"

"Perhaps one of them dreamed of becoming a chef." Tom remarked dryly.

Still snickering, Harry levitated the boxes till they were next to the door by the wardrobe, and then dug out his pajamas. Tom followed suit a moment later.

It had been a long day, so both of them fell asleep rather quickly. Harry woke up again a few hours later and looked around, wondering what had woken him. It had been Tom, he realized. He was having a nightmare, he was certain of it, though how he could tell, he wasn't sure. The boy made not a sound, and his only movement was an occasional twitch, but he was certain nonetheless. He was at a loss for a moment as to what to do. Should he wake him? Leave him be? That's when his gaze fell on the boxes of children's toys. He crept out of bed as quietly as he could manage and retrieved the teddy bear from earlier, squeezed it and tucked it into Tom's arms.

"All is well. You are safe." he hissed as he straightened his blankets and tucked him in. "There are no predators in the nest."

Bit by bit Tom's muscles relaxed. He gave the other boy a final light pat and went back to his own bed, and was swiftly asleep once more.

The boys were both up bright and early the next morning. The teddy bear was nowhere to be seen. It wasn't on Tom's bed, but neither had it been returned to the box of toys. Harry didn't say anything about it and neither did Tom, though Harry was certain he felt his eyes on him at different points of the day, studying him like he was some strange new insect he'd never before encountered. It made him kind of sad.

Harry had met several people upon returning to the wizarding world who were nice to him just because; it seemed Tom hadn't been so lucky if he was still so suspicious of kindness.

They were both up earlier than any of the adults in the house, so they decided to explore. That didn't last for long. The adults had, if anything, understated the state of the rest of the house. It was filthy, and there were things skittering in the walls and in the dark corners. They found the library, but again it was so filthy they decided to wait until it had been cleaned up some.

At a loss, they wandered downstairs and ended up arguing about ideas on how to better decorate the house until the rest of the household was up and breakfast was announced. Tom made a picture of the atrium. He and Harry poked at it and altered the colors until they found something that they both liked, that still had a bit of red to keep Sirius happy.

Sirius was sulky when he realized what they were doing. Remus and Loki kept snickering.

"Next you're going to want to rearrange all the rooms too." Sirius said sourly.

"What do you mean?"
"Can you?"
"How?"
Sirius sighed. "I really need to learn to keep my big mouth shut, apparently. My great-great… a bunch of them…uncle Pisces Black was the one that first built this house about oh, seven hundred years ago or so. Back then it was a pretty basic structure and set up just the way he liked it. Once he got married though, and started having kids he kept needing more space for one reason or another. Now, like I said, he had the place looking just like he wanted, so he didn't want to just start slapping on extra wings or anything, and really, there was already actually plenty of space in here, he just often needed different spaces.

One day, on thinking about it, he wondered if he could use the handy-dandy new space expanding charms that had recently been discovered to good use. He came up with a scheme to make rooms that could be switched out when they were needed and stored the rest of the time. It took him a while to figure out the trick to it, but once he did he made a bunch of rooms that could be switched out. Rumors began to spread that there were hundreds of rooms in this place and it moved around like Hogwarts did. Folks at the time were very impressed. His kids…or maybe it was his grandkids? I don't know; it's been awhile since I heard this story… Anyway, they made the first wizarding tents using his trick with the rooms. So yeah, there's a bunch of rooms stored in the attic when they're not in use."

"Really? Kreacher!"

Kreacher appeared again and glared at everyone before focusing on Harry.

"Is you again. What you is needing this time?"

"Can you tell us what all rooms are in storage and what ones are currently in use?"

Kreacher puffed up his chest. "House of Black is having many fine rooms for every occasion. The rooms currently in storage are the grand ballroom, the very large dining room, the pool room, the billiards room, the Turkish bath, the nursery and school room…"

Tom had been smart enough to take notes--that is, he'd charmed his quill to do so for him.

"That's a lot of rooms. We need a floor plan. Is there a limit to the number of rooms for each floor? How many to a side? Are there any that can't be moved? Which ones?" he quizzed once the list was complete.

The rest of breakfast was spent with the boys quizzing Kreacher and making tentative floor plan sketches, while Sirius sat there, rather put out at how his 'refurbish the house' plan had just been hijacked.

Remus poked him in the arm until he joined the kids' conversation.

By the time they were ready to leave for Diagon Alley they had worked out a floor plan they all liked. It was given to the elves so they could start rearranging things while they were gone.

Remus decided to stay at the house and oversee the rearranging, so Sirius, Harry, Loki and Tom headed off to Diagon Alley. Once there, Loki and Tom headed to Gringott's.

"Well, kiddo? Where to first?"

"I need notebooks for the project I mentioned. That's going to be my friends' Christmas presents. I need a galaxy in a globe too. Does the Black library have anything on metallurgy or engineering by any chance?"
"Metal… what?"

"Does it?"

"I haven't the foggiest, but I wouldn't think so. Dark curses more like."

"Are you sure about that? Surely there's more there than just that. It was a pretty big library."

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't need that stuff right now anyway. What do you think Remus would like?"

"I got him a gift certificate for Madame Malkins so he can get some new duds."

"He likes to read, right? Maybe a gift certificate for the book store."

"Or some bourbon. He might like that…though we've fairly extensive wine cellars at the house already. Books would probably be good. He likes books. I should probably pick up something for Tom. I didn't know he was coming until right before you all showed up. What's he like?"

"He likes books, antiques, Slytherin things, snakes, nice clothes, books, good food, candy and books."

"So books then?"

"That or antiques or something Slytherin. I think I'll get him a snake."

"Urgh. I don't like snakes."

"We'll be able to talk to it, so it won't bite you or anything, and it would be helpful. I'll bet anything the mouse population goes way down while it's there. Maybe I'll just get him a gift certificate for the pet store though. I have a feeling he'll want to pick out his own."

"What's Loki getting him?"

"I don't know. Probably either clothes or books. Loki likes those two as well."

"Alright then. Where to first?"

"Stationary store, then the rest."

"Okay."

"Actually, change that. There's the galaxy in a globe. We'll get that first."

"You're the boss."

Harry hurried inside the shop, Sirius right on his heels. It was somewhat crowded inside; apparently they weren't the only folks out to do last minute Christmas shopping. A couple of witches and an elderly wizard were nearby when Harry grabbed his with a cry of triumph.

"My, you're rather excited." one of the witches laughed. "I'll admit it's a pretty little bauble. I bought one for my grandson last year. It just sits on the shelf collecting dust."

"Aye. Waste of money if you ask me."
"A waste? Are you crazy? This thing is amazing! Frankly I don't know why they haven't made a bigger splash. The witch who made this, Cassiopeia Black, should be world famous for this thing! She should have won awards!"

"For a pretty little bauble?"

"It's no bauble! It lets you explore our entire galaxy in real time from the comfort of your home! She wrote a book about it. It took her twenty years to work out all the bugs to make this thing. In fact...see? It's right there. That tells you all the stuff you can do with it, and tells some of her story about the trouble she had getting it to work right. It was because of her book I wanted one so bad. This is a revolutionary, one of a kind piece of magic!"

As Harry trotted off to pay for his, the two witches and wizard each grabbed one of the books he'd pointed out and began flipping through it. Others, who had seen Harry making his speech, sidled up to see what was going on.

All of them were rosy-cheeked and dusted with a light coating of quickly-melting snow when they arrived back at Grimmauld Place.

"I can't wait to see how the house looks now."

"Yeah. I hope they're done with everything. I want to see it too." Tom agreed.

The boys ran ahead upstairs, the adults following more slowly, peeking in the open doorways the boys had left behind as they passed.

"Wow. These rooms have been out of use for as long or longer than the rest of the house. Why are they in so much better condition?" Sirius said in surprise.

"There must have been spellwork on them to keep them preserved while in storage." Remus replied.

"The boys chose well. Most of these rooms have windows. If we leave the inner doors open during the day it should bring a lot more light into the house. It shouldn't seem so gloomy then, even without you making everything red. Your...father? Seems to have been quite the hunter." Loki commented, after peeking into the study, which could now be accessed through a doorway under the stairs.

"My great-grandfather, actually. Though, I think my grandfather might have done the ogre there."

"My atrium." Sirius grumbled once they were back at the base of the stairs. "They ruined it."

"No offense, Sirius, but..."

"Too late. I'm offended."

"It looks much better this way. It's still red."

"The walls look like candy canes!"

"They do not."

"I think I preferred the black marble floor, before you covered it up with that hideous rug, anyway. The white does seem to open the place up some."
"My lion heads. I worked hard on those."

"They're still there, they're just smaller."

"I made them that size because I wanted them that way!"

Sirius looked around and frowned. "I don't like it. It's too...white, too cold."

"Well...how about we change the white marble to red?"

"Yeah. Let's do that."

The three men looked around and nodded.

"I like it. You've got your red, and the red marble warms up the room some. It also picks up those thin red stripes and the ruby eyes in your lions nicely, without being too overpowering." Loki pointed out.

Sirius finally nodded. "I can live with this. I still say the walls look like candy canes."

"Well, it is Christmas." Remus joked.

The boys came downstairs and stopped to look at the changes.

"I like it."

"Good, because it's staying like this. How're your rooms?"

"Great."

"Same here. I wasn't sure about the black and purple when I picked it, but it actually looks pretty cool."

"Black and purple huh? Well, You're the one that has to live there."

"What colors did you pick?" Loki asked Tom.

"Green and blue. I've got a window seat, a balcony and a desk."

"Me too. That's why I picked it. Those two rooms were the only ones with a window seat."

"Well, glad you like them. Ready to decorate?"

"Yes!"

The parlor had a seven foot tree that filled the whole house with the smell of pine, and several boxes of ornaments waiting to be put on it. The elves had already laid pine boughs, holly and pine cones, along with some twinkling lights on the mantelpieces and going up the stairway. The house elf heads on the wall leading up the stairs--an odd tradition started by one of Sirius' great aunts when the elves got too old to carry tea trays--were all wearing santa hats.

"Well, let's get started. Larger ornaments at the bottom, smaller as we get towards the top."

Tom peeked in one of the boxes and held up a ball that looked like it had a piece of the night sky trapped within. "Orion...Regulus...Bellatrix...Andromeda..." he began reading off.
"Yeah. Bit of a family tradition, that. We're all named after stars. That reminds me. I have ones for the two of you."

"Us? We're not named after stars." Harry objected.

"Yeah. I had to pick one for you."

He gave each of them a small box. When opened they found similar ornaments. Harry's had the Little Dipper, though the view seemed to be focused on the handle.

"Polaris. The north star. It seemed fitting."

Tom peeked in his box and found the Pleiades centered in his.

When he glanced at Sirius for an explanation, he smiled sadly at him. "I was going to do the constellation Gemini at first, because your name means 'twin', but my grandfather, Pollux Black already had that one. I gave you the Pleiades because your mother, Merope, was named for one of the seven sisters."

Tom simply nodded, but he kept a possessive grip on his ornament.

"Go ahead. Yours go up first."

Harry smiled at Sirius brilliantly and bounced over to the tree to put up his ornament. Tom didn't smile, but the careful way he hung his said more than words that he too was touched by the sentiment involved.

When they were done, Sirius clapped his hands, donned a santa hat and began singing 'god rest ye, merry hippogriffs'.

When Harry retired to his room that night, he found two letters for him waiting. The first was from Aunt Cissy. Harry glanced up when he saw Tom lurking in the doorway watching him.

"Yes?"

"Who's that from?"

"Narcissa Malfoy. She asked me to send Kreacher with the boxes of baby toys. She knows a charity dinner for poor kids where they can be handed out as presents for Christmas."

"It's good I got here when I did then. I didn't get a chance to finish scanning all of them this morning."

"Scanning them?"

"To see how they work." Tom scoffed.

"I don't think we've learned how to do that."

Tom shook his head in disgust as he sat down next to the first box.

"That's a disgrace. We learned our first scanning spell first year. It didn't tell us much because we didn't know much, but we still learned how. We learned new ones in different classes each year. As we learned more our scans could tell us more. It's appalling what's become of Hogwarts since
Dumbledore took over."

"Is it really that different?" Harry wondered as he sat down beside him.

"Yes. We learned a lot more, and the classes moved a lot faster. DADA is a joke. The stupid teacher picks volunteers to act out his stupid books, and doesn't teach us any magic."

"I'm not sure he can do any." Harry said gloomily.

"I heard about the pixies, and about him nearly removing all your bones."

"Yeah. I was lucky Loki was there to stop him. I had a broken arm and I couldn't get out of the way because Malfoy was holding me in place so he could hide behind me."

"Did you really destroy Dumbledore's office with the pixies?"

"Yeah, but it was an accident. He brought it on himself."

"Nice." Tom chortled as he began scanning the children's books.

"What are you doing?"

Tom glanced at him a moment while seeming to weight his worth with his eyes, but finally began to instruct him.

"There's a whole class of scanning spells. You can search for ingredients--potions uses those ones a lot, or you can search for types of magic--charms, transfigurations, curses and the like. The wider your base of knowledge the more you can find out. For example, if you never heard of a certain type of charm, or never studied charms at all, you could scan for them all you like, but anything you got back wouldn't mean anything to you. For the first, most basic scan, you'll get a rough idea of the types of magic that are present, but that's all. Based on your findings there you can then do more exacting scans to find out more. The wand movement goes like this…"

Tom was, Harry discovered, a very good teacher. He remembered vaguely that he'd planned to be the DADA teacher once he'd graduated. It was really a shame that things hadn't worked out that way. Hogwarts would be a lot different if he had, he was sure.

He was certain Tom had gotten more out of the exercise than he himself had; but then, he was older and just knew more, so that was probably to be expected. Even so, he now had a dozen handy scanning spells under his belt, and he could make better use of them in the future.

"It's pretty sad I just learned more spells in a half hour with you than in a month at Hogwarts."

"It's like I said, they used to push us more and teach a lot more. Because they've slowed things down so much, everyone seems to have gotten it into their heads that what they're learning must be really hard and they end up having trouble with it because of that belief. The way it was presented before it was magic, you were capable and you'd best do it or suffer the consequences. No one had as much trouble as the students now seem to."

Tom said bitterly.

They both stood from their seats on the floor and Tom spotted Harry's galaxy in a globe.

"Pretty."

"Ugh. That's the same thing the lady at the shop said. It's so much more than that!" Harry huffed,
grabbing it up. He tapped it with his wand and said "Sol". The room around them filled with stars, 
and they suddenly seemed to be standing in the midst of the void, before a great ball of fire that 
seemed to fill the horizon as far as they could see.

"See that? That's our sun. Mercury."

The giant fireball receded some, and they were now standing before a much smaller, rather seared 
looking planet, though the sun, being so much larger still took most of their attention.

"Venus." The view shifted again, and this time they gazed down upon a thick layer of sulphurous 
clouds that obscured any view of the planet beneath.

"Earth"

The void seemed to race past them until they were standing above a blue and white planet. Unlike 
the last two, this one was adorned with twinkling lights, some of which seemed to be moving from 
place to place, and was ringed with strange machines with blinking lights that kept pace with the 
planet. 
Tom Riddle paled and looked down at the Earth with honest astonishment writ large across his 
face.

"What…"

"You've probably been told the muggle world has changed a lot since you were walking around 
last. Those things are artificial satellites made by different companies. Most of them are probably 
carrying cell phone signals. The rest, I'm not sure what they're for."

"Muggles did this? Dumbledore has even more to answer for than I thought. We were light years 
ahead of them when last I walked this earth. We could travel across the world and communicate 
across it in short order, we could heal things that would have killed a muggle…. And now, because 
Dumbledore decided to dumb down the populace, we're falling behind! This should have been us!"

"I won't disagree with you there. Luna."

The view moved again. This time Tom Riddle's hands clenched at the sight of an American flag 
and a number of footsteps preserved on the Lunar landscape for them to see.

"They really went to the moon."

"Yeah. They really did. Mars."

The red planet turned slowly beneath them.

"No Martians. That’s rather disappointing."

"Asteroid belt, Sol system."

"Why are we here? I wanted to see Jupiter."

"Because this was our goal. You found the explorer's club by accident, but you were sworn in, so 
you're kind of stuck with us. I bought this thing for the club. We're planning to mine asteroids once 
we figure out how, and using the proceeds to fund a wizarding space program. We're going to form 
a company, on paper at least, so that we can hold patents for our work as a group, so no one gets 
left out or short-changed. I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to Cassiopeia Black and see if she'd 
join in. I had some ideas of maybe being able to use this thing as the basis of a guidance system
somehow, but she died a few months ago, without getting the credit her work deserved. I need to hold a meeting with the rest of the group to see if they'll agree to bring Remus and Sirius in. We were originally a bit hesitant to fill you in on what we were doing, because you're older than us. Ron didn't want to get his brother Percy involved, even though he's supposed to be pretty smart, because he's certain he would use the fact he was older to get the jump on the rest of us and cut us out of things. It occurred to me that now that these globes seem to finally be getting the recognition they deserved--they started selling like hotcakes after I got mine earlier--other people might start getting the same sort of ideas we're having. We don't want to have someone else do it first and cut us out of everything, just because we're kids. We need to get this project moving ahead before that happens, and for that we need folks that are already of age that can help us."

"Why Remus and Sirius?"

"Why not? They're both clever, they don't have jobs, and most importantly, Sirius is the heir of Black. Cassiopeia didn't have any children or anything. That means he now owns the patents on her work, and might have access to her notes and stuff too. He also made a flying motorcycle when he was still in school, so this kind of project should be right up his alley."

"That's good thinking, actually. How do you know they won't just shaft us as well?"

Harry smiled at him for including himself as part of the group. "I was hoping Loki could help with that, actually. He might have some ideas."

"I used to want to do something like this, when I was a kid, before Hogwarts. I forgot about it somewhere along the way. I'm not sure why. You can count me in."

"Great!"

"So, all this is why you have a secret clubhouse?"

"Sort of. Originally it was just a place for me and Neville to plan out vengeance without anyone bugging us, it sort of grew from there. Jupiter."

"From vengeance to asteroid mining. That's a bit of a leap. What?"

Harry pointed to one of Jupiter's moons, on which they could see evidence of lights.

"The muggles are going to be mad when they eventually get out this far." Harry laughed. "As far as they're concerned, the solar system and everything in it belongs to them. The whole universe, in fact. As far as they're concerned, there's no evidence of extraterrestrial life anywhere, and so the whole universe was made just for them, it's just a matter of getting to it and figuring out how best to exploit it."

"I don't care whether or not it's politically correct to say it or not. Muggles are disgusting creatures. It used to be hard to breath from all the oily smoke pouring out of their wretched factories, and they tore apart any place with coal or oil and left behind nothing but filthy slag heaps that poisoned the water nearby. I'm glad there's other things out there. Hopefully they can keep them confined to this one small area of space before they destroy everything."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, but you lived before environmental regulations and child labor laws. I'm hardly one to sing the praises of muggles, but I think you're perhaps giving them too bad a rap. They can't just wave their wands to do stuff. They have to do everything the long way, step-by-step. They've learned a lot and accomplished a lot in a very short period of time, and really should get credit for that. That said, I originally started thinking of this space program in the hopes we
could eventually find someplace else for us to go and move there. They're putting cameras everywhere, they now have instantaneous worldwide communications… and most wizards don't have a clue. Eventually it will reach a point where we can't just hide anymore. Before it comes to that I want us to have a world of our own, where we can be wizards openly without fear, fly in the open and do amazing feats of magic without always looking over our shoulder to see if there are muggles about."

"A worthy goal."

"I'm willing to give credit where it's due. Muggles have learned and studied a lot of things. I'm quite willing to study what they've learned and learn from it as well, especially if it gets me closer to my goal. Wizards study magic, but they don't study aerospace engineering, and while Cassiopeia Black made exploring the planets easy, wizards have never made an in depth study of the spaces between and what sort of precautions are needed to travel there safely, or what sort of hazards there might be that we need to be aware of."

"We've a lot of work ahead of us." Tom sounded quite pleased by that. "You know, we never did get a chance to look in the library. It's clean now."

"Hey, that's right."

Harry shut off the galaxy in a globe and they headed out to go see what was available.

"Sirius wasn't sure if there was anything about metallurgy or not. I hope so. We found stuff on mining at Hogwarts, but nothing on metallurgy. It'd be nice if wizards had stuff on beginner engineering too, but I'm not holding out much hope."

"Charms, enchanting objects, advanced transfiguration, advanced arithimancy… We'll need all of that as well if we're to make a proper go of things. Runes too, most likely."

"We need to get to muggle London and hit a few bookstores. The science museums too…"

The boys stopped short. Loki was seated inside the library, smiling at them both in amusement. There were a couple of stacks of books on the table near him.

"Good evening, children. Growing boys should be in bed right now."

"We just wanted to look at some things." Tom didn't sound sulky, but Harry was certain he felt that way.

"I'm sure you did, but you can begin your studies in the morning after a good night's sleep. I've taken the liberty of selecting a number of texts for each of you. They're copies. Most of the books in here are heavily warded, and some of them might do you harm should you try to take them without Sirius' knowledge or permission. If there's still time left to the holiday when you've both finished what I've selected for you I'll see about selecting a few more for you to take with you to Hogwarts. Thomas, dear boy, please be sure to read everything cover to cover. You and I are rather alike in that we like what we like and tend to ignore that which doesn't immediately interest us or contribute to our goals. It's something that has caused me any number of problems over the years, and likely will for you as well unless you try to cultivate good research habits now."

He waved Tom towards the stack of thick books he pushed forward. Harry was pointed to the second stack. The books were generally thinner, but there was two or three more than were in Tom's stack, something which he noticed.

"He's further behind than you are, dear boy. His are all beginner texts, while yours are more
advanced. I'm sure he'll let you read them if you ask nicely." he chided.

"Goodnight, Loki." they chorused before trudging back to bed.

"Goodnight boys."
The Explorer's Club

Chapter Summary

The kids return from the winter holidays and begin to plot their course to space in earnest. A breakthrough is made in the Chamber of Secrets affair, but everyone is left with more questions than answers.

"Why do you have to sit so far back on the bloody train? I swear…" Ron grumbled as he trudged through the door.

"So next time ask you mum if you can just floo to the station, that's all." Neville was unsympathetic.

"Hey, Ron. Good holiday?" Harry greeted.

"It was good." Ron shrugged as he and Harry heaved his trunk into the rack.

"No Ginevra?" Luna asked curiously.

"She stayed at the other end with some of her roommates. She didn't feel like wandering the whole length of the train again."

"Good. That means we'll be able to speak freely." Tom commented.

The door slid open and revealed Millicent and Theo Nott.

"You're all here already, good."

Theo had been sworn in during the holiday after they'd held a group meeting with Remus and Sirius and signed contracts to make a company. The patents on the galaxy in a globe and the rights to the proceeds from the accompanying book, as well as those patents Sirius had filed after he'd charmed up his motorcycle were now held by the company. The galaxy in a globe was selling like hotcakes, as were the books. The profits from all of that were now filtering in to a vault opened in the company's name. After finding out about the patents for the motorcycle, Harry had mentioned the Knight Bus. Sirius had done some investigating and discovered the Knight Bus was violating some of his patents. The matter was going to court. Once it did, chances were that proceeds from the settlement would be filtering into the vault as well. They now had a nice starter fund for their work. Sirius, as the patents generating all the money belonged to him, was made CEO of the new company. Remus, who was often between jobs on account of being a werewolf, had been given a paying job as Head of the R and D department. The rest of them were listed as employees under Remus, also for research and development, as that was all they actually had at the moment. Bringing the two adults in had been a great idea, it turned out. They had all sorts of ideas of how to divide up research. They were all hoping to be able to get started on something a bit more concrete come summer time.

Millicent and Theo took their seats. Once they had, Tom locked the door and made the windows opaque.

"Now that we're all here, I call the first official meeting of the Explorer's Club for the new year to
order. Who'd like to begin?" Harry said formally.

"What exactly are we going to be doing?" Theo asked immediately.

"Eventually? Asteroid mining."

"Yeah, I got all that. I mean what are we going to be doing now to make that happen?"

"Well, right now we're going to be looking into a few things. Obviously any actual test runs will be taking place over the summers. Remus and Sirius are going to be researching how to build an actual ship, a model first for test runs, but fully functional. They're also going to be trying to make a working guidance system using the research notes from the galaxy in a globe as well as Sirius' own work in making his flying motorcycle apparate. I had an idea to use action figures as the crew for the first test runs on the model ship. Some of you will need to be looking into that--making them, giving them skills, enabling them to talk so they could maybe give reports, that sort of thing. Since asteroid mining is the eventual goal, Harry has already gotten several books on mining charms, metallurgy and the like. I myself will be looking into designing environmental systems for the ship, as well as sensors to record data for analysis once the ship returns. Until we do our test run we don't know whether any magic on the ship will break down or malfunction in some way once away from the earth's magical field. That's something we need to know before we try sending any people up. We also need information on the gravity wells of different planets, asteroids, suns and moons so we can be sure not to get caught in them when we send the ship out. Something the size of Jupiter, if we get too close might suck us in, and it is very possible the ship wouldn't actually be able to apparate away. I'm sure we'll think of more things as we really begin working, but that's what we've got to start with at the moment." Tom explained.

"Everyone has their notebooks, right? Each division should keep their notes in their own section. You don't need to record every passing thought you have, just enough information on your particular research project that we can all keep track of what the others are doing and if necessary have enough information to factor in to our own part of things. If any questions or problems occur to you, you should try to remember to write them down to be looked into later, either by yourself or someone else. Even if we're all working on different aspects, in the end it's all towards the same goal." Harry continued.

"There's six bookshelves in the clubhouse right now. Each Hogwart's division gets two to store any books notes or models relating to their part of things. We asked the elves to add some extra rooms to the clubhouse too. Each division also gets a workroom just for their project. General meetings to compare notes and progress will be held in the common room." Tom concluded.

"Sounds good. What about space suits? There's no air out there to breathe, and it's really cold too." Millicent wondered.

"We don't need them yet. We're gonna send action figures, weren't you listening?" Ron replied.

"They still need to be tested in real world conditions, not to mention the action figures might not need to breathe, but they probably can't stand up to the cold." Theo scoffed.

"You're absolutely right. I suppose that would mostly fall under my research into environmental systems. I'll just need to work on some for suits as well as in the ship." Tom nodded.

"We're gonna put the figures in tiny space suits?" Neville asked.

"We might. They'll have to be layered in sensors to give us feedback about how the suits are functioning."
"Are the figures going to be charmed to perform mining functions, or will we be making some kind of tools that are either part of or brought out of the ship?" Luna wondered.

"I guess our groups will each need to work on half that question. We'll have to do experiments to see what works best I guess." Harry shrugged.

"We're going to need to build a space simulation to do test landings and such. We don't want to be trying it cold out in actual space." Colin warned.

"That will probably have to wait for summer." Neville answered.

"I figured. I just wanted to make sure the idea was out there."

A rather imperious sounding knock sounded at the door. The kids all exchanged a glance. Tom stood and unlocked the door, revealing a rather puffed-up looking Percy Weasley standing there.

"Compartment are not allowed to be locked or the windows obscured." he said rather pompously. "I don't know what sort of shenanigans you're up to, but both you and the young lady in question must either leave the compartment or keep the door and windows open."

Ron huffed and stomped over to peek around Tom's arm.

"Oh, get stuffed, Percy. Go bother someone else."

Percy's face turned the color of curdled milk.

"Ron? I guess with so many it had to be one of us... but still! He's a second year, you perverted monster!"

Harry peeked around Tom's other arm.

"You need to find a girl-friend or something, mate. You really need to stop obsessing about everyone's non-existent sex lives."

"He does this a lot?" Tom wondered.

"He called Hermione the whore of Babylon for looking at a bookshelf." Ron noted sourly.

Tom raised an eyebrow at Percy, closed the door in his face, and re-locked it.

"Back at Hogwarts again." Ron sighed once back in the castle.

Milicent, Tom, Theo and Luna had already gone to their own tables, leaving Harry, Ron, Neville and Colin to head to Gryffindor.

"It's good to be back, though it's weird. I'm actually excited to get to work, and class is just going to get in the way." Colin lamented.

"If you look at it that way, yeah it will. If you keep in mind that you'll constantly be learning new stuff which will make our work easier, especially for you and Luna. We're not that far ahead of you two, but we still know twice as much. Class is actually going to be necessary even if it does feel like it's sort of getting in the way. It should be alright." Neville tried to console him.

"I wonder where Lockhart is? I'd have thought he'd be sure to be there so he could preen for all the
returning students." Harry muttered.

As they were taking their seats a bald black guy with a gold hoop earring in one ear came out of the side room and took a seat at the teacher's table.

"Who's that guy?" Colin wondered.

"Oh, I know him. He's an auror. His name's Kingsley Shacklebolt." Ron informed them.

"He just sat in Lockhart's seat." Harry pointed out.

"Did the curse strike early, do you think?" Neville whispered.

"I dunno. You think he's dead?" Ron wondered.

"Who's dead?" Lavender asked.

"Possibly Lockhart. There's someone new in his seat." Seamus answered her.

"Hope he's a better teacher." Dean commented.

"Is that all you have to say? Professor Lockhart could be dead!" Parvati scolded.

"I never quite forgave him for the bloody pixies." Seamus scoffed.

"The new guy is an auror, so hopefully he knows his stuff." Dean added.

"I'm not holding out much hope. Lockhart was supposed to be a world famous monster hunter, and look how he turned out." Harry muttered.

"Yeah." the kids all sighed gloomily.

"So, what all did you get up to over the hols?" Neville asked everyone.

"We went to visit my aunt and uncle, it was their turn. I got to play with their new baby, who is adorable." Lavender answered.

"My older brother and his wife came to visit. They're expecting a baby in spring. We're all very excited." Parvati replied next.

"You have an older brother?"

"Two of them. Padma and I were something of a surprise. They're ten and fifteen years older than us." Parvati laughed.

"Huh. Where was the other brother then?"

"Oh, he was around, but he still lives with us. He's finishing up training as a healer."

"Cool."

"We took in a quidditch game and went to visit my gran." was Seamus' reply.

"We went to visit my gran as well. Full house. My mum has two sisters. One has four kids the other has three, and then of course there's six of us." Dean added his own summation.

"Sounds crowded." Harry noted.
"Sounds normal." Ron scoffed. "My dad has three brothers, and his dad has seven. That's crowded."

"Blimey." Dean laughed. "What'd you get up to?"

"The usual. Lots of big dinners, relatives dropping in, including mum's aunt Muriel, who's a miserable old bat." Ron scoffed.

"Same here, mostly. Plus I worked in my greenhouse...and went to visit my parents." Neville answered quietly.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, but then Seamus turned to Harry in awkward desperation. "You? Good holiday?"

"It was great, actually. Me, Loki and Tom all stayed with my godfather, Sirius, and his friend Remus. We helped redecorate the house--no one had been living there for years, so it was a bit of a mess. We wandered around muggle London a few times--it's been fifty years since Tom's seen it. He was pretty freaked by how much has changed in that time. It was fun."

"Tom? The book guy went with you?" Lavender asked curiously.

"Yeah. Loki adopted him too, so he's my brother now."

"Sucks, don't it?" Ron muttered.

"Hardly. Having an older brother is great!"

"You'll learn." Ron muttered, casting a dark glance at the twins and Percy.

"Welcome, students, to another term of Hogwarts. I'm sure many of you have noted the newest addition to our ranks. May I present Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt. Auror Shacklebolt will be covering Professor Lockhart's classes for now as he unexpectedly had to leave us. Now, dig in!" Headmaster Dumbledore announced.

"Unexpectedly had to leave? He go on a trip? Ran off to battle zombies? What's that mean?" Colin wondered.

"Dunno. Wonder why they didn't tell us?" Ron muttered absently as he filled his plate.

"Maybe it was a sudden death in the family or something like that?" Neville said uncertainly. "I wonder if anyone knows?"

"If anyone does, we'll know by tomorrow." Parvati said confidently.

"We'll leave you to it then. Just be sure to tell the rest of us." Dean said cheerfully.

It turned out they didn't need to wait for Lavender and Parvati to question anyone or gather gossip; everyone found out what happened to Lockhart the next morning when the papers arrived. On the front page stood a picture of a very freaked-out looking Lockhart, holding a prisoner intake number from Azkaban. He seemed to be crying and saying "I'm too pretty for this"...but that part might have been their imaginations.
"Lockhart is behind the Chamber of Secrets affair? Why would he do that?" Lavender said with both horror and confusion.

"Says here he planned to get the sword of Gryffindor and ride his fame to being the next Minister, after writing yet another best-selling book." Seamus answered, as he was further along in the article.

"Why bother with all that? Why not just run?" Dean wondered.

"He figured he needed the extra push, on account of being a complete fraud. He stole all those stories he wrote. Turns out the only magic he's any good at is grooming charms and obliviates. Bastard." Ron muttered angrily.

"I don't know…it still sounds sort of fishy." Harry mused.

"What's fishy? He admitted to all of it. He had his house elf doing petrifications, and told the basilisk he made, via imperious, to stay in the tunnels. He did some kind of toad-attracting charm to steal Neville's toad to make the thing, slaughtered the chickens so it wouldn't be killed before the sword appeared… He thought saving the school while you and Dumbledore were helpless would make him a shoo-in for 'greatest wizard of the age'." Ron objected.

"Poor Dobby, being made to help with something like that. He tried to warn me, you know." Harry told the others at the table.

"He was going to blame the attacks on Ginny Weasley under the control of an 'evil diary' so there'd be a culprit for everything, except his plan got ruined when Tom was found to be an actual transfigured boy and not just a talking book like he thought." Parvati continued as she read the rest of the article.

"That ruddy bastard!" Ron howled.

They saw Percy go and sit by Ginny, who seemed to be very upset. Ron frowned at the two of them and went to join them, as did the twins. Whatever she was telling them seemed to both anger and upset them. As one they rose from the table and drug Ginny off with them.

"Wonder what that was all about?" Harry said as the five of them passed by.

"She's probably just upset that some jerk professor was trying to frame her for attacking everyone. Poor thing. What a way to start your time at Hogwarts." Lavender said sympathetically.

Harry found he himself was remarkably unsympathetic. He'd had worse his first year. He hadn't cried about it, and people certainly hadn't come oozing out of the woodwork to coddle and take care of him, even though he'd nearly died at least twice. Typical.

"Harry! Quidditch practice tonight after classes. Be there." Oliver shouted from further down the table.

"Bloody buggering hell."

"MR. POTTER! Language!" McGonagall snapped as she bustled by.

"Tough break, mate." Neville snickered.

"Yeah."
They didn't find out until lunch time why all the Weasleys had been so upset earlier, or where they'd taken Ginny.

"It was worse than we even knew. That bastard was messing with her mind and making her think she did stuff." Ron snarled.

"Like what?"

"Remember when old Filch's cat was found? She was all upset about it? She said she had déjà vu or something when she saw the cat hanging there, like she'd been there or been involved, except she was pretty sure she was just asleep up in her dorm room. She also said the night the chickens were all slaughtered, she woke up covered in blood and chicken feathers. She was scared, but she thought her roommates were just playing a cruel prank on her. She just cleaned everything up and went back to bed. She wondered again if she was going mad or something when she heard about the chickens, except she didn't think she could have actually done it as she would have had to walk through the whole school looking like that, and the fat lady would have seen her when she woke her up to get back in the dorm, so she wasn't sure what to think."

"What about Hermione and Myrtle?" Neville asked.

"Huh… she didn't say anything about that. By that point though the house elf had been found so maybe he didn't bother with her memory? I dunno. Stupid ministry."

"Yeah. I guess I'm glad he's free now." Harry muttered. "If he was under orders it wasn't his fault, any of it. He was under some kind of weird control magic beyond that too. When I asked who his master was he went flying into the wall like someone had picked him up and slammed him. How is that in any way fair or right? I'm worried though. Loki said elves don't do well without a family bond. What's going to happen to him now?"

"Dunno. 'snot like I'm a house elf expert." Ron shrugged.

"How'd they get him anyway?" Neville wondered.

"They must have been looking for him since Loki and I reported him stealing my mail this summer. If they traced him to Lockhart, that explains why he was brought in for questioning though."

"Mum and dad are with Gin now. They're really upset that she didn't tell them what was going on while we were all home though."

"I can imagine."

"Mum's prolly gonna make a bonfire of all her Lockhart books. I wouldn't be surprised if she was the first to ever send a howler to Azkaban as well. Frankly, Lockhart's lucky he's locked up."

When classes finally let out, Neville and Ron were both itching to get to the garden and get to work. Harry glowered at both of them unhappily as he prepared to trudge off to quidditch practice. Ron seemed entirely too cheerful about this unhappy state of affairs for Harry's liking.

"Too bad, mate. I guess we'll just have to get started without you."

Harry very unobtrusively hit him with a stinging hex in the buttocks when he turned away.
Ron yelped and grabbed his bottom, which felt like it had just been pinched, and glared at the Ravenclaw fourth year boy who was standing right nearby in affront.

"OI! Listen, you bastard, I don't care what Percy told you, it's not like that AT ALL. You really shouldn't listen to him. He's a prat, and he's got sex on the brain or something. Just keep your bloody paws to yourself, you hear me?"

Harry snickered to himself as he slipped outside and hopped his broom to head down to the pitch.

January passed swiftly in a haze of classes, quidditch and trying to work on the space project. February blew in cold and blustery and it was time for Gryffindor's game with Ravenclaw. Ravenclaw, while it had a decent team, it wasn't on the level of Slytherin. After facing the green team on their new brooms, this game was a walk in the park in comparison. When one added in the non-stop practices, well, the poor eagles hadn't really stood a chance.

"And Gryffindor wins! Final score 780-160 versus Ravenclaw!"

Harry flailed a bit as the Gryffindor team dog-piled him, right there in the middle of the field.

"You did it! Good job, Harry! If we can do it again in our last game with Hufflepuff, we might actually have a chance at the cup!" Oliver crowed.

"Good god, I hope so." Harry muttered.

"That's the spirit! Let's murder those bastards! We need to…"

"Go to Hogsmeade and celebrate our win!" Katie Bell growled. "We are not holding practice right after finishing such a long game!"

"But…"

"NO!" the team chorused.

Oliver was drug off by main force to the locker rooms before he had a chance to get any more crazy ideas. Harry was cheered and swarmed by the rest of the house, as were the rest of the team. The field was now a milling crowd of red and gold as far as the eye could see. Harry smiled and nodded and tried not to wince as he was repeatedly pounded on the back. He just wanted to get showered and changed and head to the garden. With such a large margin win, they might actually be able to get Oliver to cool it for a bit. It was only February. Their next game wasn't until May.

When he came out of the locker room, the crowds were gone, as was the rest of the team--all of them had already headed off to Hogsmeade together to celebrate. He really hated being so much younger than the rest of them sometimes. To his surprise Loki, Sirius and Remus were all waiting for him, as was Tom.

"You were amazing out there, kiddo! Your dad would be so proud!" Sirius crowed.

"Congratulations, Harry." Remus said kindly.

"You were alright…for a Gryffindork." Tom sniffed.

A small green snake poked her head out of Tom's collar--his Christmas present from Harry.

"Do not listen to him, hatchling. He was cheering very loudly. He kept waking me up."
"Traitor."

"Thank you, Nagini." Harry laughed, sticking his tongue out at Tom.

"So..." Sirius said uncomfortably. He was still unnerved hearing all them speak snake language, but he made such an effort not to be they didn't hold it against him. "Played any pranks lately?"

"Actually, I did. I hit Ron with a stinging hex last month"

"That's not really a prank, kiddo."

"Let me finish. Ron thought a Ravenclaw boy standing nearby had pinched his bum, so he started yelling at him about it. They got into a fight, which was later broken up by McGonagall. Ron tried to explain that the guy molested him because his brother Percy had been spreading rumors about him..."

"His brother was? What kind of rumors?" Remus asked.

Tom explained about what had happened on the train.

"The boy got mad again and said he hadn't done anything, and they both ended up in detention. Ron was so mad he went and hexed his brother, and then wrote to their mum. Percy got a howler because of it. You should have seen his face! Up until it started yelling, he seemed convinced it must have been for one of the others. He just about died."

"I still say the best part was when that Ravenclaw boy jumped up while the thing was howling and started screaming at them both. He had to be drug off to the hospital wing for some calming draught. It turns out the twins heard he'd molested Ron and they'd been pranking him night and day since then, and Ginny hexed the guy."

"All that from a single stinging hex?"

"You're like the uber pranker! You get better results without trying than most people do when they actually are!" Sirius complained.

"You must be blessed by the god of mischief or something!" Remus chuckled.

Remus and Sirius blinked and looked at each other, and then turned to look at Loki.

Loki just smiled mysteriously, said goodbye to the boys and vanished in a cloud of green and gold sparkles.

Remus and Sirius looked at each other uncertainly.

"Nah."

Tom left soon after to go to Hogsmeade, so Remus and Sirius walked Harry back to the castle.

"So how are things with you two? How's that court case going?"

"It's going. There were a couple of other patent suits ahead of mine, so they haven't actually done anything yet. From what I saw of the patents they filed, mine predates them by a decade. They didn't do anything new, just added on to my existing work. It's open and shut. They'll probably just have to pay royalties of some sort, but the amount is what will be decided. From what they told me, in a case like this they usually try to find a compromise between fair compensation for the patent holder and punitive damage to the other company that will end up making their business fail
because most of the profits are going to the patent holder. I don't want to ruin their company, I just want my contribution acknowledged and paid for."

"How much longer is it likely to take?"

"Should be done by this summer, one way or another."

"Takes a long time."

"Yeah. Usually only capital cases make it through the system with any speed. Everything else gets bogged down in red tape."

"How about with you? Other than your little prank, what have you been up to?" Remus asked.

"Nothing much." Harry sighed. "Between classes, homework and constant quidditch practices I've barely had time to do anything else. I think I've gotten to work on the project a grand total of maybe three times since school started up again. Ron and Neville have been making some headway, but I wanted to help out. The other divisions are both a lot further ahead than we are."

"There's no rush, kiddo. We've only barely begun our part of things. It's not all going to happen overnight, so don't worry about it."

"Still. It's frustrating."

"Yeah. Don't worry about it though, really. Spring break will be coming up soon. You'll have a few days off classes then, even if you can't come home for it."

"HA! They usually weigh us down with so much homework it takes the whole break, however long it is, to actually get it all done by the time classes resume! Not to mention Oliver is probably going to want us to be in practice the whole week."

"Things will work out. Looks like we're here. Enjoy the rest of your weekend."

"You certainly deserve the break after that game. Your father really would have been so proud." Remus said rather mistily.

"A right chip off the old block. He had plans for you to be a quidditch star. He'd already bought your first broom before you were even a month old. Your mum wasn't having it, of course. I think she locked the thing up as soon as she saw it." Sirius snickered.

"I remember that!" Remus laughed. "James, honestly! He can't even sit up yet! What do you think he's going to do with that?"

"Your mum probably would have had a dozen heart-attacks watching you do all those crazy stunts you pull…but she would have been proud too."

Harry waved goodbye and hurried into the castle.

As much as Harry loved hearing about his parents, knowing they would have been thrilled with him being on the quidditch team made him a bit sad and uncertain as well. If they won the cup this year, he was seriously considering quitting the team. Could he still do that after seeing how happy it made everyone? He just didn't know.

When he got back to the Garden, he ran into Ron and Neville on their way out.
"Where are you going?"

"We had been asking Tom if we could head down to the chamber to practice our mining charms and all before, but he said no."

"He's afraid we're either gonna get killed in a cave in or bring the castle down."

"We told him we still needed to practice, so he suggested we study the castle. We can't dig any holes, but we can practice the rest of it."

"Types of stone, thickness, stress points and all that."

"Oh. That was a good idea, actually. You're going to do that now?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. I'll come with you. I finally have some time off."

"Where should we start?"

"Deep down. The dungeons. There's some places with natural stonework if you go far enough. We can see how it differs from the rest of the castle, and the stress points should be more obvious at the base where all the weight is resting."

"Good point. Dungeons it is."

They wandered down far enough into the dungeons that the fitted stonework ended and the natural rock showed through in places.

"Igneous with granite intrusions. Must be volcanoes in the area."

"I think I'd heard that, yeah. Lots of volcanic activity up this way. Further north than us though, unless I'm mistaken."

They scanned the walls and ceiling for a bit and then wandered back to where the castle proper began.

"These are some weird readings. I'm not sure what to make of it."

"Yeah, it's like granite, but not."

"Let me see. Huh, yeah, I see what you mean. There's no breaking points like you find in granite. Granite is a hard, sturdy stone, but easy to break in the right spots. They left in the hardness and made it slightly elastic, without so many shattering points. They must have magically altered the stones to make them last the test of time."

"Why the slight elasticity though? Who wants a wobbly castle?" Ron asked, sounding mystified.

"Someone who's building in a place with a lot of seismic activity. I think I heard about muggles doing something similar with buildings in areas that have a lot of earthquakes. They make them bendable, not hugely so--no one wants a wobbly building either, but it sort of absorbs some of the shock and sways instead of just tearing itself apart."

"Oak stands mighty before the storm and breaks. Willow bends to the might of the storm and survives?" Neville quoted.
"Yeah, just like that."
"Cool. They were pretty brilliant, weren't they?" Ron noted.
"Yeah, they really were."
"The stone is different down here."
"Different how?"
"Harder, not so wiggly."
"It would have to be, wouldn't it? You need something sturdy to hold the weight of everything." Neville reasoned.
"The doorways are probably harder as well, to make up for the gap." Harry agreed.
"Yeah. They'd need to be stronger to hold the weight."

The three of them wandered slowly along, cataloguing the changes in the stone as they went, watching the ebb and flow of the different quality of stone, seeing where it was used and figuring out why.

"This is weird. The wall here isn't as thick as it is elsewhere."
"Yeah? Let me see."
"What are you three doing?"
The boys twitched as Snape suddenly loomed up behind them.
"Looking for secret passageways. We think we found one."
"Yeah. There's something right there. I wonder…"
Ron tapped the spot and part of the wall swung open, revealing stairs heading upwards. "Huh, lookit that. You think that's how the troll escaped the dungeons? We should go look!"
"You will stay here. You have no idea where these lead." Snape huffed. He pushed past them and drew his own wand. A flick of it made a ball of light that hovered along over his head, lighting his way.

"I wonder how that troll found it if it is the right stairway?" Harry wondered.
"Yeah, it was hidden." Neville nodded.
"Maybe they see differently than we do? I know most animals see differently. They can see better in the dark or sometimes see different colors, or they're really good at tracking movement."
"Maybe he could hear it was hollow? He had big ears, and they were really sensitive. He didn't start rampaging till Hermione started screaming. I think she was hurting his ears." Ron disagreed.
"Huh, yeah, could be." Neville nodded again.
"Could be. Bats navigate by echolocation. And muggles have a machine they call an ultrasound. If
they run it over a pregnant woman's belly it lets you sort of see the baby."
"Muggles can do that?"
"Yeah… I'm going to the library. I just got an idea."

Harry ran off, lost in thought. Ron shuddered.

"What's with you?"

"He's turning into Hermione. It makes me feel funny every time I think it. I hope she wakes up soon."

Neville just looked at him. He wasn't sure what, if anything, he should say about that.

Snape loomed out of the stairway and glared at both of them.

"Where is Potter?"

"He went to the library."

Snape narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Why?" he demanded.

"I'm not sure. We were wondering if trolls had funny eyesight and that's how it found the passage, and then he started talking about bats and muggles peeking in bellies or something, and then he ran off."

Snape sighed. He rather regretted asking the question; who knew what ran through that irritating child's head sometimes.

"You were correct. It leads to the second floor corridor."

"Cool."

"Use it. Gryffindors have no business in the dungeons. If there are further passages hidden down here they belong to Slytherin house."

The boys frowned at him and stomped up the passageway.

"I swear. That guy needs to get a life." Ron muttered resentfully.

"Five points from Gryffindor!"

"Bugger."

"Where the heck did Harry run off to?" Neville wondered.

"Yeah, he said he was coming here, but I can't find him anywhere."

"You're looking for Harry Potter?" a nearby Ravenclaw asked.

"Su Li, right? Yeah, we are." Neville replied.

"He was here a minute ago. He was digging through the card catalogue and then started muttering about how he didn't know how it would be listed, and then he asked me if the muggle studies
teacher was around."
"Is she?"
"Yeah. Her classroom is on the first floor."
"Okay, thanks."
The boys wandered off again and decided to find Harry before he ran off again.
"What the bloody hell does he need the muggle studies teacher for?" Ron muttered irritably.
"Darned if I know."
"You think it has something to do with those belly machines?"
"I don't know, maybe. He did say it was a muggle thing. Maybe he wanted to ask her about them."
"He's a weird guy sometimes, Harry is. Gets strange ideas, goes running off, doesn't bother to explain himself."
"Tom's the same way."
"Yeah. You'd think they were actually brothers. They're kinda like the twins. I keep waiting for them to start finishing each other's sentences."
"I hope they don't. It gets kind of annoying."
"Hah! You don't have to live with them."

"Um, hello? Are you professor Burbage? Muggle Studies?"
"Yes? Hello. Harry Potter, right?"
"Yes'm."
"Can I help you? It's just, I was actually on my way out…"
"I'm sorry. It should only take a moment. I just wanted to ask you something real quick."
"Alright. If I can be of help…"
"I wanted to look up some stuff in the library, and I realized that even if wizards studied it, I don't know what they called it because they probably didn't give it the same name muggles did."
"Oh, I see. What in particular?"
"Ah. Well. Hmm. That's… Let me check something real quick. I don’t actually know of anyone that studied that in particular… although, there actually was a naturalist who studied bat populations in Wales a few years back. Let me see if I can find his name for you. As for the rest…. Vision spectrums?"
"We, that is my friends and I, found a secret passage; one we think that troll last year might have
used to get from the dungeons to the second floor without anyone seeing it. We wondered how he found it, and I thought maybe he could see differently than us and saw something we didn't, but my friend Ron thinks he could maybe hear that it was hollow there."

"Oh, I see. There was a naturalist that studied goblins as well. I know they need glasses when they work the counters, but they can apparently see just fine in their tunnels; wizards not so much. Ground penetrating radar though, that's... although... I know dwarves work with stone a lot. Stonework is to dwarves what forging is to goblins. There might be something there that might touch on what you're looking for. Ultrasound... babies, fluid... maybe someone who studied merfolk? Their language, I know, sounds like awful shrieking if they're above water, but it sounds like regular English beneath it. There might be something in there that might intersect with what you're looking for... Oh, here we go. I knew I had his name somewhere. Oh, and here's the goblin fellow too. I don't have anything about dwarves or merfolk though. You should be able to find something in the card catalogue in the library though."

"Thanks. This will be a big help."

"You're quite welcome. It's nice to see students engaged with their studies."

"So... what do you do in muggle studies anyway? It's just, I'm supposed to be picking my electives soon. I grew up with muggles. Would this class actually be of any value to someone like me, or are you just going to say "this is a telephone, not a fellytone, please don't shout in it, they can hear you just fine."

"Speaking from experience?" Professor Burbage laughed.

"Not exactly. I could see Ron doing that though."

"Doing what?"

Harry and Professor Burbage turned to see Ron and Neville entering the room.

"Shout into the fellytone."

"Well...yeah. If you're far away, how else are you gonna hear me?"

"It doesn't really work like that. As for your question, well, yes, the class itself is probably not something a muggle raised student would really find much use in, generally speaking. Are you planning to continue your muggle education though?"

"I'm...not sure? What are the benefits?"

"Well, if you have records in the muggle world, you'll appear to disappear at age eleven if you don't. If you plan to spend any time in the muggle world in the future, that will cause you no end of problems. If you try to buy a muggle house, a car...if you do in fact want to continue your muggle education into the university level, you'll need those records. If you want to work with the muggle liason office, the only requirement is a NEWT in muggle studies. I've had a lot of students become rather irate about that, either because they feel it's insulting to have so few requirements for such an important job, or because they feel it will in fact be an easy ride. What most don't seem to realize is that it's actually just the first step. To actually be of any use to the muggle liason office, you need to have records, and you need to be able to continue your education to the point that you can actually keep up with and understand advances in the muggle world and see if they'll be problematical for wizards. For muggle raised students like yourself, if you join the muggle studies program, you can continue your muggle education through it. We have an arrangement with a
school that allows this. You'll be able to do the school work in class, and you'll have to take certain tests during the summers—they'll just backdate everything and generate records to fill in your first and second year based on your performance in your later school work and testing so they'll be somewhat consistent."

"Huh. I was thinking about going for twelve OWLs. How would that work?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. Not if you're going to keep up with your muggle schooling. In most cases people do self-study for muggle studies and divination. You have to make prior arrangements with myself and professor Trelawney so that you can get periodic testing to be sure you're keeping up, and so you can take the OWL. I would suggest you speak to your head of house about it. It's possible some other sort of arrangement could be reached. If not, you might have to just make the decision to only take fewer classes."

"I see. Well, thank you professor. You've been very helpful."

"You're quite welcome. I hope to see you next year."

Neville and Ron waved, sighed, and followed Harry again as he marched off back to the library.

Ron and Neville got bored after a while, watching Harry digging through the stacks and looking up stuff about goblins, dwarves, merfolk and bats, before wandering off to look up mapping charms. He sent them off to continue their survey of Hogwarts to see if the stonework varied significantly between floors, and to pay special attention to the open areas, towers and such to see if anything special had to be done there. Harry stayed at the library for another two hours, and headed back to the garden with his pockets weighted down with copies of books. He ate lunch and dinner in the mining group's workroom, surrounded by books and scribbling notes, and then wandered off to get more. Neville and Ron wandered back after a while later and went off to sword fight for a bit. When they got back from dinner, they found Harry still scribbling away.

"Oh, it's you two. See that? Mapping charms for geological surveys. I think they should work to map the stone variations in Hogwarts. I'm looking in to how to get 3-d but I haven't had any luck so far. If you two want to get started on that it would probably be helpful." he waved vaguely towards one of the tables. Neville and Ron traded a glance and sidled over to find a paper filled with scribbles, and some badly done drawings of wand movements, with the words "BRING PAPER!!" scrawled across the bottom.

They sighed, and glared at the back of Harry's head, but he was buried behind several books and muttering to himself and didn't notice.

"What the heck is 3-d?" Neville wondered.

"Dunno. I know what DD is…my brothers told me once." Ron admitted, his ears going pink. "But I don't know what that has to do with maps… unless he's trying to get into the girl's dorms?"

"Who's trying to get into the girl's dorms?" Millicent demanded.

"Harry maybe."

"Harry?" She repeated with disbelief.

"Why do you think he's trying to get into the girls' dorms?" Tom interrupted.
"Because he wants us to start making a geological survey map of Hogwarts." Neville replied.

"Yeah, he wants some 3D but doesn't know how to do it yet. I never figured him for a pervert."

"Three dimensions. He wants to make a standing map of Hogwarts that will show layers, not just a flat image on paper. Why would you… You know what, I don't even want to know."

"I take it you found something interesting in your examination of the castle?" Luna interjected.

"Well, yeah, the stone is weird. Harry thinks Ravenclaw was an engineering genius. He thinks the castle was designed to be earthquake proof. He said muggles have only just begun trying to make buildings that use the same principles." Neville replied.

"That is very interesting. When you finish you maps and collate your findings, I believe the Quibbler would be interested in doing a story on it."

"Yeah? That's cool. It's probably going to take a long time to make maps of everything though. It is a big castle." Ron sighed.

"Maybe you should just pick a section of the castle then and do a top to bottom map of that one section to demonstrate some of what you're talking about. The full survey can wait." Tom commented.

"Yeah, I guess."

"If we're going to do that we should probably do the outer wall and our chosen section and then also take a look at the center and see if it differs significantly. We need to do one of the towers too. We can do Gryffindor, I guess. I have to admit, I'm a bit curious now." Neville decided.

"What's Harry doing anyway?" Theo wondered.

"Dunno. He was off talking to the muggle studies teacher and then got a bunch of books on goblins, dwarves and bats for some reason. Oh, and merfolk."

"Why? What does any of that have to do with mining?" Millicent asked.

"We're not sure, but it has something to do with the muggles' belly machine."

Tom sighed. "Go do your survey."

The weeks began to seemingly fly by. The Explorer's club found their time stretched thin as the teachers began piling on more work as the end of term began to loom in the distance. By mutual agreement, as spring break approached, the whole group got together for a homework marathon, so they could get it all out of the way and have the remainder of the break free for their project.

"And done! I swear, bloody teachers. Bunch of sadists, they are." Ron muttered as he dried the ink on the last of his essays.

The rest of the group seemed to be just finishing up as well, except for Harry and Luna, who were over on one of the couches. She seemed to be writing another article. He listened in, but Harry was babbling about 'dark matter' and waving around some weird four-dimensional rainbow in a box he'd made. Maybe he'd made a dark magic detector? He wasn't sure. Harry seemed to be making a lot of weird things anymore.
A muffled boom sounded from the Miner's Group workshop. They all turned to look, but only Harry ran off to investigate. Ron and Neville stood to join him, but then the door opened, revealing the Weasley twins. The two groups stared at each other.

"So…this is where"
"You've been hiding yourself"
"All this time"
"Gin-Gin has been trying to get her kitty cat to find you"
"She's convinced you've all become animagi"
"And have been having parties in the animal tunnels"

"Why would… Oh, Pounce tried to lead her here by them?" Millicent guessed.

"Why is everyone so damned nosy? What's it to you where I'm hanging out?" Ron grumbled.

"A better question is how did you find this place?" Tom interjected.

Harry wandered out, looking peeved.
"Team Gamma is kaput. I think we're going to have to stick with the rock-eaters. They can't be trusted with explosives."

"Where'd they get explosives?" Millicent sighed.

"I made some. I'm not sure how they got up on the shelf and got them out of their container though. The good news is that they seems to really dig mining…ha! Dig. Mining. They decided to get to work on the practice rock we got them. We're going to need a new one. They blew up the rock and themselves. There's pieces all over the work room." He finally seemed to focus on the room and frowned when he spotted the twins. "We got new members? Who brought them in? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"They just showed up on their own. The question is still how." Theo shrugged.

Harry zeroed in on the blank piece of parchment one of them had in his hand. "Accio."

"OI!"
"You give that back!"

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

The twins eyes widened.

"Hey, is that the Marauder's Map? Why do you two have it?" Ron demanded.

"How do you know about it?" Fred asked, bewildered.

"My dad, godfather, their friend and that dirty rat bastard Peter Pettigrew made it." Harry answered absently.

"What is this place?"
"Why are you all here?"
"What's going on?"
"Who's team Gamma, and why"
"Is no one more upset they apparently killed themselves?"

The Explorers all sighed. Harry marched up to them and held out his pinky.
"You have to swear the oaths first."

"Great. More Gryffindors. I thought we were gonna get a Hufflepuff next?" Theo sighed.

While the rest were swearing in the twins, Harry went to the training room to call Remus and Sirius to explain about the intruders in their midst.

"Time for a group meeting, I guess."

Tom was just finishing up with the twins when Harry returned. Harry enlarged his mirror and put it on the wall so everyone could see the two men pictured within.

"Group meeting, everyone."

"So… What to do with you two." Remus mused.

"Pat us on the head and send us on our way?" Fred joked.

"Nope. 'fraid not. You poke in where you weren't intended to go, you pay the consequences." Sirius disagreed.

"And those are?" George asked nervously.

"That's what we're trying to figure."

"One question first?" Fred demanded.

"Go ahead."

"What is this place? What's going on here?"

The kids took turns explaining. It was safe enough to do so now that they were bound to secrecy like the rest of them.

"Wow. We knew you were sneaking off, Ronniekins…" George said in shock.

"We had no idea you were doing anything useful." Fred finished.

"OI"

"So, what now?" George wondered.

"Well. What are you two planning to do with your future?"

"We were planning to open a shop and sell our own line of pranks."

"Oh? I do hope you weren't planning on using stuff you learned from our map as the basis. That's not a good way to start off a business. We can prove it was mostly our work if that's the case. I might even have patents filed that will cover at least some of it. That was something my family taught me that I actually continued doing even after I ran away."

The twins sagged as they saw their dreams go up in smoke.

"Don't be so glum, boys. I can offer an alternative. You were hoping to raise money to eventually open a shop, correct?"
"Yeah. We were going to run a mail order business to raise funds. That was the plan, anyway."

"If we bring you onboard, you can help out with this project--split your time between it and product development. Once you've graduated I can front you the money for a shop. That would both give you your start and bring in more money for this project. We're still only in the development stages. Once we start seriously building and testing we're going to need funding for materials and such. We can work out a contract when it gets to that point. The shop itself and anything you make that incorporates our work in a substantial way will be owned by us and you'll get a cut of the proceeds for production and sale. Anything you develop that is your own original work, you two will own, and we'll get a cut for the shop, materials and research assistance. That should be win-win for everyone. Right now you can be Tom's assistants. He's been doing a bang-up job, but he's one person and he could use a few extra pairs of hands to make things go faster. At times he doesn't need your assistance one or both of you can help out in the other departments. How's that sound?"

Sirius decided.

"You've got a deal!" the twins replied eagerly.

"Well then, welcome aboard."

"Thanks!"

"Just one more thing though" Fred said hesitantly. George's eyes widened and he smiled sheepishly.

"Oh, yeah. Our friend, Lee Jordan…"

"What about him?"

"You were all saying you're hoping to get the figures to the point they can just make reports and stuff"

"He's into all that. None of you seem to be working specifically on communications"

"He could probably be a big help"

"And he's already been looking into it"

"He wants to open his own wireless station"

"He was planning to try to raise money for it like we were with our shop."

"He's also our roommate. If we start being secretive and can't tell him anything at all"

"He's going to get suspicious and probably start following us like we did Ronnie."

"Bloody hell. What is it with you Gryffindorks being so damned nosy!" Millicent huffed.

The Gryffindorks in question all just laughed.

"So…what exactly are you all working on?" Fred wondered.

Harry dug out a couple of notebooks and two small square mirrors from a box on one of the shelves.

"This here is your official Explorer's Club Inc. Research and Development Project Book. If you look on the sides you'll see different colored tabs. The Geological Survey and Mining group, which is us three" he pointed to himself, Ron and Neville, is the orange tab."

"Enchanted Items, Workers and Tools project, which is all of us is the purple tab." Millicent pointed to herself, Luna, Colin and Theo.

"Environmental Systems and Hazards is the green tab. That's me." Tom spoke up.

"The red tab is Aerospace Design and Management. Right now that's myself and Moony here."
"The white tab is where we post questions or problems that occur to us as we're working on things, just so it's all in one place. All the books are connected, so you can comment on particular pages in other sections than your own, but do try to keep it unobtrusive. Absolutely no major changes to existing systems or projects are to be made by those outside the project team. We each have our own working group. If you see something you think might be a problem, or that you think could work better with tweaking etc., just leave a note to that effect. The project team in charge will implement the changes or not depending on what they decide. Keep in mind that the same can be done to your project notes if you start pissing people off, so keep it friendly. This is your official communications mirror. They're all connected as well. You can call an individual mirror by saying the person's name, or you can group call everyone, though that part needs tweaking as everyone's face gets really tiny on the mirror surface and it can be tough to keep track of what everyone is saying. That's the reason we usually hold group meetings like this." he gestured around the room.

"If that other guy joins in to form a new project group, he's going to need notebook space and a work room." Theo noted.

"These ones are almost spent. I was going to get a new batch once we were all home for the summer. There's still room in the white tab. We'll just give him half of that for the time being and then a proper section when we start the new project books."

"That should work. What's his favorite color?"

"Red. But since that's taken"

"He'd probably like blue."

"Alright then. Bring him by tomorrow sometime. We'll see if he wants to join up."

"This is great. So…we're with you? Where's our workroom?" They asked Tom.

Tom pointed over his shoulder. The twins hurried over and peeked inside, then paled.

"Um…why are there tiny people trapped in bottles of ice"

"And fire"

"And wind"

"And water?"

"Environmental systems. I'm checking the integrity of the protective suits I made. If you look closely you can see they're all wearing one."

"Oh… so they are."

Lee Jordan, somewhat bemused by the secrecy, flabbergasted at the headquarters and the projects all the 'midgets' were working on, joined the Explorer's club with little fuss, and was soon bustling about in the new 'Communications and Transport Report Functions Relay' project room. The twins split their time between there and Tom's Environmental studies room when they weren't off in their "Pranking headquarters", which was yet another work room that got added to the clubhouse. When Spring break was over, classes kicked back into gear, as did quidditch practice for Harry and the twins.

In the beginning of April, Tom, who had been brooding about having been replaced, and who still
had lingering questions about the whole chamber of secrets affair, began getting paranoid that there might have been a second person involved who was as yet unknown, and still lurking about the castle.

He overheard Neville telling the others that the mandrakes, which were needed for the restorative draught to unpetrify the victims, were getting 'moody and secretive', and once they tried to start moving into each other's pots, which should be in just a few more weeks, they'd be mature and ready to be harvested.

The others expressed some relief that their friend would be restored, and some trepidation at finally learning whether she had been 'messed with' or was actually a criminal mastermind who they'd never known at all. Since the girl had already been petrified when he himself had been restored, he'd never met her, and honestly had quite forgotten about her and her 'polyjuice plot'. Having it brought to his attention once more upped his lingering paranoia that someone was there among them, possibly plotting against him and half of the rest of the club. Being the sort of person he was, he decided to do something about it.

A few days after Tom enacted his plan to protect himself somewhat, the students of Hogwarts had begun to notice something had changed within the school, something significant. The only problem was that none of them had a clue what that change was, exactly. The teachers noted a change as well, though mostly because they began getting a string of inane complaints from their students.

"...and I saw him coming towards me down the hall and I thought 'Oh, great, it's that slimy snake. What's he going to say this time? The thing was, when he reached the end of the hall, all I could think was that he was kind of cute. I'm pretty sure he dosed me with a love potion or something. Naturally I was horrified and ran away. Madame Pomfrey keeps telling me there's nothing in my system, but there has to be something! You need to do something!"

"It was weird, you know? That guy Smith. He said something to me, and I didn't want to punch him in the face for it. He must have dosed me with something. You should look into that. What do you mean I shouldn't want to punch anyone in the face for speaking to me? Everyone wants to punch that guy. He probably deserves it."

There were lots of reports like that, but the biggest indication that something profound had shifted were two incidents involving Oliver Wood.

"Hey guys, I decided to cancel the next two practices. We're in pretty good shape. We'll get another good one or two in right before the game."
"Seriously? But...you want to practice all day, every day!"
"It just occurred to me that I have OWLs coming up. I've gotta study. If I don't pass, I won't get wand rights. Never mind joining a professional league, I won't even be a wizard! On top of that, my mum will kill me! No, I need to hit the books for a bit. I just hope I haven't left it too late. Gods, I'm an idiot!"

Oliver's sudden turnaround regarding the never-ending quidditch practices was shocking enough. What happened a few days later made even that pale in comparison.

It was at lunch on an ordinary sunny afternoon. The Gryffindor and Slytherin first years were returning from their herbology lesson. The rest of the years noted their arrival because they were all acting oddly. The boys, some seemed embarrassed, some seemed angry, some seemed pale and sort of shocked...one or two looked sort of starry eyed. The girls were either spitting mad or
giggling madly, sporting pink cheeks and embarrassed smiles.

"What's with you lot?" Ron demanded.

Ginny, who was one of the gigglers, and Colin, who seemed rather starry-eyed were both eager to tell the tale.

"They were kissing! Like really, really"

"Looked like they were trying to eat each other's faces, they did!"

"Right there against the greenhouse!"

"Professor Sprout yelled at them, but they didn't seem to notice!"

"She hosed them down!"

"She kept muttering about spring, and that they needed to keep their pants on, but they were still wearing them from what I saw."

"You mean you looked!" Ron sputtered.

"Well, YEAH. Wouldn't you have?" Ginny rolled her eyes. Colin grinned and his face turned bright red.

"Who was it though?" Parvati, who was sitting right nearby on the edge of her seat demanded.

Ginny giggled again, and Colin's face went a bit more red.

"It was them!" she whispered, pointing.

She and Colin scrambled to get in their seats before they noticed them pointing or talking about them.

"What! No way!"

"OMG this is HUGE!" Lavender and Parvati hissed.

They spotted Padma watching them intently and squealed. This was too good to not share. They grabbed each other's hands and ran to the Ravenclaw table in hopes of being the ones to spread the biggest scoop all year. Oliver Wood, and his arch rival, nemesis and most hated fellow quidditch captain had just come into the hall. They both seemed jumpy and a bit shell shocked. They glanced at each other, but their gazes skittered away from one another, and they hurried in opposite directions to take their seats. Significantly, they each chose as seat that would leave them with their backs to each other. Oliver sunk down in his seat, put his elbows on the table and sunk his head into his hands. Marcus seemed to spend the remainder of the lunch hour staring at the wall.

Ron's face screwed up in horror.

"I'm going to be sick." he muttered.

Neville elbowed him in the side. "Leave him alone. He seems to be having enough of a crisis already."

"But Flint! Why not, I dunno, anyone else! It's Flint!" Ron hissed.
"You know, I find I'm not actually all that surprised for some reason. I never saw it myself, but the girls all swore up and down he had a lot of UST with Flint. The twins thought they were barking, but it looks like they were right." Harry mused.

"What's UST?"

"Unresolved sexual tension. Like, two people bicker a lot, but they can't seem to stay away from each other, and it gets really annoying, and everyone around them wishes they would just snog already. That's how Katie explained it, anyway."

"Oh, so like Ron and Hermione?" Seamus commented.

"Yeah. Just like that." Dean nodded.

Ron squeaked, his face went scarlet and his eyes bugged out. Dean and Seamus took one look at him and started laughing.

"Oh, man! You should see your face!"

"I-I-It's not like that!"

"HA!"

"We're friends!"

"Pull the other one."

"I'm too young for that stuff!"

"Well, I won't disagree with you there." Dean snorted.

Ron made an odd face, and his skin seemed not to know whether to blush redder or pale, and so he ended up looking sort of mottled and sickly. Colin popped up nearby and snapped a picture.

"Thanks, mate! That one's a keeper!" Seamus laughed.

"Snape just drug Flint off by his ear." Neville noted.

"Probably gonna check him for love potions or something." Harry sighed.

"Greasy git! As if Oliver would do that! Flint would be damn lucky to have him!"

When classes were over for the day, the teachers began to gather in the teacher's lounge.

"Ah, Severus, there you are. So? Find anything on Mr. Flint?"

Snape scowled at all of them and flopped down in his seat, clutching a hot cup of tea in both his hands.

"No. There was nothing." he muttered.

"Of course there wasn't. It's spring." Sprout chided.

"Oh, Kingsley, there you are. So, what do you think about all the drama this afternoon?"
"I think someone has a lot to answer for."

"What do you mean?"

Shacklebolt moved forward and laid a couple of long pieces of parchment on the table.

"When my last class today ended, Tom Riddle approached me and gave me these. The kid had some lingering questions about the chamber of secrets, he'd heard the little girl who was petrified might have been interfered with in some way. Between all that and finding out he'd been replaced and had his old nickname become a byword for terror, he was, perhaps justifiably, a bit paranoid. He decided the best way to protect himself was to protect everyone from interference. He told me he set up something at either end of the most high-traffic corridor. When you went in one side it scanned and catalogued you for any harmful magic on your person, when you reached the next it removed what it could. He set up something in his trunk to record any findings. That's what that is there." he gestured to the parchment. The teachers blanched at seeing the length of the lists. Snape and McGonagall each reached for one. Flitwick and Sprout did their best to read over their shoulders. "Clever as he is, he's a fourth year. He scanned for general classes of spells, and as most of them were in fact minor hexes they were able to be removed by his scheme. When he began noticing odd changes in the school, he went to check on his contraption and was rather alarmed by the number of spells that were removed. He gave me the ward stone and asked me to add in anything else I thought might be pertinent. I did so. I've decided to leave his scans in place until my changes have had a chance to be checked on."

"All of my Slytherins are on here!"

"So are my Hufflepuffs!"

"What was done to them?" Flitwick demanded.

"All the Slytherins had a low level general aversion charm. It was subtle enough that over time it would put people on edge while in their presence, and make them seem less attractive than they actually are. I've had a number of students complain to me that one of the Slytherins 'did something' and demanded I arrest them for dosing them with love potions. I've also overheard a number of scathing comments to the effect that the whole house was using beautifying potions so you couldn't see how 'troll-like' they were anymore." He sighed then, rather sheepishly. "I don't like to admit it, but the first time I sat down at the teachers table, when I looked at the Slytherin table, all I could think was that they looked like an unpleasant lot."

"What about my Hufflepuffs?"

"They seem to have been made to seem mediocre. Nice kids, not very bright, not very capable." The other teachers leaned away from him and Sprout as they both growled. Sprout was, of course, their head of house. Kingsley had been a Hufflepuff himself while in school.

He shook off his anger and went back to making his report. "One of the Hufflepuff students, Zacharias Smith, had a second spell on him"

"Did it make people want to punch him in the face?"

"Not specifically. It would have made those in his presence annoyed and agitated though. Did… Did he get punched in the face a lot?"

"No. He did get hexed a lot. I've also received a number of complaints about him. They could never tell me anything specific he had done, and so I never gave him detention or anything, which
"Oliver Wood and Marcus Flint were given an obsession to channel other...energies into."

Sprout snickered. The other teachers cringed. After a moment, Spout sighed. "Those poor boys. It's no wonder they're so confused."

"I should have paid more attention. Madame Pomfrey told me Harry Potter had complained to her during a check-up that he was missing meals and sleep because Oliver was keeping them at practice for hours every day. She asked Madame Hooch to keep an eye on him. I should have realized there was a problem when he tried dragging them out there during classes when she stepped in to do so."

Sprout started snickering again. "Poor Mr. Flint. He might not be able to walk once that boy gets done with him!"

"Pomona!" McGonagall chided.

"Was anything done to Potter, Weasley or Longbottom?" Professor Flitwick suddenly asked.

"Why do you ask?" Shacklebolt asked curiously.

"Well...not to put too fine a point on it...they all seem a lot, well, smarter, than they did last year."

"They didn't come up on any of the lists."

"I don't think that was magic." McGonagall admitted. "I don't want to cast blame, but..."

"It's Granger's fault." Snape said sourly.

"You think she did something to them?"

"Just be herself." McGonagall sighed. "She has a very domineering personality. Molly Weasley and Augusta Longbottom do as well. Given that he had the same reaction to her as the other boys, I can only assume Petunia Dursley did as well. Looking back, I wonder if the boys were never given a chance to blossom because, upon leaving their very domineering mother figures, Miss Granger simply stepped into the role. They all claimed she was conniving and manipulative. If she manipulated them the way an overbearing mother does to get her children to comply, it would be something they could all recognize but were rather helpless in the face of. Having her removed from the equation simply gave them chance to spread their wings and find their own strengths, I think."

"I know Longbottom's potions grades began to immediately improve once he started partnering with Potter rather than Granger. She used to be hissing instructions in his ear nonstop. He made toxic sludge and blew up his cauldron just about every class. I told her constantly to stop, but the chit never would." Snape huffed.

"If that was the case I'm surprised Gryffindor had any points left. That seems unlike you."

"Albus. He restored any points I took from her and was constantly berating me for being mean to the poor little muggleborn girl. It was the same when I marked her down for not following directions on her homework. I'd ask for ten inches on a narrow subject, she'd give me a rambling five foot treatise that went off on long tangents and incorporated things that were at best only marginally connected to the topic at hand. He said that she was top of her class bar none in every other class and so I was obviously just picking on her. I told him she doesn't follow directions,
doesn't listen to instruction, and while she can parrot back blocks of text directly from the book on command, I'm not actually certain she really understands what she's doing. Her potions always come out good, not perfect, but often better than many others. I know she can follow written directions very well, but that's all. He's been interfering in how I'm allowed to grade her, and has made it clear that she is not to lose points or get detentions from me because it is obvious to him that I'm biased and holding a grudge against the chit! And so I'm stuck reading her nonsensical ramblings, all five feet of them, every week. Until Longbottom switched partners I had regular accidents in class and she would not stop talking, and there was nothing I was allowed to do about it!" He glared at the other teachers. "I blame all of you. If the rest of you had put your foot down about her ridiculous homework length, or chided her to stay on topic it wouldn't have been such a problem."

"Did you say you actually read the essays? All of them?" Flitwick asked. "Why don't you just use the grading charm?"

"I don't like it. I did that at first, but then I read through some of the essays that had gotten full marks and realized they didn't deserve the grade they'd gotten with the charm. It uses your own knowledge and looks for key words and phrases to generate points and then measures the average points across the stack to generate the score. Upon actually reading the paper, I realized that though he had all the right words, the actual sentences revealed he didn't have the first clue what he was talking about. I've done them by hand ever since. If all of you are simply using that charm, it's no wonder Albus thinks I'm being mean to the ridiculous chit! Had I been using the charm she would probably be getting over a hundred percent each time simply due to length and number of key words compared to the others." he scoffed.

The rest of the teachers traded an uneasy glance. Hermione was usually the only O in the classes she was in. The rest of the students fell into the more expected bell curve, with E's as the highest score, the majority falling into A's, and a few D's to round things out. She was always ahead of the curve, usually to such a degree that there was no real comparison. Last year she had scored top of her house, top of her year, and by such a lead that even second place was miles behind her.

"She is actually a very intelligent little girl."

"Perhaps. I know she retains information very well, but from what I've seen of her she's a parrot, not the second coming of Merlin."

"We're getting rather off the original subject. Who cursed our students? And why? They're children!"

"And what will the long-term effects be? We don't know how long these curses have been in place. I've sometimes rolled my eyes at the Slytherin persecution complex…but if the children were cursed to make others react with at least some distrust and hostility in their daily interactions, it's really no wonder they felt that way!"

"And my children. Cursed to have others see them as lesser in some way. They all work so hard, and they're good kids, every one of them. Poor Zacharias. He's curious and full of questions, and he's not willing to accept pat answers… but it was always a chore to answer them. Looking back, I realize I often felt impatient or irritable when dealing with him. I've been a teacher too long to let it interfere with doing my job, but it was there. How bewildered he must have been to be met with anger and hostility from everyone just for being curious."

"I don't have any suspects as of yet. I've questioned different students, but no one knows of any enemies they might have, and none of them can think of anyone who might have done this to them. The perception of the two houses seems to predate any of the current students being sorted. Most of
them came from families from the same house, and had a positive perception of each before arriving at the school. Upon hearing either house dismissed as being 'evil' or 'duffers' they were often fired up to prove otherwise, and found it difficult to do so. The Hufflepuffs all wanted to prove they weren't losers, the Slytherins that they weren't evil, but everyone perceived them that way no matter what they did and they eventually gave up trying to convince anyone otherwise. Something like this would shape society in profound ways. I have to wonder, if this has been going on for years, is it part of why the war just seemed to erupt out of nowhere and it was so nonsensical at times? Were there just whole swaths of the population stewing in resentment for years, feeling persecuted and ill-done by, while others had a simmering low-level hostility that had built up over years? Is that why it just seemed there was suddenly open warfare in the streets?"

"You think it's a set up for a second war."

"It could very well be. The thing is, at this point I don't know who did it or when, or if it was the same person who cursed both houses. I don't know why the Smith kid got a bit of extra, and I don't know where the quidditch kids' fit in to things, unless it was simply meant to heighten tensions through rivalry and cut off any uh, "points of contact" between the two houses, or if it was someone who liked one or both of them and was trying to keep them away from each other. I just don't know. I hope to find out more. I've widened the scope of what Riddle's scanners look for, I've added in imperious and a few other curses. Maybe something will turn up and I'll get more answers, but for now I'm as stumped as all of you are."
Year's End/ Start of summer

Chapter Summary

The school year comes to a close, new members are added to the Explorer's club and tentative plans are made for the summer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dumbledore paced behind his desk and glared at his deputy, his spy and his pet auror in frustration.

"The Bloody Baron is under *imperius*, my students have been cursed, and you don't know who is responsible? I would think it was obvious! It is Lord Voldemort! Go arrest Tom Riddle and take him to have his rancid soul sucked out and let it be an end to this nonsense!"

"Albus! That is enough! You need to let go of this strange obsession you have with Mr. Riddle!" McGonagall snapped.

"I am not *obsessed*, I am *concerned!* Just because all of you are content to bury your head in the sand doesn't mean I will do the same!"

"He was trapped as a diary for fifty years. I went and found photographs of him from fifty years ago, and he's unchanged. I've also had a chance to observe him at length, and he's actually a teenager. I doubt a man nearing seventy years of age could pretend well enough to fool anyone, let alone do so for a whole school year near enough." Snape added to her objections.

"Dark magic!"

"I feel I should also point out that we wouldn't even know about all the curses if not for Mr. Riddle." Shaklebolt added as well. "Mostly because no one was actually looking to see if they were cursed. He's paranoid and worried, and came to me for help when he found something concrete to be worried about."

"Lulling you into a false sense of safety! He's up to something, mark my words."

"Albus. You need to stop this. I understand, I do." McGonagall tried another tack. "The war was terrible for everyone. After believing for so long that it was him, I realize it must be difficult to change tacks after so long…"

"I was not mistaken." Dumbledore hissed. "It was him, and now, thanks to your foolish interference he's here, walking around and living with HARRY POTTER and his odious guardian! You have all but handed our world to him on a silver platter! He cannot be trusted! There is nothing good or clean in him and there never has been! His charming façade is a lie. He is selfish, and cruel and thinks only of himself and his own never-ending hunger for power. Sooner or later he will slip up and then you will see."

Dumbledore drew his dignity around him like a shield.
"You are dismissed. I have many other important matters that require my attention. I have told you what needs to be done."

McGonagall, Snape and Shaklebolt exchanged a look and left the office.

The roar of the crowd was deafening outside, and they hadn't even left the locker room yet.

"This is it. Last chance for the cup. Our last game helped us a lot, but not enough. Slytherin is still ahead in points. Potter, drag it out as long as you can. Girls, score fast and often. Fred, George, keep the heat on. We **have** to get that cup. We **have** to."

"Oliver. Relax. You said it yourself. We're in good shape. Slytherin has already played its last game for the season. So long as we can rack up a high enough score we're golden."

"And even if something goes wrong, it isn't the end of the world. We played a good season, and the scouts, if they were watching, will know it."

"You don't understand! We **HAVE** to win the cup! My ass is on the line here! Literally."

"he added sotto voice.

"EW!"

"Oliver! Damn! TMI!"

"Why would you even make a bet like that?"

"What's going on?" Harry asked innocently.

The rest of the team fell abruptly silent and looked nervously at the wide-eyed second year in their midst.

"NOTHING." Fred and George yelped. If word of this conversation, in front of little ears, ever got back to their mum they'd be killed for sure.

"It's nothing. Let's win this thing!" Oliver replied at the same time.

"YEAH!"

The game was a grueling one. Hufflepuff seemed determined to win, even if it meant playing all day. They fought like cornered badgers right until the end. Harry had been keeping one ear on the score, one eye on the snitch. He could have gotten it a couple of times during the game, but instead just made sure the other seeker didn't, and did his best to disrupt the opposing chasers plays wherever possible. Finally, after hours of play they managed a big enough lead to make the snitch count. The snitch seemed incensed at being ignored for so long; it led both seekers on a merry chase--through the stands, through the air, through the other players--through the hoops! Harry's focus narrowed until there was only the snitch. He strained and managed to grasp it, just in time to make a very narrow escape from a steep dive.

"AND POTTER HAS THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS! GRYFFINDOR IS THE NEW CHAMPIONS! WOO HOO!"
Harry was swarmed mid-air by his ecstatic team. Oliver was crying…but even through the tears he was wearing a crazy-eyed sort of feral expression that Harry found sort of disturbing. The rest of the team seemed to feel the same, but for some reason they kept snickering as well.

Teenagers were weird.

Gryffindor swarmed across the field, crying and cheering, and then the team was drug off to go shower and then party.

Harry spotted professor McGonagall beaming at all of them and grinning smugly at Snape, who seemed very put out by the result of the game. Harry was still sort of torn about whether or not to quit, especially now that Oliver had regained his sanity. Maybe he could compromise? Get them to train a reserve; if it got to be too much, just have them take over? It was something to think about.

His family was waiting for him when he came out of the showers. Sirius picked him up and swung him around. Remus patted him on the shoulder, Loki smiled and Tom noogied his head till he cried uncle.

Loki couldn't stay, but he congratulated him on his win before leaving. Sirius and Remus stayed to walk the boys back to the castle.

He felt warm inside, like a big balloon filled him up almost to bursting. He should have known it wouldn't last.

His first clue that something was wrong was when he felt Tom stiffen up beside him and come to a halt. Harry followed his gaze curiously and blanched. He didn't even think about it, he just shrieked and threw a knife. It pinned the thing to the side of Hagrid's hut.

"Why is that spider so big!!!!???
"

"That's a baby." Tom said, his voice tight.

He was still staring out at the edge of the forest, his face pale. That was when Harry realized the grass seemed to be moving. It was hard to see in the near twilight, but there were more of them. A lot more. Spiders as big as his head, some the size of a large dog…and some of them were bigger. A lot bigger. Remus and Sirius tried to shove the kids towards the castle, but Harry wasn't having it.

"We can't let them get past us! No one knows they're coming!"

Tom, his face pale but resolute, started firing into the oncoming horde.

"That won't be enough! They're magic resistant!"

"SECTUMSEMPRA!"

The one Sirius seemed to hit hissed angrily, but it kept advancing, its pincers clicking with menace. Harry rather wished now he had more knives. One was still stuck fast in Hagrid's hut. He had one more. He wished suddenly, with all his might, for something bigger to drive the things back with. Tom tried more spells, but they kept bouncing off their shells. Even their eyes weren't good targets as they were covered with a thin layer of magic-resistant skin as well. Remus and Sirius tried firing at the same target to see if they had more luck--which they did--but there were a dozen for every one they managed to halt. Harry backed up slowly, trying to see a way out. He was not going to let
Hogwarts be overrun, even if he really, really wanted to get away from those things.

"Please...somebody help us!"

The cold fear that had begun to fill Harry's heart melted away like snow in a spring thaw as beautiful music filled the clearing. A flash of flame erupted overhead, and Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes, flew in a circle before dropping the Sorting Hat on Harry's head. Harry wasn't sure what was going on, but maybe the hat could do something--maybe trigger the wards he'd always heard so much about and fry them?

"I'm afraid not, little Gryffindor. But I can do something. Stay strong. Help is on the way."

"Ow." Harry murmured as something heavy thunked him right in the head.

He pulled the hat off and peered inside, only to see a golden handle studded with rubies. Harry pulled it free. It was a sword.

"Cool."

Harry stuffed the hat into his pocket and hefted the sword in his hand before charging forward, right into the oncoming horde.

"HARRY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING! GET BACK HERE!"

Harry went to work with the sword. It was a nice sword. It fit perfectly in his hand, it was light but strong, and best of all, it cut through giant spiders like butter. Tom transfigured himself a halberd from a fallen tree branch, made it sharp and unbreakable and waded out to join him.

Remus and Sirius were a half step behind him.

"BLOODY GRYFFINDORS! YOU'RE ALL CRAZY!"

"Psh. Says the Slytherin who's out here with me."

"Where the hell are they all coming from?" Remus shouted.

"I think a better question is why! I don't want to see whatever they're running from!" Sirius replied.

"Nagini said she smells smoke."

By that point teachers had come running to help turn the tide. Harry pulled his broom from his other pocket and mounted it, but his foot was grabbed before he could take off.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Tom demanded.

"To put out the fire, obviously."

"You're an idiot." Tom growled. "Budge up. You're not going alone."

"Hurry up then!"

Once above the tree line they could see the smoke.

"Go around. And put a bubblehead on. You don't want to breathe that in."

"I don't know the…"
"Here."

Harry wrinkled his nose at the bubble that was now fitted over his head, but ignored it to head towards the fire.

"Do you know any good water spells?"

"Just aguamenti"

"That won't be strong enough."

Tom coached him through a strong water spell that would release a torrent of water, more akin to a fire hose than a water spout like the aguamenti produced. As they drew closer a tree went up like paper just as the wind blew, sending sparks across the next few trees in the row.

"Get closer. Go around. Here. Start spraying!"

With the two of them they were able to cover a fairly wide area, but it didn't seem to be enough. Fires were still burning, and the wind kept spreading the flames further.

"People are coming!"

"Good! We're never going to put this out at this rate!"

The Hufflepuff quidditch team, as well as a dozen conscripts who had brooms with them at school, who had seen the flames from their common room, and realized the fire would continue to rage out of control while all the teachers were busy trying to hold off the fleeing spiders had decided to come to the rescue. With so many more helpers spread out along the fire line they finally started making headway. When the last of the fires were out, the whole group spread out to wet down the surrounding trees and ground, and check for stray sparks just in case there were any they'd missed. They all let out a tired cheer as the last of the smoke began to fade away.

"Hurry back to where the spiders are. I want to get some of the venom before Snape steals it all."

Tom whispered quietly in Harry's ear.

"Seriously?"

"It's a hundred galleons an ounce on the black market. Damn right I'm serious. I'll have to hold on to it for a bit until the market glut is passed, but once I can sell it I should be rolling in it for the foreseeable future."

"I'm getting some too then."

"By all means. We'll get more working together."

When they got back towards Hogwarts, the air over the castle was filled with dozens of flying horses--thestrals, and ones that looked to be half bird--hippogriffs, according to Tom.

The teachers and what looked to be all of the rest of Hufflepuff house milling around on the grounds.

Hagrid, who it seemed had slipped off to Hogsmeade earlier after the game, was sobbing over the piles of spider corpses.
Dumbledore was standing amidst the crowd, staring at the piles of spider corpses, and all the tired, pissed off soot-covered people while looking rather shell-shocked.

Marcus Flint and Oliver Wood were out there as well. They seemed to have gotten dressed in a hurry. Oliver's jumper was inside out, and Marcus' shirt was buttoned wrong and half out of his trousers.

"Gosh. Was Flint bitten by one of the things?"

"Why do you ask?" James McAlister, one of the Hufflepuff chasers asked.

"Well, look at him. He's limping." Harry glanced back over his shoulder. Tom sounded like he was choking.

James coughed and his face got rather red. The rest of the team further down started sniggering.

There was a party raging in Gryffindor house when Harry and Oliver finally made it back there.

"Hey! Oliver! Have a good… time?"

"Jesus, what the hell happened to you two?"

Ron paled and stumbled back a step. "I-is that a s-spider leg?"

"Huh?" Harry glanced down at himself and saw something clinging to his robe, stuck there by ichor.

"Pincer, I think. Yuck."

"Why do you both smell like burning?"

"And why are you covered in spider bits?"

"Go look out the bloody window. I swear." Oliver grumbled before stomping off.

"What crawled up his ass and died?"

"Holy hell! What happened out there?"

"Forest fire. Acromantulas."

"What's an acromantula?"

"They're spiders. The babies are the size of a small dog. The adults are about the size of a car. There was a whole colony of the things out in the forest. We had to battle them at the forest's edge to keep them from overwhelming Hogwarts and eating everyone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to go take a shower."

The room was silent as Harry trudged away out of sight, and then the whole house erupted in noise, charged out of the house to go question the portraits, and try to get a better view of the grounds.

Naturally the story was on everyone's lips come morning. Hufflepuff house's points had quadrupled
overnight--every student who helped battle acromantulas or fight the fire had gotten points. For Slytherin and Gryffindor that had amounted to twenty points each; for Hufflepuff it was considerably more.

Harry was questioned endlessly about the sword of Gryffindor. Zacharias Smith had been looking out the window when the phoenix arrived to give it to him and had told everyone.

"For the last time! I put it back in the hat and gave it back to the phoenix! I don't have it anymore!"

"I still say you're crazy, mate. Me, I would of kept that thing, hung it up on my wall and told everyone I was the heir of Gryffindor."

"Even if I had wanted to, do you really think any of the teachers was going to let me? Heck, Dumbledore practically ran over to snatch it when he heard I had it. He just looked at me like I was nuts when I told him it was already gone. I wish everyone would just let it drop already."

The students who hadn't been present for the battle the night before crept out onto the grounds to see what spider remains there were after they'd been eaten by the hippogriffs and thestrals. The bits that remained were enough to put several people off their food for the rest of the day, and to give others a lingering case of arachnophobia. Poor Ron, who was arachnophobic before the attack, due to a mean prank played on him by the twins when he was little where they turned his teddy bear into a giant spider, had nightmares for a week after.

As always happened in Hogwarts, the excitement lasted a few days, but then was left behind as the teachers began making the final push to prepare everyone for the upcoming exams. Everyone was so busy revising and doing last minute homework, the days flew by, and before they knew it May was almost over.

"Hey, have you heard? Professor Sprout said the mandrakes have started trying to move into each other's pots. They're finally mature." Neville announced that morning at breakfast.

"So they can finally make that restorative draught?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. She said it will probably be ready Sunday night."

"Hermione'll be unpetrified finally!" Ron said cheerfully.

"Yeah, looks like."

"Wow. It's been so long. I can't wait to see her again. Right, Harry?"

"Uh, Ron? We were still fighting the last time I saw her."

"So were you, weren't you?" Neville reminded him.

"Oh. That's right. It's been months. I kind of forgot about that. It's no matter though, it'll still be great to see her."

"Yeah. It will. She's going to go spare when she discovers she missed the whole year though." Harry agreed.

"You don't think she'll get in trouble, do you? About the polyjuice?" Neville wondered.

"I wouldn't think so. What can they really charge her with? She wanted to make it, she wanted to
steal the boomslang, she wanted to impersonate a bunch of people, but she never got a chance to actually do so. On top of that she's been petrified for months." Ron assured him.

"Do you guys think she was messed with, or was she just secretly evil all along?" Neville suddenly asked.

"I dunno really. On the one hand, it seems out of character. She's all about rules and obeying authority. On the other hand, it seems very in character. Making a NEWT level potion as a second year, managing to get into all four houses…both those are things people normally couldn't accomplish. She likes standing above the crowd and showing off how clever she is, so it does actually seem like something she'd do. I really just don't know. I guess we'll find out once they question her." Harry shrugged.

"She's gonna flip when we show her the garden." Ron chuckled.

Harry and Neville traded a look and frowned. Neville nudged Ron with his foot to remind him they were in public. It looked like they were going to have to have a group meeting before Hermione woke up.

"Okay, this emergency meeting of the Explorer's club is now called to order. Alright, kiddo, what's the emergency?" Sirius asked from the wall.

Remus wasn't present for once. They found out, to their surprise, that he'd been auditing several university math, science and engineering courses to be able to better help them design a working model ship that they could make as mundane as possible, just in case their magic failed once off planet. After his study of the spectrum Harry was no longer worried about that, but figured extra knowledge had never hurt anyone. In fact, it gave him some ideas on how to most productively use his summer when not directly working on the project.

"Well, basically, Hermione is likely to be unpetrified this Sunday night. Ron has assumed that she's going to just be brought onboard."

"Oi, Weasley! We all agreed to a group vote before any new members, at least ones that didn't just show up on their own, could be added. If you want her brought in as your sponsored person you need to convince all of us it's a good idea." Millicent huffed.

"Why wouldn't it be? Hermione's smart. She's also muggleborn, which means she probably already knows about a lot of the stuff we've been reading up on."

"Both good points. Anyone have points against?" Sirius agreed.

"Before she was petrified she was at odds with me for weeks, and had just argued with Ron. That could probably be worked around in time if we both made up with her. The real reason I'm going to vote no is that I think she's going to unbalance the working dynamic we have going."

"Okay. Why?"

"She'll try to take over everyone's project and tell us we're doing it wrong and that she could do it better and we should just sit in the corner while she shows us how much smarter she is than the rest of us. She absolutely has to be in charge, she refuses to admit she's wrong about anything ever. If she doesn't get her way she nags. If that doesn't work, she cries. If you still don't listen to her, the
first thing she's going to do is go running off to a teacher, vow of silence be damned, and complain and raise a ruckus. She's relentless like that. It won't matter to her that it's our project, that we've been doing fine without her, or that she might ruin everything. She has to be number one, and if for some reason she can't be she'd rather see everyone else crash and burn."

"I think you're being a bit hard on her." Neville objected.

"No, I'm not. Sirius and Remus she might listen to because they're adults, but only so long as they agree with her. The rest of us are peers, and so we don't count. Only one opinion counts with her and that's her opinion. Everyone else can agree with her or get out of the way."

"I think he's right. It's a bad idea." Millicent agreed.

"You only think that because she's a Gryffindor." Ron complained.

"That's a small part of it. I think we should get some more Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs or more Slytherins before we add more lions to the mix. On a project like this I think a bit of diversity would go a long way. The bigger part is that everything Harry said fits with what the rest of us have seen of her in class." she explained.

Beside her Theo nodded. "If we vote right now I'm also going to vote no. I think she would unbalance things. The mix we've got going now is working nicely. We've got enough hands for everything, everyone gets along pretty well, and we've got a nice synergy building."

"Okay, we have three no votes with reasons. Anyone else?"

"Recent problems aside, Hermione is a good friend. She is smart, and she loves research. She'd probably be able to contribute a lot. Plus, if I start disappearing as well it's going to be a mess." Ron argued. "So my vote is still yes."

"While I think all of you have good points, I think I'm going to vote yes because I think we should drag her in and get her under contract before she becomes a problem and head that off as much as possible." Neville sighed.

"I say we delay this vote until after she's restored and the aurors and unspeakables have questioned her. I think she should also be run through my scanners a few times before any decisions are made. We don't know yet how much of her problematical behavior is her and how much might have been influenced by spells put on her. Until we know she's clear of interference I say we shouldn't even consider her for inclusion. Once she's known to be free of interference I say we observe her for a while and make a decision then. It's possible she won't be a problem we need to manage, and so we can just focus on whether or not she'll be an asset." Tom chimed in.

"Alright then. Votes to delay the voting?" Luna asked.

The kids exchanged a glance and there was a unanimous "AYE".

"Alright then, Hermione Granger is tabled until further notice."

"Does anyone have recommendations for others to include or do we think we have enough people already?"

"I've been tentatively feeling out a few people in Slytherin. No recommendations at this time." Millicent answered.

"I've been paying more attention to the Hufflepuffs. Now that they don't just scream 'incompetent'
every time you look at them, a few of them suddenly seem like good prospects. I've been trying to chat a few of them up and see how they feel about science, space exploration and the like, but it's been slow going. They still get twitchy when a Slytherin wants to talk to them." Theo admitted with a roll of his eyes. "No recommendations at this time."

"People seem more willing to talk to me lately, but as yet I haven't found anyone in Ravenclaw that I think would be a good recruit. No recommendations at this time."

Lee opened his mouth, but Millicent glared at him. "No more Gryffindors until we've mixed things up a bit more. Gryffindors make up 3/4ths of the group already, and we've got another lined up for further consideration."

"If you had let me speak you'd know they're actually a couple of Ravenclaws. They're cousins. Fourth years, like me. I want to bring them in to the communications group. Without getting too into things I've been feeling them out. They're half-bloods, they live in a muggle area and have lots of muggle electronics at home that they've been practicing with. I've been helping them out now and again. We were thinking about working together to get our wireless station off the ground after graduation. They're sci-fi buffs, they love muggle stuff. They would be completely into this project, and would be a great help."

"What are their names?" Luna asked. "Bernard White and Kendall Jones."

"I'll vote yes."

"I thought there weren't any you'd recommend?" Neville pointed out.

"I was concentrating on the first and second years. I don't know either of them well, but they both seem nice and are quite clever, and would probably be a great help."

The others exchanged a glance.

"I'll give them a yes too." Harry decided. He trusted Luna's judgment.

"Me too." Colin shrugged.

"I will as well." Neville decided.

The three Slytherins traded a look and gave their own 'yes' vote as well.

The twins added theirs.

"They're nice folks. Smart"

"Not big fans of quidditch."

"but other than that"

"They're alright."

Ron, still stung that Hermione, who was his and Harry's best friend had gotten tabled while some Ravenclaw interlopers were given an easy in gave his own yes rather grudgingly once Lee explained that he really needed the help.

"The wizarding world doesn't have anything comparable to muggle computers and what have you. If it's just me, with OWLs coming up next year, I'm not going to make much headway. We have to build a new system from the ground up…almost. We have been working on the idea already, but
we haven't gotten too far yet. I'm hoping we'll make more headway if we work on it all year rather than just the odd weekend in summer."

"Fine. Yes."

"Alright. Two new members. Bring them by before you all leave and get them sworn in. Any other business?"

"Actually, I have a suggestion for discussion." Harry spoke up.

"Shoot."

"Remus taking classes made me wonder if that might not be a good idea for all of us to do over the summer. Not a bunch, just maybe one here or there, just to widen our horizons. Since all of us are underage, we'd need some kind of a glamour or notice-me-not or something to make us blend in better. We could just audit a class here and there and compare notes. If no one thinks all of us trying to sit through summer university intro science courses is a good idea, maybe we should sign up for a summer science camp for kids, or space camp or something."

"Space camp? Muggles go camping out there? I thought they weren't quite that far ahead yet?"

"No, no. The places that run the space program have camps for kids where they learn about space and the space program or something. I only just heard about it once, I don't actually know that many details. I don't know how you get in, or how much it costs or what all it covers or anything. It might be something to look in to."

"I'll get Loki on that. He knows more about the muggle world than I do. I'll ask Remus about auditing university courses and see if he thinks it would be worthwhile and I'll get back to you on that, alright?"

"Okay."

"Any other business?"

"Um, no. I can't think of anything."

"Alrighty then. Meeting adjourned."

Sirius vanished from the mirror and the rest of them looked at each other.

"That whole thing with taking muggle classes… I dunno mate. Maybe some of you'll be able to manage it, but if I'm vanishing all the time to go lurk around some muggle school, my mum's gonna be having fits. I'm prolly gonna have trouble even coming to visit once a week. Mum doesn't like us out of her sight. Even if I can manage to convince her to let me visit, she's prolly gonna send Ginny with me, which means I might not be able to come at all."

"Is that going to be a problem for everyone?"

"Daddy knows Sirius and Remus, and he knows I'm friends with all of you. If I say I'm going to visit, I think he'll be happy for the most part. I won't be able to be around the whole summer, because we'll probably take at least one short trip, but as long as I'm not gone all day every day it shouldn't be a problem."
"Same here." Millicent admitted.

"My dad's grandpa age. As long as I'm not underfoot and don't seem to be getting into any trouble, he won't care much, as long as he knows where I'm going."

"My gran might be as much a problem as Ron's mum...maybe. She seems to want me right where she can keep an eye on me, but at the same time she's always telling me how popular and well-liked my dad was and how many friends he had, so she might just let me come and go so long as she knows where I'm going. I just don't know."

"Won't it be kind of dangerous? Going to a muggle university to sneak into classes?" Colin wondered.

"Could we just use the globe thingy, do you think?" Neville suddenly asked.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked, intrigued.

"The galaxy in a globe. Couldn't we just go to earth and just, like, spy on the classes from a distance, that way we don't all have to worry about blending or something going wrong?"

"Why don't we check?"

Harry grabbed the galaxy off the mantle and fired it up. The kids went seemingly racing through the stars and then came to a stop over their own little blue and white planet.

"I still can't believe muggles did all this." Theo said, shaking his head.

"You can't? Think how I feel." Tom grumbled, glaring at the satellites.

They zoomed in on England, but ran into an invisible wall. They got close enough to see the structure of the landscape and cities, but couldn't get any closer. They could see cars and people, but they were just so many small figures moving around on the surface.

"Damn. I guess that won't work. Could we make an earth in a globe for ourselves and go further?" Neville wondered.

"That would be rather invasive...not to mention distracting. Maybe a university in a globe? Or space camp in a globe? Admit it, if we could just go walking in and out of people's houses and watch them we'd end up doing that, and that really wouldn't be right. None of us would like it if it was being done to us." Harry objected.

The twins looked at each other and nodded.

"It's true. We wouldn't."

"In fact, we should develop a shield to keep something like that from being able to be used."

"Good idea. Once the idea is out there, someone, somewhere will use it in a way it wasn't originally intended. Imagine the government watching you and going after you because you said you didn't like the minister while you were eating dinner with your family." Theo said darkly.

"Or criminals watching to see where you keep your valuables" Millicent agreed.

"Or your ward stone" Tom added.

"That would be creepy, and dangerous...but just setting something up so we can creep around the
classes and such to see what they're up to and learning should be alright. If we can do it." Luna mused.

"I think that should be doable. I've been studying the galaxy in a globe. Just attaching it to a single place would be far, far simpler than what she did." Tom offered.

"That's what we'll do then."

"We should find out what's the best school for science and watch that. No sense giving ourselves a subpar education after all." Theo spoke up.

"Yeah, good point. That'll also give us a better idea of what all they're capable of." Millicent agreed.

"If it's anything dangerous we can write more Quibbler articles to alert the public and the ministry."

"Yeah, that would be useful."

"I can't believe I volunteered to take classes during the summer." Ron said glumly.

On Sunday the Explorer's club gathered in the garden to await the results of Hermione's questioning--after filling in their new members, Bernard and Kendall. They busied themselves with their individual projects while Harry was off discovering what he could. He returned between lunch and dinner time and removed his father's invisibility cloak, which he had used to listen in to the questioning, and to the teachers and the Unspeakables when they discussed matters afterwards.

"Well?"

"She was messed with. It's all her personality traits--she wants to know everything, she wants to be the best, etc., but someone magnified those traits and it started warping her personality. She also seems to have a life debt to me that makes her slightly more inclined to try to do things to help me or keep me safe, and that was also warped because of what was done to her. That's what the Unspeakables think anyway. She's not going to be released for a little while yet. They're sending another Unspeakable to work with her a bit, someone whose area of expertise is the mind, to try to fix things. They said that unlike what was done to everyone else, which just changed others' perception of them but didn't actually change them in any fundamental way, what was done to her messed her all up and she'll probably continue engaging in criminal activity if the damage isn't dealt with."

"Damn." Ron muttered.

"Poor girl." Colin said, sounding disturbed.

"This just pisses me off. I was all set to yell at her about trying to impersonate me." Millicent grumbled.

"Same here." Harry laughed. "Oh, there was one more thing. Ron… the teachers were left with the impression that Hermione battled the troll and had to rescue us, not the other way around."

"What? Why would they think that? She just stood there screaming and wouldn't run when we distracted it 'cause she was too scared to move!"
"She told them she read all about trolls and thought she could handle it, and we stood there gaping at her because we couldn't believe she'd just lied to a teacher, which gave them the impression she'd just marched off to deal with the troll, did so, and had to rescue our dumb asses while she was at it, which left us so in awe of her skill that we were left speechless. They know now, but that's what they've thought all this time."

"That's so bloody typical. Knock out a troll, the teachers think you're both a dumbass and a damsel in distress."

"So… I take it with all this that Granger is back on the table as a possible candidate?" Millicent asked.

"I guess, but not right away. Give the mind guy a chance to work with her, let her study to catch up with anything she missed, and spend the summer away from Hogwarts first. Knowing someone messed with your head and brought you to the attention of law enforcement, knowing she might have died had Myrtle not been between her and that basilisk that was running around… it's bound to change her somewhat. Let's see where the pieces fall first."

"Alright, now that's out of the way, what are the rest of you doing for your electives?" Neville asked. "I've been getting stuff from all my relatives all week giving me advice, and they all tell me to take something different. I have no idea what to take."

"I'm going for twelve, so I'm just taking everything."

"You are? Didn't professor Burbage say you should probably only take ten if you were gonna do the extra muggle studies though?"

"She did, but Tom pointed out that it's probably greatly reduced coursework, just enough to know what's being discussed and take a test on it. The point is to prove basic competency, not actually attend a muggle school and have a second whole set of daily homework like we would at Hogwarts, because that would be nearly impossible for anyone to keep up with. I'm going to do the extra muggle stuff on my own and check in with Professor Burbage once a week or so, and I'll do the same with the divination professor. I'll take the classes for the other three electives. It'll be a lot of work, but I think I can manage it. If I really can't I might just have to drop the extras before OWL year. I talked to Professor McGonagall about it and she said she'd arrange it if I thought I could do it."

"Well…that would make things simpler if I just took everything. Plus, if I'm only doing the muggle studies class not the extra work it should be fine."

"Now you're all making me feel like a slacker. Maybe I'll do the same."

"I'm not going to be the only one not getting twelve OWLs. Why do you all have to be such overachievers?"

"I asked Professor Snape if I could sit the OWLs for muggle studies and CoMC next year and he said he'd arrange it, once I explained I'd been looking into what has changed and managed to get Hagrid to focus on OWL level creatures that would be covered during the test in our study sessions, rather than the NEWT level monsters he wanted to talk about, so I'll be getting twelve too."

"We're getting ten apiece. We took arithimancy runes and the extra muggle studies" Bernard told them.
"Neither of us was interested in working with animals, and divination is only useful if you've a knack for it, we were told, so we didn't bother." Kendall agreed.

"I did the same." Lee agreed.

"Bloody hell. That means I'm going to have to do it too, or I'll be the only one of our year in the group that isn't!" Ron sighed.

"Look at it this way, Ron. Think how proud your mum will be." Harry shrugged.

"That's true. Of course, that means she's gonna be on your backs even more than usual." he told the twins.

"We were just planning to get enough each for wand rights."

"We weren't really worried about anything else."

"Most of what we've learned has been"

"outside the classroom"

"You should probably both sit every test you think you can qualify for. It would be better for your shop in the long run, even if you don't see the value in it. If someone levels a complaint against you, the low number of OWLs you each have would work against you." Tom warned.

The twins sighed glumly; there went their free time.

"Should we make her a card?" Ron suddenly asked.

"Who?" Luna asked curiously.

"Hermione. She's gotta be upset--someone messed with her, she almost died, missed the whole year."

"Hmm. Yes, we probably should."

"I'll get some parchment." Neville offered.

"If anyone has any money on them we can get some candy or something for her." Colin suggested.

"She's not allowed to eat candy. Her parents are dentists." Harry replied.

"What does that mean anyway? I know she told us that before. Are they a candy-hating religious cult?" Ron asked.

"No. They're muggle tooth doctors. Eating candy leads to tooth decay, so they don't want her to do it, because they want her teeth healthy."

"Oh. That makes much more sense."

"That's stupid. You can eat candy as much as you want, as long as you maintain good dental hygiene." Theo scoffed.

"Well, they don't agree or they don't trust her to do a good enough job cleaning them."

"We could make her a floral display." Luna suggested.
"Or get her a new book." Colin added. The little he'd seen of her before she was petrified, she always seemed to have a book in hand.

"We'll stick with flowers. Anyone good with designing floral arrangements?" Harry asked.

"Just everyone make a few and we'll put 'em in a vase and call it a job well done." Millicent scoffed.

The remaining days at Hogwarts slipped away quickly. Dumbledore decided to cancel the exams that year—which didn't help the OWL or NEWT students, but gave those in the Garden nearly two weeks without classes to work on their respective projects, though they took advantage of the warm weather to hang out outside a bit every day as well.

"Well, we'll be leaving school tomorrow, so this will be our last meeting until we can get together over the summer. Hermione will likely sit with me and Ron, so no meeting on the train this time… not to mention Percy is still peeved about what happened last time and will probably be lurking around trying to listen in or something, now that he's no longer convinced Tom and Ron are having a torrid affair when no one's looking."

The twins laughed out loud, the rest indulged in some good-natured ribbing at the two boys' expense.

"I can't wait to start making some actual progress towards launching the ship." Colin said eagerly.

"That could be months, or even years away, depending. But, yeah, we're all looking forward to it." Tom agreed.

"I just hope mum lets me come by without making a big deal of it, or lets Ginny go visit one of her roommates or something rather than siccing her on me."

"Tough luck being her precious widdle Ronniekins. Don't worry though"

"We can fill in for you easy enough if she wants you close by!"

"Aw, shut it you two!"

"I'll try to have new notebooks for everyone by our next meeting. We've all only got a few pages left in any of the sections. Does anyone need anything else?" Harry asked.

"We have"

"A shopping list"

"of things we need"

"for product development."

"Alright, give it here. I'll see what I can do."

Lee smiled and handed over his own list, as did Theo for the enchantments group.

"Geez, we're gonna need to start mining soon with all the expenses we're piling up already."

"That's what the corporate account is for. We knew there'd be expenses before we were ready to do
anything." Tom reminded.

"Yeah. Hopefully Sirius won that court case, and that the galaxy in a globe has continued selling well."

"Anything else?" Theo asked.

"No. I think that was everything." Luna replied. "Alright then. Meeting adjourned."

"Here's an empty compartment." Hermione announced.

She and Ginny went in first and made themselves comfy by the window. Harry, Neville, Luna and Ron trailed in after, all of them looking a little dazed. Between Hermione and Ginny there hadn't been a moment of silence since they'd all left the castle an hour ago. Those girls could talk.

"I can feel my brain dribbling out my ears." Neville muttered quietly in Harry's ear as they sat down.

"You and me both, mate."

"So where is your new "brother" at anyway, Harry? I have yet to meet him."

"I told him to stay away, because you'd spend the entire nine-hour trip interrogating him."

"I would not" Hermione scoffed, but Ron and Neville both started laughing and looked at her like she was mad.

"I seconded Harry. I told him 'we're serious', she won't even take a breath between questions, and by the time she's done she'll know what you ate for breakfast that morning, what color shorts you're wearing, and your favorite wank material."

"RON! Ew!" Ginny squeaked, her face going red.

"That's disgusting, Ronald!" Hermione agreed.

"True though. All true."

"I was hardly going to ask him questions like that. I’m more interested in what all you've all been up to since I was petrified."

"School, homework, this and that." Neville said evasively.

"I saw the article in the Quibbler you all wrote about the castle, and I've heard all about you, Harry, creeping around on the grounds being weird and poking at rocks!"

"We were looking for secret passages is all."

"Secret passages." Hermione repeated, her voice flat. "In the rocks on the grounds?"

"No. Duh. That would be pretty dumb."

Hermione looked ready to strangle all of them.
"We were studying the stonework. Harry was studying what undressed stone in its natural state was like. That's why we discovered how weird the stone in the castle was. We knew it was transfigured, but it just seemed like granite, not something made into granite. It took us awhile to realize the stone changed slightly as we went up, and then what it meant."

"Yeah, she transfigured the properties of the stone, not the stone itself, and made it earthquake proof." Harry nodded.

"That's not the sort of thing wizards normally worry about. If the building is falling down around you 'cause of an earthquake, you just apparate out, right?" Ginny pointed out.

"But in a normal castle, that wouldn't be a problem. Castles were strongholds. While there would have been some kids around, they'd be vastly outnumbered by the number of adults, so one could just grab each of them and they'd all get out safely." Neville replied. "At Hogwarts though, it was going to be a school. The kids would vastly outnumber the adults. Even with older children helping they'd never be able to get everyone out in time. She had to think of problems like that and find ways to counteract it so that the whole British wizarding population wouldn't just be wiped out. She did it too."

"Yeah, she was something else. Dumbledore might be called the greatest wizard of the age, but I think everyone can agree Ravenclaw was the smartest witch of any age." Harry added.

"Yes, even a thousand years later, the stuff she did is still pretty revolutionary." Neville agreed.

"It really is. Daddy resold that article to Transfiguration Weekly as well as the Daily Prophet." Luna added.

"And that's with just barely scratching the surface of all the secrets Hogwarts holds. Pretty incredible stuff." Harry agreed.

"And that hypercube you made? With the spectrum analysis?" Hermione asked Harry, her voice sounding a bit strangled.

"That grew out of the same search for secret passages. We found the passage the troll used to get to the second floor. I wondered if the troll could just see differently than we could, and Ron wondered if he could just hear the wall was hollow there. I looked into it and mapped out the range of vision for normal humans, wizards, goblins, etc. And then I started thinking about this program I saw over the summer. Muggles, using math, have decided that about 90% of the universe is missing, or rather that they can't perceive it in any way, and neither can their instruments. I figured at least some of that had to be magic, so I started adding magic in to my spectrum analysis, and then I started wondering about wizard space, so I made the hypercube to show how it all fits together, and it looks like I was right, some of that missing stuff is magic. It's pretty interesting really...and then I started wondering what muggles and squibs see in places like Diagon Alley. Regular humans can't perceive fourth dimensional object directly. They can only see parts of it at once. Diagon Alley, which is wizard space with more wizard space inside it, meaning it might actually be five dimensions in places, is probably very uncomfortable and horrifying for a muggle. Everything probably looks like it's warping and twisting as they walk, people probably do too, and they probably look like they're just appearing and disappearing every other step. Add in all the noise and color and they probably feel like they're trapped in a nightmare, one that makes them nauseous and gives them a headache. The first time I went to Diagon Alley, with Hagrid, when we were outside the Leaky Cauldron, I notice the muggle's eyes seem to just go from the one shop to the other on either side. To them, the space where the Leaky Cauldron is doesn't exist. They can't perceive it at all."
"They can't see your cube thingy either?"

"They can see part of it at a time, so it looks like it keeps warping and changing shape. They've made computer models, but they warp and twist too--but then it's a two-dimensional model of a four dimensional object, of which they can only see three dimensions of at any one time, so that's not too surprising."

Hermione looked tense and slightly ill the longer they talked. Harry had no doubt she'd been frantically combing through every book she had all summer looking for things to write long, rambling fifty page articles on to begin submitting to the various academic journals and papers so that she could get her name out there as well. Poor kid--she looked like she was going to throw up.

The whole compartment jumped when the door was suddenly thrown open and a wild-eyed Draco Malfoy stood framed within.

"POTTER! What's this I hear about you quitting the quidditch team?"

"WHAT!!!!" Ron bellowed.

"Would you two calm down?" Harry huffed. "I'm going to have more classes next year. Even with Oliver returned to sanity and snogging Flint all over the castle, I realized I was just not going to have enough time for everything plus quidditch practice on top of it. I told them if they really couldn't find anyone I'd play, but only if absolutely necessary."

"HOW COULD YOU?!" Ron and Malfoy howled together.

"Wow, geez. I'm not obligated, not anymore anyway. We won the cup this year, so McGonagall can't expel me, and I already told her as much. I didn't try out for the team, you know. I was just put on. Now, someone who wanted to be on the team will have a chance to try out. No big deal."

Malfoy looked for a moment like he wanted to strangle him, then threw up his hands and stormed off in a huff.

"Geez. What's his problem?"

"I'd think that was obvious." Neville laughed. "He thinks of you as his arch-rival. He beat you in your game, but Gryffindor still won the cup. He won't ever get the chance to beat you now. Plus with Hufflepuff winning the house cup, he doesn't even have that to brag about."

"Diva. I swear. If it means that much to him I'll challenge him to a seekers game next year or something."

Ron was still sitting there looking stunned. "How could you? It's quidditch."

"So try out for the team."

"I'm not great at seeker. I make a better keeper."

"So try out when Oliver graduates."

"Maybe I'll try out." Ginny spoke up, tossing her hair. "I'm a great seeker."

"You don't even know how to fly a broom." Ron scoffed. "Prat. We had flying lessons this year, but even before that I was good. I used to sneak out at night and steal all your brooms from the broom shed and go flying at night. I'm a shoo in."
"What? No you didn't!"

"I did." Ginny growled defiantly. "It's not my fault you all sleep like great, snoring lumps."

"If you get on and need to borrow my broom, just let me know."

"Thank you, Harry." Ginny said with a demure smile, before slanting a triumphant smile Luna's way.

Luna didn't notice, she was reading the latest edition of the Quibbler and humming under her breath. Ginny rolled her eyes and turned back to Harry, but he wasn't paying attention either.

Finally she sunk back in her seat and petted her cat, who was full grown by now. Hermione shot her a sympathetic look. *Boys.*

"Have you lot had any more thoughts on who that thousand-year immortal is?" Neville suddenly asked.

"What thousand year immortal?" Hermione asked slowly, looking at all of them like they were nuts.

"Oh, didn't you hear about that? Tom set up a thing to scan everyone for curses, but so much was coming up he gave the control thingy to Shacklebolt to look for more stuff. He added in the imperius curse and got a hit, but it was the Bloody Baron."

"But…he's a ghost."

"Yeah, and he's been under imperius for a thousand years. Rowena Ravenclaw sent him off to bring back her daughter so she could see her before she died. They'd had a falling out and Helena stole her diadem and fled. She thought it would make her smarter, but that was all Ravenclaw. She was going to marry an Albanian muggle after she hid it in a tree. The Baron had been after her for years, so she just assumed it was a crime of passion when he killed her and then killed himself, but it turns out he'd gotten married in the time since she'd left. He'd finally accepted she was never going to return his feelings. He was put under imperius before he left and sent off to assassinate her. Ravenclaw was a queen, and Helena, her daughter, was a princess. Hogwarts was an independent kingdom. The Baron was actually Gryffindor's son, so when he killed himself it wiped out two of the heirs of Hogwarts, but Ravenclaw held on longer than expected and she died after her daughter did, so the throne hopped sideways to her cousins rather than being conquered with Helena's murder. The Baron was still under imperius all this time, so whoever did it is still out there and probably still trying to claim Hogwarts. Everyone thought it was a sign of his guilt until the result of the scan came back, but it turns out his bleeding wounds are the signs of his guilt. Pretty freaky, huh?"

"That's ridiculous." Hermione said flatly. "He's a ghost. It's probably just the memory of the spell, not the spell itself. *Thousand year old immortal.*" she repeated, her voice scathing.

She froze uncomfortably when she realized Luna's wide-grey eyes were fixed on her like she was some particularly unusual species of insect that she just suddenly found in the compartment with her.

"You're a witch who lives in a magic castle most of the year, in spaces that muggles can't even perceive. Why do you find it so hard to believe in things?" she asked curiously.

She didn't bother to wait for an answer. She turned to Harry and said "Remind me to bring her some dirigible plums next year. Maybe that will help open her mind."
"Sure...though actually, I think we've some plum juice with lunch. Brunhilde added it, I think."

"Oh, that was very nice of her. Be sure to thank her for me."

"Will do."

Once off the train, Neville, Harry and Luna said their goodbyes to the rest and headed down to the other end of the platform where Loki, Mrs. Longbottom and Mr. Lovegood were waiting. Hermione followed the Weasleys out of the doorway back to the muggle platform where her parents were waiting.

She was surprised how very glad she was to see them. This whole year had been rather upsetting; it was good to be able to just bask in the normal for a bit.

"Hermione! Thank goodness. We've gotten so few letters this year, we were beginning to wonder if you'd fallen off the face of the earth."

She winced at her father's innocent statement.

"Just busy is all. Time went by so fast... Did I really send so few?"

"Yes, and didn't answer ours either."

"Sorry dad. I'll try to do better next year."

"See that you do."

"So we were thinking France this year. How's that sound?"

"Marvelous."

"We should probably all brush up on our French before heading out."

"Sure thing."

Once they were in the car and back on the road, she began to wonder about everything Harry had said earlier.

"Mum...Dad? What does Diagon Alley look like to you?"

Her parents traded a look in the front seat.

"Why do you ask, dear?"

"Because of something Harry was talking about earlier. The truth. What does it look like?" Her mother sighed.

"Like a psychedelic movie and we're trapped in the middle of it, but we're not stoned, so we can't even enjoy it."

"What brought this on? Something your little friend said?"

"He made a hypercube. Humans, the non-magical ones anyway, can't perceive fourth dimensional space directly. He wondered if Diagon Alley or Hogwarts would actually be a horrifying
experience for someone without magic. He thinks squibs might be the same, and that's why they all have half-kneazle cats. He thinks it's the wizarding world equivalent of a seeing-eye dog that helps squibs navigate four dimensional space without becoming too disoriented. It made me wonder."

"What does it look like to you?"

"No different than walking around Picadilly Circus. There's a road that curves off to the side, shops, lit up signs in the windows, people wandering down the alley and in and out of the shops."

"The shops were worse than the rest of it.\" her dad noted.

"He thinks they might technically be fifth dimensional. The whole alley is in the fourth dimension, and then the shops are expanded spaces within there, and so…"

"Ah. That's…a relief, actually.\" her dad admitted.

Off Hermione's look, her mother decided to explain.

"You seemed so excited, but to us it seemed a really horrible place. I was nauseous and had a terrible headache when we left."

"It's a bit unsetting just having stuff randomly appear and disappear in front of you and sort of twist and warp. Disorienting."

"Wait…did you say one of your friends just made a hypercube?"

"Yeah.\" she said sourly. "He was doing a spectrum analysis because he was wondering if a troll that got in the castle last year could just see differently than humans could, which is how it found a secret passage no one else knew about. He read a bunch of studies different naturalists did, and put it together and then added in magic because of a program he saw about dark matter, and put it in a hypercube to show how it all fit together.\" she snorted then. "He used that to make himself some kind of funky eyewear with different lenses so he could look at things under different spectrums. He wandered around the grounds wearing the thing, poking at rocks and hanging out with Luna Lovegood. Most everyone in school thinks he's crazy now."

Her parents were no longer listening, instead they were still stuck on the first part. Hermione sighed.

"Dark matter is all magic! Of course!"

"Some of it. Harry thinks it only accounts for part of it. He's not sure what the rest is, or if anyone among wizards knows."

"Spectrum analysis and extra dimensional space. What clever friends you have."

"I suppose.\" she agreed with a frown. It only got worse when she ended up telling them the rest of what they'd been up to in studying the castle.

"You should invite your friends over some time. We'd love to meet them."

She crossed her arms and sunk back into her seat, fuming.

She'd brought back top marks across the board last year and they'd barely done more than tell her 'acceptable'. The boys do a few little tricks because they were wasting time looking for secret passages and they're all excited. She couldn't win with these people.
"Harry. Harry!"

"Huh? Whuh?...Ron?"

"Yeah, mate, it's me. Pick up."

Harry rolled blearily out of bed and dug through the clutter on his dresser till he found his mirror. When he finally looked into it, he found his friend, Ron Weasley, peering back.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Bad news. My dad won the lottery."

"...? How is that bad news?"

"He decided the best way to spend the money is to take the whole family to Egypt for the whole summer to see Bill."

"The whole summer? With all of you? He must have won a lot."

"Seven hundred galleons." Ron nodded.

"Okay. Wow. That is disappointing."

"Sorry, mate. I was really looking forward to seeing what all we could get done this summer."

"Don't sweat it, Ron. You can't help this, and I'm sure you're looking forward to seeing your brother. He's been gone for a while, right?"

"Few years, yeah. We haven't really seen him since he got out of Hogwarts, really."

"So go then, enjoy yourself and don't worry about it. Just try to make the trip count."

"What do you mean?" "Well, you're going to Egypt, right? It's a whole different country, different language, different history. Their magic might be different. They probably know things that are only known by Egyptian wizards or those who study their magic. They might do similar things differently than we do, which means you could learn a lot about how magic works just by studying the differences and stuff, right?"

"Huh. Yeah, I never thought about that."

"So, yeah. Make it count. Learn stuff. Scan stuff. Bring stuff back. In fact, if you and the twins are all going to be gone all summer, I'll just give all of you a tab to record stuff you learn while you're there. You three aren't the only ones that are going to be gone. Millie and her family are going to be off visiting relatives too. Neville's gran is dragging him to Greece to see some healers there to consult about his parent's case. Theo's dad is taking him to Italy for a bit. Luna and her dad are going to Germany to see some friend of his and wander around the Black Forest looking for creatures. Colin's family is going to Majorca for a while. Lee, Kendall and Bernard are the only ones that are going to be around most of the summer, and even with them they're going to be gone for a week each at different times."
"Oh. Wow. That really sucks. So everyone is going to be gone? This is a huge setback! We're not going to get anything done at all, all summer!"

"Yeah, tell me about it. Remus and Sirius aren't too worried. They said they're still kind of working their way around ship design, and what muggles know about space travel and astronomy, so we might not have made too much progress this summer anyway. We'll just have to continue on come September. I was hoping you at least would be around."

"Sorry, mate. What are you and Tom going to do while we're all gone?"

"We're already working on the university in a globe we were talking about before, and we're thinking of spying on the space camps running this summer, so we'll be working on those and then using them, I guess. Loki hinted he might take us for a trip soon, so we'll see how that goes."

"Oh, good. I'm glad you two won't just be stuck at home doing nothing."

"Don't worry about that. When are you guys leaving, anyway?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Alright. See if you can stop by tomorrow to get your new notebook. I'll give you two for the twins as well. Damn. I'm glad I hadn't actually gone shopping for all the stuff you guys wanted yet. By the time anyone was around to use it it would probably all have gone bad. The twins stuff, I mean. They asked for a lot of potions ingredients."

"Oh. Yeah, that was lucky. This kind of sucks. I mean, I'm excited about seeing Bill, of course, and I've never been to Egypt but…"

"Yeah. I know. I kind of feel the same." Ron sighed suddenly and rolled his eyes.

"Mum's calling me. I gotta go. I'll see if she'll let me stop by later. Sorry about this, mate."

"No problem Ron. Just enjoy your vacation. No worries."

"We just lost the last three." Harry announced as he wandered in to Tom's room.

"Damn. What the hell is it with everyone?"

"Well…it's summer, parents haven't seen their kids all year and they all want to go on vacation."

"I realize that, but they really need to get their priorities in order." Tom grumbled.

"It is what it is. I told everyone to at least make their trips count. They're going to research foreign magic and stuff while they're gone."

"That's something at least."

"You get the uni in a globe done?"

"Hmm? Yes, it's over there."

"What uni is it?"
"MIT. I checked. It's the highest ranking muggle science university."

"Where is it?"

"Massachusetts."

"Where's that?"

"America."

"Oh. Good. At least we'll be able to understand them. They speak English."

"American, but we should be able to get the gist."

"Wanna take a look? How will we know where to go?"

"Loki was very helpful with that. He popped over and got the master list of classes and times. We just have to find them within the buildings and be there. We'll have to account for time differences, but that shouldn't be too much trouble. We're in luck, as they do have summer session classes going on. Not as many or as varied as during the fall or spring terms, but some."

"Oh, goody. So, what have we got?"

"List is over there. Toss me the campus map, will you?"

"Looks like we'll mostly be doing this in the afternoon and evenings, to account for time differences. Damn. There's so many that sound interesting. I hope I can actually follow them. It'll be hard without books."

"I actually have a solution for that as well. We just need to go to their bookstore and find the classes we're interested in and take a look at the required texts. We can just get copies of our own if it seems necessary."

"Oh, yeah. Good point. Did you finish the space camp in a globe?"

"It's over there. The brochure and itinerary is there too. That one is here and most of the activities take place earlier in the day. We can do that in the morning and the uni at night."

"Okay. Sounds like a plan."

When the boys headed down to the kitchen for breakfast, they found Sirius, Remus and Loki already there.

"Good morning, children. Why the long faces?"

"The Weasleys are going to Egypt for the whole summer. They were the last three."

"How are they going to manage that?"

"Their dad won the lottery. They're going to visit the oldest, Bill. They haven't seen him in a few years."

"Oh. Disappointing, but no worries. We'll get this thing going eventually."

"Yeah."
"So, in the absence of your projects, what are you going to be doing today?"

"We're still working on the project, we're just going to branch out."

"We're going to remotely observe space camp for the next two weeks, or at least the parts that sound useful and interesting." Tom explained.

"You two are really dedicated. That's good and all, but... it is the summer. Feel free to unwind and have some fun too." Sirius cautioned.

"The project is fun. Besides... If I don't stay busy I'll just lay around like an unproductive lump and waste hours that could have been better spent working."

"Same here." Tom agreed.

"Weird kids, but whatever."

The boys ate their breakfast quickly and retired to the parlor to attend space camp.

"I've got a treat lined up for all of you today." Bill told his family as they finished up their breakfast.

"Some of the tombs we've already cleared and made safe are open for tourists. It will give you all a rough idea of the kind of place I spend most of my days."

"What's interesting about an empty tomb?" Percy wondered sourly.

Bill ignored his mood; he'd been grouchy since they'd all arrived, not that he completely blamed him. He'd had a summer internship at the Ministry that he'd had to give up because of the trip.

"Lots of things. Inscriptions, bits of the curses that were laid on the place--deactivated, of course. There's lots of murals and paintings, and a few of the notable finds from each for you to see. They're in warded boxes, of course, but you'll still be able to see them. There's a few mummies and such in some of them too. You'll have fun."

"Sounds cool. Stop being such a spoilsport, Percy." Charlie, the second eldest son reprimanded.

Percy just glared at him and went back to pushing his breakfast around on his plate. The heat hit them like a hammer to the head when they exited the inn they'd all been staying at. Even in the light, loose desert robes they'd all gotten themselves, the heat was stifling; it felt rather like standing in an oven...or even a kiln. The cooling charms they'd layered on themselves before venturing out seemed to do little to alleviate it.

"Goodness. How can you stand it, dear? Are you sure you don't want to move back home?"

"No, mother. I'm right where I want to be." Bill sighed.

He loved his mother, he did, but they'd only been here a week and they'd had the same sort-of argument every day since.

"I have to work today, so I'll walk all of you to where the tour will be meeting up, but then I'll have to go."

Molly huffed with discontent. "I can't believe they're making you work. They should give you
some time off to be with your family."

"Mum, if you'll recall, I've been with all of you for the last couple of days. I'm only a journeyman; they have rules about what I can and can't do. One of those happens to be that I can't take several weeks off, in the middle of a job, with no warning, just because my father happened to win the lottery."

"Are you sure you won't let me cut your hair?" Molly changed tacks. "It's gotten so long. Losing all that extra would be a blessing in all this head, I'd think. And that earring! Very unprofessional. When you're done with all this business, you're going to have trouble finding a good position at the Ministry with such fripperies and…"

"Mum." Bill said patiently "I'm not planning to get a job at the Ministry"

"In a year or…"

"Not now. Not in a year. Not ever."

"I really wish you…"

"Mum."

Molly huffed in irritation at how stubborn her firstborn was being. He was like Arthur in that; normally so easygoing that it took you by surprise when they suddenly dug their heels in about something and refused to budge. It was irritating when Arthur did it. It was beyond irritating to have her son pull the same thing on her.

"Looks like we're here." Bill said cheerfully, as though the previous conversation hadn't taken place.

"Sheldon here will get you all set up. I'll see you all later."

Before Bill could leave, a commotion in the distance drew their attention.

"…must allow me to leave! My wife, she will be frantic by now!"

"Sorry, chief, no can do. You've six arms, mate, if you haven't noticed. Don't you think your wife will be a bit alarmed by that?"

"Very much so, but I am sure she is more alarmed by the fact that I have disappeared when I was expected back that very evening!"

"Can't let you. Not until and unless we figure out how to fix you. Sorry."

"And when will that be? Weeks have passed, and still you tell me to be patient! My children will be grown with children of their own at this rate!"

The Weasleys and Bill's friend Sheldon, watched as the six-armed man was drug away by several wizards, protesting all the while.

"That poor bastard. I wish we could figure out how to help him"

"Him and the other. He's worse. 'e's got two heads, you see, so he curses ye outa both of them while 'e's trying to get away."

"What happened to them?"
"A stupid oversight on our part. We had cleared out all the curses, we thought. He and his friend were likely tomb robbers trying their luck. They snuck in while we were still clearing the place. It turned out there was a second set of curses hidden inside the others that were specifically tied to muggles. They ran afoul of them, and well, you saw what happened. We went over the whole place a second time and found a few more muggle-specific curses and removed them, but that doesn't do those guys any good. The thing is, we can't quite figure out what was done to them, so we can't fix it. We can't let them go unless we do, because of secrecy. It's been almost three months already and they're not taking our continued requests for patience at all well. The team leader thought we should just dose them with draught of living death, but he was overruled since we didn't know what effect it might have on the curses they were under. Now that they've started trying to escape a few times a day he'll probably get his way."

"Poor fellows" Arthur mused, before grinning and clapping his hands together. "So! Let's get started on our tour, shall we?"

"I'll see you."

"Later, Bill!"

Sheldon led them into the tomb that was nearby. It was dim inside, after the brightness outside, even with the few small magical lamps that were in there.

"Take a moment and let your eyes adjust. This here is the entryway. Wizard tombs in this area are a little different than the muggle ones. The muggle ones, while they often had to move heavy rocks to get inside, were pretty straightforward for the most part. There were passages that led you right to where everything was kept. Wizard tombs, well, they didn't want anyone in here rooting around, and so they made things difficult."

"They were that worried about tomb robbers?"

"Well… yes. It was more than that though. You see, the tombs were built not only to keep others out, but well, to keep their occupants in."

"They buried people alive?!"

"Not quite. You see…back in the day, the Egyptian wizards, some of them, went through a bit of a phase. Immortality. They all wanted it, and thought they'd found the means to achieve it. It turned out to be a terrible curse."

"Why? What happened to them?"

"Well, they didn't stop aging for one. You've seen mummies depicted as being all wrapped up in bandages? Well, that was done to keep their bodies from falling apart. The guy who led the whole immortality craze was a Greek fellow who became known as "Herpo the Foul". He was the first one to try being immortal. He eventually regretted what he'd done to himself and reversed it. The Egyptians kept on doing weird things to themselves trying to stave off death, aging, falling apart. No one now is really sure what all they did to themselves, but the end result was mummies. They don't have internal organs anymore, we know that much. Even the muggle mummies don't. We think they started removing all that stuff from their dead thinking they would rise up and be immortal as well, but they got it backwards. They did it while they were still sort of alive and just couldn't die. The other folks, ones who hadn't joined the immortality craze, began to notice that those who had became shriveled, mad, destructive, and couldn't be killed. They started rounding
them up and securing them in tombs like this one, filled with mazes of secret passages and every inch lined with curses to keep them contained. The ones who did this were often wealthy, powerful wizards. There's usually so much gold in these places because it belonged to those wealthy, powerful wizards before they transformed into monsters and ran amok. It was all gathered up and buried with them for fear it was all cursed and would lead the monsters back to whomever was so foolish as to claim it for their own. And they were right. Every piece that gets removed from these places usually does have to be gone over pretty carefully, just in case, as much of it is in fact cursed in various ways. We also usually have to deal with the mummies."

"They're still alive? Aren't these tombs thousands of years old? That's what Bill said."

"They are, well, if you can call it that. Mad revenants, locked away in tombs, in the dark, for thousands of years, because they couldn't be allowed to roam free. If there's any part of the wizards still in them I couldn't tell you. Poor bastards. I'll bet you every last one wishes they'd never even considered it. I very much doubt thousands of years imprisoned in a dark, airless tomb is what they thought of when they decided to live forever."

The collective Weasleys all shuddered in horror.

"Isn't there anything that can be done for them?"

"If there is, I don't know it. The goblins might. They usually leave one around, contained of course, for the tours. Each new tomb though we usually find another. They round them up as we clear out of an area. I don't know where they take them or what they do to them. For their own sakes, I really hope the goblins know how to make the poor bastards just die already."


"I agree, son. Some things shouldn't be messed with."

"Well, now that I've depressed and horrified everyone, we're going to play a little game. Who's ready?"

"I am!"

"We all are."

"It's not going to be more creepy mummy stories is it? I'm gonna have nightmares as it is."

"No, nothing like that. I did say they built these places to keep people out, remember? We're going to play 'who can find the secret passage'? Ready?"

"READY!"

"Have at it, folks!"

Ron pulled his wand, grinned, and reminded himself to thank Harry when they got back. He had this in the bag.

"Hello you two. How's the space school going?"

"Eh. It's going. It's really more of an expensive day camp to cater to a few kids with an interest in
space than it is any kind of serious training program. I mean, the rocket thing was sort of cool, but I've already been making explosives and I know about basic aerodynamics in a general way already, so I didn't really learn anything there."

"The university lectures on astronomy and such were interesting, but we didn't really learn anything there that isn't already covered in the five years of basic astronomy everyone gets at Hogwarts."

"So it was a bust then?"

"Pretty much. The kids there all seemed really into it, but I guess it's not as impressive if you've already flown on a broom, explored most of the galaxy by proxy and have been exploring higher dimensional topology in your free time."

Remus shook his head a bit. "Well, yes, I would suppose that would be true. How has the other thing been going? I understand you've been sneaking in to watch university lectures?"

Tom grimaced and looked a bit disgruntled.

"Ah, yeah. We um, kind of got egotistical there. I think. We tried jumping right in the deep end, but we didn't know a lot of the terminology and hadn't peeked in on the lower level classes first and we were both getting a bit lost. Once we realized we were going to have to fill out our background on some of the stuff before we could really appreciate the classes we wanted to take, we just went through the catalogue to see what sort of order we should take some of the classes in and we went to the bookstore to generate a reading list for ourselves. Once we've caught ourselves up on that stuff we're going to try again." Harry replied.

"Probably a good idea." Remus remarked. He grinned a bit wryly at them. "I ran into much the same problem myself. I tried to do the same and discovered I really hadn't the first clue what they were talking about. I spoke to one of the student counselors and they directed me towards the beginner level classes as well to get up to speed before tackling the stuff I actually wanted. It was a bit humbling."

Tom just grunted unhappily.

"It wasn't a complete loss. I've been hanging around the mechanical and materials engineering labs. I think I've learned a lot just by watching them work. I think I'll keep doing that. Do you think Sirius would mind…"

"If I'd mind what?" the man himself asked as he came into the room.

"If I set up a workroom so I can build some stuff to experiment with?"

"Eh, knock yourself out. You should take a look through the available workrooms first. We might already have what you're looking for. A lot of my relatives set up rooms like that over the centuries. They got up to some weird stuff."

"Okay. Thanks."

"I'm actually glad you're here. I was thinking that we might need to expand the R & D departments we already have going." Tom spoke up.

"Really? How so?"

"I think we need to get a biological systems department going."
"Isn't that what you're doing already?"

"Sort of. I'm trying to make suits and things to protect us against hostile environments, and trying to make sure the inside of the ship is comfortable and habitable for when we eventually travel, but I think we need to go further. The eventual plan is to leave this planet and found a planet just for the magical world, correct?"

"Yes?"

"What if we can't find worlds that are already green and fertile and full of water and breathable atmosphere that aren't already claimed by someone? We might have to settle a lifeless rock and make it bloom before we can move anyone there. I am of course hopeful that won't be necessary, the little Loki has let slip now and again makes it sound like the whole galaxy is far more populated than the muggles ever dared imagine. If that is the case, finding a world like Earth where we can just plop down and settle without trouble might be a bit of a longshot. Even if we can find a world that's already green, we may need to tweak it quite a bit before it feels like home. Either way, we're going to need experts to either terraform dead worlds or tweak living ones to actually make this work."

Sirius rubbed his face tiredly. "This keeps getting more complicated, doesn't it?"

He noted Harry was looking fairly disgruntled. "What's with you, squirt?"

"If we do that I'm going to lose Neville for the mining group."

"I guess you'll have to start recruiting then."

"So far everyone I've told about studying rocks and stuff thinks I'm crazy." Harry sighed mournfully.

"Then you haven't been talking to the right people is all." Tom scoffed.

"I talked to anyone who expressed an interest in what I was doing." Harry objected. "I'm going to have a hard time finding more people. I mean, yeah, at least Ron will still be there, but Neville jumping ship on me is going to be a huge setback for my department."

"Why are you so certain he will? He might stay on."

"Herbology is his passion. All the stuff we've been doing, he's been interested, but wave a plant under his nose and he's gone."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Don't worry about it so much."

Harry finished his breakfast and headed off to look at the workrooms that were available. He had a lot of work ahead of him if he didn't want his department to fall completely behind.

Chapter End Notes

The sequel to this work Dream a Dream is now up and at four chapters, just in case you missed that.
Follow Harry and friends as they continue their space program, and as they struggle with school, interpersonal relationships and ancient mysteries!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!