The Memento

by Theine

Summary

Until he befriends a grass snake in his aunt's garden Harry believes his relatives when they say there is no such thing as magic. Looking for a place to belong, he ventures into an elusive world shackled by age-old prejudices and fear of a man who may or may not be his father. What he finds is more than he expected, but less than he hoped.

Notes

Hello and welcome to The Memento!

The idea for this story began bouncing around in my head several years ago when the illustrated edition of the first Harry Potter book came out. I've been working on it slowly ever since, and have finally decided to start posting it. The first few chapters have gone through their final-final round of editing and will be spaced out over the next few weeks to give me time to catch up on writing new material (which is more likely to happen now that I won't be going back and re-editing the first few chapters over and over and over...).

This story will diverge from canon to a point. While many of the main events from the books will take place, I'm doing my best to put a unique, plot-relevant, spin on each of them. I know this is a dangerous claim to make when there's well over 700k stories in the fandom posted online, but during my years of lurking I've never come across one that alters the events in quite this way. If you've come across a similar story in your own travels I'd very much like to read it, because goodness knows I've seen enough bathroom troll encounters to last me a lifetime. :)

Despite being rated M, this story isn't overly dark or violent. There will be instances of abuse, neglect, bullying, and graphic violence, however I've tried to keep them realistic.
given the situation the characters find themselves in. There will be no gore for the sake of
gore, and characters will not be maimed for no better reason than that they needed
something to angst over.

But that's enough rambling from me, so without further ado...

**Key:**
"Speech"
"*Parseltongue*"
*Thoughts*

**Disclaimer:** I don't own Harry Potter. If I did, Voldemort would have won.

This story is cross-posted on FanFiction.
Peaceful mornings at Number Four Privet Drive were a rare commodity for Harry Potter. At six o'clock sharp his aunt would undo the latch on his cupboard and rap her bony knuckles against the door hard enough to rattle the frame. If he slept through her initial barrage she would shriek at him as well, which was unpleasant on the best of days and often an omen of worse to come.

From there he navigated an obstacle course of snide remarks and dodged the occasional rolling pin in a race to prepare enough food to sate his uncle and whale of a cousin. As the clock ticked relentlessly overhead he scrambled eggs, fried bacon, roasted hash browns, and buttered a mountain of toast. At the end of the hour he would set the kitchen table with a feast fit for six, then stand aside and wait. His uncle and cousin would roll down the stairs shortly after and inhale the food he’d spent an hour preparing in less than fifteen minutes.

In Harry's opinion his uncle and cousin would do well with a little less bacon and eggs — they were both round as they were tall, with flabby stomachs and rolling double chins — but no one wanted Harry's opinion.

No one wanted Harry at all.

Harry was sure the Dursleys would give him away to the first person who came knocking — blood relatives or not. Unfortunately for them, scraggly orphans with untameable black hair, bad eyes, and an inexplicable tendency to make lightbulbs explode with his mere presence weren't in high demand. So they were stuck with him, and he with them.

The Dursleys made the best of the situation by setting Harry chores that kept him out of the way. Harry made the best of the situation by keeping his head down and mouth shut. He had learned long ago that to do otherwise would only result in punishment.

That's why, when his aunt had ushered him outside one bright June morning and pointed vaguely in the direction of the garden shed, he'd set to work without complaint. In the past three hours he'd mown the lawn, swept the walk, and watered his aunt's prized hydrangea. The sun was making its final ascent as he moved to his last task — weeding. He picked his way from the flowerbeds flanking the front door to the garden tucked against the whitewashed fence out back, decimating every unidentified shoot and sprout he could lay his hands on.

Currently, Harry was sitting at the edge of the lawn, his hands stained green and a pail full of weeds at his side. He tossed a stubborn dandelion into the pail, then wiped his brow, leaving a streak of dirt running from temple to temple beneath his fringe.

His morning had been blissfully incident free thus far. His aunt hadn't yelled at him, the neighbours were keeping their suspicious glares to themselves, and all the plants were alive and exactly the same size they'd been when he was first tossed out the back door.

It was the best he could expect while living with his relatives — and that was why he knew it wouldn’t last.

The hissing swish of the patio door sliding open to release his cousin's gang from afternoon tea and cakes sounded the death knell for his moment of peace.

He paused in the act of pulling up another dandelion and peeked over his shoulder.

Dudley was the first to waddle out into the stuffy summer air. His fingers were sticky with icing
and crumbs cascaded down the jersey stretched taut around his bulging stomach. He popped each pudgy digit into his mouth one by one and licked them clean as he looked around the yard with a bored expression.

Dudley didn't like the outdoors — as he often reminded his parents with loud and tear-filled protests. He much preferred to sit inside and blow up aliens on his computer.

Harry preferred when Dudley remained inside as well. For as long as he could remember, his cousin had been his constant tormentor, and every hour Dudley spent sitting in front of his desktop was one less spent on his other favourite pastime: Harry Hunting.

Harry eased onto the balls of his feet as a trio of human bulldogs shuffled from the house at Dudley’s heels. Dennis, Gordon, and Malcolm were all thickset, with dull eyes and heavy jowls better adapted to barking than polite conversation. They’d been Dudley’s cronies since second grade, much to Harry’s dismay. It was harder to run from a pack, and it hurt more when they caught him.

Behind the quartet of heavies was a fifth boy, Piers, who was wiry and quick as a greyhound. He was Dudley’s right hand man, and had more brains than the rest put together. It was his job to catch Dudley’s targets and hold them until the others caught up. A role he excelled at.

Harry hated the lot of them.

"Run along and play," Harry's aunt Petunia called through the open kitchen window. "And don't forget to come back for lemonade if you get thirsty."

She would offer them lemonade, Harry thought, bitterness lodging in his throat. If he complained of thirst she'd tell him to get a drink from the garden hose.

Malcolm nudged Dudley with his elbow and tipped his chin in Harry's direction. The silent question was met with toothy smirks that made Harry's blood run cold.

He rounded his shoulders and gave the dandelion another tug. He doubted they’d leave him to his chores. He was a ‘safe’ target. No one ever reprimanded Dudley and his gang for roughing him up. Harry wasn’t their child, after all, and therefore wasn’t their problem.

As the years went by, the silence became permission — and that permission twisted into encouragement.

"Get him!" Dudley bellowed, sounding the hunt.

The five boys lunged, Piers in the lead, their arms outstretched and lips pulled back in savage glee.

Harry sprang away from the grasping hands, leaving the dandelion clinging to the soil by the tips of its milky white roots. There was a dull thud and the slosh of water behind him as Piers skidded into a decorative birdbath at the edge of the garden.

Harry didn't look back as the hunt reoriented itself and raced in pursuit.

He sprinted down the walkway beside the house, his callused feet striking a drumroll against the interlocking bricks. Stopping wasn’t an option. When his legs screamed in protest he pushed them to go faster, throwing himself around the corner of the house and into the front yard — arms wheeling to shift his momentum.

A misstep.
His right foot slid off the walkway and his knee twisted inward, then folded. A startled yelp leapt from his throat as he tumbled to the lawn, scraping his knees and elbows.

Dudley's gang was close behind him, their heavy footfalls shaking the ground beneath his palms. Or perhaps the shaking was his own as he scrambled onto the balls of his feet and dove headlong into the flowerbed below the sitting room window.

His shoulder grazed the stuccoed wall, which tore his already threadbare shirt and rubbed the skin beneath it raw. Harry bit his lips, not making a sound even as a trickle of hot blood ran down his arm. The pain was only a fraction of what he'd feel if caught, and thus easy to ignore.

The soil was damp from watering and stank of manure, but he didn't hesitate going to ground behind his aunt's hydrangea. He tucked himself away behind its thick screen of leaves and periwinkle blue blossoms, and hoped it would be enough.

The leaves were still rustling when Dudley’s gang rounded the corner. Harry watched through the narrow gap beneath the branches as five pairs of trainers fanned out across the front lawn, circling.

"Where'd he go?" whined Piers. "We was right behind him!"

Dudley was already bent over panting. "Can't. Have. Gotten. Far," he said between puffs. Harry didn't need to see his cousin's eyes to know they were scanning the block with its perfect, identical houses and their perfect, identical lawns.

A pair of black trainers advanced towards his hiding place and stopped on the other side of the hydrangea. Harry's breath caught in his throat and he pressed himself deeper into the soil.

"No, don't look over here," he pleaded silently as a knee the size of a softball sunk into view.

In a few seconds the boy would peer beneath the shrub and find him. Harry looked around, frantic for an escape route, but the house and thick foliage hemmed him in. His only option was to back out the way he'd come and hope that Dudley didn't pounce on him before he could extract himself from the garden and run.

He scrambled to his hands and knees, doing his best not to disturb the leaves close overhead, and his left hand landed on the sprinkler hose. This brief moment of contact would have been unremarkable if the hose hadn't shifted against his palm. Startled, he snatched his hand away and looked down at the sentient appliance, only to discover that it was something much worse.

Coiled next to the wall was a snake.

To Harry, who had always been scrawny for his age, the snake seemed monstrously huge. Its dusty olive body was as thick as his arm, and broken only by a yellow collar around the base of its triangular head.

Harry knew it was one thing to get beat up by his cousin, but quite another to be bitten by a snake.

What if it was venomous? His breathing grew shallow as his imagination careened out of control. Would uncle Vernon bother taking him to the hospital? Or would he recline in his armchair and watch Harry expire at his feet on the living room floor?

As Harry sat petrified, the boy on the other side of the hydrangea suffered a moment of vertigo. When it passed he could no longer remember why he was kneeling on the lawn with his nose pressed to the ground. He sat up and scratched his head. When nothing explaining his strange
posture came to him he decided not to dwell on it. Lumbering back to his feet he turned away.

"Split up!" Dudley ordered, having recovered his breath. "He’s around here somewhere."

The hunt resumed, oblivious to Harry’s dilemma as he faced down a pair of open jaws and did his best to look unthreatening. His hunched posture must have rung true, because the snake didn’t strike him immediately. As the seconds turned into minutes with no break in their stalemate, he couldn’t help but notice how the snake’s large round pupils made it look as terrified of him as he was of it.

The snake’s head drew back, dragging a pair of dirt brown appendages with it. Harry ogled the out of place limbs. He was pretty sure snakes weren’t supposed to have legs, but there they were — jutting out the sides of its mouth like web-toed tusks. He floundered for a moment, but then his mind connected the dots and he sagged against the wall of the house, letting out a huge breath.

The snake couldn't bite him if it tried. Not with a frog stuffed halfway down its throat.

He pressed a hand against his mouth, smothering a hysterical giggle before it could burst from his lips and give away his position. Dudley’s gang were still nearby. He could hear them calling to one another as they searched all the usual hiding places around Number Four.

If he was lucky their hunt would carry them to the far end of the block before the snake regained the use of its mouth. Allowing him to escape to the nearby park for the rest of the afternoon without risking life or limb. It would mean abandoning his chores, and through extension his supper — as his aunt wouldn’t feed him until they were completed to her satisfaction — but Harry would rather be hungry than bloodied.

Once the boys' voices faded away, Harry counted to twenty then began to ease backwards. Turning around wasn’t an option. Even if there were enough space, Dudley had taught him the dangers of exposing his back to a threat long ago. No one would hesitate to kick him while he was down or off his guard. Fighting with honour was for fools and fictional heroes.

Harry had been a fool once upon a time, and he’d paid the price in blood. He knew better now.

“Sorry for interrupting your supper,” he whispered, the apology rolling off his tongue. It was habit by now, the only way to blunt the Dursleys’ wrath, even if it was rarely effective.

He never expected the snake would understand him.

It twitched, then went rigid, as though struck by lightning. Harry shuffled another step back. He was nearly free of the hydrangea when the snake began to writhe. Its pale belly flashed against the soil as it twisted in loops and threw its head from side to side.

“Umph!” it went.

Harry felt like a radio set to the wrong frequency. There was a faint drone tickling his ears that didn’t stop even when he raised his hands and pressed them against the sides of his head. He frowned and lowered his arms. For a moment it sounded like the snake had spoken, but he knew that couldn't be right. Animals couldn't talk, his aunt and uncle were always firm about such things.

Animals couldn't talk, and there was no such thing as magic.

Still, he lingered over the writhing body and watched as the frog was drawn down the snake's throat until there was only one leg free, then only the tip of a webbed foot.
The snake stilled. “You can Speak!” it said in a sibilant voice.

Harry’s mind unravelled like a ball of yarn. His thoughts tangled together without coherent beginning or end, knotting into a jumble of *whats, hows,* and *whys* that left him reeling. He opened and closed his mouth, but no words made it past his lips.

He plopped down on the ground, paying no attention to the leaves that rustled and batted his head. *This is a dream,* he told himself. *Aunt Petunia will knock on the door and I’ll wake up in my cupboard.*

It wouldn’t be the first time he’d dreamt of doing chores. Sometimes he spent the entire night weeding and dusting his dreamscape only to wake the next morning and do it all over again in reality. It was monotonous work, but Harry had resigned himself to a life of domestic drudgery long ago. At least until he was old enough to leave the Dursleys behind for good.

He pinched his arm hard, but the world didn’t dissolve into the dark interior of the cupboard under the stairs. The dirt remained damp against his knees, and the air heavy with the fragrance of flowers and dung; and it dawned on Harry that perhaps he wasn’t dreaming after all.

His tongue recovered before his wits. “*You can speak!*” he exclaimed.

The snake propped its head up on a thick coil. *Of course I can Speak,* it said. *All my kind can.*

“*Do you...*” he said. "*Well, do you speak to people often?*

"*No. I've never met a people who could Speak before.*"

Harry couldn't refute this claim as he didn't know much about snakes — or people for that matter. This was the first time he'd seen a snake outside of picture books, and his cousin had made sure he couldn’t make any friends at school. It wasn’t hard, even the kindest of Harry’s classmates avoided him after having their heads dunked in a toilet a few times.

If his teachers noticed how he was always chosen last for team sports, or pushed to the fringes in group work, they ignored it. Strange things happened around him, things that defied explanation, and it was easier for them to label him a black sheep and avert their eyes. Sometimes Harry wished they would hate him as his relatives did. At least then he would have an excuse to hate them back. He didn't know what to do with apathy.

The snake uncoiled and slithered up to his hand while he was brooding. Its forked tongue flicked at the blood drying on his wrist, tasting it. It tickled, and Harry let out a small, startled laugh. He eased his hand up, moving slowly so as not to scare the snake, and reached out a finger to run along its back.

"Shh!" hissed a familiar voice. "Did you hear that?"

Harry flinched and whipped his head towards the lawn, his stomach plummeting. He’d forgotten all about the hunt in his shock at meeting a talking snake, but the hunt hadn’t forgotten him.

The hydrangea rustled and a small gap opened in the leaves, illuminating the thin stalks spiderwebbing within the bush. Then a shadow moved across the light and Harry saw Piers’s dark eye peering in at him. It widened with excitement.

"It's him! He's behind the bush!"

The hunt had found him.
The hydrangea bucked as Dudley threw himself against the branches. Its leaves closed in around
Harry's head, battering him and knocking his glasses from his nose as he struggled to stand. He felt
the *crack* of a lens breaking beneath his heel, and before he could try to retrieve them a pudgy
hand burst through the leaves and clipped his cheek. After a moment of blind groping it clamped
down on his shoulder like a pair of jaws, sharp nails cutting crescent moons into the tender skin of
his shoulder. Harry struggled, but his arms were tangled in the branches and he couldn't stop his
cousin from dragging him out of the bush.

Piers was on him in an instant, wrestling his arms behind his back and locking them in place with a
cruel twist that forced Harry to arch into Dudley's first punch, which connected low on his belly.

The air left his lungs with a *whoosh* and Harry coughed weakly, feeling sick. A familiar dread
coiled inside him, winding his body taut in anticipation of the pain that would follow. He grit his
teeth and glowered at the fuzzy peach blob he assumed was his cousin, eliciting laughter from the
other boys.

“Ooh, so scary!” Dudley mocked, landing another hit on Harry’s stomach. Then he stepped back,
giving the others room to move in. “Take him around the side,” he ordered.

Harry threw his body back and forth in a desperate bid for freedom, but other hands clamped
around his arms and propelled him into the walkway beside the house.

As much as Harry insulted his cousin’s intelligence, not even Dudley was stupid enough to beat
him up on the front lawn in broad daylight. The windows of Privet Drive were full of eyes spying
through gaps between curtains. Housewives like circling vultures, waiting for a moment of
weakness — their pecking order built on the illusion of perfection and wealth.

“Let me go!” Harry shouted, though he knew it was futile. Tears gathered in the corners of his
eyes, clouding his already blurry vision. He blinked them away furiously. He wouldn't give Dudley
the satisfaction of seeing him cry. Not now. Not ever.

Once they were hidden from sight, Dudley kicked him hard on the shin and Harry’s leg collapsed.
He would have fallen, but Piers hauled him back up, presenting him to Dudley's fists.

“What's the matter Freak?” — a blow connected on Harry's left side — "Not going to scream for
us?” Dudley asked. His friends laughed raucously. Gordon, Malcolm, and Dennis were slapping
their fists against their palms in anticipation of getting their own turns.

Dudley's fists rained down on him. “Nobody wants you! You’re nothing but a waste of space!” A
blow to his jaw left Harry seeing stars. “Come on, scream for us you freak! See if anyone comes to
help you.”

Harry grit his teeth and twisted away from the blows, his hands clenching into fists. He couldn’t
deny Dudley’s words, they were all true. Every. Single. One. Nobody wanted him. Nobody would
ever want him. Arguing about it would only get him beaten worse — as punishment for lying.

He had nearly worked one arm free when Piers kneed him in the tailbone, sending a jolt up his
spine that stole the strength from his limbs. Piers hauled him back around and tightened his grip
until their bodies pressed together and Harry could feel the other boy’s warmth sinking through his
shirt. It made his skin crawl.

Dudley’s next punch sent both Harry and Piers back against the side of the house.

“Ow!” Piers whined, having acted as a cushion between Harry and the wall. “Careful Big D! Don’t
forget I’m here too.”

The other boys roared with laughter and patted Piers on the shoulders. The short reprieve was enough for Harry to gather his bearings and brace himself for the next blow.

It never landed.

The low drone was in his ears once again as a small, sibilant voice cried, “Release the Speaker!”

Piers jerked sideways. “S-s-snake!” he yowled, dropping Harry’s arms in favour of scrambling away. Dennis, Malcolm and Gordon followed close on his tail, all four of them bolting towards the safety of the back yard.

Dudley held his ground, and even without his glasses Harry could see him winding up for another punch.

Harry lashed out, channelling his pain and anger into a ringing backhand that caught his cousin across the face. He knew he wasn't strong enough to do any real damage — Dudley was a foot taller and five times his weight. Yet, as his hand connected he felt a spark, like static electricity, pass from him to his cousin.

Dudley yelped and fell back against the ornamental fence with the weight of a wrecking ball. There was a deafening crack as two of the thin whitewashed boards gave way, half dumping him into the neighbours’ yard.

Dudley staggered to his feet, eyes wide and hands clutching his fat cheek. Harry couldn’t make out his expression, but took a brief moment to revel at getting his cousin back. It ended up being one moment too long. Before he could run away, Dudley bellowed in rage and bodychecked him into the side of the house.

Stars burst across Harry’s vision as his head slammed against the wall and the breath left his lungs with a whoosh.

“Dudley?” his aunt called, her voice swimming at the edges of his fading consciousness.

“Diddikins?” There was a moment of silence, then she shrieked. “What happened to your face?”

Harry barely felt her bony hand close over his arm.

He couldn’t breathe.

He wove like a drunk as she dragged him into the muggy house, his feet slipping on the kitchen tiles. He bounced against a wall, then the door to his cupboard loomed large before his eyes. It flew open and he pitched forward into the dark space beneath the stairs.

He couldn’t breathe!

He landed hard on his cot, his head bumping against the shelves on the far wall. The door slammed shut behind him and there was a click as his aunt drew the latch home.

Curling into a ball he threw his head back, gulping like a fish out of water. It felt like an eternity before his chest expanded, sucking in a hot, stuffy breath. The air burned in his lungs, and the veins along the sides of his neck throbbed.

Oblivion tugged at him, beckoning him away from his pain and into its dark embrace. He tried to follow, but his mind was still wired for flight and fought off the encroaching darkness long enough
for him to hear raised voices beyond the door.

“It’s the freak that’s done it!”

“Yeah, he hit Big D right in the face!”

“Come here pumpkin, sit down and I’ll get you a cool cloth. When your father sees what that wretched child did—”

“I want ice cream!”

“Of course love, you can have anything you want!”

An emotion rose up in his chest, darker than anger, but it was snuffed out as unconsciousness claimed him.
Hello?

The small insistent voice teased at the corners of his mind as he slowly returned to consciousness.

Hello?

Harry groaned and rolled onto his back. He felt like he’d been dropped from the second floor window. His head was throbbing and the skin of his chest itched like a spider bite as it brushed against the gritty fabric of his t-shirt. He took a deep breath and cracked his eyes open, but he couldn’t see the source of the voice.

He couldn’t see much at all, in fact. The cupboard door was shut tight, and from the silence laying over the house he guessed it was nighttime.

Hello? he whispered “Who are you?”

There was a long pause, then the voice asked again, “Hello?”

It sounded like it was coming from below him. Curious, Harry wormed his way to the edge of the cot and peered down at the crack beneath the door.

Two years ago Dudley had put one of his father’s golf clubs through the thin wood during one of his temper tantrums, knocking a triangular hole in the door’s outside corner. It was never fixed, and Dudley took great joy in feeding the largest, blackest spiders he could find into the cupboard when Harry was locked inside. Now, Harry could almost make out a triangular head poking through the hole.

You’re the snake from the garden, aren’t you?” he asked, his voice transitioning into a soft hiss that was indistinguishable from English to his ears.

Yes, the snake replied. And you are the Speaker.

He wiggled as far as he could into the narrow gap between the cot and door, ignoring his ribs' pang of protest. Squinting, he tried to bring the snake into focus, but it was futile in the dark without his glasses.

How’d you get inside? he asked. The only other time he could recall a wild animal bigger than a beetle getting into the house was when a bird fell down the chimney two years ago.

One of the invisible walls was open, the snake replied, tilting its head back to meet his gaze.

But... why? It was unfathomable. No one ever sought him out. His relatives made sure anyone who tried was waylaid with the same ruthless efficiency they turned on door-to-door salesmen. It was for the best, they said, because he was a freak. That’s what they always called him, though they never told him why he was so different from everyone else.

…Because they did not close it?

What? No—I wasn’t talking about—I mean, why did you come inside? It’s dangerous in here. If
my aunt or uncle find you they’ll... well, it'll be bad." The bird’s story didn’t have a happy ending. The thought of what his relatives would do to a snake made his stomach churn.

“I wanted to Speak some more,” said the snake.

Harry didn't know what to do. He wasn't supposed to talk to others, and he wasn't very good at it when he tried. People often shot him unnerving looks when they thought he couldn’t see, as though he had a disease they were afraid of catching. They worked to distance themselves from him, even when he tried his best to be friendly like the children in his class. Despite all this, he couldn't stop the small surge of hope in his chest that promised this time would be different. That it was already different was evident seeing as how only one of them was human.

"You should come in," he said. "It's safer in here."

The snake wiggled in the gap, and the faint light from the hall cut off, but it couldn't pull itself through. "I'm too full." It had swallowed a whole frog not long ago, so he supposed that was to be expected.

He raised himself up on his knees and gave the cupboard door a light push. It rattled in its frame, but didn't budge.

"My aunt locked the door," he said. "I can’t get it open."

The snake's head sunk onto the dusty floor and it sounded mournful when it asked, “Are you stuck forever?”

“No, they’ll let me out eventually. They always do, at least once in the morning and evening.”

When he was younger he’d cried and pounded on the door with his fists when they locked him away — desperate to get out of the small, cramped space. A shiver stole across his shoulders. He’d overcome that fear years ago, but sometimes he still found himself looking at the door and wondering if this would be the time his relatives forgot about him.

“Say, I don’t suppose you could undo the latch?”

“What’s a latch?” the snake asked.

“A latch is...” Harry fumbled for a description that might make sense to a snake. “It’s a smooth stick that slides in and out of a hole on the outside of a door. You could probably get at it from the stairs. All you need to do is slide the stick out of the hole and the door will open.”

The snake’s head withdrew from the cupboard. “I see it!” it said after a moment. Then there was silence and Harry held his breath, waiting.

This would be the true test, he decided, on whether he was speaking to a snake, or whether he'd suffered one too many blows to the head and had lost his mind. After what felt like an eternity he heard a rattle near the top corner of the door and, ever so slowly, the sound of the bolt drawing back.

He waited until it had fallen silent once more, then pressed his fingertips against the door. It swung open without resistance.

Harry stared in shock. He squeezed his eyes shut, counted to five, then opened them.

The door was still open.
That was that, he decided after a moment. He wasn’t going insane.

He poked his head out of the cupboard and peered around the moonlit hall. The shadow of a small side table set with a vase of summer flowers loomed to his left and filled the air with a sweet fragrance that tickled his nose. Straight ahead was the lounge. No light flickered from under its door and the television had fallen silent, a sure sign the Dursleys had turned in for the night. To his right was the kitchen, and while the dishwasher was chugging away like a freight train as it cleaned the day’s dinnerware, it too seemed deserted.

He waited a moment to be sure, his body poised to dive back into his cupboard the second a shadow appeared in the kitchen doorway, but nothing stirred behind the frosted glass door.

Satisfied that his relatives were still asleep, Harry relaxed and a small smile found its way onto his lips. He twirled in place, peering around for the snake and found it coiled between the posts of the banister above the cupboard door.

“You did it!” he whispered. “Thank you!”

“People are interesting,” the snake replied, looking towards the latch. “They make such clever things.”

Harry would have rejoiced if no one had ever thought of fastening doors with latches, but he nodded along with a smile. The motion dislodged a lump of dirt from his shirt collar, which skittered spider-like down his chest. He shuddered and pulled the stiff fabric away from his skin. The dirt and mud had long since dried, but the smell of manure still lingered.

Leaning back into his cupboard he groped along the shelf opposite the door until his hand came in contact with a stack of folded clothes. He rifled through the stack until he found an oversized off-white button-down that, like everything he owned, had once belonged to his cousin.

Dudley’s hand-me-downs had always left Harry drowning in fabric, but over the past six years it had gotten so bad that he could fit four of himself in his cousin’s smallest sweater. No amount of knots or cinching could keep the clothes from sagging like scraps of old elephant skin, and sometimes he wondered why he bothered wearing them at all.

Change of clothes in hand, he started towards the small ground floor bathroom next to the front door when he paused and looked back at the snake. “I need to go in here for a bit,” he explained, pointing at the door. “Do you want to come too, or…” he trailed off and a flush crept over his cheeks when he realized he’d invited someone else into the bathroom with him.

“You do it! You could… you know, keep a lookout for my relatives out here.”

“You are able to undo that latch from inside?” the snake asked, eyeing the door with suspicion.

“It doesn’t have a latch,” he replied.

“It doesn’t?”

“No, it has a lock. I can use it to keep people out, but they can’t use it to keep me in.”

The snake seemed to consider this. “And we will be able to Speak after you return?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Then I will wait for you.”
“Thanks,” he said, grinning bashfully as he slipped through the door and closed it gently behind him. He flipped the lock, then fumbled along the wall in search of the light switch.

The lights were blinding after the darkness of his cupboard, and he clenched his eyes closed until they stopped stinging. Once he could crack them open he squinted at his reflection in the oval mirror above the sink.

A pallid, battered boy squinted back at him from under a mop of tangled black hair. One of Dudley’s punches had caught him across the face, leaving him with a black eye that was tender and swollen to the touch. He grimaced as he poked it, wondering if it would fade before he had to go back to school. It was already Sunday, but hitting Dudley resulted in at least three days imprisonment, so he wouldn’t be let out of the house until Wednesday at the earliest.

He sighed and shook his head. It wasn’t worth fretting over. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d gone to school with a black eye, after all.

Dirt drifted from him in waves as he pulled off his clothes and dropped them in a heap on the floor. Even with his poor vision he could see his chest was a mosaic of blues, greens, and angry reds. The scrape on his left shoulder had already closed, but it still throbbed when he brushed at the dried blood coating it with a piece of wet toilet paper.

At least nothing was broken, he thought as he dabbed at the bruises. He didn’t like having broken bones, they hurt too much for too long and made running difficult. Bruises, at least, would be gone in a couple of days.

When he was as clean as he could manage, he pulled on the button-up and then used the facilities as silently as possible. The last thing he wanted was his aunt or uncle hearing the sound of running water and coming down to investigate.

He turned off the lights and let his eyes adjust again before he opened the door and poked his head out into the entryway. Nothing stirred on the landing above as he padded back into the hall and tossed the soiled clothes onto the foot of his cot.

The snake had wound back down to the floor and now sat in a puddle of moonlight on the old blue carpet. “Are you the same Speaker?” it asked as Harry started to push the door closed.

He stopped, leaving it open a crack as he looked down at the snake. “Of course I am,” he said, confused. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You look brighter,” the snake replied. “Did you shed your skin behind the door?”

Harry blinked and looked down at himself. “No, I just changed my clothes.” He plucked at the shirt to show that it wasn’t attached to his body.

The snake uncoiled and slithered closer, the bulge of the frog heavy in its throat. “It is not your skin?”

“No, it’s just fabric.”

“Most strange. How do you recognize each other if you’re always shifting markings?”

Harry paused, uncertain. He’d never really thought about it. “I think we recognize people by their faces, not their clothes,” he said.

“Their faces?” The snake flicked its tongue several times, then murmured again, “Most strange.”
“Is this what you wanted to talk about?” Harry asked.

The snake slithered around him, encircling his feet. “I want to Speak about everything!” it replied, which was a daunting task for Harry who rarely spoke of anything at all.

He hopped out from the ring of scales and opened the kitchen door. The leftovers in the refrigerator were calling his name and his stomach growled in anticipation. “Well, why don’t we start by introducing ourselves?” he suggested. “My name’s Harry Potter.”

“I’m Basil.”

“That's a pretty name. Did your mother give it to you?”

“Mother hatched us and then chased us away, just as I did my own hatchlings,” Basil said. “She did not give us names. I’m Basil because it’s the first thing I remember.”

“You’ve had a baby?” he squeaked, backing into the kitchen as he looked at the snake — at her — with wide eyes. His class had suffered through ‘the birds and the bees' speech last year in school, and whenever he remembered the chubby nurse explaining how a man and a woman made babies he felt a strong urge to hide under a rock.

“I had a clutch,” Basil corrected as she followed him into the kitchen, which did nothing to lessen his embarrassment.

“But why would you chase them off? Didn’t you want them?” It seemed cruel. He wanted to be angry with her, but when he tried to imagine how it would feel to be chased off by his mother he drew a blank. He didn’t remember her at all, he’d been too young when she and his father died. He tried imagining aunt Petunia running him off instead and felt a bizarre sense of relief.

“Because that is our way,” Basil said. "We are born ready for the hunt. There was nothing more I could do for them.”

Harry sighed and padded towards the refrigerator. The kitchen's ceramic tile was pleasantly cool against the soles of his feet. A muggy heat clung to the air despite being the middle of the night, and without proper ventilation his cupboard had been stifling. “I wish it were the same for humans. I can’t stand it here.”

“The person with the shrill voice is your mother?”

“No. My parents died when I was little. Petunia’s my aunt. My mother’s sister.”

“What happened to them?”

Harry shrugged, letting the hollow feeling that appeared beneath his ribs whenever he thought of his parents roll from his back. “My father was driving drunk and ran a red light. He didn’t see the oncoming truck until it was on us, and by then it was too late. They died in the crash, but I guess I got lucky — or unlucky, since I wound up here in the end.”

Basil was quiet, and he got the sense that some of the things he was describing were too human for her to comprehend. “I do not understand,” she said eventually, “but I am glad you were lucky. I would not have met you if you had died.”

“I’m glad too,” he said, and for once he almost meant it.

Taking hold of the refrigerator’s handle, he opened the door and began to scour the shelves.
If living with the Dursley’s had taught him anything over the last ten years, it was that some rules existed to be broken. When he was younger the thought of stealing food had filled him with a burning guilt that ate at his stomach with the same ferocity as his hunger pangs when he was locked away without food as punishment. Sometimes the punishments lasted for days, and there was no large meal awaiting him at the end. His uncle was always quick to remind him that he was living at Number Four at their expense. Eating their food. Taking up their space.

Nothing here belonged to him, not even the water that came through the taps.

Despite his relatives’ best efforts they couldn’t quash his survival instincts. Hunger was a powerful motivator, and over time the feelings of guilt had faded away, allowing him to pluck a chicken drumstick from one of the plastic Ziplock containers without a troubled conscience.

“It’s cold,” Basil remarked, peering up at the undersides of the glass shelves overflowing with enough food to satisfy a herd of elephants for a week. “Like winter.”

“It’s a fridge,” Harry explained, selecting several roasted potatoes from another container. As long as he didn’t take the last of anything his aunt wouldn’t notice when she went to heat up leftovers the next day. “People use it to keep food from going bad.”

He scarfed down the meal, keeping a wary eye on the kitchen doorway. When his stomach had stopped grumbling he folded a few non-perishables in a napkin and set them on the counter for later.

As Basil investigated the vent at the base of the dishwasher with her nose, he pulled a chair over to the sink and hopped up on the seat. Turning on the tap, he leaned over and gulped at the stream, drawing back every few seconds for air. It was messy and he ended up with as much water on his face as he did in his mouth, but it was faster than using his hand, and safer than taking down a glass that might be discovered come morning.

Unfortunately, the gurgle of the faucet left him deaf to his surroundings, so he didn’t hear the floorboards above his head creak as a heavy body made its way towards the top of the stairs.

“Something comes,” Basil warned him, her head twisting towards the kitchen door.

Harry froze and only then heard the thump, thump, thump of footsteps descending the stairway.

“Hide!” he whispered, fumbling with the tap as he tried to shut it off, but he turned it in the wrong direction in his panic. He twisted it back, cutting off the water, and then jumped from the chair. “Quick!”

A shadow loomed on the other side of the frosted glass door as Harry threw himself around the short counter that separated the kitchen from the dining room and pressed his back against the wood. Basil slid around the corner after him, her body sheltered beneath the overhang between the counter and floor. Harry wished he could join her as his uncle lumbered into the room.

Vernon Dursley was whistling as he followed Harry’s footsteps to the fridge for a midnight snack. The jaunty tune was interrupted by a surprised grunt that Harry assumed meant the man had noticed the out of place chair, but he must have been more hungry than curious because the fridge door opened seconds later.

Harry peeked around the corner. His uncle's stocky frame was silhouetted by the fridge’s light as he rummaged through the second shelf. Glancing up, Harry caught sight of a white triangle of paper poking over the edge of the counter.
His heart dropped into his stomach as he realized he’d left the napkin full of food sitting in plain view. Vernon might disregard the chair as a result of his son’s own late-night fridge raid, but Dudley never left so much as a scrap on his plate during meals, and Petunia didn’t snack, period. With the rest of his family accounted for he would jump to the only other possible conclusion, and Harry would suffer for it.

Harry held his breath, terrified of making a sound as he eased to his feet and snaked his arms over the lip of the counter. His hands closed around the napkin, cupping it between his palms before darting back to safety.

The fridge door swung shut with a click. Vernon was whistling again as he moved to the counter and set a can of soda down exactly where the napkin had lain a moment before. He hummed in appreciation, the sound muffled as he stuffed a lemon custard into his mouth. He followed up the pastry by cracking open the soda and downing it in a single long gulp. Harry pressed his forehead against his knees and tried to keep his breathing quiet as his uncle let out a belch and patted his belly in satisfaction.

The empty can was tossed into the sink and for a moment Harry panicked, worried that his uncle would drag the chair back to its place at the table and discover him. Vernon must have been too tired to bother, since he shuffled to the door and left without a backward glance. He did pause a moment in the hall, as though considering whether a single custard would be enough to last him the rest of the night, but then the creaky bottom step let out a shrill squeak and he was on his way back to bed.

Harry let out a shaky breath and raised his head.

“Are we safe now?” Basil asked, not leaving the shelter of the overhang.

“I think so,” he replied.

“You did not choose a good place for your den,” she said as they crept back into the kitchen proper and towards the door. “There are many dangers here.”

Harry looked down at the pilfered food in his hands and sighed. "I wasn't exactly given a choice in the matter, and I can't just leave."

"Why not?"

His voice wavered as he replied, "Because I have nowhere else to go."

The hall was the same as when he'd left. Moonlight still poured in from the window at its end, the flowers on the side table still infused the air with their sweet scent, and the cupboard door was still open a crack.

He'd stepped up to the door and grabbed the handle when he realized Basil was no longer beside him. She'd frozen in the kitchen doorway, her tongue lapping the air.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Something is wrong. I taste another's breath on the air."

Harry looked up in time to see his uncle's furious face loom out of the darkness on the other side of the bannister. Vernon's arm shot out and his beefy hand closed around Harry's neck.

"I've got you now, Boy!" he snarled, spittle flying from his lips. Harry dropped the napkin and
clawed at the hand around his throat, but his nails were too short and dull to cause any damage. Vernon shook him like a rag doll, nearly lifting his feet from the floor. "Thought I didn't notice you sneaking about like a rat? We've given you a roof over your head for ten years and you repay our kindness by stealing our food and hurting our son!"

Harry stopped trying to claw his way out of his uncle's grip and held on instead, rising onto the tips of his toes as he tried to keep the pressure off his neck. Vernon continued to rant, but Harry wasn't listening. He knew it all by heart.

"Speaker!" Basil called as she circled his dancing feet. "Harry! Quickly, play dead!"

Play... dead? He didn't think it would work. Surely his uncle would know better than to believe he'd killed him, but his vision was fading to black and he'd run out of options. He fell limp in his uncle's grasp. The sudden dead weight dragged Vernon against the bannister, which groaned in protest.

"What do you think you're playing at?" Vernon hollered, shaking him harder. There was an edge of panic in his voice.

Harry's neck burned as though it was on fire. "Basil!" he managed to say from between clenched teeth.

She let out a low, angry hiss, and then she was spiralling up his leg. She moved under his button-up, muscular coils propelling her towards his uncle's hand like a torpedo.

"Argh!" Vernon cried, dropping Harry as small sharp teeth sunk into the outside of his hand just below the pinky. "What the devil was that?"

Harry didn't wait for his uncle to recover. He threw open the door to his cupboard, kicked the food under the cot, and then dove inside. Scrambling to the foot of his mattress, he dropped off the end and folded himself into the crawlspace below the bottom three steps.

"Get back here, Boy! I'm not done with you yet!" Vernon yelled as he thundered down the stairs. He lunged into the cupboard after Harry, but the doorway was too narrow to admit more than his head and shoulders. He huffed and puffed, but he couldn't force his way in. After another minute of struggling he admitted defeat.

"I'll deal with you in the morning," he growled ominously, before slamming the door shut and throwing the bolt.

Harry remained curled in the crawlspace long after he was sure his uncle had gone to bed, not daring to make the same mistake twice in one night. Basil remained coiled around his shoulders, and in the lightless space his skin came alive. He marvelled at the feel of her scales. They were rough and dry, like fine sandpaper, and he could feel the wiry muscles beneath them as she adjusted her position. Her body wrapped him from shoulder to hip, crossing his chest once at the base of his ribs. He should have been afraid, a snake her size could easily hurt him — kill him, even. Yet, there was a small voice deep inside his heart reassuring him that he had nothing to fear. He knew, somehow, that she wouldn't harm him.

Not like his uncle would come morning.

Shuddering, he dragged himself up onto his cot and brushed a veil of cobwebs from his head. He hadn't cleaned the crawlspace in a long time, and Dudley's spiders had claimed it as their own. He felt one skitter across his knee and flicked it away.
"You helped me again," he said to Basil, the words coming out as a wheeze. "Thank you."

"The fat man wanted to squeeze you," Basil replied. "But I will not let him, for there is still so much to Speak about."

Harry eased down onto the mattress, not bothering to get under the sheets. His cot was unforgiving, as always. He could feel its metal grid through the meagre padding offered by his mattress and pillow. The metal crossbars dug into his shoulder and hip, but his burst of adrenaline was tapering off, and he started to slip towards sleep.

"We'll need to wait until morning," he murmured, letting his eyes fall shut.

Basil prodded his neck, her tongue ghosting across his jaw. "You are hurting," she said.

He grimaced and coughed weakly. "It's nothing. I'm used to it."

"My Secret cannot help with this type of hurt. I am sorry."

"Your Secret?" he asked.

"Yes. All my kind know a Secret."

"Who teaches you?"

"No one teaches us. It is something we know from the moment of our hatching — like hunting, or breathing."

Curiosity piqued, Harry forced his eyes open and stared blindly in her direction. "What's yours?" he asked, then realizing it wouldn't be a secret anymore if she told him, added, "If you can tell me, that is."

"I can remove passengers from the bodies of others," she said. "Sometimes I help the red fox who lives under the rosebush. She is always getting fleas."

An image of Basil preening a fox with her forked tongue flitted across his mind and made him smile. "How do you get them out?"

This gave her pause. He felt her swing her head back and forth until it was pointing towards one of the wormier sections of shelving lining the cupboard. "Like this," she said. "Avello Vectoris!"

Harry bolted upright, the pain in his side and neck forgotten as five streamers of neon blue light erupted from Basil’s mouth and danced through the air. They met the shelf and split, twining around the wood and diving into wormholes until it glowed eerily from within. The lights eased back out, bringing the dark bodies of three pill-bugs and a shiny black centipede with them. The insects’ legs flailed helplessly as they were suspended in midair. Then, as quickly as the neon lights had first appeared, they blinked out and the bugs dropped out of sight, landing on the floor under the cot with a series of soft plops.

Harry rubbed his eyes hard with the balls of his palms. He couldn’t believe what he’d seen, but the afterglow of the lights was shining in negative on the backs of his eyelids as if daring him to deny their existence. "That was amazing!" he said. "It was like magic!"

"It was magic."

"You can do magic?" Harry didn’t care that his voice had risen so loud that his aunt and uncle
were sure to hear him through the floor. Uncle Vernon was wrong. Animals could talk, and magic was real!

The dull, predictable world of his aunt and uncle was nothing but a lie.

“So can you,” said Basil.

It was like an explosion went off in his chest, excitement so powerful it hurt. “Me? But I can’t—I’m just Harry.”

“You stung the other boy with magic,” she said. “The one who struck you. His face went red and scaly.”

Had it? Harry couldn’t remember much beyond Dudley tackling him. There had been a shriek, and voices outside the door, but apart from that everything was fuzzy. He ran a hand through his hair and scrunched his nose in thought.

Over the years he’d been at the heart of several inexplicable occurrences, all of which had seen him punished severely by his relatives. If he could use magic then glass objects exploding when he was angry made a certain sort of sense. As did growing his hair back in one night, turning his teacher’s wig blue, and suddenly finding himself on the roof of the school kitchens.

Those memories brought back others, less pleasant, and the bubble of excitement in his chest deflated. He slumped and his hand slid down to cover the front of his neck. “My aunt and uncle will kill me if they find out.”

Basil hissed softly, “Then it must become your secret.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh Basil, why are you so adorable? ;)

For those curious about her spell, it translates to 'I tear out the passenger'.

I've always wondered how the meanings of words would translate between Parselmouth and English. It's hard enough trying to reconcile the differences between what a human understands of the world, and what a snake does. Throwing a magical language into the mix makes it all the more complicated.

I figure that when Harry says 'stairs', Basil understands it as a 'rough hill'. However, since she's never come across a latch, fridge, or 'driving drunk', while Harry knows the word to describe it in parseltongue, she doesn't understand what it means. This, of course, begs the question of how all those words got into parseltongue in the first place...

How do you see Parseltongue working? Are there different dialects shared between snakes of a specific region? Or is the language itself instinctual, meaning that every snake in the world speaks it exactly the same way?

So many questions, so few answers.

Until next time,
The Zoo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cot under the stairs groaned in protest as Harry flopped backwards, his arms crossed tight against his chest and a frustrated growl on his lips. He pushed his recovered glasses up until they were nestled in his wild hair, then pressed his palms into the hollows of his eyes. The focus of his current vexation sat on the shelf in front of him. A damp hunk of wood he'd torn from the cupboard's back wall and populated with a small colony of pill-bugs.

"This will never work!" he whined, not for the first time.

It was two weeks since he'd first met Basil in his aunt's flowerbed, and he'd been trying to use her spell ever since. He'd whispered the magic words at night, at recess, and all through his chores. Even when his mouth was so dry it felt as though he'd stuffed it with cotton-bating. Yet, despite all his efforts, he still hadn't been rewarded with a single blue streamer of light.

His aunt had taken notice of his newfound obsession early in the second week, and had started watching him with a pinched, nervous look on her face whenever they were in the same room. Harry assumed she was debating if he'd finally cracked, and whether carting him off to an asylum would damage her reputation with the neighbours. He never suspected she'd recognize an incantation. Her denial of anything magical was, to him, ironclad.

The Dursleys' frowned upon imagination. His aunt had even banned the whimsical Sunday morning cartoons the rest of his classmates gushed over. While this meant little to Harry, who wasn't supposed to watch television at all, the fact she'd held firm in the face of multiple Dudley temper tantrums had cemented in his mind how desperate she was to be seen as normal.

This, of course, implied that it was possible to be abnormal, but he hadn't yet connected her fear of abnormality with an awareness of magic's existence, and thus continued to practice quietly in her presence.

He threw his arms over his head, letting them bounce on the thin mattress. He didn't want to admit defeat, but he couldn't help feeling discouraged with his lack of progress.

"What if you're wrong, Basil?" he said to the ceiling. "What if I can't do magic?"

"You can," came the quiet reply from below him. As he waited for her to climb up the cot's leg and onto the sheets he pushed his glasses back onto his nose. They were missing half the left lens, and the right was riddled with hairline fractures, but they still made the world a little clearer, so he was stuck with them until the school took note and pestered his aunt into buying a new pair.

Basil popped up near his head, and he rolled on his side to face her. "How can you be so sure?"

Her forked tongue ghosted against the tip of his nose. "I can taste it on your skin. It is sharp, like the sky before lightning strikes."

Harry sniffed his wrist, but all he could smell was sweat, dust, and the lemony tang of cleaning products.

"I don't smell anything special."
Basil hissed in amusement. "It is a wonder you humans can smell anything at all with such short tongues."

Harry smiled and shook his head. He knew she was teasing him, he'd already explained to her that humans didn't smell with their tongues. She hadn't believed him at first, but when he wouldn't back down she came to accept it as one of his many strange human quirks.

While Basil's humour helped soothe his aggravation, it didn't help him with the spell. "Even if I have magic, what good is it if I can't use it?" he whined. "You said I have to believe the spell will work, but how can I when it always fails? It's like there's a part of me that knows I won't succeed, and no matter how much I want to believe otherwise it's always there in the background, reminding me."

If he were honest, the voice reminded him of his uncle's booming proclamations that 'there is no such thing as magic'. The words had been drilled into him so many times that even when given overwhelming evidence to the contrary they refused to shrivel up and vanish.

Basil was quiet for a long moment. "Do you doubt we are Speaking right now?" she asked.

"No, of course not," he replied, then his eyes widened and he bolted upright.

He knew he was speaking with Basil, he hadn't doubted it since those first few encounters in the garden and cupboard; but he told himself he believed in magic, as if it were a lie he was desperate to make true. It was only a small difference, one he'd never considered before, but having identified a problem he was sure he'd be able to overcome it. Revitalized, he twisted around until he was facing the wormy chunk of wood once more.

"Thanks, Basil," he said, rubbing the groove on top of her head.

He could do this. He knew he could.

Harry was barely awake the next morning when his aunt pounded on the cupboard door, shrieking for him to get up and mind the bacon. It was Dudley's birthday, and this meant any transgressions on Harry's part would see him punished twice as bad as on any other day of the year. It also meant he would be shipped off to old Ms Figg's house — which reeked of cabbage and was overflowing with cats — while his cousin and one of his friends went out to theme parks or fancy restaurants. This year they were going to the zoo, and Harry couldn't help but sigh with longing when he thought about zebras and elephants and lions.

So, he was very much surprised when a half-hour later found him buckled into the backseat of the car beside a sulking Piers and Dudley on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life.

"Broke her leg tripping on a cat!" aunt Petunia grumbled in the front seat. "Of all the days!"

Harry vowed he'd never speak ill of cats ever again.
Everything went well until after lunch. They'd toured all the outdoor enclosures by this point and
now joined the crowd shuffling into the reptile house to escape the sun. Harry's initial excitement
fizzled when he saw the small glass-fronted tanks in which the zoo's colourful snakes and lizards
lived. They reminded him of his cupboard; small, isolated, and cramped. Even the shortest snake
couldn't have stretched out fully in its tank.

Dudley and Piers rushed off as soon as they were in the door, looking for the largest snake in the
place; a twelve foot boa constrictor who was currently draped over a thick branch, fast asleep.
Harry trailed after them, keeping a safe distance in case they became bored with the animals and
decided they'd rather hit him instead.

Dudley frowned at the boa. "Make it move!"

Vernon rapped on the glass and Harry winced in sympathy for the snake. "Move!" Vernon shouted,
but the boa didn't so much as flinch.

"This is boring," Dudley said, before dragging Piers off towards a sandy scaled cobra.

Harry moved up in front of the tank, and after a quick glance around to make sure no one was
within earshot whispered, "Sorry about them. It must be terrible dealing with people banging on
your glass day after day."

The boa's head twitched. Its long tongue flicked over one eye as its pupils zeroed in on Harry.

"You can understand me too?" Harry asked. The boa nodded, and its nose inched forward until it
was nearly pressed against the glass. Harry leaned in to meet it.

"You are a Speaker!" the boa hissed.

"Yes. Have you met many others?"

The boa shook its head. "I have never before met a two-legs who could Speak the noble tongue of
serpents. All those who come here do nothing but moan and squawk and tap."

Hundreds of people passed through the reptile house every day, and Harry had hoped that at least
one of them would share his ability. It would be nice to talk to someone about it without worrying
about them calling him a freak.

"Oh, that's too bad. I guess human Speakers must be pretty rare."

"Most rare," agreed the snake. "I have heard of only one other."

Harry perked up. "Who was it?" he asked.

"I do not know. He came before my time," the boa admitted. "We only have stories, passed from
tongue to tongue late at night when all the two-legs leave and the false-suns turn low."

Harry leaned even closer in his excitement, until his nose was almost pressed to the glass. "What do
the stories say?"

"They say the Speaker came when the cold wind blows, surrounded by two-legs who were bed-
mates but not friends." The boa's eyes were distant, and the rhythm of its voice changed, becoming
almost musical. "He was small, with dark hair and eyes like deep pools, and when he Spoke you
were compelled to follow. His bed-mates attacked him for Speaking to old FalseLight. Instead of
defending himself, he raised his arms and the invisible walls vanished, freeing kith and kin so they
could avenge him!"

Harry listened, enraptured, barely remembering to breathe. Images of a small dark haired boy danced across his inner eye, magic sparking from his arms as he vanished glass after glass. For a moment the boy became himself, and his entire body throbbed with the desire to use his magic the same way — for it was magic the boy from long ago had used. He was sure of it.

"Of course," the boa continued in a more practical tone. "It was too cold to leave, so they were quickly caught and put back in their tanks, but I hear it was a grand adventure while it lasted."

"What happened to the boy?" Harry asked, desperate to hear more. "Did he ever come back?"

"An old two-legs dragged him out into the cold air, beyond the reach of fangs and coils. Those left behind waited the rest of their lives, hoping, but he never returned."

The snake fixed him with an expectant stare, its pupils narrowing into slits.

"You are not the same Speaker, but you carry his power in your voice. Will you raise your arms and vanish the invisible walls? Will you set us free?"

"I wish I could," Harry said, his fingers curling into fists against the warm glass as the throbbing want inside him turned bittersweet. "But I don't know how. My magic won't listen to me."

"It is not the magic that must listen," said the boa. "You must listen to yourself, to your desires. Will yourself to believe in their power. The world exists because we see, hear, taste, and feel it. I see the false-suns and know they are bright, touch dry wood an know it is rough, taste murky water and know it is stagnant — I hear your words and know you are a Speaker. This is the true world, but I can also believe the suns are dark, the wood is smooth, the water is clear, and the words you Speak are nothing but animal sounds until these things become true in my mind."

Harry frowned. "So you pretend?"

"It is more than pretending. Believe enough and it will become your reality. Desire enough and you can make that reality a truth. Magic is forcing the world to shed its skin and become something new."

The snake flicked its tail across the bleached wood and a fragment of papery snakeskin dropped onto the frond of a broad leafed fern then slid into the murky pool of water at the base of the tank. "Magic courses within you, a force of change — of potential. Learn your heart and you will learn to channel its course. To send it rushing from beneath your skins and reshape reality to match your desires."

Harry wobbled, dizzy from the inundation of new information. "I don't understand," he said. "If magic can change reality, why haven't you gotten rid of the glass yourself?"

The snake sighed, a low drawn out hiss. "The current within me will only rise for my Secret," it lamented. "So it is with all our kind. I do not know if it is the same for two-legs such as yourself. You make so many clever things, perhaps your magic may do the same."

Harry chewed his lower lip. There were enough strange occurrences in his past that it was unlikely his magic was limited to a single action. In fact, the thought that it could be limited at all struck him as strange. If magic was truly based on desire, then why shouldn't the snakes be able to vanish the fronts of their own tanks? There must be more to it, he decided. Just because the potential for change was there didn't mean he had the strength to bring it about.

"If you can only use magic for your Secret, how do you know it can do more?"

The boa's reply was lost beneath an excited shriek. "Dudley! Mr Dursley! Come see what this
snake's doing!"

Piers had noticed him.

Dudley waddled back to the boa's tank as fast as his vast bulk allowed. Harry was still bent forward, hands on the glass, when his cousin's fist caught him in the side and knocked him to the ground.

Pain flared along Harry's left arm as it collided with the floor, and a tingling heat surged over his shoulder and into his chest. As he grit his teeth and snarled at his cousin's interruption, the heat in his chest sparked to life, growing into a raging flame that seared him from the inside and turned his bones to ash.

The dull overhead lights flickered wildly as he glowered at Dudley. His cousin had the side of his pudgy face pressed against the glass, trying to get closer to the boa.

*Let him, then!* Harry seethed, and the magic within him roiled. It felt like it was trying to obey him, pressing against the underside of his skin, but was trapped without an outlet. He raised his right arm towards the tank, imagining once again the boy from the story, with his dark hair and deep eyes. He wanted the glass to disappear — he *needed* it to.

*There is no glass,* he insisted, letting his imagination take over. *There never was to begin with. We were all mistaken.*

Dudley shrieked in terror as he fell forward, flipping over the handrail in front of the tank. His wail became a gurgle as he landed headfirst in the boa's murky pool with a mighty splash. A cascade of water surged over the low lip of the tank and onto the floor, bringing with it the smell of damp, rotting vegetation among other unsavoury things. Harry drew back from the miniature flood, shuffling along the floor as best he could with his left arm cradled against his stomach and a huge grin splitting his face.

He'd done it.

There was a moment of confused silence in the reptile house while heads craned round to find the source of the splash. A group of schoolgirls dressed all in matching magenta uniforms shuffled back to keep the water from touching their polished shoes.

The boa uncoiled. Below it, Dudley froze in place. He was wheezing with fright, and Harry could see the whites of his eyes as a dark brown coil thicker than Harry's leg grazed the top of his head. Ignoring him, the boa slid under the handrail and onto the floor.

Aunt Petunia was fighting her way through the stunned crowd, elbowing aside a bewildered young man wearing a khaki zoo uniform who was clutching the handle of a mop so hard his knuckles looked ready to burst through the skin. When she set eyes on Dudley in the snake's tank she shrieked. The sound reverberated off the cement walls and the boa's head whipped in her direction. It snapped its jaws.

Panic ensued.

The crowd surged for the exit, pushing and tripping over each other in their haste to get away. The boa snapped playfully at their heels, hurrying them along. It paused next to Harry, who had pressed himself against the wall to keep from being trampled.

"*Well done little two-leg Speaker,*" it hissed.
Harry flushed with pleasure at the praise. "I couldn't have done it without your help."

The boa bobbed its head then slithered towards the exit, and Harry thought he heard it say, "Brazil, here I come!"

"So," said a voice from behind him, and he glanced back to see a rough-scaled rattlesnake staring intently at him. "Will you let me out too?"

Harry opened his mouth to say he could try, but then he caught sight of his uncle's furious purple face bearing down on him and the words died in his throat.

"How dare you!" his uncle roared once they were safely back at Privet Drive and had ushered Piers out the door. "You!— You!—"

Harry cowered next to the chesterfield in the sitting room. "I don't know what happened!" he pleaded, backing as far away from his uncle as he dared. It was a lie, of course, but his uncle was puffing like an enraged bull and uttering the word 'magic' would be the same as raising a red cape without the accompanying sword.

Vernon didn't believe him, he never did. His hand drew back and Harry braced himself, not foolish enough to try and dodge.

"You— cupboard— no meals!" he gasped before dropping into an armchair and loosening the tie around his short neck. Petunia rushed in with a large glass of brandy and pressed it into her husband's hand.

Harry picked himself up off the floor, clutching his cheek. He didn't resist as his aunt marched him into the hall, pulled open the cupboard door, and shoved him in. He scrambled to get his feet out of the way before she slammed the door shut and drew the bolt.

Harry flopped out on his cot. He knew he should feel angry with his relatives, but his chest was singing with a restless excitement that made him want to jump up and dance. He had performed magic! Real magic!

"Basil!" he called, looking around for his friend. "Basil, I did it! You were right all along. I can use magic! I spoke to a boa constrictor, and it told me a story about a Speaker from long ago who set the snakes free, and then I made the glass vanish and my cousin fell into the tank!"

Basil had spent the day sleeping in her favourite corner, and it took several long seconds before her head peeked up over the lip of the cot. She yawned, showing off black gums. "What did it feel like?" she asked.

Harry giggled and hugged his chest. "It was the best feeling in the world — which is a little strange because it sort of felt like I was on fire. But not a bad on-fire, just hot and tingly. It was like I could feel the magic under my skin trying to get out, and then I imagined Dudley falling into the tank because there wasn't any glass."

"Can you bring the feeling back?" Basil asked.

Harry rubbed his cheek, where a bruise was already forming. Could he? He still didn't know how
to trigger it, but the feeling had been stronger than ever before. He shuffled around until he was facing the shelf and closed his eyes. His chest was still tight with excitement, but he thought he could feel something else as well, a trembling resonance beneath his ribs. He focused on it, feeding it memories of the zoo and his anger at Dudley. It burgeoned, overflowing his chest and running along his spine in a tingling rush that raised goose pimples on his arms. His lips went numb and he opened his eyes, taking a deep breath in.

"Avello Vectoris." He let the tingling sensation roll from his lips with the words. The sharp taste of ozone was on his tongue as two pale blue strings of light burst from his mouth and coiled lazily through the air. They prodded the wooden shelf, then plucked the small black body of a beetle from a shallow hole and held it suspended in mid-air, just in front of his nose. The sensation began to ebb, and when Harry closed his lips the lights faded away and left him feeling a deep sense of calm.

"A good first try," Basil said, snatching up the beetle and eating it as she slithered onto his knee.

Harry huffed, then broke into a grin. Even if his uncle struck him, even if they kept him locked away until the end of time, it didn't matter. Magic was real, and he was determined to learn how to use it.

Chapter End Notes

Was that a cameo by a certain silver-tongued villain? Why yes, yes it was. :)

I had way too much fun writing the boa's dialogue. I hope you enjoyed its explanation/hints on how wandless magic works in this universe, and that you'll stick around to find out whether Harry manages to put the advice to use.

Thank you to everyone who subscribed to this story or left kudos!

Stay magical,
-Theine
Secrecy of Correspondence

Harry's aunt and uncle must have been frightfully angry with him because the summer vacation was well under way by the time they let him out of his cupboard. He emerged, blinking, into the light, his limbs pale and shaking as they reached for the warmth of the sun where it fell through the open front door.

Never one to waste an opening, his aunt shoved a broom into his grasping hands. "Well, get on with it," she ordered with a sneer before bustling off to the lounge.

Harry slumped against the plastic handle and heaved a sigh. Sometimes, he mused, he was far better off stuck inside his cupboard. While the cramped space was dark and stuffy, he was free of chores while locked away. Dudley also left him alone, though from the way he thundered up and down the stairs each day Harry suspected it wasn't voluntary.

With Basil's help, Harry had been free to roam the house once the Dursleys turned in for the night. Together they'd pilfered the fridge to their hearts' content, snacking on pot roast and leftover cake. Some nights they'd snuck outside to breathe in the fresh night air and watch the stars wheel overhead. On others they played silent games of cat and mouse among the shadowy legs of the kitchen table and chairs.

During the day he'd practiced magic.

It began as an exercise in trial and error. Using memories as a stick to prod his magic awake only got him so far. Like a slumbering dragon it grumbled at his clumsy intrusions, cracked one glowing eye open, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

He kept at it, undeterred now that he knew his ability to use magic was more than just wistful thinking. For weeks he lost himself in memories of insults and beatings until he could feel them battering his body and spirit, real as any blow. It hurt, and he collapsed more than once, trembling and drenched with sweat. No longer able to tell dreams from reality. Basil remained by his side during those dark times, her soft voice guiding him away from the nightmares.

The panicked fluttering of his heart did what thoughts alone could not.

When the memories became too much to bear his magic woke. It coursed beneath his skin, a searing roar that echoed through his skull. Paint cans and boxes of old Christmas lights rattled on the shelves as he struggled to regain awareness and control before the magic consumed him. He reigned it in as best he could, waiting for the inferno to become a simmering heat before letting Basil's spell roll off his lips.

With each day of practice his magic woke a little quicker and a little quieter. After a week it dozed fitfully in the hollow space below his lungs. After two it did not sleep at all.

Practice became pleasant once Harry passed that first hurdle. With magic at his fingertips he could concentrate on warping reality rather than reopening old wounds.

He wouldn't have mastered his magic to the same extent if he hadn't been locked away for so long. For whatever it was worth, it had given him ample time to practice without distractions.

The Monday morning after he was set free dawned the same as any other. Harry woke to his aunt rapping on the cupboard door as the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. He hauled
himself out of bed and went to the kitchen, where his aunt was bustling about the coffee machine. Falling into his morning routine, he pulled their large cast iron frying pan out of the drawer under the oven and wrestled it onto the stovetop.

As his aunt watched the coffee brew, he cracked eggs onto the hot iron and salivated as a slab of bacon crisped. If he was lucky there would be some leftovers he could filch that evening. They would be cold, but Harry was used to cold food.

The ceiling creaked and heavy footsteps thumped along the hall above them. Harry glanced up, as he always did, half expecting to see his uncle's foot crash through the plaster as the upper floor finally gave out under the man’s weight.

His aunt cuffed the back of his head hard enough to send his glasses sliding down his nose. He dropped the flipper and slapped a hand against his face to keep them from flying off onto the bacon. "Pay attention, Boy" she scolded. "I won't have you ruining breakfast again."

It had been years since he let the Dursley's food burn, but Harry lowered his head obediently. He shoved his glasses into place and took the flipper back in hand. He prodded the scrambled eggs as his aunt poured two large mugs of coffee. She added a cream and three sugars to her husband’s before setting it on the kitchen table.

Vernon trundled into the room shortly after, dressed in a wool waistcoat and slacks. He sunk onto his chair with a disgruntled huff and gulped down a mouthful of the scalding coffee.

Once the bacon and eggs were cooked, Harry maneuvered the heavy pan to the table. The weight hurt his wrist, but it was worth more than his life to drop it. Vernon was never particularly generous before he’d had his first coffee of the day.

There was a click in the front hall and the thump of letters falling onto the doormat.

“Get the mail, Boy!” Vernon snapped before raising the mug to his lips again.

Harry set the pan down on the wooden trivet in the centre of the table and angled the flipper’s handle so it was within easy reach of his uncle. Vernon batted his hand aside and started shovelling food onto his plate. Bits of egg flew off the flipper and splattered against the table top, making a mess of Petunia's floral placemats.

Harry left his uncle to his breakfast and stepped out into the hall. Dudley was clomping down the stairs, his stomach growling audibly and eyes screwed up with sleep. Harry sidestepped him, ducking into the sitting room doorway. Any hallway his cousin was in became single-lane traffic only, and Harry didn’t feel like being shoved against a wall this early in the morning.

As soon as Dudley entered the kitchen Petunia began to coo and fuss over him. Harry rolled his eyes, pretending to gag at the stream of mushy nicknames and endearments issuing from her mouth. While he hated being called Boy or Freak, he couldn’t imagine that Harrikins or Harhar would be any better. He was ten for goodness sake, not two.

The way now clear, Harry approached the door. There were three letters waiting for him on the mat. A dull brown envelope from the bank, a postcard from his terrible aunt Marge, and… Harry stared at the last letter in astonishment. It was addressed to him in large, loopy, beautiful green cursive that he could only dream of imitating.

He’d never received any post before, and had to read the address three times before it fully sunk in.

*Mr. Harry J. Potter*
There was no return address or stamp on the envelope, much to his confusion. He moved to flip it over, hoping the sender had signed the back, when his fingers brushed against something thick and waxy.

“What’s taking you so long, Boy?” Vernon yelled from his seat. It sounded like his mouth was full of eggs. “Checking for letter bombs?” He chuckled at his own joke.

Harry didn’t rise to the bait, but he turned his feet toward the kitchen as he investigated the back of the envelope. Holding the flap closed was a purple wax seal. He held it close to his nose and peered at the impression. It was decorated with a coat of arms bearing a lion, snake, badger, and eagle surrounding the letter ‘H’. There was a banner at the base with some words on it, but they were too small for him to read. From what little he could make out he concluded they weren’t in English anyway.

He set the bill and postcard on the table for his uncle, then sunk down with his back against the wall and tried to unstick the seal — for it seemed a shame to break it.

Vernon grunted as he read the postcard. “Marge is ill,” he said to Petunia. “Ate a funny whelk. She might not be able to make it over this year.”

Petunia tutted as she dropped two slices of bread into the toaster but didn’t offer any condolences. Harry knew his aunt was as fond of Marge’s visits as he was — which was not at all — and for a very similar reason. Marge always brought her old, foul-tempered bulldog Ripper with her, and Ripper took joy in biting everything he could fit between his jaws. Sometimes he went after Petunia’s furniture, but his favourite target was Harry’s legs. The number of bites Harry had received over the years was staggering, at least two per visit since before he could walk. Even the mention of the dog’s name was enough to make him break out in a cold sweat.

The wax seal popped off after a minute of careful peeling and Harry stroked it gently, not caring when it left a tacky film on his fingers. A letter closed with a seal. It felt magical, like something out of a storybook. His heart sped up with excitement as he extracted the envelope’s contents.

Dudley swooped in, snatching the letter out of Harry’s hands and leaving him with nothing but the envelope, seal, and a nasty paper cut on his index finger.

“Dad! Dad! Harry’s got a letter!” He brandished the paper gleefully as Harry jumped to his feet.

“That’s mine!” he protested, trying to snatch it back.

Dudley raised his arm above his head and shoved Harry hard, knocking him back to the ground. "Don't talk back, Freak," he jeered before pressing the letter into his father’s waiting hand.

“Attaboy, Dudley,” Vernon said as he shook the sheaf of parchment open and glanced at it. “There’s no one who would be writing to the…” The words died in his mouth. As his eyes skimmed down the letter his face went from red, to purple, to the sickly grey of old porridge faster than a traffic light.
“P-Petunia!” he stammered, summoning her from where she was buttering toast.

“What is it, Darling?” She leaned over his shoulder and looked down at the parchment clutched in his fist. As she read the first line her eyes went hard and she raised a trembling hand to her lips.

“Vernon!” Her voice cracked and her knuckles were white where she clutched the back of his uncle’s chair. “What do we do?”

“It’s mine,” Harry said again. “So you should give it back.”

Muscles were twitching furiously beneath Vernon’s face. He looked like he was about to explode. Realizing he’d overstepped his bounds, Harry backed away and hunched his shoulders. He lowered his head in submission, then peeked at his uncle from under his fringe. Vernon looked murderous, and Harry’s legs tensed, ready to run in case the man lunged at him over the table.

“It was addressed to you in mistake,” Petunia said, not even trying to look sincere. “Now, I want the garden watered and the lawn mown by ten o’clock. No breakfast until you’re done.”

Harry grit his teeth as his hands curled into fists. He had half a mind to ignore his chores and go back to his cupboard in protest, but no doubt she’d take it as an opportunity to lock him in for another week. His fists trembled from the strain of keeping them clenched and he let the muscles relax with a defeated sigh.

No matter how much he’d prefer isolation to interacting with his relatives, he’d been immobile in the dark for far too long. So, with a sullen look thrown at his too-nosy relatives and stupid mail-stealing cousin, he stomped out the kitchen door and into the back yard.

His body was aching by the time he finished his chores and was rewarded with a single piece of toast covered in a thin layer of marmalade. He ate it standing in the doorway of the living room and watched as his uncle pulled the grate off the electric fireplace. Vernon looked back at him and nodded pleasantly as he fed the mysterious letter into the flames.

Harry’s magic was alive beneath his skin. He could feel it running down his arms and across his lips, hot as the fire hissing in the grate. He stared hard at the flames, imagining that they were living things with teeth and claws.

_Burn him_, he thought. _Like he’s burning my letter!_

The fire flared up, bright and terrible.

Vernon bellowed in pain and tipped backwards. He floundered like an upended turtle, waving his right hand wildly as flames ate the sleeve of his jumper.

A grim smile twisted Harry’s lips as he slid from the doorway, not wanting to be around when his uncle recovered his wits. He slipped into his cupboard while Vernon rushed into the kitchen and turned on the tap.

"Petunia!" he bellowed. "A hand if you would!"

Harry heard his aunt come in from the garden and cluck her tongue. He imagined her fretting over the ruined jumper as she helped her massive husband struggle out of it.

He decided to stay put for a while. A shirtless Vernon Dursley wasn’t something he was keen on witnessing.
Harry spent the rest of the day in a flurry of activity to keep his mind off the mystery of the letter. He stripped his ratty old bedding and ran it through the wash, then dusted every corner of his cupboard. He even crawled into the narrow space beneath his cot, which was full of cobwebs and the carcasses of small insects. Basil watched his activity with bemusement, obviously not as bothered by dirt and dust as he was. She snapped up the spiders he sent scurrying from their webs, crunching them between her jaws before swallowing them, legs and all.

“I can’t believe them!” Harry grumbled for the hundredth time once he was back inside his — now rather clean — cupboard. Basil was curled on his lap, patiently listening to him gripe.

He ran his finger along the back of the seal, pushing hard enough to leave a shallow indent in the wax. “It wasn’t theirs to read!”

“Can we steal it back?” she asked, flicking her tongue after the word ‘steal’. It had taken several days of fumbling explanations on Harry’s part to explain the concept of ownership to her. She had grasped it well enough in the end, though she believed it to be quite silly. To her, it wasn’t stealing if Harry took food from the fridge. The food existed to be eaten and only ended up in storage because the Dursleys hadn’t wanted it, making it fair game. Unless he was taking food off their forks, she couldn’t see why they’d be upset.

Harry didn’t want to give her a demonstration.

He sighed. “My uncle burned it. It’s nothing but ash now.”

“Will you get another one?”

“Another letter?” Harry scratched his head and looked down at the empty envelope, which he’d set on the shelf across from the door. He doubted the sender knew their first letter had been destroyed… but then, they’d known about his cupboard. Not even his aunt’s lady friends knew where he slept, and they came over every second weekend.

“Maybe,” he said as his mood lightened. “But we’ll need to make sure they don’t find it first or they’ll take it away again.”

“I’ll help!” Basil said, her head bobbing in excitement. “And then you can see your paper words!”

Harry’s mind buzzed with possibilities. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do…”

The kitchen was very full the next morning. Vernon came down before the bacon had hit the pan and sat at his regular place at the table. The newspaper was open in front of him, but his eyes were still and he appeared to be listening intently for something.

Dudley waddled downstairs not long after his father. He glowered at Harry and rapped a short cane on the leg of his chair. The stick was part of his new school uniform, used to hit other students when the teachers weren’t watching. He looked as though he’d like to test it out on Harry, who had no desire to become a guinea pig.

Petunia had her back to them. She was looking out the kitchen window and had been wiping the same glass for the last five minutes while the coffee cooled in the carafe beside her.

The click of the letter slot in the hall sounded like a cannon shot, and both his aunt and uncle flinched.

Harry set a decanter of orange juice down on the table. “Shall I get the mail?” he asked, stalling for
time and trying to keep his uncle’s eyes from the entryway.

Vernon sent him a look of deep mistrust and turned to Dudley. “Son, get the mail.”

“I don’t wanna!” Dudley whined, distracted by the appearance of the juice. Picking up the decanter, he began to pour himself a cup. “Make Harry get it!”

“Dudley!” Vernon snapped, and his son looked up, startled. He was never on the receiving end of his father’s anger, that was reserved for Harry. For a moment Dudley’s face was blank, then it set into a scowl. Forgotten, the juice overflowed the lip of his cup, making a sticky orange puddle on the table.

“I don’t mind,” said Harry, edging around a cursing Dudley on his way to the door. He peeked down the hall and caught a glimpse of a scaled tail disappearing into the washroom.

“No!” Vernon growled. He pushed back from the table so hard that it scraped an inch across the kitchen floor and caused another wave of juice to slosh from Dudley’s cup. He shouldered Harry aside and marched to the front door. Bending awkwardly at the waist he plucked the one remaining letter from the mat with his beefy fingers. When he turned around his face was gleeful.

“Oh ho ho!” he chuckled as he returned to the kitchen.

Harry had never seen him look so happy to receive a bill in his life.

It was late afternoon before Harry could retreat to his cupboard.

His arms trembled from exhaustion as he pulled the door closed behind him. He’d spent the last few hours polishing every window in the house until they were shiny death-traps for the neighbourhood birds. He guessed he had an hour before his aunt dragged him back into the kitchen to start on dinner, two if he was lucky, and he didn’t want to waste a single minute.

Basil was waiting on the foot of his bed, her body coiled possessively around a letter closed with a purple wax seal. “I stole it!” she said, sounding very pleased with herself as she relinquished the envelope to Harry.

“Thanks, Basil. You’re amazing!”

She slithered up his side and settled round his shoulders like a living scarf as he popped off the seal. “Tell me what the paper words say.”

Harry’s heart pounded as he drew out three heavy sheets of parchment and an empty return envelope with ‘Hogwarts’ written across the front. He glanced at the strange name, shrugged, and then set the envelope aside. No doubt the letter would make everything clear.

He read the first sheet and his heart twanged like a large rubber band. “Basil! Listen to this! It’s an invitation to study at a school for magic!

“Dear Mr Potter. We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on the 1st of September. We await your owl by no later than July 31st. Yours sincerely, Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress.”

Questions flitted across Harry’s mind. What did they mean by ‘we await your owl’? Was it a secret wizard code? Why hadn’t he ever heard of Hogwarts before? How had they heard of him? And
most importantly, would his aunt and uncle let him attend? Judging by their horrified faces at breakfast the day before, the answer to the latter would be a resounding 'no'. The Dursleys intended for Harry to attend the local comprehensive, Stonewall High. Though if he missed as many days as he had in primary due to punishments his aunt may as well keep him home and claim homeschooling.

“Do you think they invited me because you taught me that spell and I managed to do it right?” The timing seemed perfect. Though how anyone could know what he did inside his cupboard when the door was locked made him glance around, half expecting to see some sort of hidden camera. A magical hidden camera.

“You were using magic before,” Basil pointed out. “But I am glad we will get away from your not-family. I do not like them. I wish I had fangs to sink into their ankles.” She bared her gums, lined with only a few small curved teeth, and Harry patted her head in consolation. “And I wish to learn more secrets,” she added.

“You want to come?” he asked, delighted that he wouldn’t have to venture into a new world alone.

“Of course. Someone must eat the spiders under your bed.”

Harry grinned and set the invitation down beside him while his eyes devoured the next sheet. It was a list of supplies.

Wizarding robes, dragon-hide gloves, textbooks written by people with fanciful names like Arsenius Jigger and Newt Scamander, a wand, and cauldron. If he hadn’t already believed in magic he would have thought it all a great joke. He frowned a little when he saw snakes weren’t listed alongside owls, cats, rats, and toads as proper pets, but Basil wasn’t his pet. She was his friend.

Where will I find any of this? Harry wondered, his heart sinking. And how will I pay for it?

His aunt and uncle refused to spend money on him. He was already a burden, they said it all the time. He worried his bottom lip and read over the list again. He found the answer to his first question in the letter’s footer, where several place names were listed including a ‘Diagon Alley’ in London.

He had never been to London before, not that he could remember, but he had the impression that it was quite large. He knew there were trains to London from Guildford station, and he could probably scrounge up the fare for a return trip, but what then? Would he walk up to strangers in the street until one of them gave him directions to England’s magical underbelly?

It was at this point he realized he’d already made up his mind.

“Basil,” he said. “We’re going on an adventure.”

She hissed, pleased, and caressed his shoulders with her coils.

As it turned out, the cryptic note about owls wasn’t all that cryptic.

The last sheet of parchment was a confirmation form. After putting a huge checkmark in the ‘yes’ box and signing his name on the bottom line with an old ballpoint pen, Harry tucked it in the return envelope and slipped from the house.

When he reached the post box at the end of the drive he was stunned to find a large grey owl perched atop it. The owl watched him with wide knowing eyes as he pulled up short. He clutched
the letter to his chest, his gaze glued on the owl’s sharp talons. Basil drew her head back and hid under the oversized collar of his shirt.

The owl hooted dolefully then clicked its beak, its eyes zeroing in on the envelope.

Slowly, risking life and digits, Harry held out the letter.

The owl hopped to the edge of the post box and plucked the envelope from his fingers. It thrust off from its perch and took to the air with several powerful beats of its wings.

Harry watched the owl glide silently into the blue sky. When it vanished from sight his excitement returned in leaps and bounds.

He had mailed a letter by owl!

He skipped back to Number Four, keeping an eye on the gutters for spare coins. He was going to a school for magic, and if the Dursleys didn’t like it they could go stuff themselves!
Necessity

Harry sat on the lumpy pillow at the head of his cot, his knees tucked tight against his chest. It was just past six in the evening and outside his cupboard the setting sun was painting the old blue carpet with stripes of gold. Fingers of light reached tentatively through the door’s ventilation grill, but they couldn’t pierce the shroud of gloom resting over his shoulders.

“You are troubled,” Basil said. She was coiled opposite him, a dark smudge on the bedsheets. Harry sighed. In the space between them sat a handful of coins arranged into small piles, each worth one pound. They hadn’t been easy to obtain. In the four days since he’d answered the Hogwarts letter, Harry had scoured the gutters from Privet Drive to the train station. He’d checked the chesterfield and armchairs in the sitting room, poked his fingers under the radiator in the garage, and even rifled through his uncle and cousin’s pant pockets when he did the laundry. Yet he still only had a meagre five pounds.

While at the station he’d checked the train schedules. A return trip to London would set him back seven-fifty on top of the cost of his school equipment.

“At this rate I won’t be able to save enough money before school starts,” he said with another sigh. “There’s only thirty-three days left before September. What if I don’t manage to get my supplies on time? Do you think they’ll kick me out? Send me back here?”

Basil reared back. “If they try I will bite them for you! And then I will squeeze their necks until they breathe no longer.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think that would help. Killing is wrong. They’d just get angry with us.”

“Killing is wrong?” Basil asked, sounding puzzled. “Why is killing wrong? All things kill — for food, for territory, for mates. It is part of life, like the cold of winter sleep. I could not eat a frog without killing it.”

“You don’t think…” Harry worried his lip between his teeth. Until Basil said things like this it was easy to forget she was a snake and didn’t think as humans did. Her world was simpler, unburdened by the rules of society.

“If a human kills another human they’ll get in trouble,” he said, trying to explain. “It makes everyone sad.”

Not that anyone would be sad if he died. The Dursleys would probably hold a party to celebrate. The thought left a painful hollowness in the space between his lungs, so he pushed it away.

“Have you ever killed another snake?”

“No,” she said. “None have ever challenged me. Few snakes live here, and I am larger than those that do.”

“But if one did, wouldn’t it be better to talk to them? If you understand what they want then maybe you wouldn’t need to fight, and no one would need to die.”

“Is that what humans do?” she asked. “Solve their problems with Speaking?”
He wanted to say ‘yes’, but the word stuck in his throat. “Not always,” he admitted, thinking of his cousin. “Sometimes they hurt or scare them. But even then, they aren’t supposed to kill the other person.”

“Not all can be solved by words or intimidation,” Basil said. “Sometimes killing is necessary if you want to live.”

“I don’t know... I guess if someone was trying to kill me I’d be okay with... killing them. I want to live. Even if no one else cares that I’m alive. I want to find somewhere to belong, where people have never heard of the Dursleys and will like me for me.” His voice trembled and he rubbed his eyes fiercely with the sleeve of his jumper.

“I like you,” Basil said. “You are my bed-mate. I will always like you.”

He gave a watery laugh. “Thanks Basil. I like you too.”

Taking a deep, calming breath, he turned his attention back to the coins. “Okay, if we want enough money to get to London we’ll need to steal it from the Dursleys.”

Basil perked up at the mention of stealing. “Ooh, can I help? Will it be like with your paper words?”

Harry sniffed and rolled his eyes. He’d been a terrible influence on her. “You can, but it won’t be the same as before. They keep their money in their rooms, so we’ll need to wait until late at night and then sneak upstairs. If they wake up while we’re up there it will be trouble, so we need to be really careful.”

He collected together the coins and slipped them into one of his few socks without holes. “Once we get the money we’ll need to leave right away in case they notice it’s gone in the morning.”

“Will we go this night?”

Harry looked around the inside of the cupboard and nodded. He couldn’t bear staying here any longer when there was the possibility of a whole new world just beyond his fingertips. “Yes.”

Harry tossed and turned that night, dropping in and out of sleep. Each time he woke he snuck to the kitchen to check the hour on the stove’s digital clock, but time seemed to have slowed to a crawl. The fifth time he made the silent trek, only to see that it was just past two, he was convinced the night would last forever.

From his previous trip to Guildsford, he knew the first train to London left at five. An hour after that his aunt would be up and banging on his cupboard door. Though it was unlikely the Dursleys would look for him at the station — if they bothered to look at all — he didn’t want to risk them catching him. If he couldn't make the first train he was determined to be on the second. Anything to get out of Little Whinging by six.

Three o’clock finally arrived and Harry nudged Basil awake. Normally she would have been sleeping curled on his chest, but his constant in-and-out had left her hissing sleepy curses — most of which involved his scales rotting — and moving to the very end of the cot. She came awake with a start when he picked her up and set her round his shoulders.

“You smell of stress,” she said, her tongue lapping at his breath.

“I’m a little nervous,” he admitted. “The last time I took money like this it… didn’t end well for
me."

He’d never forget. He’d been eight at the time, and all the boys in his class had been playing with their new Gameboys. They looked like they were having so much fun, and Harry hoped if he had one as well they might play with him. At the time he hadn’t understood how expensive they were, and had thought it would be easy to swipe enough from his uncle’s wallet.

Vernon had caught him, of course, and had been beyond furious.

It was the first time Harry remembered the man beating him. Normally his uncle would smack him across the head and throw him in his cupboard, but that time he’d laid into him the same way Dudley did now — with fists and savage kicks. Harry didn’t remember much past the second blow. All he knew was that he’d woke sore and bloody in his cupboard a full day later. He’d been leery of stealing for a month after that, even curtailing his raids of the fridge, but hunger won out in the end and he went back to his old ways.

“I’ll protect you,” Basil promised, squeezing his shoulders gently. “Always.”

They crept up the stairs. Harry moved on all fours, keeping his body low and weight spread out so the steps wouldn’t creak and give him away. The deep shadows didn’t bother him. He was used to the dark and his eyes were already adjusted for night vision. He didn’t stumble once while reaching the landing, but he did pause on the top step and let Basil slither into the hall. Darkness didn’t hinder her, and she would be the first to notice his relatives rousing from sleep.

His aunt and uncle’s room was the first on the landing, the door rattling from Vernon’s resounding snores. The man was clearly fast asleep, but Harry couldn’t be sure about his aunt. It was remarkable she slept at all with Vernon’s racket, and Harry supposed she relied on earplugs to muffle the noise to an acceptable level.

He kept low as he skirted their door, following Basil farther down the hall until they reached Dudley’s room. Pressing his ear to the wood, he listened until he was sure his cousin was asleep. Dudley didn’t snore to quite the same level as his father, but Harry was sure it would only be a matter of time seeing how he was inflating like a beach ball. It made him glad to sleep downstairs where it was quiet, even if his room was a cupboard.

He eased the knob around and cracked the door open just wide enough for Basil to slide into the room. She was gone for less than a minute before he heard her quiet voice call him in.

Opening the door a little wider, he slipped inside and immediately blinked at how much brighter it was. His cousin’s window was propped open, beckoning a non-existant breeze in an attempt to relieve the humid summer air. With the curtains drawn back the yellow glow of the streetlight outside fell unimpeded into the room. It lit a minefield of clothes and toys scattered across the floor. The light would help Harry’s search, but if his cousin woke it would also immediately reveal his presence in the room.

There was no helping it, not without risking the squeaky curtain rod, so Harry resolved to find his cousin’s wallet as fast as possible and get out.

It was easier said than done. Nothing in the room seemed to have a permanent home, and Harry had to tread carefully to avoid stepping on various figurines and electronics buried beneath the dirty laundry. It was no wonder so many of Dudley’s belongings broke soon after he received them, Harry thought as he stubbed his toe on a walkman.

Dudley’s wallet could have been anywhere, but Harry was thorough and eventually found it tucked
under a pair of used pants. He grimaced in disgust as he lifted the wallet away from the undergarments, then moved to the window and flipped it open. In the glow of the streetlamp he could see a large stack of bills. A fifty pound note caught his eye, and he was about to pull it out when he paused and looked over the bills again. It was the only fifty in the wallet, and Dudley was sure to notice if it went missing.

If he wanted to get away with this he’d need to be smart about it. So Harry ignored the fifty and removed several smaller bills — two twenties, a ten, and a five. Dudley was terrible at math, and Harry hoped there was still enough money in the wallet that his cousin wouldn’t notice he was over fifty pounds poorer than yesterday.

He slipped the wallet away and was making his way to the door when his foot landed on a toy shark. He yelped and tried to hop back as its dorsal fin jabbed into the soft skin of his arch, but his ankle became tangled in a jumper and he crashed to the floor.

“Harry!” Basil cried, as she slithered to his side, her head up and small fangs bared. "What has hurt you? Is it still here?” Her eyes landed on the shark and she let out a long hiss. “You! Fish creature. Prepare to face my coils!”

She leapt upon the toy, wrapping her long body around it until only the tip of its tail was visible. There were a few seconds of frantic wrestling before she cried in dismay, “Why are your scales so hard? Fish of stone, I will have you yet!”

Harry rubbed the sole of his foot and smothered a laugh, not sure what to make of Basil’s valiant attempt to defend him. He pulled the jumper from his ankle and started to rise when his cousin’s snoring cut off. He looked up at the bed in horror as Dudley sat up and rubbed his eyes.

No! Harry thought, a wave of despair crashing over him. I was so close!

His heart thundered in his chest as Dudley looked around bleary-eyed and spotted him half-off the floor. For a moment his cousin looked puzzled, but then the expression morphed into anger. Dudley swung his legs out of bed and took a deep breath, ready to bellow for his parents.

There was no time to think. Harry threw up his hand, pointing his fingers at his cousin's flabby chest. "You can't move!” he shouted, bending all his will into holding Dudley still. He ignored how his cousin flinched back, instead imagined him frozen in place like a flabby human statue.

Dudley jerked, his arms stuttering as he tried to raise them defensively. "Whaattern yoouu...” he started to ask, but Harry thrust his hand forward again, believing in the magic with all his might. Dudley's body went rigid and his mouth froze halfway open. A high whine vaulted from his immobile tongue and tumbled through the air like an acrobat.

"No one can hear you," Harry said, growing confident. His cousin's whine cut out, unheard and unheeded.

Dudley’s chest heaved as his eyes darted about the room. There was a soft rushing sound, like water escaping from a chink in a pipe, and the front of his pyjama pants grew dark. A small pungent puddle formed on the carpet beneath his feet, lingering a moment before the coarse weave sucked it up.

Harry's face split in a grin and he giggled, though there was nothing funny about the situation. Rising to his feet, he studied Dudley with gleaming eyes. He'd never used his magic on another person before. So far his practice had been limited to inanimate objects and insects.
Seeing his tormentor trapped immobile sent a heady rush coursing through his veins. After years of cruelty and derision it was now Dudley's turn to be helpless, and from the fat tears rolling down his cheeks he knew he was at Harry's mercy.

*I can do anything!* The thought made Harry's body tingle. *I can make him pay for everything he's done to me!*

He wanted it. Wanted vengeance for all the times Dudley had left him bleeding on the playground. For all the insults and jeers. For every potential friend he’d chased away. The desire consumed him until he lost all awareness of his body and existed as nothing but a swirling maelstrom of emotion and magic.

He didn't feel Basil spiral up his leg. She had given up the fight with the toy shark, declaring it a draw when she noticed Dudley was awake.

“Will we kill him?” she asked, passing over his hips and under his baggy nightshirt. Her scales tickled his skin as she settled around his shoulders and raised her head to taste Dudley’s breath.

Her voice grounded him and he snapped back into his body. Was Dudley's death necessary?

He studied his cousin’s snot and tear stained face. His need for vengeance still burned bright, but a worm of pity ate its way into his heart. No matter how much he hated his cousin, it wasn’t enough to want him dead.

He looked Dudley straight in the eye. "You're pathetic," he said. "And I won't sink to your level."

Dudley's eyes glazed over and Harry felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. He staggered towards his cousin’s writing desk and leaned against the chair, panting. On the bed, Dudley twitched and his right arm inched up towards his face.

The heat of Harry's magic was cooling, and with a stab of terror he realized that once it faded there would be nothing holding Dudley back. His head spun as he grasped the last flickers of his power and focused them outward.

“I was not here,” he said. Another wave of dizziness overtook him, but he propped himself up against the chair and took a steadying breath. “You never saw me. You will go to sleep, and when you wake up tomorrow you won't remember any of this.”

The magic faded and he slumped to his hands and knees.

Dudley’s face went slack. He stared straight ahead, making no sign he could see Harry at his bedside. He wobbled for a moment, then collapsed on his bed and pulled the blankets over his head. A moment later he was snoring.

Harry took a second to breathe, but he knew he couldn't linger. He staggered to his feet and limped from the upper floor before he could stop and reflect on what he'd done to Dudley. There’d be time for that once he'd made it away safe.

Returning to his cupboard he pulled on his least tattered jeans and t-shirt, then wound a black and white kerchief around his neck. He had liberated the scarf from the garage. While the thick scent of oil lingered on the fabric it had proved useful when he wanted to ferry Basil in and out of the house. She could hide under the kerchief without his relatives being any the wiser, and he hoped it would work on the train attendants as well. For now though, he was happy to have her tail coiled around his upper arm while her head bobbed in front of his chest like a pendant.
He shoved the sock full of money into his pocket, and then fished his school satchel out from the small space at the foot of his cot. Left over paper and pencils scattered across the blanket and rolled onto the floor as he dumped it out. He left them where they fell and tucked his school letter into the bag's inner pocket.

Hurrying to the kitchen he packed a water bottle from the pantry and some leftover roast potatoes into the bag, and then zipped it shut. Slinging it over his shoulder he let himself out the back door, locking the knob behind him.

He didn’t bother leaving a note. The Dursley’s wouldn’t care.

A ground mist sat heavy on the lawns and coiled around the bases of the old street lamps as Harry made his way down Privet Drive. Above him the stars were fading as the sky changed from black to the inky blue of predawn. A single bird sang in the hedgerow next to the road, oblivious to the liquid shadow of a cat stalking beneath the parked cars. Harry took a deep breath and shivered. There was a faint chill in the air that cut through his thin clothes.

The solitude was eerie. Privet Drive was as suburban as it got. During the day there were always housewives puttering about their gardens or chatting at street corners while they walked their yappy little dogs. At this hour the street was silent, houses still and dark as they waited for their residents to rise from the depths of sleep. Knowing he was the only person present in this moment evoked a strange lonely feeling in his chest. One that not even the weight of Basil’s coils could dissuade.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been outside before sunrise. When his aunt held important dinner parties for Vernon’s clients she locked him out regardless of the weather so his presence wouldn’t ‘insult her guests’ sensibilities’. Sometimes he was out all night, curled up next to the back door. Clinging to a vain hope that his aunt would let him back in before the night was completely through. She never did, though the next morning she always made an effort to look surprised to see him standing at the door.

Perhaps she hoped he would run away in the night.

Perhaps one of these nights he would.

He shivered again and shoved his hands into his pant pockets. It wasn’t really running away if he intended to come back. Still, this would be the farthest he’d ever gone on his own, and as he walked down the empty street his determination wavered. Going to London would put him miles away from the only place he’d ever known. It wasn’t a home — more of a place to keep out of the rain — yet part of him was begging to scurry back to his cupboard and the safety of the familiar. That part grew stronger the longer he walked, until it was almost a physical force drawing him back.

He stopped and shook his head, bewildered at the strange feeling. He didn’t feel this trepidation when he went to the park or school, and both of those were farther away from Privet Drive than he was now. “Don’t be a coward,” he whispered. “This is what you wanted.”

Basil shifted around his neck, drawing herself up out of sight. She poked her head out of the bunched fabric near his jaw and flicked her tongue, tasting the morning air. “It will be sunny,” she declared. “A good day to hunt for secrets.”

Her presence anchored him and the draw to return to the Dursleys’ receded as her words reminded him of his purpose. He was off to find the magical world. This was no time for cowardice!
He strode down the sidewalk with new confidence, passing under the street sign and turning left towards the train station. Behind him the air shifted, rippling like the trailing edge of a curtain, before falling still once more.
The train ride from Guildsford to Waterloo was long and uneventful, but Harry’s first glimpse of London more than made up for the hours of creaking handrails and musty seats.

Buildings towered over his head as he set out from the station, some gleaming like mirrors in the rising sun, while others were built of old stone bricks and stained with pigeon droppings. They were taller than any building he’d ever seen, taller than even the bright-tailed magpies wheeling overhead dared fly, and his head spun when he imagined what the people living on the top floors would see when they looked out their windows. From that height he’d be nothing but a drab dot on the sidewalk — as insignificant and unremarkable as an ant.

He followed his nose to the river Thames and peered at the boats chugging along its dark, sluggish water through the guardrails of the Golden Jubilee Bridge’s narrow pedestrian walkway. On the far side he spotted a gigantic ferris wheel rotating sedately in the distance, sunlight glinting off the metal roofs of its cabins. He spent five minutes watching it in awe. He’d never been to a fair, but Dudley had bragged about the different rides for a week after his parents took him on his ninth birthday.

As he delved deeper into the city he heard Big Ben toll eight, and was nearly run over as men and women in sharp business suits burst from their apartment buildings and stampeded towards a caravan of black taxi cabs circling the block like hungry sharks.

His hands clenched around the strap of his bag each time one of the taxis pulled away and bullied their way into the morning traffic. He’d lost his parents to a car crash, and every time tires screeched or a horn blared in warning his mind filled with scenes of fire and twisted metal. He was terrified of witnessing a collision, but the cabbies knew their trade well and all those he saw remained in one piece.

On the sidewalks, no one paid any attention to the small dark haired boy with the broken glasses and baggy clothes weaving through the crowds. It was a reassuring sort of invisibility.

“Where is all the grass?” Basil asked after hours of walking the streets.

Harry, who’d been too busy searching for signs of magic to notice much of his mundane surroundings after the initial awe wore off, paused. He remembered passing by parks earlier that morning, but apart from the thin trees breaking up the sidewalk every few meters, this part of the city was grey cement and stone.

“Did you want down for a bit?” he asked, sinking back against the front of an abandoned boutique. There were three discoloured mannequins propped behind the dirty window — all of whom were wearing clothes even Harry knew were several decades out of date. He leaned back against the rough brick facing and raised a hand to shade his eyes. It was approaching noon and his feet were sore from slipping around in his oversized shoes.

“I want to find another snake,” she replied. “Perhaps they will know where the secrets are hidden.”

That sounded like a wonderful idea to Harry. For a sheltered boy from the suburbs the city crowds were overwhelming. Unlike him, they all seemed to know where they were going. They hurried from one street corner to the next, and he was too intimidated to stop anyone to ask for directions. They might get angry with him. Or worse, called the police to deal with the underage vagabond
running about London unaccompanied.

Snakes he could deal with. Unlike people, they were nice to him. Unfortunately, the chance of finding another snake in the city was astronomically smaller than finding another human.

With the day halfway over he knew he was running out of time and options. He studied the approaching crowd and picked out the least intimidating candidate: a young woman with a leather purse slung over her shoulder. While he was steeling himself to intercept her, two people stepped out of the boutique window.

He caught the unexpected movement out of the corner of his eye, and his head whipped round so fast that he dislodged Basil’s tail from where it rested against his collarbone. She tightened her grip on his shoulders and hissed in surprise, demanding to know what had happened and who she needed to bite.

The woman he’d intended to stop didn’t so much as stumble. She strode past the new arrivals without glancing in their direction.

Harry, on the other hand, couldn’t stop staring. He’d never seen someone with a stuffed vulture on their hat before.

The hat had a wide brim that drooped at the edges. It perched on the head of a formidable looking older woman in a lurid green dress-suit. She had a bright red handbag looped over one arm while the other tugged on the hand of a blond, round-faced boy.

The boy looked to be around eleven, the same age as Dudley, though he was not nearly as fat. Harry was close to eleven as well, but he was always mistaken as younger than his real age. He blamed years of close quarters and scant meals, but he couldn’t tell anyone his suspicions. That would only get him in trouble with the Dursleys for ‘telling lies;’ no matter how true they might be.

“Gran, couldn’t we have stayed a little longer?” the boy asked. His voice was watery, as though he’d been crying.

His grandmother shook her head and the vulture swayed as though it were about to take flight. “Neville, I’m sure your parents were glad to see you’ve received your Hogwarts letter, but we really must be along!”

Harry’s heart stuttered and he gasped. Hogwarts was an unusual name. Surely there was only one in existence, which meant she was talking about the same school of magic that had sent him his letter.

“To think the Cauldron’s Floo is down for maintenance today, ridiculous!” the woman muttered under her breath as she looked up and down the street. When Harry caught a glimpse of her face it was scrunched in distaste. “I haven’t gone to Diagon Alley the muggle way in years. Was it out the door and to the right?”

He stared after them, paralyzed with shock as she towed the boy named Neville along the sidewalk.

“What is it?” Basil asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I found some!” he said as he forced his legs to move. Neville and his grandmother were at the crosswalk waiting for the lights to turn and he couldn’t let them get out of his sight.

“Excuse me!” he called, his voice cracking with nerves. They didn’t look round, and Harry —
bolder than he felt — tapped the woman’s elbow. “Excuse me!”

The boy jumped and looked back at him with wide round eyes the colour of warm chocolate. His grandmother turned as well. She stared down her nose at Harry, her gaze sharp and considering as she took in his tattered appearance. Harry could see the judgement in her eyes, and it made his cheeks heat with shame.

*She has a vulture on her hat,* he reminded himself sharply. *She can’t say anything about your clothes!*

“Yes?” she snapped, much like his aunt when she was cross. Harry flinched but didn’t back down.

“Um...” he said, his brain trying to catch up with the fact that he may have accosted a full-grown witch in the middle of the street. He took a deep breath and plowed on. “I couldn’t help overhearing— that is— I need to buy my Hogwarts school things but don’t know how to get to Diagon Alley!”

The old witch continued to scrutinizing him, making him fidget with unease.

“May I follow you? I promise I won’t cause any trouble—”

“Easy there, young man,” she said imperiously, holding up a hand to ward off any further begging on his part. “You may of course come along if you don’t know where to go. But where are your parents?”

“Dead,” Harry replied, too relieved at finding a guide to think about lying.

Neville made a soft, sad sound and his hand tightened on his grandmother’s. Up to this point he had been peeking at Harry shyly, but at the mention of parents his eyes fell to his unoccupied hand where he was clutching a colourful candy wrapper.

The old woman looked at Neville with a small frown, and then turned her gaze back to Harry, though it wasn’t as piercing as before. “And your guardians?” she asked.

Harry forced himself to meet her eyes. “At home,” he answered, hoping she wouldn’t ask for more details.

She huffed. “The nerve of them! To let a young boy such as yourself wander about London alone.” Harry didn’t try to make excuses for the Dursleys, he didn’t want to think about them right now.

“My name is Augusta Longbottom,” she said, extracting her hand from Neville and holding it out. He hesitated before taking it. Physical contact was something he avoided if he could, but he’d once heard his uncle tell Dudley the importance of a good handshake. He’d said you could tell a lot about someone’s personality by their grip, and as Harry took Mrs Longbottom’s hand he thought he could see what his uncle meant.

Her grip was strong and firm as iron, as though she tolerated no weakness in herself or those around her. She shook his hand with a confidence born of more than her age. It made him think of newscasts of the Queen, though he thought the Queen’s hats were much more tasteful than Mrs Longbottom’s.

When she released his hand he pulled it back and tucked it close against his stomach. She didn’t notice his discomfort, having turned to motion towards the boy at her side. “And this is my grandson, Neville. He’s also starting at Hogwarts this year, Mister…?”
It took Harry a moment to realize she was asking for his name. No one had ever called him *Mister* before. His aunt and uncle never called him anything but *Boy* or *Freak*. He didn't learn his name was Harry until his first day of primary school, and it took another year to realize that his last name was Potter, not Dursley. That realization had shaken him to the core. Suddenly it made sense why Vernon and Petunia treated Dudley so much better than him. Dudley was their son, while he was nothing but an interloper. A leech who had been thrust upon them when his parents got themselves killed.

“My name’s Harry,” he said. “Harry Potter.”

Mrs Longbottom and Neville went very still. “Harry Potter?” she repeated, the iron in her voice faltering.

“Yes…” he said, and his face heated up again. They were staring at him like he was one of the exotic beasts from the zoo. Like they knew something about him, though what there was to know Harry wasn’t sure. His life had been rather dull so far.

*Is my name strange?* he wondered. It had always felt a bit plain to him.

“I— I see,” said Mrs Longbottom, as her grey eyes took in his appearance again. They paused on his forehead, and he had the strangest feeling she could see past his fringe to the lightning shaped scar he’d gotten in the crash that killed his parents.

He reached up and flattened his hair self-consciously, making sure the scar was covered. It was a strange mark. It never faded or healed, and while it didn't pain him it looked as raw as though he'd carved it into his skin only moments before. This had caused several misunderstandings with his teachers over the years, and in the end his aunt allowed him to grow out his fringe, if only to stop the troublesome questions.

Mrs Longbottom looked away. “You do look like them,” she murmured so softly that Harry assumed he’d misheard her. Before he could ask, the traffic light changed and the crowd surged around them.

“Gracious! We need to cross!” Mrs Longbottom said. She whirled around, her red bag swinging like a pendulum. “Quickly Neville! Mr Potter!”

The crowd parted around her as though she were the wrong end of a magnet. No one gave them a second glance, and Harry wondered whether the strange sort of invisibility he had felt earlier that morning was something common to magic folk. It was the only explanation he could give for Mrs Longbottom’s vulture going unnoticed.

Harry glanced at the boy walking beside him. He didn't know what to make of Neville. Physically he resembled Dudley, but their personalities seemed light-years apart. Dudley was selfish, brash, and would never peek shyly at Harry from beneath his fringe as Neville was.

Because of Basil, Harry was no longer lonely, but he thought it would be nice to have a human friend. Excitement fluttered in his belly when he realized that without the Dursleys spreading lies about him or Dudley trying to shove Neville's head in a toilet, there was nothing keeping him from at least trying to befriend the other boy.

"So you're a wizard too?" he asked as they crossed the midway point in the road.

Neville's cheeks turned pink and he tightened his grip on the candy wrapper in his hand. "I- I suppose so. At least, I hope I'll be. Someday."
Distracted, Neville didn't see the curb until his toe collided with it. He toppled over with a startled yelp and landed hard on his hands and knees. The candy wrapper slipped from his fingers and drifted along the ground until the shiny black shoe of a businessman pinned it in place.

"Oh no!" Neville cried, stumbling towards it. He reached out, but the wrapper took flight again. It danced away from his fingers, drafting behind one pair of legs after another. The farther Neville went, the more people seemed to notice him. A young man with a backwards baseball cap pulled low over his eyes dodged out of the way and shot him a dirty look as Neville nearly bowled into his legs.

"Watch where you're going!" he said.

"I'm sorry!" Neville cried. "I just—" he made another swipe at the wrapper, which was still determined to evade him. The next gust of air dragged it towards the side of the road where the maw of a storm drain gaped wide, ready to devour it.

Harry took pity on Neville and darted after the wrapper himself. He didn't understand why it was so important to the other boy, but he knew what loss felt like and wouldn't wish it upon anyone. He sidestepped a grey-haired woman and snagged the wrapper out of the air a hand's width from the grate over the drain. Neville's eyes were shining with gratitude as he handed it over.

"T-thanks," he stammered with a timid smile.

"Neville?" Mrs Longbottom called from the far end of the block, having only then realized they'd fallen behind. "Mr Potter?"

They hurried towards her. "I'm the one who should be thanking you," said Harry. "I've been walking around for hours already."

"Do you live here in London?" Neville asked.

"No. I live in Surrey. I came out on the train."

Neville gaped. "On your own?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted.

"That's so brave!" said Neville, a look of awe on his face.

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. It was nice, he thought, to be brave rather than a freak.

The Leaky Cauldron was a run-down little pub with dirty windows and a battered sign creaking above the door. It looked very out of place crammed between a big book store and record shop, yet the eyes of the people on the street jumped over it without pausing to contemplate whether it was late enough in the afternoon to order a pint. Harry had a feeling that, like Mrs Longbottom and her hat, the pub was something that most people couldn’t see, and he wondered how wizards did it.

"Here we are," Mrs Longbottom said. A small bell jingled as she pulled open the door and motioned them in.

The pub’s interior was dim and hazy. It smelt of pipe smoke and sawdust, the latter of which dusted the floor and drifted round the legs of heavy wooden tables and chairs. Harry caught a glimpse of footprints in the dust — heavy boots, a child’s sneakers, and the dainty paw prints of a cat — before a gust of wind blew through the open door and scattered them.
As soon as the door closed behind them the sounds of the cars and pedestrians on the street cut off, leaving only the reedy voice of a fiddle and the soft murmurs of a shady looking group of men in black robes at the bar. The men were drinking something bright red and steaming from thick pewter tankards. They glanced at the threesome before turning back to their whispered conversation.

Harry stuck close to Neville as they strode through the common room.

A massive fireplace took up the majority of the north wall. The hearth was cold, and a full grown man could have stood below the mantle without ducking his head.

One was, in fact, Harry saw as they passed by. The man was wearing a pair of swim goggles and had a kerchief much like Harry’s over his nose and mouth. He was covered head to toe in soot and was muttering about ‘back-drafting’ and ‘damn slobs’ as he worked a long pole up and down the chimney stack.

A portly grey haired man stood behind the bar cleaning glasses. He looked up when they approached and a grin split his lips. “Ah, Dowager Longbottom. Welcome!”

“Good afternoon, Tom,” she said. “You’re looking well.”

“You’re too kind, Madam,” Tom replied and then held up a thick pewter mug. “Firewhisky? I’ve just got in a bottle of 1949 and am hankering to crack her open. Best year since the fire-crab fiasco of 1942, if you remember.”

Mrs Longbottom interrupted him with a wave of her hand. “Later, perhaps. We’re off to the Alley.”

“Of course,” said Tom. He set down the glass and stepped out from behind the bar. He was wearing blue and orange pinstriped pants under his apron, and a pair of shiny green shoes that would have given Harry’s aunt a conniption.

Tom led them past the bar and down a short hallway lined with paintings of revels in which the subjects moved — reeling drunkenly from frame to frame. Harry was so busy trying to determine whether the paintings were cleverly disguised television screens set into the wall that he almost ran into Neville when they reached a narrow back door. Tom held it open graciously and waved them through before returning to the pub.

They stepped out into a cramped back yard enclosed with red brick walls. Two metal dustbins stood next to the pub door and the scent of rotting food was heavy in the enclosed space. Neville wrinkled his nose.

Harry looked around in confusion and wondered where they’d go from here. He couldn’t see any other exits from the yard, and the wall was too tall to climb.

Mrs Longbottom stepped forward and drew a thin piece of dark wood from her handbag. “Observe,” she instructed. She counted three bricks up and two across from the lid of the bin in the corner, then rapped on the wall three times with the tip of her stick.

The brick she touched wiggled as though it were alive and sunk back into the wall, dragging its neighbours along with a high grinding sound that set Harry’s teeth on edge. A gap appeared as the bricks rolled outward, and soon they were facing a broad archway onto a busy cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

“Come,” Mrs Longbottom said, striding into the alley and prompting both Harry and Neville to
scramble after her. Behind them the archway closed, the bricks undulating like the surface of a pond before solidifying once more into a wall.

Diagon Alley, Harry quickly decided, was not for the claustrophobic.

The buildings jutted, bent, or leaned into the street at impossible angles, crowding out the sky until only a sliver of blue remained. The gloom leant an air of mystery to the old buildings, which were pressed cheek to jowl and were bursting at the seams with all manner of oddities.

There were shops selling quills, shops selling telescopes and globes of the moon, latticed windows stacked with barrels of leeches and frog spawn, tottering piles of books, and mannequins who twirled and flaunted robes sewn with symbols he had never seen before. A stack of shining cauldrons sat outside the door of one shop, some big enough that he could have stood inside and only just seen over the rim. Across the street a gaggle of children were peering through a window at a sleek broomstick with metal footrests curving out beside its tail.

Owls flitted from roof to roof, letters clutched in their beaks or tied to their talons. Basil shifted warily whenever one passed too close overhead, but none of the owls noticed her beneath the kerchief.

"The air tastes different here," she whispered in his ear as they passed a dark shop with a sign that read: *Eyelops Owl Emporium — Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown and Snowy*. "It is pungent, like before a lightning storm."

He took a deep breath in through his nose, but all he could smell was the incense wafting from a store full of crystal balls. "Do you think it's magical energy?" he whispered back.

"Perhaps," she replied. "But it is much stronger than anything I've tasted before. Be cautious."

If Harry had eight more eyes he might have been able to heed her warning, but he was having a hard enough time dodging shoppers and keeping track of Neville and Mrs Longbottom.

In the enclosed alley, the crowds were thicker than they had been on the streets of London, yet the people here bustled about with a liveliness and sense of community that was missing on the other side of the Leaky Cauldron. They all seemed to know each other and the alley was loud with laughter and voices calling out greetings.

Harry felt very out of place in his cousin's old clothes as witches and wizards swept past in colourful robes and peaked hats. He caught snatches of conversations as his little party passed by.

“...Did you hear? Fortescue's has a new flavour!” said a sandy-haired boy to a group of giggling girls. "Wasabi, whatever that is..."

“...Jeremy has been begging me for a broom for his birthday, but the new models are too expensive. You have a Cleansweep Five, right? How does it handle in bad weather?..."

“...Dragon liver, sixteen sickles an ounce!” a portly woman in a scarlet robe grumbled to her companion as they stared into a basin of something raw and purple outside an apothecary. "They're mad! See the bruising on the right lobes? Makes them next to worthless in Doxycide..."

Harry's hand sunk into his pocket and clenched around his bank notes. He didn't know what a sickle was — it sounded like some sort of farming implement — but he knew he didn't have any. He hoped the stores would accept British pounds, he wasn't sure what he'd do if they didn't.

“Where are we going?” he asked Neville.
“To the bank I expect,” Neville replied. “Gran never carries much money on her.”

“The bank?”

Neville nodded. “Gringotts. I suppose you need to go to your vault as well…” His voice trailed off as his face drained of colour. Harry thought he looked a little green at the prospect.

“I don’t have a vault,” he said, and Neville gave him a puzzled frown.

Mrs Longbottom barked in laughter. “Of course you do.” she said, not looking back over her shoulder. “Several, I should think. Though I expect the only one you’ll be able to access is your education trust, at least until you come of age.”

“My education trust?” Harry asked.

“Of course, boy! The Potters’ are a family of old money, they’ll have put aside something to see you through school.” She finally looked back at him, and though her face retained its iron mask there was something almost like sadness in her eyes. “I suppose you’re the last of the house.”

Harry was skeptical. “My parents… were rich?” he asked, not believing it. After all, if there was a fortune with his name on it buried under the streets of London, why had he spent his life in a cupboard with his aunt and uncle ragging on him for being a burden? If his parents had money wouldn’t they have set some aside for whomever needed to look after him in the case of their untimely deaths?

A jolt went through him as he had a second realization. If his parents were from an old wizarding family they must have had magic as well, just like him.

“They didn’t compare to a family like the Blacks or Malfoys,” Mrs Longbottom said with a tight-lipped smile. “But they were no paupers. Ah, here we are. Gringotts.”

They had come to a tall building made of white marble that would have been more at home in Rome or Athens. Smooth columns as wide as he was tall stretched from the ground to the curved roof every few meters along its facade. The entire building was tilting to the left, as though a strong wind had started to blow it over but been unable to finish the job. Harry felt himself tilting along with it the longer he stared up at the imposing structure.

Climbing a broad marble staircase they came to double doors of burnished bronze flanked by two small men with swarthy, clever faces and very long fingers and feet. Harry waited until they’d been bowed through the doors before he leaned towards Neville and asked in a whisper, “What were those things?”

“Goblins,” Neville whispered back. “They run the bank. Don’t make them angry, Gran says they have terrible tempers.”

They passed through a second set of doors — these were silver — and came to a vast marble hall with a blue and grey mosaic floor. Crystal chandeliers lit with candles hung from the vaulted ceiling, making the walls dance with spots of light. Tall counters ran the length of the hall, each manned by goblins perched on rickety chairs.

Harry followed Mrs Longbottom to a free goblin and watched as she handed over a small silver key. The goblin turned it over in his spindly fingers before nodding.

“Anything else?” the goblin asked in a scratchy voice.
She motioned Harry forward. “Mr Harry Potter will need to access his trust vault.”

The goblin leaned over the desk to look down at him. He was wearing a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that sat low on his pointed nose, and when he grinned — more of a grimace, really — it was all fangs. “And does Mr Harry Potter have his key?”

“No, sir,” he replied meekly.

Surprise flitted across the goblin’s face, but it was quickly erased by a frown. “If Mr Harry Potter wishes to access his vault he must provide identification.”

“What sort of identification?” Harry asked, looking between the goblin and Mrs Longbottom. He was too young to have an ID card, and the Dursleys had never bothered getting him a passport.


Harry opened his mouth to say the only thing on that list he had was blood when Mrs Longbottom put a hand on his shoulder. It was not meant unkindly, but ten years’ worth of instinct made Harry jerk away from the touch.

She gave him a strange look, but didn’t question him on his skittish behaviour. “Do you have your Hogwarts letter?” she asked instead.

"Oh!" Harry pulled open his satchel and dug his letter out from the inside pocket. He handed it to the goblin, who accepted it with a small nod.

The goblin studied the address. One of his bushy eyebrows arched skeptically, but he didn’t comment on the fact Harry lived in a cupboard. Flipping the envelope over, he held a thick magnifying glass up to the seal and peered at the Hogwarts crest. He then pulled out the invitation and read it over.

“This is in order,” he said once he finished. He tucked the letter into the envelope and handed it back to Harry. “Does Mr Harry Potter have a wand?”

“Um, no,” said Harry. “I’ll need to use blood.”

The goblin nodded and disappeared behind his desk. There was the sound of papers being shuffled and then he came around the side holding a small piece of vellum and a silver needle. “One drop will suffice,” he said, handing the needle to Harry.

Harry tested the point; it was very sharp. Gritting his teeth, he drove the needle into the pad of his thumb at an angle. He used the tip to tear at the skin, breaking it enough to coax a drop of blood to the surface before the wound started to heal. Beside him, Neville uttered a startled squeak.

“You don’t need to be quite so vigorous, Mr Potter,” Mrs Longbottom said. “Blood is a powerful medium, and the Gringotts needles are designed to draw the exact amount required. Regardless of how badly you maul yourself.”

“Oh,” Harry said, staring down at his thumb sheepishly. He pulled out the needle and, as Mrs Longbottom said, a single drop of blood welled to the surface and sat poised upon his skin. He moved it over the vellum and tipped his thumb, letting the drop fall onto the creamy surface. Then he pressed his thumb and forefinger together and tucked them into his pocket.

He’d never thought of his blood as powerful. He associated it with vicious rounds of Harry Hunting where his cousin went too far and left him sticky, reeking of iron, and with horrible stains on his clothes that wouldn’t come out no matter how much he washed them. To think, all those times Dudley could have siphoned off his blood and used it for nefarious purposes. It sent a shiver through him to think about it.
down his spine. With the amount he’d bled over the past ten years his cousin would have had buckets of the stuff.

The goblin was watching him with a pensive expression on its leathery face. It waggled its fingers over the vellum and the drop of blood began to move, spiderwebbing outward until it formed three words: **Harry James Potter**.

“This is in order,” he said. He snapped his fingers and both vellum and needle vanished in a puff of white smoke. Hopping back up onto his tall chair, he began filling in a slip of parchment using a bushy quill pen.

“Would you like me to heal your thumb?” Mrs Longbottom asked as the goblin worked.

Harry looked at her in surprise. “No, thank you. It should have closed on its own by now.”

She looked skeptical, so Harry showed her his thumb. The pad was pink and puckered, as though he’d pressed it too long against the back of a kitchen knife, but it was no longer bleeding and the skin had sealed over the wound. It was still tender, and he didn’t fancy grasping anything in his left hand for the next little while, but the discomfort would pass soon enough.

“Remarkable,” Mrs Longbottom said, leaning closer and peering down at his hand. “Do you always heal this quickly?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Harry asked, eyeing her closely in case she tried to grab him for a closer look.

She shook her head, and the vulture on her hat wobbled. “Accidental healing magic is common in infants,” she explained. “But in most cases it diminishes once a child turns five. For you to heal this quickly at your age… your magic must be quite powerful.” She sent a look Neville’s way that made the other boy shrink and shuffle his feet. Harry thought she looked ashamed, though he had no idea why.

They were interrupted by a loud *thump* from the desk when the goblin pressed a heavy wooden stamp to the corner of the slip. He leaned over the desk and held the slip out to Harry, who took it with a small, “Thank you, sir.”

“That is an official Gringotts withdrawal form,” the goblin explained. “It is tied to your blood and will grant access to vault six hundred eighty-seven until the time you reclaim your key. Do not lose it! When you no longer have need of the form you must bring it back here and one of the tellers will see it securely destroyed. Do you understand?”

Harry looked down at the form in his hands and saw that his name had transferred onto it from the vellum. “I understand, sir,” he said. “Only… how can I reclaim my key when I don’t know who has it?”

The goblin frowned. With another snap of his fingers a tall stack of documents appeared on the desk next to him. He flipped through them quickly, pausing a third of the way down. “The key to your trust vault is being held by one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore,” he said.

Harry was startled to recognize the name of the Hogwarts headmaster. “Why does he have it?”

“According to my records, he was named the executor of your trust upon the death of your parents,” the goblin explained. “As the Headmaster of Hogwarts he is in an ideal situation to monitor your school-related expenses.” He paused. His brow scrunched and he leaned over his desk to look into Harry’s eyes. “That being said, it is… unusual to see you here without a school representative, Mr Potter. He should have, at the very least, ensured you had your key before you
visited our establishment.”

Harry tried to look away, but the goblin’s black eyes were like whirlpools into the void. They pulled at him, and he was struck with the sense that lying to the teller would be impossible.

“I haven’t seen anyone from the school,” he said. “All I received was my letter.”

“Most curious,” the goblin muttered, breaking eye contact and settling back into his chair. He mustn’t have been curious enough, because he didn’t ask Harry anything else. Instead, he turned back to Mrs Longbottom and said, “I will have someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!”

A second goblin appeared so suddenly that Harry swore he had sprung up from the mosaic tiles. “This way, please,” the new goblin said, and trotted off towards a pair of double doors at the end of the hall without a backward glance.

Harry soon learned why Neville had looked green at the mention of vaults.

Passing through the doors they found themselves in a torchlit corridor lined with railroad tracks and small metal carts. Griphook ushered them by other parties of witches, wizards, and their goblin guides, and onto a cart on the left hand side of the corridor. Harry waited until both Mrs Longbottom and Neville had taken a seat on the cart’s metal bench before sliding himself on the end. As soon as he settled he found himself stuck, as though his bottom had been glued down. The goblin sat in front of them, his hands on a u-shaped steering wheel.

“Please keep all limbs within the cart,” he said, and then he pulled a lever next to his right leg. They started moving, slowly at first, but picking up speed as the track descended.

Harry was enjoying the gentle rocking of the cart when the tunnel ended and a chasm yawned in front of them. It’s depths were black as pitch, and Harry was about to ask how deep it went when he noticed that instead of turning aside the tracks appeared to roll right over the lip. His question died in his throat and beside him Neville gulped.

The cart teetered a moment on the edge, teasing them. Then they were diving.

Harry’s stomach clenched and he gripped the handlebar in front of him for dear life as the cart plummeted into the darkness. The wind generated by their descent whipped his hair into a frenzy and nearly tore his glasses from his nose. He slapped a hand on them, then instantly regretted retaining his vision as a wall of rock loomed out of the darkness straight ahead.

Dudley had bragged about rollercoasters, but Harry was sure none of them would have lived up to the ride on the Gringotts’ cart as they shot into a rough-hewn tunnel, flipping all the way around as they went.

“I do not like this!” Basil hissed in distress. Her grip on his neck tightened until he began to see stars. “I do not like this at all!”

When the cart jerked to a stop Harry was panting and blinking in an attempt to clear his vision. “Ease up!” he croaked. “I’m gonna pass out.”

His distress went unnoticed by the cart’s other occupants, who had all stepped out onto a narrow ledge beside the track and were unlocking a circular steel door set into the tunnel wall with Mrs Longbottom’s silver key. Neville was bent double, clutching his stomach and moaning pitifully. He sounded like he was about to be sick.

“Do we need to do that again?” Basil asked once she had calmed enough to loosen her coils.
“Yes,” Harry replied. “Sorry.”

The door was swinging closed by the time Harry thought to crane his neck back in an attempt to catch a glimpse of Neville’s vault, and he quickly rearranged himself on the bench as the other boy slid back into his seat.

“I hope your vault isn’t far,” Neville said, still looking ill. “I hate these carts.”

“I think they’re rather brilliant,” Harry replied. “Do they go any faster?”

Neville went a pasty white, but Griphook turned to fix Harry with a wicked smile. “Care to find out, Mr Potter?” the goblin asked.

Before Harry could reply, Griphook flipped a switch on his steering wheel and the cart shot off like a rocket, trailing startled screams and the goblin’s high-pitched laughter behind it like a banner.

To both Neville and Basil’s great relief they pulled to a stop not a minute later. Griphook turned a knob on his left and the entire cart rotated around so Harry was now the one sitting closest to the stone ledge. He scrambled out after Griphook, grateful that he wouldn’t need to clamber over Neville and his grandmother to do so. The vaults had been carved into the face of a subterranean cliff and it was a very long way down.

They came to another circular iron door, and in the dim light of the cart’s headlamps Harry could just make out a small plaque with the number six hundred eighty-seven on it bolted to the stone. He stood next to the goblin dumbly, unsure what to do seeing as how they didn’t have a key. Griphook gave him another sharp-toothed grin, inserted one of his long pointed fingernails into the keyhole, and twisted it.

When the door swung open all Harry could do was stand and gape. There were piles of gold coins, mounds of silver, and heaps of bronze. Suddenly the fifty pounds in his pocket didn’t seem important at all.

“This is all… mine?” he asked in astonishment.

“Indeed,” Griphook replied.

Harry looked down at his satchel, and then at his pockets. “How will I carry it?”


Harry opened his mouth to ask which ones were galleons when he realized that the goblin had already given him the answer. He nodded in gratitude and paid the goblin six of the large golden coins. Then he began stuffing handfuls into the pouch. He had no idea how much he’d need for his school supplies, but the enchanted pouch never filled up or dragged down on his wrist so he decided to take more rather than less. Even so, he barely left a dent in the vault’s contents.

And this is only a trust vault, he thought, awed.

Perhaps it was a good thing he’d remained ignorant of his fortune under the streets of London. If the Dursleys had known about it they’d have had it from him faster than blinking.

As he climbed back into the cart Harry allowed himself a small smile of victory. His day was looking up, and he was determined that nothing would spoil it.
The Wand Chooses

When Harry stole out of the house that morning he had three goals set for the day: get to London, find the alley, and buy his supplies. The minutiae of actual shopping had evaded him until he stepped out of Gringotts and was faced with scores of stores battling for his attention. He froze on the top step, unsure where to go first. The contents of his supply list jumbled together in his head. He needed books, and clothes, and... and... His eyes skated up and down the street.

Finding Diagon Alley was only the first step, it seemed. Finding everything he needed inside the alley would be a quest wholly unto itself.

Beside him, Neville looked far more concerned with keeping his breakfast down than the daunting task of finding his school supplies. Though he was less green now that his feet were back on solid ground, he continued to clutch his stomach as though it were trying to jump free of his body and scamper away.

A moment later Harry discovered why Neville could afford to be so calm.

“Robes are first on your list,” Mrs Longbottom said, taking the situation firmly in hand. "Come along, it's already well past midday."

Neville hobbled after his grandmother as she swept down the stairs. They paused at the bottom, just before vanishing into the crowd of witches and wizards passing in front of the bank, and looked up at Harry.

"You're free to join us if you wish," Mrs Longbottom said, her voice carrying over the clamour of the alley. Neville nodded, a hopeful light chasing the remnants of discomfort from his face.

Happiness burgeoned in Harry's chest. He could hardly believe his luck as he bounded down the stairs to join them. By all rights the Longbottoms should have abandoned him. He was imposing on their trip after all, and as Mrs Longbottom had pointed out, the day would soon give way to evening. They didn't have time to worry about him, yet they were. From the genuine smile shining on Neville's face, Harry could almost believe they were happy to have him along. As though he wasn’t a nuisance.

It was bizarre, but he didn't want to question it and risk shattering the illusion, so he kept his doubts quiet.

Mrs Longbottom led them to a shop with Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions written in cursive on a sign above the door. The mannikins in the window were striking casual poses, one in a plain black robe and the other in a muted green. For a moment Harry thought the one in black winked at him as he entered the shop, but quickly decided it was nothing but a trick of the light.

Madam Malkin’s was packed with racks of robes, shelves of soft-looking boots, and ledges lined with pointed hats. Everything was organized by colour. While blacks took up most of the floorspace, the edges of the shop were lined with robes in every hue of the rainbow. The shoes and hats were as colourful as the robes, though he noted with a little relief that none of the latter came equipped with taxidermy animals. The only colour that didn’t exist anywhere in the store was pure white. Harry took a moment to ponder this as a squat witch dressed all in mauve popped out from behind a rack to the right of the door.

“Hogwarts?” she asked, looking Harry and Neville over.
“Yes,” replied Mrs Longbottom. “And I’m in need of a new summer shawl. My last one got caught in a little potions mishap.”

As Mrs Longbottom vanished off to their left to look at shawls, the mauve witch led Harry and Neville to the back of the store where several footstools stood in a row. It looked like they were the only two there.

“Up you get if you please, young sirs,” the witch said. She pulled out a stick of wood resembling Mrs Longbottom’s and gave it a flick. Two tape measures soared across the room and began to dance around them, calling out numbers in squeaky voices.

Harry had a sudden realization that what he’d mistaken for a piece of wood was probably a wand, and he felt very silly for not figuring it out earlier.

“So, that’s three sets of inner and outer robes each,” the witch said to herself as she pulled out oversized black robes. “One hat. A pair of gloves, and a cloak.”

“I already have a good pair of gloves,” Neville said.

“Good, good,” said the witch. There were sewing mannequins set in front of the stools, and she draped a robe over each. To Harry’s delight the robes began to shrink and taper all on their own. For once, it seemed, he wouldn’t be going to school in clothes four times too big.

“Do you sell clothes other than robes?” Harry asked the witch as she bustled about fetching their hats. He didn’t want to admit it out loud, but he could use pants that hadn’t once belonged to Dudley. If the rest of his clothes were going to fit, he’d like his undergarments to as well. “Jeans? Or jumpers?”

“Muggle clothing?” she asked.

“Um,” he caught Neville’s eye, bewildered.

“Muggles are what we call non-magic folk,” Neville explained.

Harry mouthed the word, testing it out. Muggles. He liked it. It sounded stifling, like his relatives.

“Yes,” he said to the witch. “Muggle clothing.”

She flicked her wand again and a brochure soared over to him accompanied by a feather quill pen. “Put a tick next to the items you wish to buy,” she instructed. “It will use the same measurements as your robes.”

While Harry had fun choosing clothes for the first time in his life, Neville gave him a crash course on the wizarding world. Harry absorbed it ravenously; from the names and weights of the coins in his pouch, to a sport called Quidditch that was played on flying broomsticks.

In turn, Harry told Neville a heavily edited version of life with the Dursleys, and about attending primary school.

“You’ve already been to a school?” Neville looked stunned.

“You haven’t?” asked Harry, equally stunned.

“No. I don’t know anyone from a pureblood family who went somewhere before Hogwarts. We have tutors though,” he added at the end.
That was another thing Neville told Harry about: bloodlines. Apparently, Neville was from one of those old families, much like the Potters.

“Am I a pureblood?” Harry asked. He had finally found the section of the brochure dealing with undergarments and was trying to decide between trunks and briefs. Dudley had always worn briefs, so he decided to be contrary and go with the trunks.

Neville scrunched up his face in thought. “No, I don’t think so. If you have a muggle aunt then your mother must have been muggleborn. That would make you half-blood at least.”

“Oh,” said Harry, unable to hide his disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” Neville said, trying to cheer him up. “There are plenty of half-blood witches and wizards and no one thinks any worse of them. Or, at least decent people don’t.”

Harry hoped most of the people he met were decent.

He managed to convince the witch, who he learned was none other than Mme Malkin herself, to let him wear some of his new muggle clothing out of the store. So, by the time they were leaving with all their purchases paid for and tucked away in charmed bags, Harry was wearing a pair of soft ankle boots, jeans, and a black t-shirt. None of which made him look like he was drowning in fabric.

He kept his kerchief on. Basil had confided to him that being around so many humans and owls made her nervous. As comfortable as she was with him, she had spent most of her life in the wild, where humans were as likely to kill her as let her go on her way. Out of respect for her, he kept her presence a secret, even though he was bursting to share all the strange and wonderful things he saw in passing.

“Now than I can see you properly, you’re quite scrawny,” Mrs. Longbottom remarked, looking him over critically. Harry shrugged. There was nothing he could do about his size.

“And we’ll need to do something about those eyeglasses,” she continued. “I’d fix them myself but… well, charms were never my strong suit. And I expect you like your nose where it is.”

Neville was far more cheerful now that he’d gotten over his initial shyness, and he almost talked Harry’s ear off as they bought their stationary, telescopes, and cauldrons. They spent over half-an-hour in the apothecary — which reeked of bad eggs — where Neville rambled off the names and properties of nearly every plant in the store. Some of these Harry recognized from his aunt’s garden, but most had strange, exotic names like Chinese Chomping Cabbage and *Mimbulus Mimbletonia*.

Harry didn't retain much of the impromptu lesson, but he made a mental note to partner with Neville in Herbology — the class the other boy was most looking forward to. From Neville’s quick descriptions Harry thought he’d enjoy learning transfiguration, the art of turning one thing into another. He grinned whenever he imagined turning the Dursleys into fat, croaking toads.

Speaking of toads: “My uncle Algie gave me one as a present,” Neville told him as they finally got down to locating their potions supplies. “I’ve named him Trevor. What about you? What kind of pet do you want?”

“I was thinking about a snake,” Harry said. “But the letter doesn’t list them.”

Mrs Longbottom, who had been standing silently next to the check out as they shopped, snorted. “I
should think not!” she said. “Serpents have been associated with Dark Magic for centuries now.”

Harry abandoned his search for a vial of frog spawn and looked over at her. “Dark magic?” he asked, puzzled. “Is that magic you can only use at night?”

“Only use at— goodness child, where did you get that idea?” Mrs Longbottom asked. “It is the most foul force in this world! Dark Magic will corrupt your heart and soul until you are nothing but a shell of a human being. A creature without pity or remorse that is only capable of spreading fear, pain, and death!”

“So… the magic is bad?” He hadn’t known there were different kinds of magic. Magic was a part of him, but it didn’t control his thoughts and actions. Or at least he didn’t think it did. What Mrs Longbottom described sounded frightening, like the magic was alive. Like it wanted to cause harm, and bent the people born with it into monsters.

*It must be terrible*, he thought, *to be born with magic like that.*

She gave him a sharp look. “Bad is an understatement! The most evil witches and wizards in history have all used Dark Magic to its fullest potential. Torture! Disfigurement! Murder!” Her expression softened. “To take another human life… such things cannot be countenanced!”

“But what if it’s necessary?” he asked.

“Necessary!” Mrs Longbottom’s face flushed and she got a steely glint in her eyes. “And when, pray tell, would you say it’s necessary?”

Harry cringed. “It’s nothing,” he said.

His answer would have been enough for the Dursleys or his teachers, but Mrs Longbottom was neither and she wasn’t willing to let it go. “No, young man,” she said in a tone that left no space for argument. “I’m sure we’d all like to hear what sort of situation you believe requires the death of another!”

Harry wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. Beneath the kerchief Basil flexed her coils, as though she could sense his anxiety. “Well… what if someone’s trying to kill you and the only way to stop them is to kill them first?”

She harrumphed. “Such acts are best left on the battlefield — which I pray you will never again witness. We have ways of dealing with such conflicts without the waste of life.”

*Again?* He didn’t think he’d *ever* seen a battlefield, not unless he counted the playground during lunch hour. “But what does all that have to do with snakes?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“Parseltongue.”

He didn’t recognize the word. “Pardon?”

“The language of snakes,” she said with a scowl. “The ability to speak it — known as parselmouth — is the mark of a Dark Wizard. You-Know-Who was one, and he wrought such evil upon our community that the aftershocks are still felt today. Historically, serpents are associated with evildoers and are used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic.”

Harry felt as though his heart had lurched to a stop. He stumbled back, bouncing against the shelf of vials, which tinkled gaily. His knees wobbled and he would have fallen, but Neville grabbed his arm. Neville’s face was pale and worried as he propped him upright, and Harry couldn’t find the
strength to pull away from the contact.

*Parseltongue*… The word repeated itself over and over inside his mind. *The mark of a Dark Wizard… with magic that corrupts the soul.* He bit the inside of his lip hard enough to taste blood.

*Does this mean I’m an evil person?* he wondered. He didn’t feel evil — he wasn’t even sure what *evil* would feel like. Mostly he felt sad, or scared, or angry, and yet… he remembered the thrill when he’d held Dudley immobile. How he’d wanted to hurt his cousin, to make him feel how he felt after each round of Harry Hunting. The magic had come easily to him then, and it had felt *right.*

Was it wrong to harm someone who’d harmed him? Part of Harry said yes, but the rest of him wasn’t sure.

Mrs Longbottom looked pleased at his reaction. Certain of her victory, she turned her attention on the apothecary, who had been watching their exchange with a look of discomfort on her thin face. “Just ask this young lady, I’m sure she could name several pernicious potions that call for snake venom.”

The girl jumped, clearly not happy about being drawn into the argument. Her eyes darted between Harry and Mrs Longbottom. “Um, well I— I’ve never studied such things!”

“As well you shouldn’t!” Mrs Longbottom said, nodding her head in approval. The apothecary slumped in relief.

Harry’s voice shook as he muttered, “I see.” He swallowed hard then straightened and pulled away from Neville. “I didn’t know snakes had such a bad reputation.”

He turned to the shelf and grabbed the first vial of frog spawn he saw, then wove his way to the far side of the store and slipped behind a display table piled high with baskets of mandrake root, wormwood, and fragrant hellebore.

“You are scared,” Basil said, raising her head to rub her nose against his cheek. “What did the Bird-Woman say to make you so scared?”

Harry looked down at her, his first real friend, and the tension in his chest ebbed, flowing away like the tide. He reached up and ran his knuckle tenderly along her jaw. Basil wasn’t evil, so why should talking to her be?

“I’ll tell you later,” he whispered.

She rubbed against his hand and the tip of her tail flicked over his collarbone. “I do not like it when you are scared.”

Harry smiled bitterly. “Neither do I.”

“I’m sorry about Gran,” Neville whispered once they’d purchased their first year potion supplies and were trailing behind Mrs Longbottom to their next destination. “She gets like that sometimes. It’s kind of scary.”

“She’s done that to you as well?” Harry asked.

Neville clutched his shopping bag tight to his chest. “Yes,” he admitted, his voice barely audible over the chatter of the crowd around them. “All the time.” Then he looked up at Harry with wide eyes. “P-please don’t hate me for it. You’ve been so nice to me, a-and I… I like you. You seem like a good person.”
“I wouldn’t hate you for something like that,” Harry said. “Besides, I like you too. I… I don’t have a lot of friends, and you’ve been really kind. Letting me tag along, and telling me things about this world. If not for you I’d still be wandering around muggle London right now.”

Neville’s smile lit his entire face, and Harry found himself returning it with a small smile of his own. They continued down the alley with a new spring in their steps, each thinking how nice it was to have found a kindred spirit at last.

With their newfound quiet camaraderie, Harry and Neville enjoyed the next hour of their afternoon.

They went to a shop called *Occuvision*, where a willowy wizard with a French accent told Harry his prescription had been wrong for years. This didn’t surprise Harry. His aunt had chosen him a pair of cheap, generic reading glasses when a note came home from the school saying he was unable to see the board. But he only realized how bad they were when he put on a similar pair of round glasses and the world came into startling focus.

“You ‘ave such pretty eyes,” the wizard told him as he swapped out the glasses for a pair whose arms connected a little higher on the frame. “Their colour c’est magnifique. It ’tis a pity to cover them up.”

Harry’s aunt would no doubt disagree with the man. She couldn’t stand anything unnatural, and unfortunately for Harry his eyes fell in that category. It wasn’t the fact they were green — which was rare, but perfectly normal — but that they were *bright* green. His aunt called the colour harlequin, which made Harry feel like one of those clowns whose sole purpose in life was to terrorize small children at birthday parties. Regardless of the strange name, he wouldn’t give up his eyes for anything. They might be useless for seeing, but they gave him a kind of distinction among his peers. While the children at school might have wonderful clothes, toys, and friends; none of them had eyes as brilliant as Harry’s.

Fitted with a new pair of glasses, Harry felt more prepared when they entered Flourish and Blott’s, a maze of a bookstore that was far bigger on the inside than the storefront suggested. It was two stories tall, and if Harry hadn’t seen the brick and mortar archway above the door he would have sworn the store was built entirely of books. Thick tomes and skinny hardbacks lined every inch of the walls, bringing with them the pleasant scent of vanilla, almonds, and old leather. Excess volumes stood in teetering piles around the floor. They swayed gently as he walked past, as though they were a hair away from toppling over. They didn’t, much to his relief. Some of those tomes looked heavy, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to dig himself out if they landed on his head.

Being able to read without squinting was a novelty to Harry, and he took full advantage of it. While Neville was begging his grandmother for a botany book not listed on their school supplies, Harry picked out a few extra volumes of his own. *Curses and Counter-Curses* sounded promising, as did *Shellshocked: A Guide to Defensive Magic*.

Dudley wouldn’t stand a chance after today.

Laden down with new books, they stopped at Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour for an afternoon snack. The parlour was located in the restaurant district of the alley, where the street was wider to accommodate patios crammed with tables and their vibrant umbrellas. It was well past lunch hour, but the muggy heat ensured the tables were packed with witches and wizards enjoying ice cream cones or sundaes slathered in melted chocolate and caramel.

“Pick whichever you like, Neville,” Mrs Longbottom said when they reached the front of the line. She reached into her red handbag and fished out a thin paisley coin pouch. She glanced down at
Harry. “And you as well. Consider it a birthday treat.”

Harry stared up at her dumbly before turning to Neville. “Is it your birthday?” he asked him.

Neville, who was leaning against the glass display looking at the different ice cream flavours, nodded. “Yeah, Gran promised she’d take me to get my school things today. I’ll have a raspberry chocolate fudge, please,” he added to the stocky man behind the counter.

“Two scoops, or three?” the man asked with a grin.

Neville sneaked a peek at his grandmother, but she merely raised her eyes to the ceiling and sighed. “Three!” he said, taking her silence as permission.

The man served up Neville’s cone, but before handing it over he produced a thin metal stick and stuck it in the topmost scoop. He tapped it with his wand and the tip of the stick began emitting rainbow sparks. “Happy Birthday!” he said, handing the cone over. “You’re just turning eleven then? Excited to start your first year at Hogwarts?”

“Yes, sir!”

The man smiled and turned to Harry. “And what about you, young sir? Have a birthday coming up as well?”

“Um…” The only thing Harry knew about his birthday was that it was some time between Dudley’s and the end of the year. The Dursleys had never held a party for him, so he couldn’t be sure of the exact date, but he liked to say it was on Halloween.

He had opened his mouth to tell the man as much, when Neville piped up. “It’s tomorrow, right?”

Harry was struck dumb for the second time in as many minutes, and there was a strange nigglign at the back of his mind, the same as when he had first accosted Neville and his grandmother. The feeling that told him they knew more about him than they were letting on. “How did you know?” he asked carefully.

Neville licked his ice cream, the rainbow sparks dancing about his head. “Gran told me,” he replied.

Harry turned a questioning gaze on the witch, who grimaced. “Your mother and my daughter-in-law shared the same maternity ward at St. Mungo’s. We had your family over to our estate several times before…” she paused, then shook her head. “Never mind. Those times are far behind us. There's no use dwelling on what could have been.”

Harry let this new information sink in. He’d been born on July 31st, in the same hospital as Neville. They'd known each other — had playdates. Then his parents had died and cut short his chance at having at least one friend growing up.

There was no way for him to verify any of it, but it was nice to imagine his past hadn't always been the dark, dusty interior of a boot cupboard. At the very least it explained how the Longbottoms knew him.

“Well, young sir?” the ice cream man asked. “Have a preference?”

The people in line behind them were growing restless at the delay, so Harry pulled himself together and chose the first flavour he saw. “Um, a single scoop of salted liquorice, please.”
The man gave him two scoops. Harry didn’t want to protest and hold up the line yet again, so he accepted it with a small smile and followed Neville to a newly vacated table on the patio as Mrs Longbottom paid.

“Happy Birthday, by the way,” he said to Neville. “I’m sorry I don’t have a gift for you.”

“That’s okay,” Neville replied. “After all, I don’t have a gift for you either.”

The ice cream didn’t turn runny in the summer heat, so Harry was able to enjoy it at his leisure. He’d never eaten ice cream before. The Dursleys had never allowed it. And even though it left him feeling queasy, he thought it was something he’d like to try again. Though next time, he promised himself, he’d pick a different flavour.

“I suppose you’ll need a wand,” Mrs Longbottom said as he popped the tip of the cone in his mouth and wiped his fingers on a paper napkin.

“Yes,” Harry replied. He wondered if Neville already had a wand. It seemed likely seeing how he’d grown up in a magical household, and Harry was struck by a sudden fear he’d show up to his first class and find he was years behind all his classmates.

Breathe, he told himself firmly. You’ve used magic plenty of times. This won’t be any different.

There was, of course, the new matter of his magic corrupting his soul during the course of his education, but he pushed that fear to the back of his mind, refusing to dwell on it. Mrs Longbottom was wrong about snakes being evil, surely she could be wrong about this as well.

“Ollivanders, then.” She pointed down the crowded street, towards where the gleaming white bulk of Gringotts lay basking in the sun. “He’s the only real wand maker of note on the Isles.”

For being a noted wand maker, the shop was narrow and shabby, with a dark facade and a single wand lying on a purple pillow in the front window. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC. It looked like it had been that long since they last dusted, too.

A tinkling bell rang in the depths of the shop as they entered. The walls were crammed from floor to ceiling with thousands and thousands of thin boxes set in narrow cubbies. Filing cabinets, Harry thought as he looked around, must never have caught on in the wizarding world.

“Good afternoon,” said a soft voice. Harry nearly jumped out of his skin, and Neville squeaked in fright from where he was waiting with his grandmother by the door.

An old man drifted out from behind one of the towering stacks, his wide, pale eyes shimmering like moons in the gloom of the shop.

Harry was reminded of a moth. “Hello,” he replied.

“Ah yes,” said the man. “Yes, yes. I thought I’d be seeing you soon, Harry Potter. You have your mother’s eyes. It seems only yesterday that she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work.”

“I have her eyes?” he asked. He’d never seen photos of his parents, and his relatives never spoke of them except to complain about how they were selfish and lazy to have saddled them with Harry without a single ‘by your leave’. Harry didn’t even know their names. On the rare occasions he thought of them at all they existed in his mind as indistinct, amorphous shadows.
Mr Ollivander drifted closer and peered at him. Harry wished the man would blink. His own eyes were starting to water in empathy.

“The shape,” Mr Ollivander said, and then he frowned. “But her eyes were darker. Bottle green, while yours remind me of…”

But what Harry’s eyes reminded the man of, he never found out.

“Your father, on the other hand,” Mr Ollivander said, switching tracks. “Favoured a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favoured it — it’s really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course.”

Does this mean wands are alive as well? Harry wondered with some trepidation, but he nodded his head as though he’d known it all along.

This seemed to please Mr Ollivander, as he released Harry from his unblinking gaze, turning it onto Neville. “And Mr Longbottom. Here for a wand as well?”

“No,” Mrs Longbottom said as she placed a hand on Neville’s shoulder. “Neville will be using my son’s wand. To honour his memory.”

“He isn’t dead,” Neville murmured.

“Hmm.” Mr Ollivander circled around Harry until he stood in front of Neville. “Frank Longbottom. Rowan and unicorn hair. Nine inches. Springy. Good for defensive magic. I must warn you that unicorn wands are very faithful to their first owners. You may find some difficulty in using it to its full potential.”

Neville wilted under the wand-maker’s scrutiny, but his grandmother didn’t bat an eye. They met each other head on, iron clashing with moonlight. Harry felt a ripple of power pass through him, the whisper of veiled magic, and he shivered.

Mrs Longbottom must have won, because without another word on the subject Mr Ollivander turned away and was suddenly back at Harry’s side, pulling a tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket.

“Which is your wand hand, Mr Potter?” he asked, the abrupt question catching Harry off guard.

“Er — well, I’m right handed,” he replied before raising his arm for Mr Ollivander to measure. It was a repeat of the tailor shop, and Harry wasn’t in the least bit surprised when the tape continued its work even after Mr Ollivander let it go. It zipped around him merrily, measuring the strangest places. It seemed especially eager to determine the distance between his nostrils, though what mystical significance that could have was beyond Harry.

Mr Ollivander flitted about the shop, pulling boxes from the stacks. “Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr Potter,” he said. “We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard’s wand.” He sent a pointed look Neville’s way, which wasn’t fair as Neville didn’t have any say in the matter of his wand.

“That will do,” he said to the tape measure, which crumpled on the floor in a heap.

And then it began.
Mr Ollivander would present Harry with a wand, and Harry would wave it around foolishly before it was snatched back and another given in its place. It felt like this continued for hours. The boxes of tried wands were piling up on Mr Ollivander’s desk, and Harry felt himself giving up that he’d find a wand at all.

Mr Ollivander wasn’t deterred. In fact, he seemed to grow more excited with each rejected wand. “Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we’ll find the perfect match here somewhere — I wonder now — yes, why not.” And with that the old man vanished off somewhere deep in the stacks.

“Are wands even necessary?” Harry asked Neville during this short reprieve. “I mean, if we can do magic without them, then why bother?”

“Without a wand?” Neville looked uncertain. “Wandless magic’s really advanced. You need to be a powerful witch or wizard to do that.”

Harry wasn’t convinced. He knew next to nothing about magic, but that hadn’t stopped him from using it. “Haven’t you ever made things float?” he asked. Then, thinking back to his first Hogwarts letter, “Or catch fire?”

Neville squirmed and avoided Harry’s eyes. “I haven’t… I’m not very…”

He was rescued by his grandmother, who cut off his faltering attempt at an explanation with one of her own. “What you’re referring to is accidental magic,” she said. “True wandless magic is fully under the control of the witch or wizard casting it.”

“But I can control it!” Harry protested.

Mrs Longbottom crossed her arms and fixed him with a disapproving look. “Are you implying that you intentionally set something ablaze?” she asked. She didn’t look happy, and Harry wisely snapped his mouth shut before he could say anything incriminating.

“I thought not,” Mrs Longbottom said, taking his silence as denial.

Mr Ollivander chose that moment to reappear. He shuffled out of the back holding a very old box and looking rather dustier than when he’d gone in. “Try this,” he said as he pried off the lid and pulled out a wand as pale as bone. “Unusual combination. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.”

Harry took the wand and gasped as a surge of heat ran down his arm. It reached for the wand, sinking into the white wood, and something in the wand reached back. It embraced him as though he were an old friend and left his entire body feeling warm.

“Avello Vectoris,” he whispered. The wand hummed in response and familiar neon streamers erupted from its tip to dance around the store. He flicked the wand and they dissipated.

“Oh, bravo!” Mr Ollivander clapped his hands together. “Yes, indeed, oh, very good. It’s been years since I’ve seen such a good showing on a first wand!” He held out his hand and Harry reluctantly relinquished the wand, which was still sending pleasant waves of warmth up his arm.

Mr Ollivander moved to place it back in the box when his wispy brows furrowed in a frown. “What’s this?” he murmured, rotating the wand around to peer down its length. Without so much as a word of warning, he grasped it by its tip and handle, and bent it.

“What are you doing?” Harry cried in horror as the wood strained between the man’s spidery fingers. He’d only held the wand for a moment, but the thought of it snapping sent waves of panic
racing through his body. The bulb of a lamp on the counter shattered with a bang, casting Mr Ollivander's face into shadow. The wand — his wand — seemed to respond. It wiggled in the wand maker's grip and spat angry red sparks from its tip.

Mr Ollivander blinked and his ghostly eyes found their way back to Harry. “Well, well, well… how curious…” he said, releasing the wand’s tip and lowering it into its box. “How very curious…”

“You had best explain, Garrick!” Mrs Longbottom exclaimed, sounding as out of sorts as Harry felt. “Goodness knows you can’t do that to a wizard’s wand and then pass it off as nothing!”

“Hmm?” Mr Ollivander seemed lost in thought. “Oh, that was merely a rigidity test. I perform it on every wand I create. They may not enjoy it, but there’s no real cause for concern.”

Harry’s skin was still itching with magic, but he forced it down by taking several calming breaths. “What was curious?” he asked from between clenched teeth.

Mr Ollivander fixed him with his pale stare. “Two things,” he said. “Two most curious things. Tell me, do you remember your wand’s characteristics?”

“Yes, they were,” Mr Ollivander said, a strange glimmer in his eyes. “But the wand has changed.”

“Changed? Can they do that?”

“Indeed, Mr Potter, though it is very rare. Wands have three characteristics, you see: wood, core, and rigidity. Two of these are immutable. A cherry wand cannot become ash, and a dragon heartstring will never be the hair of a unicorn. Rigidity however will, on rare occasions, change.

“In normal circumstances, if a wand’s attributes do not align with a wizard it will reject him. Yet, on rare occasions the wood and core's yearning for a certain wizard’s partnership will be so strong that they overpower an incompatible rigidity and mould it to fit their desired partner.”

“And that’s what happened with me?” Harry asked, looking at the holly wand resting innocently in its box.

Mr Ollivander nodded. “A wand’s rigidity or flexibility marks certain of its wielder’s personal characteristics. Their adaptability, their willingness to trust, and their resolve. Your wand used to be supple, but it is now quite rigid.” He gave a faint smile. “Whatever obstacles life throws in your path, Mr Potter, I feel you will face them with an unyielding resolve to remain true to yourself and your ideals.”

Harry ducked his head and tried not to blush. It felt like the wand-maker was praising him. “And the other curious thing?” he asked.

Mr Ollivander’s face sobered. “I remember every wand I’ve ever sold, Mr Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather — just one other. Thirteen and a half inches. Yew. A powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands… Well, it is curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother” — he leaned close and pressed one long white finger to Harry’s forehead, pushing his fringe aside in the process — “why, its brother gave you that scar.”

Harry jerked away from Mr Ollivander’s hand and brushed his fringe back into place. Behind him, Mrs Longbottom drew in a sharp breath.
“My scar is from the car crash that killed my parents,” he said.

“What!” Mrs Longbottom yelped like a dog whose tail had been trodden upon. “A car crash? Who told you that load of tosh?” Then she went very quiet and Harry noticed that everyone was staring at him with that knowing look in their eyes.

“That’s what my aunt and uncle told me…” he offered weakly.

“He doesn’t know, Augusta?” Mr Ollivander asked, his moon-eyes wide in shock.

“I thought he did,” she replied, looking flustered. “I was worried it would be a sensitive subject and never brought it up.”

Harry twisted the hem of his new shirt in his hands. It sounded like they were about to consign him to death. “What should I know?” he asked.

“Well…” Mrs Longbottom hesitated. For a moment she looked torn, but then her mask slid back into place and she straightened her shoulders, steeling herself. “You have a right to know.”

She pulled out her wand and flicked it several times. A shimmering veil dropped over the four of them and the sound of pedestrians on the street cut off. “Privacy wards,” she explained as she tucked her wand away. “Now, listen carefully. Twenty years ago a Dark Wizard rose to power here in England. He built an army of followers, and killed all who opposed him. Your parents, and my son and daughter-in-law, fought against him.

“The war was brutal, and many witches and wizards lost their lives. It seemed like it would never end. But then, just when all hope seemed lost, a prophecy was made.” Her eyes locked onto Harry’s. “The prophecy’s existence and contents were never made public. It spoke of a child born at the end of July to parents who had thrice defied You-Know-Who. The child would hold the power to vanquish him once and for all.” She smiled grimly. “There were only two children born that year who fit all the criteria. You were one,” she said, “Neville was the other.”

Harry felt numb. He looked over at Neville and saw that the boy was trembling. “A prophecy is like a prediction, right?” he asked, groping for an analogy that would help him make sense of the situation. “Like when the weatherman on the telly forecasts if it will rain or not?”

“I don’t know about this ‘weatherman’,;” Mrs Longbottom said. “But yes. Prophecies are future events laid out by a Seer.”

“Do they always come true?” he asked, thinking again of the weatherman, who was wrong as often as he was right.

“Prophecies,” Mr Ollivander said, “are a tricky business. Many go unheard, making it impossible to determine their veracity. Others are self-fulfilling, and may only come into play through the actions of those about whom they have been made. But to answer your question, yes. Those that are activated will always come true, though not always in the way we expect.”

His pale gaze turned to Mrs Longbottom. “I am curious how you came to learn so much of it.”

“I know because something went wrong,” she said, a bitter edge in her voice. “You-Know-Who learned of the prophecy and began hunting for the child destined to defeat him. The affected families were informed and went into hiding. You, Mr Potter, were only a year old at the time. The wards around your house should have been impenetrable, but He found you ten years ago on Samhain. He killed your parents, and then tried to kill you... but prophecies work in strange ways. Instead of dying, your house was torn apart in a magical explosion, and when the dust settled...”

“...you”
were the only thing left alive.

“That scar” — she pointed at his forehead — “is a curse scar. Born of the touch of foul magics. No one else has ever survived the curse You-Know-Who used against you. It’s just not heard of.”

“So my parents... were killed?” Harry thought he should feel sad at this revelation, or at least more sad than when he’d thought they died in an accident, but the emotions wouldn’t come.

“Your parents died fighting for what they believed in,” Mrs Longbottom said. “You should be proud of them, and their sacrifice.”

Harry tried, but he couldn’t help wishing they hadn’t fought quite so hard. That way they might still be alive, and he wouldn’t have spent the last ten years with the Dursleys.

“Your survival has puzzled the wizarding world,” Mr Ollivander said in his soft voice. “They claim you are the one who vanquished You-Know-Who. For it’s true he vanished that night, at the peak of his power, and has not been seen or heard from since. If the prophecy has come to pass as Augusta believes, then they are correct.”

“Did he… die?” Harry asked.

Mr Ollivander nodded solemnly. “He did.”

A horrible, cold feeling settled in Harry’s stomach like a ball of lead. A man had died because of him. He’d killed him. He wrapped his arms around his body, as though the meagre warmth they provided could melt the ice creeping under his skin.

I had to, he insisted. He killed my parents. He would have killed me. It was necessary!

He should have been happy — he’d saved himself and avenged his parents’ deaths all at once. But the gnawing guilt wouldn’t leave him, and he realized that he couldn’t love what he’d never known, nor hate a man he’d never met.

In the end he was just Harry. Orphan. Wizard. Parselmouth…

He wet his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. “Does that mean I’m a murderer?”

Mrs Longbottom scoffed. “Murderer? No, Mr Potter, far from it. You’re a war hero! From the West Country to the Highlands, witches and wizards toast your name.”

“They know who I am?” he asked, feeling faint.

Mr Ollivander offered him a wry smile. “They do. Your name is quite well known. You might even say you’re famous.”

“But I don’t want to be famous!”

“I’m sorry, Mr Potter. But I’m afraid that’s not up to you.”

Harry was subdued as they left the wand shop and crossed the street to pick out sturdy school trunks.

“I’m sorry,” Neville said quietly after a few minutes. He looked miserable on Harry’s behalf. “That must have been hard to hear.”
Harry offered him a weak smile. “It’s okay. I would have heard eventually, and at least now I’ll have a month to think on it before school starts.”

They didn’t say anything else until they’d paid for their trunks and packed all their purchases inside.

“Well,” Harry said. “I suppose that’s everything.”

Neville was fidgeting again. “My aunts and uncles are meeting us at the Leaky Cauldron for a birthday supper. Do you want to come? I—I mean, you don’t have to. But I’d like it if you came.”

Harry looked down at his feet. Part of him wanted to say yes. He’d never been invited to a birthday before, and he was afraid that if he turned Neville down the other boy would be angry with him. The other part was feeling overwhelmed with everything he’d learned and wanted nothing more than to curl up in his cupboard with Basil and sleep.

“I should head back,” he said. “It’s a long way on the train, and if I’m out too late I’ll get locked out.”

Neville’s shoulders slumped. “Oh, okay.”

They hauled their trunks down Diagon Alley. Even though Harry’s had wheels on the bottom, he was panting by the time they got back to the Leaky Cauldron and Mrs Longbottom reopened the passage through the wall.

“You’re sure you won’t stay and eat?” she asked.

Harry’s stomach rumbled at the smell of shepherd’s pie wafting from the pub’s kitchen. The thought of an actual meal and people to share it with tempted him, but when they stepped into the common room they were hit with a wall of sound. Patrons guffawed into their drinks as they recounted tales of the day’s adventures, cutlery clinked against pewter plates, and the fiddle in the corner sang a jaunty tune that had those nearby tapping their feet and whistling along.

The inn was packed, and several curious gazes turned in their direction as they emerged with their heavy school trunks. He shook his head. “I really should be going. I don’t know how long it will take me to get back to the train station.” He had a general idea of the route he’d taken to get here. There was at least one bridge involved, and as long as he kept the ferris wheel in sight he should be able to find his way back.

“The muggle trains?” Mrs Longbottom’s nose crinkled as though she’d been presented with something unpleasant.

“Yes.”

“My dear boy, there are several much better ways to get around than on those tubes the muggles call transportation. Come.” Mrs Longbottom motioned for him to follow as she made for the exit to muggle London. Harry trailed after her, curious.

The streets of London were choked with rush hour traffic and echoed with the blare of horns as taxis jockeyed for positions at the light. Harry wasn’t sure what to expect when Mrs Longbottom walked them right up to the curb. Surely wizards didn’t have taxis too, he thought. It seemed too… mundane.

“You have your wand?” she asked.
Harry set down his trunk and extracted the wand from the paper wrapped box in his satchel.

“Good. Now, hold it out over the curb, tip pointed up.”

Harry looked at the two parked cars in front of him. There was less than a foot between their bumpers. Unsure of what Mrs Longbottom expected to happen, he pointed his wand up and edged it cautiously past the curb.

There was a loud bang and Harry jumped back with a startled squeak. He landed on Neville’s foot and nearly sent them both to the ground in a heap of tangled limbs. In front of them a large purple three decker bus appeared out of thin air and squeezed into the space between the cars, pushing them out of the way. Harry expected to hear the crunch of metal as the poor vehicles folded up like accordions, but when he glanced their way they looked as whole and undamaged as before the strange bus’s arrival.

*The Knight Bus* was written across the side of the triple-decker in loopy gold writing.

Mrs Longbottom nodded to herself. “There, much better than muggle transit. They’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

A lanky young man in a faded purple suit stepped out of the bus. He was squinting at a piece of paper. “Good afternoon,” he read. “Welcome to the Knight Bus, transportation for the stranded witch or wizard. My name,” he patted his chest without looking up, “is Stan Shunpike, and I’ll be your conductor today.”

“He always reads off that piece of paper,” Neville whispered in his ear. “And he’s been working there for a year at least.”

“You’ve taken this bus before?” Harry asked, eyeing the uppermost tier of windows. He was pretty sure you weren’t allowed to have vehicles that tall, they’d hit underpasses and the roofs of tunnels.

“All the time,” Neville said before swallowing hard. He looked a little green again, and Harry wondered if this would be a repeat of the Gringotts carts.

“For three?” Stan asked Mrs Longbottom.

“No, just young Mr Potter here,” she replied, waving a hand in his direction. “He’ll need help with his trunk.”

Harry could almost feel Stan’s eyes drift over his forehead, and he flattened his fringe, checking that his scar was hidden.

“Of course!” Stan said with far more zeal than was warranted. He hoisted up Harry’s trunk and manhandled it onto the bus. The trunk put up a valiant fight against the rough treatment, nearly crushing Stan when it started to tip over on the second step. Watching the epic struggle between man and luggage, Harry was glad he wasn’t the one stowing it aboard. With everything he’d bought it probably weighed as much as Dudley.

He turned to Mrs Longbottom. “Thank you again for helping me today.”

“It was my pleasure,” she said and gave a small, formal nod of her head.

Neville was shuffling his feet. “I’ll see you at Hogwarts?” he asked. He looked hopeful.

“Of course!” Harry said. The fact that he’d know someone on his first day was a huge relief, and
he found himself hoping that he and Neville would end up in the same house so they’d have classes together. Neville seemed like a genuinely nice person, not at all like his cousin or the children from his primary school.

Hogwarts would be different. Better, He was sure of it.

A new world, full of new people.

Harry paused as he climbed up the bus’s stairs and looked back at Neville. “Happy birthday, Neville,” he said.

Neville’s face brightened as he smiled. “Happy early birthday, Harry!”
Harry made it back to Privet drive in record time.

After receiving numerous assurances from Stan Shunpike that muggles wouldn’t notice the Knight Bus, Harry asked to be dropped off right outside his aunt and uncle’s house. He paid for a ticket, declining the curious offer of complimentary hot chocolate, and made his way toward the back of the first floor.

Unlike its muggle counterparts, the inside of the Knight Bus resembled a fancy restaurant. Ornate chairs and heavy wooden tables set with floral centrepieces lurched across the floor like drunken sailors as the bus made death defying turns through packed motorways. Overhead a cheap chandelier swung on the end of its chain, glass crystals crashing together with the sound of a hundred miniature windows shattering. Occasionally a crystal would come loose and ricochet around the bus until it became jammed in a corner or Stan managed to trap it beneath the sole of his boot.

It took less than a minute for Harry to decide that he didn’t much care for magical buses. He’d already lost count of the number of red lights they’d blasted through, and despite having learned that his parents hadn’t died in a motor accident, watching the Knight Bus skid onto sidewalks and into parking spaces left him trembling and nauseated. After they squeezed between two speeding semis he tore his eyes from the window and started paying attention to the hazards inside the bus, just in time to avoid having his knees pinched between his chair and the leg of a dangerously mobile table.

“This is not as bad as the tunnel-car,” Basil remarked. She was still tucked out of view under his kerchief, as Stan had positioned himself against the divider behind the driver’s compartment and was watching Harry intently. Fortunately, even if he saw Harry’s lips moving, he was too far away to hear anything over the roar of the engine.

“Glad you think so,” Harry muttered as he clung to the sides of his chair. He wished the Knight Bus had taken a leaf from Gringott’s book and installed the same sticky seats the bank used on their carts. If they had, he wouldn’t need to worry about being catapulted towards the windshield every time it slammed to a stop.

“When we get back to your den will you tell me why you were happy, and sad, and scared?” she asked when the bus paused beside what appeared to be an abandoned farmhouse and Stan rushed upstairs to help an elderly gentleman disembark.

“I will,” he promised.

When the Knight Bus screeched to a stop in front of his relatives’ house Harry bounded out the door, relieved to be free of the death-trap on wheels.

Grunting from the effort, Stan lugged his trunk back down the stairs and set it on the curb. He pushed back his cap and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Is this your home, then?” he asked, his head on a swivel as he stared at the nearly identical houses up and down the block in disbelief.

“I live here,” Harry replied.

“Well yeah, that’s what I asked innit?”
It wasn’t, but Harry didn’t care to explain the difference. He shrugged and waited for Stan to leave, but the lanky young wizard had become distracted by the neighbour’s garden gnomes and was peering at them with a look of morbid fascination on his face.

“Um, aren’t you supposed to be working?” Harry asked just as the driver hollered for Stan to quit his lallygagging and get on board.

“Sheesh, Ernie! Gimme a sec, would you,” he yelled back before turning on Harry and seizing his hand between sweaty palms. Harry recoiled, but managed not to pull away as Stan shook his hand vigorously. “I jus’ wanted to say that it’s an honour having met you—”

“Stan!” bellowed the driver, his patience wearing thin.

“—And that if you’re ever in a pinch you can rely on the ol’ Knight Bus to get you out of it. We owe it to you, after all.”

“Right,” Harry said, desperately wishing Stan would let go.

After a final vigorous shake he did, and then the Knight Bus vanished with a *bang*, leaving nothing but skid marks and startled cats behind. Harry grimaced and wiped his hand on the leg of his pants.

Curtains fluttered in the windows across the street as nosy neighbours peered outside, keen to learn which of their rivals was having car trouble. With no ailing automobile in sight, they turned their scrutiny on Harry and the large, old fashioned trunk at his feet. Before they could decide the sight of him in decent clothes was strange enough to warrant ringing his aunt on the phone, he hauled the trunk into the walkway beside the house.

Once he was out of sight, Harry changed back into his cousin’s castoffs.

He left his new glasses on. Apart from the joy being able to see the world clearly brought him, the wizard from *Occuvision* had confiscated his old pair with the pomp and solemnity of a pallbearer. He hadn’t dared ask for them back, though he now wished he’d been a little braver. His aunt had a keen eye for expensive accessories, and the glasses had cost him over twenty of his shining golden galleons. He didn’t know the conversion rate between wizarding money and British pounds, but if he’d melted the galleons down they would have formed a nugget larger than his aunt’s prized collection of gold earrings and necklaces, some of which had cost his uncle a week’s worth of salary.

This, he concluded, meant his glasses were expensive. Fortunately, they were also unbreakable. When he’d asked about their durability, he’d received a demonstration involving a cinder block and a falling anvil that put all his fears to rest.

Harry stashed his trunk behind the garden shed, ensuring it wouldn’t be visible from the dining room window. Then, bracing himself for the worst, he slunk inside.

His relatives weren’t pleased with his sudden reappearance.

They were sitting around the dining room table, their plates half-empty and the carcass of a roasted chicken cooling on the kitchen counter behind them. His aunt and uncle broke off a heated debate about what Mr and Mrs So-and-So next door were doing with their garden to scowl at him as he pulled the door closed and slipped off his shoes.

Dudley didn’t look up from the table. His head was bent low over his plate as he shovelled food down his throat, barely pausing to chew. He was a noisy eater; his lip-smacking, grunting, and snorting — punctuated by the *clack* of his fork against his mother’s fine china — was a
conversation wholly unto itself. He was also, it seemed, completely indifferent to Harry’s return.

Harry took this as a sign of having successfully erased his cousin’s memories and breathed a sigh of relief. From the look on his aunt and uncle’s faces his reception promised to be bad enough without additional accusations of thievery.

They started yelling at the same time, their outraged accusations melding until they became indistinguishable. Harry, having heard it all before, tuned them out. He stood patiently on the door mat, staring down at his feet as though ashamed he’d dared take a day off and skip out on his chores, as he – lazy, ungrateful child that he was – clearly hadn’t earned such a privilege.

_It won’t always be like this_, he reminded himself as his aunt launched into her favourite rant about his no-good-dirty-rotten-parents. Someday he’d have his own house. A big one, with a lounge that would turn his aunt green with envy and enough bedrooms to ensure no one would ever need to sleep in a cupboard. In his house, Basil wouldn’t need to hide all the time, and he’d have entire days off where he could lounge in the sunshine and not lift a finger to cook or clean. He couldn’t help but smile at the thought. Perhaps he could even rescue the snakes from the zoo and they could all live together, like a real family.

His daydream was interrupted when Dudley made a gagging sound and dropped his fork. Harry looked up and blinked in surprise as his cousin clasped a hand over his mouth and lurched forward, nose almost buried in his mashed potatoes as his shoulders heaved.

“Diddikins?” Petunia asked, forgetting Harry momentarily.

Vernon stopped ranting as well and leaned over to slap his son on the back. “Easy there Champ,” he said. “There’s plenty to go around. No sense making yourself sick.”

Dudley’s face was ashen pale and slick with sweat as he nodded. Swallowing thickly he scooped his fork up off the table and stabbed it into a slice of chicken.

Harry was used to his cousin eating as though each meal would be his last, but the utter desperation with which Dudley shoved the chicken in his mouth was bizarre even for him. As he raised his head to chug down a glass of milk, Harry caught sight of his eyes for the first time since his return. They were red-rimmed and swollen, as though he’d been crying. Though what Dudley had to cry about Harry couldn’t fathom. His parents gave him everything he wanted with or without his crocodile tears.

His aunt took offence at his curiosity. “What are you staring at Boy?” she snapped, resting her hand on Dudley’s shoulder as though it would hide her massive son from his scrutiny.

He dropped his gaze back to his feet. “Nothing.”

Her eyes narrowed, as though she sensed there was something different about him but was unable to put her finger on it. He relaxed as she started to look away, only to be caught off guard when her head snapped back around.

“Where did you get those glasses?” she demanded, rising part way from her chair, her fingers twitching towards his face. Harry’s hand flew up to grip his glasses’ monel frame, holding on tight.

“I— I found them,” he lied.

His uncle snorted into his brandy. “Stole them more like.”

Harry stood his ground as his aunt sunk back into her chair and sent him a venomous look. “If I
find the police knocking at the door…”

“You won’t,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “I really did find them.”

She frowned, but then Dudley reclaimed her attention by sniffing loudly and blowing his nose into his napkin. “Make yourself useful then,” she said before turning back to comfort her son.

“Yes, aunt Petunia.” With a final puzzled glance at his cousin, he hurried into the kitchen before she could change her mind.

There were no leftovers, but he managed to snag a few chicken bones that hadn’t been scraped clean and sucked on them as he scrubbed the roasting pan. By the time his relatives were finished eating he was ready for their plates; silently washing, drying, and putting them away. Then his aunt gave him a list of chores half a page long and sent him on his way with a promise of retribution if he turned in for the night before completing them.

The mantle clock in the lounge was striking eleven by the time he was finally allowed to retire to his cupboard. Feet dragging, he collapsed on his squeaky cot and pulled the door closed. Settling down on his back he let out a sigh of relief at being back in his little corner of the world.

“Now will you tell me everything?” Basil asked as she uncoiled from his shoulders and stretched out along his chest and stomach.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to speak. He told her all the strange and wonderful things he’d learned about the wizarding world from Neville: about bloodlines, classes, and how his parents had been magical, just like him.

“That does not explain why you were sad and angry,” Basil chided once he’d finished. Harry hesitated, but she continued to hector him and in the end he had no choice but to give in. Haltingly, he told her about his wand, its brother, and the prophecy that led to his parents’ deaths. And he told her about parseltongue. How it was the mark of a dark wizard. Something evil. Twisted.

As he drew to the end his voice trailed off in a choked whisper, the enormity of his plight bearing down on him with the weight of a mountain. Basil’s head rose off his chest and started swaying, as though she were a cobra rather than a harmless grass snake.

"How dare the Bird-Woman say such things about Speakers!" she hissed, irate. "Speaking does not make someone bad. That is like saying dogs are bad because they bark, or birds because they sing."

"I don’t like dogs," he said. It was an understatement; dogs terrified him. Ripper had seen to that.

Basil’s head bobbed in a serpentine version of a huff. "Yes, well, that still does not mean they are bad."

He wanted to feel relief, but Mrs Longbottom’s words continued to haunt him. She’d made the ability to speak parseltongue sound like a symptom of a larger problem. "Can magic be evil?" he asked Basil.

She tilted her head, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Like... can it choose to cause harm?"

"Magic is like a thunderstorm," she replied. "It does not choose to cause harm because it is not alive. It is a force – a part of nature that existed long before our bodies were born. We can shape it
through our desires, but it does not shape us.”

"A thunderstorm...” He liked the comparison even though he didn't know if it was true. He wanted to believe her, the thought of his magic turning him into a monster sent his stomach plummeting deep into his gut, but she was only one snake speaking against the opinion of hundreds of human witches and wizards.

"If it wasn’t their magic that made them evil, then why do you think parselmouths always turn into dark wizards? It can’t be a coincidence. They—we must have something in common."

Basil hesitated, her amber eyes studying him. “You believe evil people exist?” she asked.

His brow furrowed in confusion and he raised his head off the pillow. "Of course they do. Good people exist too, but there are fewer of them about.” She hissed skeptically, and he got the sense she disagreed. "You don't think they're real?"

"Many moons ago I found a burrow of mouse pups whose mother had gone scavenging,” she said. “There were five of them curled up together and I swallowed them down quick, every last one. They filled my belly so I would not go hungry that moon, but as I was leaving their mother returned to the burrow. She was very angry, all squeaking and biting. For her I was a bad thing come to steal away her young. But I would not call myself bad.”

"So... something that's good for me might be bad for someone else?"

"Yes!” She swayed in excitement. "And what is good for someone else might be bad for you, but that does not make them a bad person because they are doing good. You see?"

It seemed impossible. “How do you decide?” he asked. “If you can be good and bad at the same time, how do you know which you really are?”

“Your are both, and you are neither.” She paused and studied his dismayed expression. “Is it very important to think you are always good?”

Harry pressed his hands over his eyes in frustration. “I don’t know! I don’t, it’s just... does that mean it’s okay for my aunt and uncle to lock me up? Or for Dudley to hit me because it’s fun?” Or that he could kill someone without being a murderer. He ran his hands back, tangling them in his hair. “Who decides whether you’re a hero or a monster?"

“Why must you decide? You humans make everything so very complicated. The fat boy is stronger than you, so he does not fear to hit you.”

“You think Dudley will leave me alone if he’s afraid of me?” he asked, startled.

“Of course,” she replied. “Fear tells me when I should hide and when I should strike. If I did not fear the fox or cat I would die by their fangs. Right now your cousin is the fox — to drive him off you must become what the fox fears.”

“And what does the fox fear?”

If snakes could grin, Basil would have been beaming. “A thunderstorm.”

Over the years Harry had made several attempts at keeping Dudley off his back, none of which had worked. Ignoring his cousin only encouraged him to try harder, while fighting back gave him an excuse to get his parents involved. Harry had even tried playing along once. It was that disastrous
attempt that had landed him on the roof of the school kitchens and equally high on his aunt’s shitlist.

He’d never thought to frighten Dudley – until a month ago he wouldn’t have dreamt it possible. Physically, Dudley had him beat on all fronts. It was hard to intimidate a person who could dangle you off an embankment one-handed while stuffing a Knickerbocker Glory in their mouth with the other. But Harry had his own advantage now, one that had bested his cousin once already.

If Dudley was a fox, Harry was determined to become the biggest, loudest, most eave-rattling thunderstorm imaginable. There was no harm in it that he could see. All he needed to do was shake his cousin up enough that he decided Harry was no longer an appealing target.

Simple, really.

Of course, to become a thunderstorm he needed to be able to use his magic for more than exploding lights or setting people on fire — as the former had happened too often to be frightening and the latter would see him flayed by his aunt and uncle if they caught him — which meant he needed his new school books.

Fighting off fatigue, he crept outside when the clock in the sitting room struck one. Under the cold gaze of the moon, he hauled his trunk through the kitchen door and over to his cupboard. Here he ran into difficulties, as the trunk was too tall to slide under his cot and any attempt to stack the two would see its tooled leather exterior mauled by the cot’s rusty underbelly. In the end he had no choice but to fumble open the latches holding his bed of ten years together and stow the pieces in the crawlspace at the foot of the stairs. He put his trunk in its place and made it up with the blankets and thin mattress pad. He meant to pull out one of his new books and start reading right away, but by that point he was teetering on the edge of exhaustion and the second he settled down on the padded lid he fell straight to sleep.

The next morning he decided the trunk was even less comfortable to sleep on than the cot had been, but he'd happily put up with bruised hip bones and a cricked neck for another month if it meant he got to learn magic.

July ticked over into August.

Another letter from Hogwarts arrived the morning of August first, and he shoved it into his pant pocket before returning to the kitchen with the rest of the more mundane correspondence. It contained a formal letter of acceptance and a train ticket whose writing gleamed like liquid bronze in the sunlight. The ticket read: Hogwarts Express, 11 AM Departure From, Platform 9 ¾, King’s Cross, London.

It was a funny platform number. Harry didn’t recall seeing half or quarter platforms when he’d gone to London, but he’d arrived at Waterloo and had never actually set foot in King’s Cross station. Perhaps, he thought, they just have a lot more trains.

August was filled with hot, heavy days and a slog of chores. His aunt decided that he was old enough to take over all the kitchen duties, so the vast majority of his days were spent cooking and washing dishes. Despite spending hours with his hands in hot, soapy water, it wasn’t the worst task in the world. The Dursleys were rarely in the kitchen with him, so he could taste-test as often as he liked.

Whenever he had a free hour he grabbed one of his new books and took it outside. In a moment of rebelliousness he’d discovered that by climbing the branching magnolia tree in the backyard he could jump onto the roof of the garden shed. Ensconced on his perch he had a wonderfully Dudley-
free month, for neither the tree nor the shed would survive his cousin’s crushing mass if the other boy had been able to find him.

The effectiveness of his hiding place surprised Harry. The shed was only six feet tall, and anyone looking up from a distance could see him plain as day. But Dudley wasn’t looking – he wasn’t doing much of anything, in fact. He no longer had daily get-togethers with his pack of friends, and he’d lost interest in television and computer games, preferring to spend his time wolfing down alarming amounts of food at the dining room table. He’d grown another pant size in two weeks’ time, and Petunia had been forced to buy him a whole new school uniform when the buttons popped off his first.

She believed Dudley’s morose mood was a reaction to his impending departure from her bosom. Harry didn’t much care why his cousin was miserable if it meant he left him alone.

Without his cousin dogging his steps, Harry slowly worked through his school texts.

*A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot was written in dry, musty prose that bored him to tears by the time he’d reached the third chapter. He set it aside in favour of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, which implied that not only were dragons real, but chimeras, and werewolves, and centaurs, and all sorts of other strange and dangerous creatures he’d never seen before, even on the news. He wondered, as he read an entry on lethifolds, how wizards managed to keep them hidden from the muggles.

Basil was as curious about his books as he was. She couldn’t read them herself, but she pestered him to dictate passages as she sunned herself on the warm metal roof.

Harry didn’t mind. He’d never been a proficient reader, and even with his new glasses he found he still lost his place on the page unless he used the tip of a finger to trace each line. Sometimes he’d reach the end of a paragraph and realize he’d spent so much effort deciphering each individual word that he had no clue what they meant all together. Other times the information seemed to slip in his eyes and directly out the back of his head, bypassing his brain altogether. The only thing that helped his retention was reading aloud, and he was fortunate that — unlike English — parseltongue didn’t dry out his mouth until he’d been at it for several hours.

“The act of transfiguration from one form to another is first and foremost an exercise in visualization,” he read from *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration*. “While correct wand movements and pronunciation of the incantation fuel the transformation, without the guidance of the witch or wizard’s mind their matchstick will remain a matchstick, and they will never be able to change a mouse into a snuffbox.”

He wasn’t sure what either of those transfigurations would be good for unless you were fond of sewing or snuff, but they seemed easy enough. Of course, the book then went into painstaking detail about exactly how one should flick one’s wand and never mentioned visualization again.

“Why would you waste a perfectly good mouse by turning it into something else?” Basil wondered, a very mouse-sized bulge in her thin body. “Unless, of course, you’re turning it into a frog. Or a fish! *I do like fish.*” She looked at him expectantly, as though waiting for a cornucopia of fishy delight to flop, wet and stinking, from the palm of his hand.

Harry snorted in laughter and shook his head. Even if he was able to make fish, he didn’t dare practice spells on the shed roof. Dudley might not be able to see him, but the neighbours certainly could and he didn’t want word of his freakishness getting back to the Dursleys.

Practical sessions of Operation Become a Thunderstorm occurred late at night when he was sure
his relatives wouldn't bumble down to investigate the thud of an overzealous paintbrush slamming against the underside of the stairs, or the neon flare of spell-light chasing spiders out the hole in the corner of the door.

With his new textbooks fuelling his imagination, his wandless experiments progressed rapidly. And while the mental gymnastics required to convince himself that his palm could glow or that gravity was a figment of his imagination left him numb with exhaustion, the sense of accomplishment he gained from each success pushed him to keep practicing. Neville had said performing magic without a wand was extremely difficult — the mark of a powerful wizard. For Harry, who had always been powerless against the Dursleys, it was a chance to prove his worth, to himself more than anyone else. He wanted to become proficient — more than proficient — so that the next time Dudley or his uncle came after him he’d be able to defend himself.

Within a month he felt comfortable casting a handful of spells from his Charms and Defence books, which was fortunate for his morale as practicing with his wand turned out to be nowhere near as satisfying.

According to his books, magic should have been easier with a wand. The spells filling their pages were formulaic, precise, and didn’t require his full attention to bring about their effects. Unfortunately, they also required a basic understanding of Latin — something Harry was sorely lacking. He had no idea how to pronounce strange, foreign words like wingardium leviosa or brachiabindo, and no one had thought to add a guide.

After setting fire to his bedding for the third time in a row trying to cast a spell from his book on curses and counter-curses that was meant to make the target’s hair fall out, he flopped back in a sooty, smoke-stained huff and glowered at his wand.

“Aren’t you supposed to be good at this?” he growled.

The pleasant vibrations emanating up his arm from the thin piece of holly cut out, as though it were saying, “It’s not my fault you can’t pronounce Calvorio.”

Harry pursed his lips. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Basil, who had taken refuge from his pathetic attempts at magic on the topmost shelf of the cupboard, poked her head out from behind a can of rusted nails. “Sticks cannot speak,” she reminded him, giving Harry a good reason to turn in for the night before he completely lost his mind.

As the end of August approached, Harry was struck with a new worry. How should he tell the Dursleys he was going away to school?

They'd want to know how he was accepted. More than that, they'd want to know how he was paying for it, and Harry had no intention of ever telling them about his Gringott's vault. Magical or not, the Dursleys wouldn’t turn up their noses at mounds of gold and silver coins.

He was so torn that come August thirty-first he still hadn’t spoken a word to his aunt or uncle, and was running out of time.

It was just before lunch and the kitchen was swarming with pollen kicked up as his aunt clipped the stems of colourful carnations, fragrant freesias, and snarling snapdragons swiped from the neighbours’ gardens. Harry had done the swiping, of course; sneaking across well-watered lawns with his aunt’s kitchen scissors while she directed him from behind a barricade of gauzy curtains
— a General ensconced in her fortress while he, poor foot-soldier, risked death by pruning shears should he be caught sabotaging enemy fortifications.

When he’d returned with an orchid snatched from beneath Mrs Number Eight’s upturned nose his aunt let out a crow of triumph so loud that even Dudley took notice, raising his eyes from where they’d been staring apathetically at the television. At the realization that Harry had managed to please his mother, his face set into a petulant scowl. He struggled out of his armchair, snatched the scissors from Harry’s hands, and marched out the front door.

Harry watched from the threshold as Dudley jiggled across the road, scanning the flowerbeds across the way for a suitable victim, not even trying to be discreet. He shook his head, sure his cousin would get a hiding he wouldn’t soon forget, and wandered into the kitchen to start preparing the midday meal.

No longer faced with his impending death, the Hogwarts conundrum returned to plague him as he sliced ham to go in their sandwiches. He glanced at his aunt, trying to convince himself that it would be easy to slip in between the snap of her scissors. Nothing large or dramatic, just a simple: ‘Oh, I'm going to King's Cross on the first to catch a train to school,’ and then adamantly refuse to tell her anything else. It wasn't as though he needed to rely on them for a ride. He knew how to call the Knight Bus, and so long as he budgeted in enough time to work around their unpredictable route he should have no trouble catching the train. Then it would be a full, Dursley-free ten months! His heart felt like it was floating out of his chest whenever he imagined it, free as one of the birds chasing across the pale blue sky.

He had almost worked up the courage to spit it out when Dudley staggered into the kitchen with a stalk of purple flowers clutched in his hand and proceeded to be violently ill all over the floor.

His aunt shrieked loud enough to raise the dead and dropped her scissors, looking between her son and the once pristine floor in abject horror. Harry wrinkled his nose and sliced another piece of ham. The racket summoned Vernon from where he was lurking in the sitting room. It was a Friday, and while his uncle would normally be at work, he’d taken a week-long vacation to see Dudley off to Smeltings Academy. As expected, he appeared in the doorway, a plate of biscuits in hand.

"Didikins!" Petunia cried as she maneuvered around the puddle of sick and clutched his shoulder. "What's wrong? Is your tum-tum sore?"

Dudley swayed. “I wanna…” His words were slurred, and there was sweat pouring down his face and neck. “I wanna not pathe— eugh…” A burp bubbled up from his stomach, bringing along a portion of scone for the ride. Then his lips parted in a strange smile and he lifted the hand with the flowers. “I got them. They’re yours, for snipping, so go ahaa!"

"What's wrong with him?" Vernon asked, dropping the plate. It shattered on the floor, chips of painted china exploding outward. The biscuits, however, remained safely in his beefy fist.

Petunia took the flowers from Dudley, who seemed to be having trouble opening his hand, and set them down on the counter. She guided him to a chair and lugged him onto it. "I don't know," she said shrilly. "Didikins? Pumpkin? Tell Mommy what's wrong." She shook his shoulder.

Harry kept his head down. This was the sort of thing his uncle loved blaming him for, and yet… he watched as Dudley was sick again, this time over the morning’s paper. There was definitely something wrong with him, and those flowers looked oddly familiar, if only he could remember where he’d seen them.

He set the knife down on the cutting board and hurried to his cupboard, wiping his hands clean on
his old jeans. Throwing off the bedding he opened his trunk, found his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore, and began to flip through the pages. He didn't need to go far. The flowers had a unique appearance, as though they were wearing helmets or hoods made of arching petals, and they were within the first twenty pages of the book. He returned to the kitchen, holding the book open at the right page, and found his aunt turning one of the stalks over in her hands.

"Ah," he said as her face grew pale. She dropped the flower and stared at her arm. "You don't want to touch those. They're poisonous."

"What do you mean, poisonous?" his uncle roared. His face was the colour of an overripe plum, and Harry eyed him warily before turning back to his book and reading the entry aloud.

"Aconite, also known as monkshood, wolf's bane, or the Queen of all Poisons, is a highly toxic plant prized for its use in..." He skipped ahead, sure that the mention of potions in this situation would only incite his uncle's wrath.

"When ingested, will cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea followed by sensations of burning, tingling and numbness of the mouth and face, and burning of the abdomen. Other symptoms include sweating, dizziness, difficulty breathing, headaches, and confusion.

"Death usually occurs within two to six hours in fatal poisonings, though with large doses death may be instantaneous,

"Caution: Proper protective gear should always be worn when handling aconite leaves, as its toxin is easily absorbed through the skin. In this event—"

"Let me see that!" His uncle snatched the book from his hands. As his eyes descended the page the blood drained from his face and he made a strangled, squeaking sound.

He looked between Petunia and Dudley, eyes blown wide and sweat beading on his brow. He flung Harry's book aside, the swish and thunk of it hitting the floor ominous as an executioner's axe.

Harry didn't dare retrieve it, not while it put him in arms reach of his uncle.

"Hospital!" Vernon yelled. "Car! Now!"

Petunia was still staring at her hand, an expression of horror on her long face as she wiggled her fingers, but she moved slowly towards the door.

Vernon seized a metal fruit bowl, dumped out its contents, and shoved it under Dudley's rolling double chins. "Come on, Champ," he muttered, frantic. "On your feet. That's it!"

Harry watched as his uncle led Dudley from the room. Vernon never looked back or called for him to follow, and Harry could hardly believe it when he heard the front door slam and the car roar to life in the driveway. The Dursleys never left him at home alone. Then again, so far as he knew the Dursleys had also never been poisoned before.

He edged around the outside of the dining room, avoiding Dudley's mess, and retrieved his book. Then he walked straight out the back door and took a deep breath of fresh air. Once his nose was free of the acidic stench of stomach acid and partially digested food, he settled on the garden bench and opened it back to the page on aconite.

"In the case of an accidental poisoning, take a fresh bezoar from the stomach of a goat and sear it for three heartbeats over an open flame. Place it beneath the afflicted’s tongue and contact the nearest medi-witch or potions master immediately.”
He flipped the page, but there was no additional treatment advice for those without immediate access to a goat or the dubious contents of its digestive tract. It made him leery of trying to clean up the mess in the kitchen, but he knew he didn’t have much choice in the matter. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, soaking up the warmth of the sun on his skin and the smell of the neighbour's freshly cut lawn, putting off the malodorous task as long a possible.

Perhaps, if he was very lucky, the Dursleys would stay at the hospital overnight.

On the morning of September first, the driveway in front of Number Four Privet Drive was still empty. Harry left a note on the kitchen counter explaining that he’d be away at a boarding school until the next summer and then stepped out the front door, locking it behind him.

He didn’t look back as he dragged his trunk down to the curb.

“Are we finally going?” Basil asked sleepily from her favourite place beneath his kerchief.

“Yes,” he said, and threw his hand out over the curb, wand pointed up.
The Hogwarts Express

Stan Shunpike was manning the Knight Bus’s door once more, and he tripped over himself like an overexcited puppy while stowing Harry’s trunk on board. It drew curious looks from the other passengers, but it seemed Stan wanted to keep Harry all to himself because he spoke his name only in whispers where the others couldn’t hear. Harry didn’t complain, it was enough having to deal with Stan throwing awed looks at his forehead every few minutes. A bus full of admirers would have been too much to bear.

They arrived at King’s Cross in the middle of morning rush-hour. The station was packed with muggles who shoved past him as he navigated the atrium, knocking his head with their elbows and tripping over the end of his heavy school trunk. He lost hold of the handle twice during his hunt for the correct platform, and if the trunk hadn’t been as tall as he was tall it would have been carried away in the jostle. As it was, he managed to lose himself and spent ten minutes wandering in circles until he found a walkway that led to platforms nine through eleven.

Immediately upon arriving at a big plastic number nine bolted to an abutment he realized he had a problem. On the far side of the arch was a big plastic number ten — in the middle was nothing at all. Harry pulled his trunk through and walked along the platform until he came to a wide brick pillar. Setting his trunk down he dropped onto the lid, stomach curling unpleasantly. He pulled out his ticket and read it over, looking for any clues he might have missed. Nothing. He flipped it over, but the back was completely blank.

He glared at the curling bronze calligraphy. How was anyone supposed to get to Hogwarts if there wasn’t a train? It was as bad as expecting him to know the magical world used owls as carrier pigeons, or that Diagon Alley was hidden behind a seedy bar. He looked down the platform, determined to solve this puzzle the same way he had the others — by looking for something that seemed out of place.

The sleek silver train humming at platform ten opened its doors wide, beckoning a throng of humanity into its yellow-lit belly. Through the gaps between legs Harry caught sight of spilled cups of coffee and overflowing trash cans, their scents mingling with perfume and aftershave in the stale air trapped beneath the domed glass roof.

A smoking cigarette butt landed next to his left foot, flicked away by a man running for the train. Harry watched him jam an arm in the gap and pull hard on the doors’ lips, forcing them apart enough to slip inside. The shrill whistle of a guard chased him onboard, a sharp reprimand in the three short blasts announcing the train’s departure.

As the train clattered out of the station the guards pivoted on their heels, turning to face the opposite track. One pulled a silver pocket-watch from his jacket and checked the time. He said something to the female attendant at his side that made her snort with laughter.

It’s all so… ordinary, Harry thought as he watched the platform refill with regular, mundane people who’d never conjured flames in the palm of their hand or made paintbrushes float. There was no obvious magic here and he wondered whether there was a trick to it, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. His wand was in the pocket of the new vest hanging from his thin frame, and he fiddled with the handle, letting it warm his fingers.

“Do you taste any magic nearby?” he asked Basil quietly. She poked her head out the top of the
kerchief, lapped the air twice with her long tongue, and then recoiled with a hiss of displeasure.

“I taste many things,” she grumbled, eyeing the smouldering cigarette on the ground. “Most of them bad. I do not like it here. Can we leave?”

“Soon, but we need to find the platform first and they’ve hidden it with magic. Can’t you taste it?”

She hissed a complaint that made the tips of his ears flush bright red, but obliged him by probing the air once more. “There is something,” she said after a long moment. “It is here, yet not here. Like winter seeping through a burrow’s mouth.”

“Can you tell where it’s coming from?”

“It is all around, but maybe...” Her coils shifted across his shoulders as she slipped around the back of his neck. “Behind us?”

He twisted and looked past the barrier, back towards the walkway that had brought them to this part of the station. There wasn’t much there, just rows of trolleys in metal corrals and the soft artificial glow of the arrivals board. Of the two, the board was the most promising, and as he contemplated giving it a few sharp taps with his wand a posh, drawling voice reached his ears over the low rumble of a train pulling up to the platform.

"I don't see why we had to come through this filthy muggle station," it said, and Harry leaned over further to see a boy in rich green robes step out from a shadowy space behind the arrivals board. His angular face was scrunched in a pout as he navigated the grimy flagstone floor, carefully dodging candy wrappers and waxed paper bags. When he came to a small river of coffee spilling from an overturned cup he hitched up his robes, revealing gleaming leather loafers, and hopped daintily over the milky stream. Once he was safely on the other side, the boy smoothed his clothes with a flick of his wrist and checked that his platinum blond hair — which was gelled back off his face — hadn’t come loose.

“Honestly,” he said. “You’d think they like living in a sty the way they don’t pick up after themselves.” The boy was complaining to a tall man who could only be his father, for he had the same aristocratic cheekbones and pale hair, though the man’s was long and tied back with a black ribbon. The man’s robes were velvet, and he carried a black cane that tapped against the flagstones in time with his right foot.

"Now, now, Draco," he said, a hint of wry amusement in his voice. "It would be unseemly for you to appear sick in front of your new schoolmates. Whatever would they think of you?"

The boy, Draco, grimaced. “Apparating doesn't make me sick!”

“Of course,” his father drawled, looking thoroughly unconvinced. Draco’s cheeks flushed pink and he looked about to say something nasty back when they rounded the pillar and caught sight of Harry sitting on his trunk. Harry expected them to pass him by on their way to the platform and was caught off guard when they stopped in front of him.

"What are you staring at?” Draco asked, his eyes narrowing like Dudley's always did before he started a round of Harry Hunting.

"Umm...” Harry was torn between asking for help and running for cover. Draco's father was looming over him and he could feel the weight of the man’s scrutiny like lead weights strapped over his shoulders. It made him feel tiny, and his heart fluttered with the first seeds of panic.

Draco groaned and rolled his eyes. "Well, what are you waiting for? Move, you're blocking the
"The gate! Merlin, first muggles and now mudbloods!" Draco spat the word like venom. "It’s a wonder our entire world hasn't gone to the dogs."

Harry didn't know what a mudblood was, but he knew an insult when he heard one and bristled, irritation chasing away his fear. If the boy had been larger he might have held his tongue, but Draco was a wisp of a child, small and slender as a branch of willow — no match for a thunderstorm. “Are you always this rude?” he asked.

Draco sneered. “Rude? You’re the one whose filthy muggle blood is polluting our—”

A serpent, gleaming like silver, struck Draco’s shoulder. He flinched, his words dying in his throat. It took Harry a moment to realize that it wasn't an actual snake that had attacked the boy, but the head of his father’s cane.

"Draco," the man warned, using the cane to pull his son back a few steps so Harry had space to breathe. Then, much to Harry's surprise, the man crouched down in front of him so they were eye-to-eye.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," he said, extending a black gloved hand. "Lucius Malfoy."

Harry could see Draco gaping at his father's back, so he took the offered hand with as much dignity as he could muster and gave it what he hoped was a firm shake. "Harry Potter," he replied.

"What?" Draco yelped.

Mr Malfoy's lips curled in a tight smile. "I thought as much," he said. "You do have the Potter look about you. It's the hair I expect, much like your father's was."

Harry blinked in surprise and studied the man in front of him. He looked to be in his thirties, and Harry wondered if his parents would have been the same age had they lived through the war. “You knew my father?"

"Not well." Mr Malfoy sounded sympathetic, but his expression remained mild. "He was several years my junior in school and we didn't run in the same social circles. I saw him in passing, but I'm afraid I never saw need to speak with him."

Harry let this sink in. “Did you know my mother as well?” he asked.

“Ah, yes. Lily Evans. I had a young friend who was rather fond of your mother, despite her… unfortunate parentage.”

Harry wrinkled his nose as he thought of his aunt Petunia and the quality of parents needed to create such a spiteful, cruel woman. ‘Unfortunate’ was probably putting it kindly. At least he had finally learned his mother’s name. Lily, like the flower. It sounded much prettier than ‘Petunia’.

“She was a powerful witch,” Mr Malfoy continued. “Quite skilled at charms and potions, if I recall correctly. It broke my friend’s heart when they had a falling out. He pined for months, it was rather pitiable.”

This was all news to Harry, and he found himself fascinated with the life of this woman he couldn't even remember. “Why did they have a falling out?”
“It is not my place to say,” Mr Malfoy replied. Harry’s disappointment must have shown on his face because Mr Malfoy leaned in and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial hush. “I can, however, tell you that it involved him saying something rather regrettable in the heat of the moment.” He shot a sharp look over his shoulder at Draco, who looked mortified at the comparison.

“Did they ever make up?”

Mr Malfoy shook his head. “No. She carried a grudge until her death. A pity, really. They’d been the best of friends for years, but even when he begged for forgiveness she wouldn’t bend.”

“Well, that wasn’t very nice of her,” he said, while thinking that his mother and aunt may have shared more than a maiden name. It seemed petty to hate someone because they’d said something mean once — it had taken Harry several years of mistreatment to bring that level of hatred to bear on the Dursleys — and Mr Malfoy’s friend had even apologized afterward, something the Dursleys never did.

“Indeed,” Mr Malfoy agreed, triumph shining in his eyes. He rose back to his full height. "Now, I'm afraid my son has made a rather poor first impression on you, and for that I apologize. I expect him to be on his very best behaviour from now on. Isn't that right, Draco?"

Draco shrank under his father's gaze. "Yes, father," he said, and then froze, as if uncertain what came next. Mr Malfoy inclined his head in Harry's direction, and this must have meant something to the boy because he straightened his shoulders, walked up to Harry, and extended his own hand.

"Draco Malfoy," he said. "I'm also starting my first year."

Harry stood and took the offered hand, eager to prove he wouldn’t hold a grudge for something as petty as name-calling. His skin still crawled at the contact, but the instinctive urge to pull away was fading with each hand he shook. "Harry Potter," he replied. "I'm sorry about blocking the… gate?" He glanced back at the barrier, still puzzled over how it worked.

Mr Malfoy raised one thin eyebrow. “Were you not informed of the platform’s location? I thought Dumbledore would have explained everything to you by now.”

“Dumbledore?” Harry asked, bemused. “I’ve never met him. All my letters were from the Deputy Headmistress.”

“He didn’t send a representative from the school to meet with you during the summer?”

“No. All I got were some letters.”

“How very Dumbledore,” Mr Malfoy sneered, and Harry got the impression he didn’t much care for the Headmaster. Draco was nodding along, in complete agreement with his father.

Mr Malfoy brushed the collar of his cloak. “As a member of the Board of Governors, I suppose it falls to me to rectify the old man’s mistakes — again.” He pointed at the barrier with the top of his cane, the silver serpent head lunging forward as if to strike down the bricks with its needle-thin fangs.

“To access the Hogwarts Express, you need merely walk into the northern face of the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten.”

“I don’t need to tap anything?”

“No. The wall is an illusion, of sorts. The barrier will act solid should a muggle lean or brush
against it, but will let a witch or wizard through directly. Like so.” Mr Malfoy struck the floor with the foot of his cane and Harry’s trunk lurched into the air.

Harry made a grab for the handle, worried it would drift away, but the magic guiding its movement merely shifted it to the side and set it up on one end.

He kept a hand on it. Just in case.

Obstacle cleared, Mr Malfoy turned to his son. “Draco, show Mr Potter how to cross the barrier.”

Draco smirked at Harry as he sauntered towards the pillar. His right foot made contact with the bricks and sunk out of sight. Another step and he’d vanished straight into the wall.

So it really is a gate, Harry thought as he maneuvered his trunk around until it was pointing towards the spot the other boy had vanished. At least I was in the right place.

He tightened his grip on the trunk and pressed all his weight against the end. The wheels clacked over the floor, and then he was nosing at the barrier. There was a moment of resistance, like pressing against a membrane, before he stepped into the bricks.

Passing through the barrier felt like walking through a sheet of water. The magic slid over his skin, thicker than air, but lighter than stone. He held his breath until he stepped out the other side.

Draco was waiting impatiently for them, but Harry’s eyes were immediately drawn past him to an old scarlet steam engine puffing gently next to a platform buzzing with activity. A sign overhead read: Hogwarts Express, 11 o’clock.

Harry looked back in time to watch Mr Malfoy step through a wrought iron archway decorated with runic symbols and carved leaves. "How did everyone else get here?" he asked, bewildered. He didn't recognize any of the witches or wizards in front of him from the station, which he should have seeing as how he'd been unintentionally blocking the door.

"Apparated, probably," said Draco, turning to look over the crowd. "Or they woke up at an ungodly hour— Is that Goyle?" Draco was looking in the direction of a large, burly boy currently lifting a trunk into the train single-handed. Harry was impressed, if that trunk was anywhere near as heavy as his own the boy must have been very strong.

"A moment before you leave, Draco," his father said, drawing his son away. He moved his cane in a small circle and the air around them shimmered. It reminded Harry of what Mrs Longbottom had done in Ollivanders, and it must have had the same effect because even though the Malfoys’ lips were moving Harry couldn’t hear so much as a whisper. He tried not to stare at what was meant to be a private conversation, but from the corner of his eye he saw Draco glance in his direction and nod once.

So they’re talking about me, he thought. He was used to people gossiping behind his back. His classmates had done it all the time when they thought he wasn’t listening, and he’d grown accustomed to shouldering their disdainful looks. Yet, there was no malice in Draco’s face, merely a look of great concentration as he listened to his father, and Harry let himself hope they weren’t discussing anything bad. The elder Malfoy had been decent — for an adult. He’d been polite, had answered Harry’s questions without mocking him for his ignorance on how the magical world worked, and had even apologized for the actions of his son. No one ever apologized to Harry, no one cared about his feelings enough to bother.

Well, he reflected, that wasn’t entirely true. Basil cared, and Neville had made sure he was okay
after his grandmother’s rant in the apothecary. He wondered if Neville was already here and made a new sweep of the platform looking for him.

The shimmering barrier separating him from the two Malfoys dissipated and Draco rejoined him. “We should hurry,” he said. "Most of the good compartments should still be open."

Harry wasn’t sure how he knew if a compartment was good if this was his first year at Hogwarts but, not wanting to sit on his own in case he didn’t find Neville, he said a polite goodbye to Draco’s father and followed the boy towards the back of the train. It was fortunate he did as his ability to levitate objects was limited to the size and weight of a can of paint, and he never would have managed to get his trunk up the narrow stairs if Draco hadn't commandeered the burly boy from before.

"Harry, this is Gregory Goyle," Draco said with a lazy wave in the direction of the boy once they were safely in the narrow corridor running the length of the carriage. "He's in our year. Goyle, this is Harry Potter."

Goyle's heavy brows drew together and Harry was reminded of the gorilla he'd seen at the zoo. The boy grunted in acknowledgement, doing nothing to dispel the unflattering comparison. He didn't move to shake hands, which was expected, Harry supposed, given that they were presently occupied with two heavy trunks. He almost regretted the lost opportunity to practice what was quickly becoming a common form of greeting new people.

Almost, but not quite.

Draco didn't seem to expect any more from Goyle, because he swept Harry off down the carriage despite his protests at leaving the boy behind to lug both their trunks down the narrow passage.

"It's fine," Draco assured him. "He's more muscle than brain anyway. Aha!" They'd come to a compartment at the end of the carriage, and after poking his head in to check it was empty, Draco held the door open and motioned Harry through. "After you."

The compartment had two cushioned benches done in a moss green fabric that was decorated with small winged boars. Sturdy overhead racks, long enough to hold three trunks each, ran above each bench, their undersides padded to keep students from knocking themselves unconscious if they forgot their surroundings and stood up too quickly. Harry was much too short for this to be a concern. However, this also meant he’d never get his trunk on or off the rack without aid.

Across from the compartment door was a window looking out over the platform. He walked over and watched as students and their families said goodbye. Some cheeks were wet with tears, and hugs and small parcels were exchanged all around while owls bobbed on shoulders and sleek cats wove underfoot. It was so… busy. Rather than stoking his excitement, the bustling crowd left him feeling detached and numb. If his life had played out different, he would have been out there with his parents, saying farewell for the first time.

There was nothing he could do about that now. The prophecy had been uttered and the dark wizard had acted to eliminate a threat. He wasn’t happy with the man’s decision to hunt him down, but he understood why he felt it was necessary. It must have been frightening to learn that his death was assured at the hands of a child, and Harry couldn’t blame him for doing everything in his power to stay alive.

If wanting to live made one evil, then they were all cursed.

A loud *thunk* brought him out of his thoughts, and he looked over to where Goyle had lifted his
trunk into the overhead rack. Draco was sprawled out on the bench across from the boy, wisely putting himself out of range in case he dropped something.

"Where's your trunk?" Harry asked Draco, who pointed at the rack above him where a dark green chest rested securely. Harry was certain it hadn't been there when they arrived.

"How…?"

"I had my house elf drop it off," Draco said, picking at a manicured nail. "Well, I suppose it's my father's elf, but it still has to obey me."

Neville had mentioned house elves while they waited in Madam Malkins, they were magical beings who served the old pureblood families. "The Malfoys are an old family, then?"

Draco looked affronted. "Of course we are! And I'll have you know that we're one of the most influential and well established wizarding families in the British Isles!"

"I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "I only found out magic was real a bit over a month ago and there's still lots of things I don't know. I didn't mean to insult you or your family."

Draco was giving him a strange look, and even Goyle had paused in the act of raising the second trunk overhead. "You didn't know about magic?" he asked.

"No. Not really. I mean, I could do magic accidentally, but didn't know that's what it was. I thought I was a—" He nearly said 'a freak', but stopped himself at the last moment. "That I was strange."

Draco shook his head in disbelief. "But you're a Potter! You're from one of the old families. There are traditions to uphold, and rituals, and alliances and…" He shared a look with Goyle, who seemed just as perturbed. "What are you going to do when you turn seventeen? It isn't like they teach any of that stuff in school!"

Nerves fluttered in Harry's stomach. "What stuff? What happens when I turn seventeen?"

"You become head of the Potter household, of course! You’ll need to manage your family’s finances and properties, make contracts, and fill the Potter seat on the Wizengamot, among other responsibilities."

Harry dropped onto the bench across from Draco. It seemed that as soon as he figured out one aspect of the magical world another sprung upon him. "But I don’t know how to do any of those things," he said, overwhelmed. "Do you know how to do them?"

"My parents have been teaching me since I was little," Draco replied. "You should have learned this ages ago. What incompetent fools were you living with all these years?"

"I was sent to live with muggle relatives after my parents were killed," Harry replied.

"Muggles!" Draco sneered and Goyle made a sound of disgust. "No wonder you’re so far behind. It must have been terrible living there. I think I would have run away as soon as I could!" He paused, frowning. "At least they let you come to Hogwarts."

"They were terrible!" Harry agreed, leaning forward on the bench. "And… they don't actually know I'm here right now. They would have tried to stop me if they did."

"What do you mean they don't know?" Draco asked. "Didn't they see your letters?"
"No. I knew they wouldn't let me come, so I handled everything on my own." He leaned back and looked out the window at the platform full of families. "Though I wish the school would send out maps or something, because I wouldn’t have found Diagon Alley if I hadn't bumped into Neville and his Grandmother."

Draco laughed and looked at Harry in astonishment. "You went looking for Diagon Alley on your own? I'm not sure if that's brave or stupid."

Harry huffed. It wasn’t as though he’d had a choice in the matter!

“And with a Longbottom!” Draco continued to chuckle.

“You know Neville?”

“I’ve seen him at seasonal celebrations and Ministry events.” He shrugged. “They're a good line, at least. It could have been a lot worse."

"Worse?"

He nodded towards the window. Out on the platform a train of children with bright red hair were being herded past their carriage by a plump witch in a patched robe. The woman was looking around frantically, as though she’d lost something important. Another child, perhaps. “See all those redheads? Weasleys, the lot of them. They have more children than they can afford, and they can't afford a lot."

Having spent most of his life without a pound to his name, Harry couldn’t fault someone for doing the best they could with what they had. “Not having money doesn’t make you a bad person.”

Draco scoffed and Harry got the impression that, as far as he was concerned, money went a very long way in his estimate of a person’s inherent goodness.

“They’re not just poor, you know,” he said. “They’re blood traitors. Father says they’re trying to get a new Act passed that will make muggles untouchable.”

“Act? Like a law?”

“Yes,” Draco drawled. “The Muggle Protection Act, I believe they’re calling it. Fat load of good it will do if the muggles ever find out about us. Father says there are places where they still burn witches and wizards alive! Can you imagine?"

Harry shuddered and leaned closer to the window to watch the red-headed family’s progress down the platform. He didn’t need his imagination to know how badly muggles reacted to magic, he had ample first hand experience.

The Weasleys were loading trunks into the next carriage over while laughing at the antics of a pair of twin boys. They were pretending to steal each other’s noses and then showing them to the youngest child, and only girl, who looked to be trying very hard not to cry as she clung to her mother’s hand.

Harry’s eyes trailed along the rest of the platform, losing themselves in the vibrant wash of colours, when he caught sight of a very memorable hat. He jumped to his feet and fumbled with the window latch. Pushing it open, he squeezed as much of his head and shoulder out as would fit.

“Neville!” he called, waving his arm to catch the other boy’s attention. Neville’s head whipped around, looking every which way before finally spotting Harry.
“Who is it?” asked Basil, poking her head up to see what had caused all the excitement. She gasped. “He has a toad! Is it a present for me? Can I eat it?”

Neville was holding a toad — rather tightly — against his chest. The amphibian was beating its long legs back and forth in a valiant escape attempt that was going nowhere fast.

“You can’t eat him!” Harry said. “The toad is his friend.”

“Like you are my friend?”

“Yes!”

Neville waved back. “Harry!”

Several curious heads turned his way so Harry motioned Neville to come to the compartment and then quickly ducked back inside.

“You’re inviting him in?” Draco asked as Harry shut the window. He didn’t sound altogether pleased.

“Is that a problem?”

“I suppose it’s fine.”

A few minutes later there was a loud thunk outside followed by the sound of Neville stammering an apology. Harry walked to the door and slid it open.

Outside, Neville was clutching his toad like a lifeline and looked close to tears as a tall boy with large teeth, coarse black hair, and a green-trimmed school robe thrown casually over his street clothes loomed over him in a towering rage.

“Look what you’ve done!” the boy snarled, throwing his arm towards where two trunks were jammed between the narrow walls. “If there’s a single scratch on my trunk from this I’ll take it out of your hide!”

Harry hesitated in the doorway. The boy in green was clenching his fists and looked ready for a brawl, but friends were supposed to help each other and he dearly wished to be Neville’s friend. He cleared his throat and stepped into the hall, drawing the older boy’s ire. His scowl was ferocious as he pivoted, crooked teeth bared and a bestial growl rumbling in his chest.

Despite his initial bravado, fear born of a hundred beatings lodged in Harry’s throat, rendering him mute.

A crowd was gathering on the far side of the trunks as the commotion drew students out of their compartments. They whispered together, standing well back as the older boy took a menacing step towards Harry. “And who do you think you are?”

Harry licked his lips, the lump in his throat refusing to budge. ”Harry,” he whispered. Then, louder, “Harry Potter.”

Silence rang through the carriage at his pronouncement. For a heartbeat it stretched, heavy and tangible below the low ceiling. Then the whispers began anew.

‘Did he say Potter?’

‘The Harry Potter?’
Harry withdrew into himself as heads craned to better peer at him from across the trunks. The older boy looked surprised for a moment, but his scowl soon returned stronger than ever.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” he spat.

“It should,” said a cool voice from behind Harry’s shoulder. Draco had risen and was now leaning against the doorframe. He looked casual, elegant, and not in the least bit threatening on his own, but Goyle was at his back like a burly guard-dog and it made Harry feel a little better about their odds should things come to blows.

“You’re a Malfoy,” the older boy said, staring straight at Draco.

Draco raised his brows. “Indeed. And you’re a Flint, if I’m not mistaken.”

To Harry’s astonishment, Flint dropped his hostility and smiled. The expression didn’t look natural on him. “Marcus Flint,” he said. He held out his hand and Draco shook it.

Harry felt lost as Draco and Flint exchanged pleasantries. Something had just happened, he was sure of it, but he didn’t have a clue what it was.

“So, you’ll be starting in Slytherin this year?” Flint asked Draco.

“Naturally,” Draco replied.

While Flint was distracted, Harry caught Neville’s sleeve and tugged him through the compartment door. He looked to be in shock, his eyes too wide and a refrain of stuttering apologies falling from his lips. In his hands, Trevor the toad was in peril of being crushed. His legs had stopped flailing and his long, sticky tongue was lolling from the side of his mouth.

"Can I eat the toad now?" Basil whispered.

Harry sighed and smacked Neville across the face.

He didn't put much force behind the blow, just enough to snap Neville out of his panicked daze. Despite his restraint, moisture gathered in the corners of the boy’s eyes and his jaw dropped open. "Did you slap me?"

In response, Harry pointed at Trevor, who was twitching feebly and looked seconds away from expiring. Neville's face stretched in horror as he took in the state of his pet. "Trevor!" He rested the toad on the palm of his left hand and half-stroked half-prodded his back until he let out a sullen croak.

"Stay here," Harry instructed, pointing at the bench.

"But, my trunk..."

"I'll get it, just try to stay calm."

Harry gathered his courage and marched back to the door, sliding past Goyle and Draco to step fully into the corridor. There he stumbled as a wall of curious faces met his. Students were crammed into the narrow space on the other side of the trunks. They peered over each others shoulders and hung from the doorway of the next compartment, all eager to catch a glimpse of him.

Another round of whispers broke out, and Harry fought the urge to slink back into the safety of the compartment. He kept his eyes glued to Neville's trunk as he moved up beside it.
The trunks were truly stuck, he decided after a moment of careful tugging and twisting. Physically forcing them apart would leave scuff marks no amount of buffing would erase, and Harry wasn't keen to find out whether Flint's threats had teeth. He glanced up at the students across from him, but they seemed far more interested in watching him puzzle out a solution than in lending a hand, and he didn't dare interrupt whatever trick Draco had used to distract Flint in order to ask the older boy to unstick his trunk himself.

This left Harry with only one solution: magic.

He knelt next to the trunks and rested a hand on each lid. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine the space between the walls expanding until the trunks could slide free, but each time the vision began to solidify in his mind he was distracted by an errant whisper or the hair-raising feeling of being watched. His concentration thus shattered, both the walls and the trunks remained where they were.

"Need a hand, mate?" asked a cheeky voice from behind him.

Harry's eyes flew open and his heart jumped into his throat as he found himself pressed between a pair of identical redheads. Their shoulders bumped his sides as they worked in perfect synchronization to tip the trunks on their sides, freeing up enough space to slide them apart.

He squirmed away from them, stumbling over their legs as he put some distance between them. He pressed his back against the wall to the side of his compartment's door and tried to calm down.

"Thanks," he said when his heart had stopped pounding. The twins turned to him with identical cheshire grins.

"No problem," said the twin on his right. "We had to do something since old Flinty here was too smitten to lend a bloke a hand."

"Love at first sight," the second twin sung, clapping a hand to his chest. Some of the students in the crowd giggled.

Flint must have been listening because his face turned red. "I am not smitten!" he snarled.

Unrepentant, the twins made kissy faces at him until Flint yanked his trunk from their hands and, with a final murderous look in their direction, stormed off to gales of laughter.

"I'm not sure that was a good idea," Harry said once the door to the next carriage had slammed shut behind Flint.

The twins shrugged.

"Old Flinty doesn’t like us much anyway—"

"We play Quidditch against him see—"

"And always make sure to send him some nice presents—"

"So there’s no helping it really."

Harry dug up what he remembered from Neville’s description of the sport played on broomsticks. He didn’t know that there were people who played at the school, it sounded awfully dangerous for casual play. "You play Quidditch?"

"Yeah, for Gryffindor—"
“Which is the best house, by the way.”

Draco scoffed. He’d resumed leaning against the doorframe and was watching the twins as a meerkat would a scorpion. “The house of reckless fools, you mean.”

The twins ignored him.

“You’re really Harry Potter?” asked the one on Harry’s right.

“Yes.”

“Wicked!” they said in perfect harmony.

“Fred and George Weasley,” said the twin on the left. “I’m Fred. He’s George.”

Harry wondered if this was where they were supposed to shake hands, but much like Goyle they didn’t offer.

“So do you really have the scar—“

“From where You-Know-Who attacked you?“

Harry was already having trouble keeping the two straight in his head, so he just nodded. Their eyes went wide with anticipation and they stared at him, waiting. Harry stared back.

The silence between them stretched on and Fred began to bounce on the balls of his feet. “Do you remember what he looked like?” he blurted out. As soon as the question left his lips an eerie hush fell over the carriage.

Harry crossed his arms. He was tired of being interrogated and just wanted to go back into the compartment, shut the door, and hide. “Why would I remember what he looked like?” he said. “I don’t even know what his name was!”

“What?” exclaimed George. “But everyone knows his name.”

“What is it then?”

The twins shifted nervously. They weren’t the only ones, even Draco looked uneasy.

“Well?” he pressed after a minute went by where no one spoke.

“It’s… it’s just that—“

“People don’t say it, you know?”

Harry huffed. “That’s stupid.” He looked over the gathered faces once again, feeling bold when none of them would meet his eyes. Then he grabbed Neville’s trunk and pulled it after him into the compartment, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“It was Voldemort,” Neville said quietly. Both Draco and Goyle flinched.

“Huh?”

Neville licked his lips. “The name of the Dark Lord. It was Voldemort.”

“Voldemort.” The name felt sleek and powerful as it rolled across his tongue, and he wondered
about the man it had belonged to. Why did he become a dark lord? What was he fighting for?

“Stop saying it out loud!” Draco hissed, his eyes darting around the compartment.

Realization dawned slowly on Harry. It had been ten years since Voldemort’s death, but Draco was still afraid, and so were all those people in the corridor.

“It’s just a name,” he said. “Now help me get Neville’s trunk up. I think I just heard the train’s whistle.”

As the clock over the platform finished tolling eleven the train let out a low whistle and rumbled out of the station, picking up speed. Soon they’d left the grey and silver skyline of London behind, trading it for green fields dotted with sheep, cattle and the occasional tractor.

They were joined by another hulking first year boy who Draco introduced as Vincent Crabbe, and who turned out to be as loquacious as Goyle. The two of them sat on either side of the door, communicating in a private language of grunts and waggling eyebrows, and glaring at anyone who passed by in the corridor.

Word that Harry Potter was on the train had spread like wildfire. Not ten minutes after pulling out of the station there was a constant stream of gawkers pausing outside their door and peering in through the glass.

Draco soaked up the attention like a sponge. He looked completely at ease sprawled across one of the window seats, positioned so every passerby would be sure to recognize him. Harry wished he could have even half the boy’s confidence, but every time he tried to emulate Draco his mind returned to the snakes at the zoo who were stared at just like this, prompting him to retreat behind Neville, who seemed as uneasy at being the centre of attention as he was.

“I hope they don’t plan on doing this all year,” Harry said when a frizzy-haired girl passed by the window for the third time.

“They’ll settle down eventually,” Draco replied. “Right now they’re all excited because you haven’t been sorted yet.” He paused, and his expression became pensive. “They’re probably betting on the outcome.”

“Betting?” Harry sputtered. “With real money?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course with real money. It isn’t every day the famous Harry Potter comes to Hogwarts. Whichever house gets you will have bragging rights for the next seven years.”

Harry paled at the prospect of his unasked for fame never fading. He didn’t think he could cope with being the centre of attention for seven entire years.

“What house do you think you’ll be in anyway?” Draco asked.

“I haven’t really thought about it. You’re aiming for Slytherin, right?”

“Not just aiming. I know I’ll be in Slytherin. All my family has been; it’s traditional. Besides, the sorting ceremony will take your preferences into account if you’re determined enough.”

Neville had been very quiet since he’d taken his seat and seemed to be watching the young Malfoy with distrust, but at this he perked up. “It will?” he asked.
“Of course it will. The hat won’t sort you into a House you’d be miserable in.”

“The hat?” Harry asked.

Draco grinned. “It’s supposed to be a secret until the ceremony starts, but my father’s on the board of governors and he told me all about it. Want to hear?”

“Yeah!” Harry said, and then listened with rapt attention as Draco described how the school’s founders had enchanted a hat to judge which of the four houses they’d be best suited for. Neville was equally engrossed, though he also looked vaguely guilty at hearing something that was supposed to be kept secret. Crabbe and Goyle showed no reaction and kept scowling at the people outside the door.

“Are you worried about your sorting?” Harry asked Neville once they’d had time to digest this new information.

Neville cast a nervous glance Draco’s way. “Well, I want to be in Gryffindor like my dad… but I’ll probably end up in Hufflepuff.”

True to form, Draco scoffed.

“What about me?” Harry asked. “What house do you think I’ll be in?”

“You’re real brave,” Neville said immediately, then flushed pink. “I bet you’re a Gryffindor. I asked my Gran and she said both your parents were.”

“My parents were Gryffindors?”

“You didn’t know?” Draco asked.

Harry shook his head. “Raised by muggles, remember?”

Draco shuddered. “That still feels wrong on so many levels. But I guess it proves you’re resourceful, or else you wouldn’t have made it here today. That’s a Slytherin trait.” He glowered at Neville, who pursed his lips.

Harry could feel an argument brewing. “I’d be happy with any house as long as I can learn magic,” he said, and it was the truth.

At a quarter-to one there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and the ever-present crowd was pushed away by a trolley piled high with sweets in bright packaging. Crabbe and Goyle jumped to their feet and flung open the door as though the little old witch manning the trolley were their saviour.

She smiled wryly at their enthusiasm. “Anything off the trolley, dears?” She directed the question to Harry, Neville and Draco, for it was obvious by the way Crabbe and Goyle were digging through their pockets that they intended to buy something off the trolley. A great many things, if the amount of silver sickles that appeared in their hands was anything to go by.

“I’ll try something,” Harry said, standing and making his way to the door. He’d been too nervous to eat more than a piece of plain toast that morning, and though his nerves were still strung taut with anticipation he knew he should try to eat something at least.

The trolley was full of candies: Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Liquorice Wands and many other strange
things he’d never heard of in his life. He picked out a Pastie, and then because it would no doubt amuse Basil, a chocolate frog.

Crabbe and Goyle loaded the benches next to them with mountains of sweets, and Harry wasn’t sure how they intended to finish it all without making themselves sick. As he returned to his seat, Neville bought a Cauldron Cake and something in a mint green package with *Ice Mice* written in frosty lettering.

Despite his claim to overwhelming wealth, Draco didn’t buy anything at all. Instead he seemed content to nick sweets from Crabbe and Goyle’s piles, neither of whom so much as blinked at the theft.

“Look Basil,” he whispered while the others were occupied with their own snacks. “I’ve bought a frog.”

Her head bumped his left earlobe as she peeked over the kerchief. “You bought me a frog?”

“No. This one’s made of chocolate. It would make you sick.”

“I want a frog,” she said. “And I still can’t eat the toad?”

Harry looked around quickly for Trevor and found him cowering next to Neville’s foot, as though he could sense Basil was nearby. “No, you can’t eat him. He’s still Neville’s friend, remember?”

“I don’t know why he wants to be friends with a toad,” she said. “They aren’t very smart. Though, they’re smarter than frogs. Frogs will jump down your throat if you let them.”

“What are you whispering about over there?” Draco asked. Harry jumped, worried he’d been overheard.

“Oh, just talking to myself,” he said, then held up the Chocolate Frog package. “These aren’t real frogs, are they?”

Neville answered him. “No, but they’ve been enchanted to hop around.” He suddenly turned serious. “Be sure not to swallow them whole. I swallowed a leg once and it nearly choked me it was kicking so hard.”

Harry looked down at the box in his hands. “That seems… dangerous.”

“It’s not so bad,” said Neville. “Just remember to chew them first.”

As Neville struggled to open his Ice Mice, Harry pulled the rip-cord sealing the Chocolate Frog package and lifted the lid. The chocolate inside certainly looked like a frog, and as soon as the packaging was open it came to life, blinking globular eyes and coiling its long hind legs for a jump. Not expecting his sweet to attempt a sudden escape, Harry was a hair too slow grabbing it. Basil, however, was not.

As the frog launched itself towards the headrest behind him, Basil’s head shot from his kerchief and snagged it out of the air. She withdrew just as swiftly, but the damage had already been done.

Across from him, Draco was staring wide-eyed, a Cauldron Cake frozen halfway to his open mouth. He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand.

“It does taste funny,” Basil remarked before dropping the frog unceremoniously into Harry’s lap where it lay still, enchantment already worn off.
“Was that a—“ Draco started to say, but Harry cut him off with a ferocious glare. He caught the message and rearranged his face into a mild expression, but he couldn’t hide the bright gleam of curiosity in his eyes. When Neville excused himself to go to the washroom, he slid onto the bench next to Harry and leaned in close.

“You have a snake?” he whispered, and Harry thought he sounded a little jealous.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Harry whispered back, praying that Draco wasn’t as biased against snakes as Neville’s grandmother had been. “They aren’t allowed as pets. But she’s my friend and I wasn’t leaving her behind!”

Draco groaned. “And here I was begging my parents for an owl!”

“Are you going to tell on me?”

“What would you give for my silence?” Draco asked, smirking.

Harry bit his lip. He felt like he was back in primary school, with Dudley standing over him waving a fist-full of stolen pencils in his face. ‘Give me your lunch and I’ll give these back,’ he’d say.

“What do you want?”

“A favour,” he replied. “To be called in at a time of my choosing.”

Harry supposed that was fair enough, even though imagining what Draco might ask of him made him nervous. He hoped it wouldn’t be embarrassing. “Okay, it’s a deal.”

Draco grinned. “You’d make a good Slytherin.” He slid back into his own seat when Neville returned, and though his eyes were over-bright as the afternoon wore on, he kept his word.

In spite of the train’s magical origin, the journey to Hogwarts took close to six hours.

When the snacks had run out, Draco jumped into the role of zealous tutor and began instructing Harry on various points of proper pureblood behaviour and etiquette.

He demonstrated how to sit and stand with the casual elegance Harry had admired earlier; chin up, back straight, shoulders relaxed, and one foot slightly ahead of the other. Aware of the gawkers still crowding the compartment window, Harry was reluctant to get up and try for himself until Crabbe reached over and pulled the blind down, giving them some privacy and eliciting a chorus of muffled complaints from the other side of the door.

"A Malfoy must always be composed," Draco said as Harry attempted to mimic his posture. "The very picture of aristocratic elegance and charm." He demonstrated by giving a winning smile, which Harry admitted was effective and only slightly ruined when the train hit an uneven patch of track, causing Draco to wobble.

Harry's back cracked in protest as he straightened up and raised his head. The posture was more open than he was used to and it left him feeling exposed, but he soldiered through and grinned broadly back at Draco. The blond boy studied him, then shook his head and had Goyle take down his trunk. He retrieved a hand mirror from inside and held it up to Harry's face.

“You need to practice smiling to get it right,” he explained. "Try again, and this time relax the muscles around your eyes. You're going for open and inviting, not like you're contemplating world
domination — though hold on to that one too, you never know when it might come in handy."

The boy in the mirror looked back in bewilderment, and Harry slowly coaxed his reflection into another smile. The range of expressions his face could convey startled him. He'd never been one for primping in front of a mirror as his appearance had mattered little at the end of the day. The realization that people may have been able to read his thoughts and feelings on his face worried him, and he admitted as much aloud.

"Don’t worry," Neville said, piping up for the first time in over half an hour. "I can’t tell what you’re thinking most of the time. You even kept it together when Gran was ranting about snakes in Diagon Alley."

Draco quirked a brow and glanced at the scarf around Harry's neck. "Oh, do tell," he said, radiating curiosity.

Harry grimaced and shook his head, not willing to elaborate. Some things were better off forgotten.

Draco pouted, but had the grace to drop the topic.

Once the muscles of Harry's face were twitching from exhaustion they put the mirror away and Draco went over proper greeting and addresses, emphasizing that Harry shouldn't call anyone by their first name unless he'd been given permission to do so.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"You don't want to come across as too familiar," Draco replied. "First names are for family, friends, and close acquaintances. Would you feel comfortable calling one of your professors by their first name?"

No, Harry admitted, he wouldn’t. "Should I call you Malfoy, then?"

"Hmm..." Draco's head tilted to the side and he smirked. "You can call me Draco. I have a feeling we'll get along famously. And we'll be spending a lot of time together if I'm going to teach you everything you need to know before you're seventeen."

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. Draco had, in a roundabout way, just asked to be his friend.

"You can call me Harry!" he chirped, then blushed furiously as Draco chuckled at his ill concealed enthusiasm. Running a hand through his hair, he turned hopefully towards Neville.

"Please, call me Neville," the other boy cut in before Harry could ask. "Longbottom is what my grandmother calls me when I'm in big trouble."

Harry nodded, too happy to speak. His chest was overflowing with warmth at the thought of having friends — real, human friends. He gave Neville permission to call him by his first name as well, then turned to the two remaining boys in the compartment. Crabbe and Goyle seemed oblivious to Harry's questioning gaze.

"Ignore them," Draco advised. "They don't give anyone permission, not even me." He looked miffed, so Harry decided to change the subject.

"What about handshakes?" he asked, hoping that Draco would have the answer to this mystery as well. "When do you offer to shake, and when do you refuse?"

"You should never refuse," Draco said. "Not unless you want to mortally offend the person offering — or if you consider that person an enemy, of course." This seemed very serious for such
a common gesture, and Harry remarked as much.

"I'll give you a hint," Draco said. "What hand do you shake with?"

Harry looked down at his hands. "My right."

"And what hand do you hold your wand in?"

"Also my right." He stared harder, trying to piece together how the two were connected. "Oh! I can't do both at the same time."

"Exactly! So, if you refuse to shake hands, you're telling the other person you don't trust them not to curse you if you put your wand away — basically declaring them an enemy."

"But what if you didn't have your wand out to begin with?"

"It doesn't matter, refusing carries the same meaning either way."

Harry looked to Neville, wondering if he'd contradict Draco, but the other boy nodded. "It's true," he said, "though it's really only the pureblood or traditional halfblood families that will start feuds over it nowadays. Still, Gran's always told me it's better to be safe than sorry."

"I don't think it's quite that life or death for muggles," Harry said.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well yes, they're muggles."

"What would you have done if I'd refused to shake your hand?" he asked out of curiosity.

"I would have been obliged to carry a grudge," Draco replied, turning up his nose. "Though I can't see why you would have."

"Well, you were a little rude," Harry reminded him, but he was smiling as he said it. From Draco's strained expression Harry guessed the other boy thought he'd been a bit more than a little rude, but Harry had been called so many other unflattering names over his life that mudblood seemed tame in comparison. Besides, he knew for a fact it wasn't true — the names his cousin and uncle called him hit much closer to home.

Harry flopped back onto his seat. He wasn’t looking forward to overcoming his dislike of touching others, but it sounded like he didn’t have much choice if he wanted to keep from making enemies in this world.

*I'll get better at it,* he promised himself as Draco turned the conversation to the proper way to address a lady. *All I need to do is practice.*
remind himself not to lean back on the seat lest he crush her. Despite being tailored, his robes were voluminous enough to conceal the extra bulk, and as long as he kept the over-robes closed in the front, no one would be the wiser unless they patted him down.

They entered the outskirts of a quaint little village and then the train was pulling up to an open-air platform.

“You can leave your trunk,” Draco said as they stood and stretched. “The school house elves will deliver it to your dorm after the sorting.”

“Hogwarts has house elves too?”

“Of course, they’d never keep it clean otherwise.”

That made Hogwarts sound like a very grand place, and Harry reminded himself to breathe as a wave of excitement crashed over him. It felt like his heart was trying to squeeze out of his chest every time he glanced out the window at the platform. Students were already disembarking, their black robes blending into the long shadows cast by flickering gas lamps separating the train from the village beyond.

Neville tried to smile reassuringly, but it was wobbly with his own nerves. “You’ll be fine,” he said. In his hands, Trevor croaked pitifully and flailed his legs.

“You too,” Harry replied.
Despite waiting until the bulk of the students had disembarked, upon opening the cabin door Harry was confronted with a mob of determined hangers-on who — much to his distress — clamoured for his attention. They pressed in close around the doorway, reaching for his hair and robes as if his fame would rub off on them if only they could touch him.

As he stumbled back from the grasping hands, a silent consensus was reached among the purebloods behind him. Crabbe and Goyle stepped in front of him, clearing a path through the mob like a pair of human bulldozers. Harry trailed in their wake, Draco and Neville flanking him like guards, though neither of them looked entirely comfortable with the role. Together they fought their way out of the train and onto the dim platform. Draco slammed the door shut behind him, giving them enough of a head start to slide around a group of milling seventh years and disappear into the crowd.

"Firs' years!" boomed a gruff voice. "Firs" years this way! Come on then, that's right."

Standing at the end of the platform was a giant. It was as though someone had taken a chunk of the surrounding mountainsides and carved it into the shape of a man. He was eight feet tall with shaggy hair and a wiry black beard that obscured all his features apart from a pair of beetle black eyes and a large round nose. He was wearing a moleskin overcoat made entirely of pockets, some of which were wiggling as though their contents were alive.

"Who’s that?" Harry asked in an undertone as they joined a gaggle of other first years in front of the giant.

"The groundskeeper, I think," Draco replied. "Father says he's some kind of savage living in a hut on the edge of the grounds, and that every once in awhile he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and sets his bed on fire."

It wasn’t a very kind description, even if it was true. While the giant man did look rather wild, Harry also had the impression he was smiling under his thick beard as he waved hello to some of the older students.

"Do you know anything about him?" he asked Neville, who shrugged.

"Gran doesn’t talk much about her time in school. Not sure he would have been there anyway."

When the last of the first years had assembled the giant led them out of the station and down a long cobbled road. The night air was refreshing after having spent so long cooped up in the train. A light breeze ruffled their hair, carrying laughter and the scent of savoury pies from a tall building with a sign in the shape of three broomsticks swinging over its open door.

A handful of adult wizards in jewel-bright robes stood on the side of the road watching the student procession and speaking in low murmurs. Further on, a witch was leaning from an upper floor window and puffing lazily on a long-handled pipe. The smoke billowing from her lips was thick and white, and Harry thought he could see lithe winged shapes in it before the breeze carried it away.

The road led them from the town, its cobbles dissolving into packed dirt as land around it transformed from tidy gardens to highland wilds. Wildflowers gave way to shrubs, then to a dense forest of alder, birch, and drooping willow cut through by the silhouette of a wall looming against
the darkening sky. A gate was set into the stone bulwark, a hulking mass of wrought iron flanked by winged stone boars. It was swung wide open, beckoning them into the Hogwarts grounds where a caravan of carriages awaited.

As they approached the gate Basil let out a long, low hiss that vibrated across Harry’s skin. There was no chance to ask what had disturbed her before he stepped between the stone boars and pain lanced through his head alongside a blinding flash of green light and a high sound that rang in his ears like laughter.

His legs forgot how to walk and he fell headlong into Crabbe’s back. He bounced off as though he’d hit a tree, earning a startled grunt from the boy and concerned looks from the others.

“Are you okay?” Neville asked as Harry struggled to get his feet back under control.

Harry grit his teeth and pressed a hand to his brow. His head was throbbing with an insistent, dull pain centred along his curse scar. “Did you feel that?” he asked.

The others looked at him, puzzled. “Feel what?” Neville asked.

“Passing through the gate. There was something strange about it.”

Draco looked over his shoulder, then shrugged. “There are wards around the school grounds,” he offered, as though this were common knowledge. “But they shouldn’t react to any of us.”

“Why not?”

He rolled his eyes. “Because they can’t run a school if they don’t have any students.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Neville asked him again, eyeing the hand pressed to his head with a frown.

Harry forced it back to his side. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, it’s nothing.”

Rather than boarding the carriages with the rest of the student body, they turned off the road and scrambled down a rickety wooden staircase that groaned ominously with each of the gamekeeper’s heavy steps. As the last rays of sun vanished behind the horizon, globes of fairy fire set into the underside of the handrails sprang to life, casting everything in a soft blue light. The air grew damp, and they could hear water lapping gently against stone on the far side of a copse of birch trees.

The stairway ended on the shore of a great black loch. Their feet crunched down a pebble beach as the gamekeeper lead them towards a broad wooden pier jutting out into the water. A single lantern swayed gently on a post at its end, illuminating a fleet of boats crowded against its sides.

"Four to a boat," the gamekeeper called. "And no shovin’! I don't want ter have to fish any of you lot out of the lake, hear?"

Harry also hoped it wouldn’t come to that. He couldn’t swim, his aunt had never bothered putting him in lessons.

“Come on,” said Draco as Crabbe and Goyle ignored the giant’s instructions and began pushing their way towards the front of the line. “We’ll want to be first!”

Harry had no idea what the rush was, but Draco had already proven to have an insider’s knowledge thanks to his father, so he trusted that he’d soon find out.
They piled into one of the boats tethered next to the lantern’s post; Draco and Harry in front, with Neville and Crabbe behind them. Goyle went off to a different boat with a dark-skinned boy, which was probably for the best because a boat with both Crabbe and Goyle in it would have sunk.

“Everyone in?” the giant asked. His own large boat was riding low enough in the water that even a small wave would swamp him.

“Right then, forward!” He pulled a large, pink umbrella from inside his coat and tapped it sharply against the bow of his boat. As one, the little fleet slid from their moorings and began to glide whisper soft across the water.

It was cold on the lake, and Harry was soon shivering. He hadn't thought to bring his winter cloak, it was only the beginning of September after all, but he found himself thinking of it longingly as five minutes turned into ten with still nothing in sight.

“Should be coming into view soon,” said the giant, his voice shattering the quiet and echoing across the water.

The boats came around the side of a small cliff and Harry got his first look at Hogwarts.

Perched on a rise where a mountain’s arm met the black loch was a castle with many towers and turrets. Pennants drifted against its walls and it's windows were ablaze with light — shining to rival the starts.

“Wow!” Harry said breathlessly, unable to tear his eyes from the castle as they sailed into the shadow of its walls. Passing through a curtain of ivy, they sailed into an underground harbour where the boats pulled up against a handful of short wooden jetties. Disembarking at last, they came to the base of a wide staircase cut directly into the stone of the cliff.

Up and up they climbed, until Harry’s legs were burning and his breath came in short gasps. He reached the top just behind the groundskeeper, and when he looked back he saw the others had flagged behind and were taking a breather on a landing below.

They had come to a pair of large stone doors decorated with carvings of magical creatures. There were mermaids and horses with fish tails, centaurs and wild eyed wolves, and above them all the serpentine body of a dragon in flight. The doors were closed, and Harry could see no handle.

“Alrigh' there Harry?” The giant asked. He didn't seem at all winded from the climb.

Harry had to lean back to see the man’s face. “How do you know my name?”

“Well, I recognized you, o’course. Though las’ time I saw you, you was only a baby.”

Harry couldn’t imagine his aunt and uncle allowing this wild man to squeeze into the house at Privet Drive — he doubted they’d even allow him on the lawn. If they’d met, it must have been in the brief period before his parents’ deaths.

“Who are you, exactly?” he asked.

“Crikey, I haven’t introduced meself! Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts.” He held out a hand the size of a dinner platter and shook Harry’s whole arm with a vigorous enthusiasm that nearly caused Harry’s humerus to part company with his shoulder.

“I was hopin’ I’d get to help you with yer school shopping,” Hagrid said. “Dumbledore thought we might have some trouble gettin’ to you, but I guess it all turned out in the end, eh?
“Still, he’s looking forward to you startin’ me thinks. Seems to expect great things from you, Dumbledore does.”

Harry recovered his arm and pressed down on the joint, making sure it was still in place. “Because I killed Voldemort?”

Hagrid shuddered and his eyes darted to the shadows pockmarking the rough stone ceiling as if expecting the man’s ghost to swoop down shrieking bloody murder. “Don’ say that name!” he growled. “Gives me the willies, it does.”

“Is this oaf bothering you, Harry?” Draco asked as he stepped onto the landing. He’d finally regained enough stamina to finish the climb, though his cheeks were flushed pink and he was breathing as though he’d run a marathon. The other first year students were catching up as well, their upturned faces watching the trio on the landing with unbridled curiosity.

Harry had no idea what sort of expression was plastered across his face, but he smothered it fast. “No,” he said.

“Yer a Malfoy,” Hagrid said, eyeing Draco with obvious mistrust.

“So good of you to notice,” Draco drawled, stepping up to Harry so they stood shoulder to shoulder. A united front against the groundkeeper’s darkening expression. “If you’re quite finished butchering our noble mother tongue, I believe we have somewhere to be.”

“Hey now!” Hagrid bellowed, swatting at Draco as though the boy were a fly he could crush beneath his palm. Draco was forced a step back, and then another as the groundkeeper pulled Harry against his writhing coat. “You keep away from him, hear? Harry don’t need any of yer type skulkin’ about, fillin’ his head with nonsense!”

Draco went rigid, and he wasn’t the only one. Crabbe and Goyle looked ready to throw themselves on the groundskeeper, fists leading. Among the other first years, cold fury radiated from every fourth face and wands were drawn surreptitiously from pockets or concealed arm holsters. Harry found he was angry as well. Who did this groundskeeper think he was, sticking his bulbous nose in friendships that didn’t concern him?

“My type?” Draco said, eyes tight and a slight waver in his lower lip.

“Y’eh can’t trust him, Harry,” Hagrid said, leaning down as though confiding a great and terrible secret. “Them Malfoys are a slippery bunch — rotten to the core, the lot of them.”

Harry shrugged out of the man’s grip and marched over to Draco, whirling around so they were once again side by side. “Draco’s my friend!”

Hagrid reeled back. “But yeh can’t be— He’s a Malfoy— They’re as dark a family as dark can be!”

“I don’t believe you! And even if I did, I wouldn’t care!” Harry squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists, trying to keep the emotions burning inside him from spilling over into a burst of magic he wasn’t sure he’d be able to control. “He’s my friend, and I won’t let you tell me otherwise!”

He missed the astonishment that flashed across Draco’s face.

“But—“ Hagrid tried one last time to dissuade him, but Harry cut him off before another hurtful word could spring from his mouth.
“No!” His denial echoed down the stone steps, reverberating and doubling until it was lost under the distant lapping of water against the harbour’s shore. The tall dark skinned boy who’d shared a boat with Goyle let out a low whistle.

Behind Hagrid, the door creaked open, revealing a tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes. A pocket watch rested open in the palm of her hand and her stern face was twisted in displeasure.

“You’re late, Hagrid,” she said sharply.

Hagrid ducked his head. “Ah, sorry Professor McGonagall. Was just…” There was an awkward pause, and then he finished lamely, “waitin’ on the stragglers,”

Professor McGonagall’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “No matter. Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here.”

Harry stuck close to Draco’s side as they followed the imposing witch into a cavernous entry-hall. The other boy had regained his composure, though there was still a tremble in his voice as he said, “Wait until I tell my father about what that oaf said — in front of everyone else, no less. It was slanderous! We can take him to court for that!”

“I’ll be your witness,” said a dark haired girl standing behind them in the line.

“Me too,” Harry said quickly, his chest humming with happiness when a smile returned to Draco’s face.

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said.

Even though Draco had told him stories about Hogwart’s Great Hall on the train, the real thing was still enough to take his breath away. It was lit by hundreds of white candles, which floated in midair above the four long house tables.

The teacher’s table sat on a low dais at the end of the hall, and it was to here that Professor McGonagall led them. She lined them up facing the rest of the student body and then disappeared off to one side.

The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight, and Harry raised his eyes to the enchanted ceiling in an attempt to avoid their gazes, which felt as though they were all focused directly on him.

Professor McGonagall reappeared and silently set a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a ragged wizard’s hat.

Harry caught Draco’s eye, and the other boy inclined his head almost imperceptibly. He turned back to the hat with new interest as it twitched. Several of the other first years jumped in surprise, and Harry was pleased that he wasn’t one of them. Then a rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth and the hat began to sing.

He knew the hat would judge them, but when it claimed to be able to see everything inside their heads he started to feel a little queasy. There were a lot of things in his head he didn’t want anyone to see, least of all a talking hat. What if it told the teachers about Basil? Or about how he could speak to snakes? His mouth went dry and a tremor stole over his shoulders as he imagined them marching him out of the Great Hall at wand-point, faces hard and eyes cold with distrust.

Maybe it won’t come to that. Maybe they’d just… watch me, or something. The prospect of extra
surveillance didn’t sit well with him, but it was better than being rejected outright.

A round of applause startled him out of his thoughts and he realized the Hat had finished its song and was now bowing to the four house tables. Harry clapped his hands twice and then let them fall back to his sides. Beneath his robes, Basil flexed her coils, edging her head up his stomach until it was nestled in the dip between his ribs.

“Do not fear,” she whispered. “You are my Speaker, and I will not allow them to harm you.”

He wasn’t sure a three foot snake would be able to do much against three hundred witches and wizards, but the assurance that he’d have someone on his side helped ease his mind.

Professor McGonagall stepped forward with a long roll of parchment in her hands. “When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted,” she said, and then without further ado: “Abbott, Hannah.”

A pink-faced girl with blond pigtails stumbled out of line. She perched on the stool and Professor McGonagall set the hat on her head. There was a moment’s pause and then the hat shouted, for all the hall to hear, “Hufflepuff!”

A table on the left cheered and clapped as Hannah went to join them.

Professor McGonagall continued on through the roll. Sometimes the hat shouted out the house immediately, but for others it took a little while to decide. When Neville was called forward he sat on the stool for over four minutes, his shoulders rigid and back hunched. He shook his head several times, as though taking part in a silent argument, and Harry discovered he was holding his breath. He let it out in a rush just as the hat shouted, “Gryffindor!”

Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to ‘MacDougal, Morag’. He caught Harry’s eye, and Harry clapped for him.

After Morag came Draco, who bumped Harry’s shoulder and smirked before swaggering forward. The hat had barely touched his head when it screamed “Slytherin!”

Draco looked pleased, and Harry clapped for him as well as he went to join Crabbe and Goyle at the Slytherin table.

His name would be called soon, and he was faced with a conundrum. His friends had been sorted into different houses and as the last one up to the stool it rested on him to pick favourites… or maybe it didn’t. Draco had said it was possible to influence the sorting, not that it was required. So long as he ended up with one of them he could leave the Hat to its deliberations.

“Potter, Harry!”

He nearly tripped on the hem of his robes as he made his way forward and sank onto the stool. Professor McGonagall held out the Hat, which he accepted with trembling hands. The fabric was rough under his palms, and the familiar taste of dust and mildew tickled the back of his throat as he breathed in. It brought memories of his cupboard surging to the forefront of his mind, and he hesitated. He didn’t want the Hat to look inside his head, but he wanted to stay with his new friends and that meant being sorted.

He was still shaking as he raised the hat and lowered it slowly onto his head.

It swallowed him easily, falling over his eyes and blocking out the sea of curious faces. Even the light of the candles faded to a muted glow and Harry took comfort in the pressing semi-darkness.
"I've been waiting for you, Harry Potter," said a small voice in his ear. He jumped, nearly toppling off the stool, and his nerves were met with tinkling laughter from beyond the confines of the Hat.

"You too?" he whispered, heart wavering between pleasure at all the attention and exasperation.

The Hat chuckled. "Indeed. Your name has passed my peak several times of late attached to some rather peculiar stories, and I find myself intrigued as to their veracity."

Harry tensed. "You're going to look at my memories, aren't you?"

"Alas, Mr Potter, my creators bestowed me with a mere shadow of the art of legilimency. All I can see of your mind are impressions of your qualities and character."

"So you lied in your song?"

The Hat shifted slightly on his head of its own accord, and its voice sounded embarrassed as it said, "Yes, well, these things are constrained by metre and rhyme, you know. Besides, I like to imagine it gives the troublemakers a moment of pause when they think I've seen all their plans and darkest desires right off the train...

“But enough about that!” it exclaimed, eager to change the subject. “At the end of July, I witnessed a series of events that implied you traveled from Surrey to Diagon Alley and back entirely unescorted. It caused something of a commotion here, and I've been dying to ask: why did you do it?"

Now it was Harry's turn to shift uneasily. The hat made it sound like the school was watching him, but surely that couldn't be the case. If they knew that Harry had left his relatives' house, shouldn't they also know how he was treated within its walls? "Does this have anything to do with my sorting?"

"Am I not the Sorting Hat, and this not your sorting?"

"Couldn't you just look at the impressions, or whatever?"

"Why so evasive, Mr Potter? One might almost suspect you of wrongdoing."

Harry bit his lip. He had stolen money from Dudley to get to London, but there had been no other way. The Hat hadn't asked him how though, it had asked him why, which allowed for a much safer answer. "Well, I couldn't just wait around until the start of term and hope someone would come get me," he whispered.

"So you took the initiative?"

"Er, yes, I suppose."

The hat chuckled again. "I can already tell you will be a great foiler of plans, Mr Potter. I believe the Headmaster intended for you to be escorted to the Alley on your birthday by Rubeus Hagrid. The look of shock on his face when he realized you'd already accessed your trust vault... well, after a thousand years of the same four walls you can imagine how nice it is to have some excitement now and then."

Harry supposed he was lucky he'd taken the initiative to go to Diagon Alley on his own. If he'd waited another day Hagrid would have come to Privet Drive and there’d have been no way to keep his intention to attend Hogwarts a secret from his aunt and uncle.
"I suppose that would get a little boring," he agreed, but something the Hat had said was bothering him. "Um, Sir, you said I’d be a foiler of plans… does that mean there are plans for me already in place?"

“Aha!” said the hat. “Now there is the million galleon question! Unfortunately, I’m bound by old magics from relaying any plans or information I may have overheard in my place of repose."

“And where is it you… repose during the year? You know, in case I wanted to visit?"

The hat broke into laughter. “I thought I saw a measure of cunning in you, Mr Potter. I’m glad to see I was proven correct. You may, if you wish, find me in the headmaster’s office during the year anytime you wish for a chat with this old moth-eaten hat.”

An uneasy feeling rose in the pit of Harry’s stomach, even though he knew he had no real reason to distrust the Headmaster other than for his terrible information distribution practices and the less-than sympathetic remarks Draco’s father had made on the platform. Dumbledore had a reason to be looking into him — he was the executor of his trust after all — but the Hat almost made it sound as though there was more to the plans than that. Speculation would get him no where right now however, literally. He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting on the stool, but he guessed several minutes had gone by since his sorting began and he still felt as if they hadn’t even begun.

“Will you look at the impressions now?” he asked.

“I suppose. No matter how much I may crave idle conversation, we do have a job to do here,” the Hat said with a sigh. “And I see your classmates and teachers are growing impatient.”

The Hat made a sound as though it were clearing a non-existent throat. “Ahem, yes. Hmm, difficult. Very difficult,” it said in a stilted voice. “There’s resourcefulness here, and great determination. Not a bad mind, either. There’s talent, oh my goodness, yes — and an unbreakable spirit, now that is interesting… so, where shall I put you?”

“Are you making fun of me?” Harry asked, thrown by the sudden change in tone.

“Not at all,” the hat replied, and Harry had the impression it was smirking. “Just making sure you get a taste of an authentic sorting experience. But all fun aside, do you have a preference?”

“I’d be fine with either Gryffindor or Slytherin.”

“Gryffindor or Slytherin, eh? It’s an unusual combination, not one I come across every year. And it’s true that you’re well suited for either house, but you really have no preference?” Harry shook his head. “Curious. Most see those houses as diametrically opposed, and will always argue for one over the other.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry as he tried to puzzle out what ‘diametrically’ meant.

“Oh, I’m not angry, quite the opposite, actually. I always love a good challenge.” The Hat was quiet for a long moment and there was a faint tickling in Harry’s head before it spoke again.

“What a puzzle you are, Harry Potter. My first impulse is to put you in Slytherin. Necessity has made you resourceful far beyond your years, and such determination! Indeed, you have many of the qualities Salazar Slytherin sought in his students.

“And yet, your initiative, bravery, and reckless pursuit of your goals would seem to put you firmly in Gryffindor.”
The Hat hummed thoughtfully. “You could be great, you know. Regardless of your placement. It’s all here in your head. All you need to do is tap into it.”

Tap into it. As though he had a secret trove of knowledge buried deep in his mind. That’s silly, Harry thought. I’m pretty sure I’d know about knowing stuff if that was the case.

“Have you made a decision?” he asked.

The Hat stalled, humming and hawing. “Let me ask you a question,” it eventually said. “If you had to choose between hiding who you are to find acceptance from others, or remaining true to yourself even if it means standing alone, which would you choose?”

Harry frowned. What kind of question was that? Neither of the options seemed very good in his opinion, but if he had to choose…

“I would remain true to myself,” he said.

For years the Dursleys had tried to beat out his sense of wonder — to make him believe he was the freak they claimed he was. That there was something wrong with him. He could have agreed with them, maybe they wouldn’t have hated him so much if he had, but it had always felt viscerally wrong. He knew he wasn’t a freak, even if he’d never connected the strange occurrences around him to magic until after he met Basil. Harry was Harry, and he’d never let anyone tell him otherwise.

“Very well,” said the Hat. “Many see Gryffindor as the house of bold deeds and actions, but there are many other kinds of courage. The courage to remain true to yourself, despite pressure from all sides. An unbreakable spirit, which will not bow to expectations or manipulation. Above all your other qualities, this is your greatest strength. Use it well, young Gryffindor!”

The hat yelled the last word out for the rest of the hall to hear, and there was an explosion of cheers from the House of the Lion.

Harry pulled the Hat off his head. Even the teachers were clapping he noticed as he looked back over his shoulder. His eyes slid along the long table and came to rest on the silver haired headmaster in his high chair. Dumbledore inclined his head Harry’s way, and raised his goblet in a silent toast.

Draco was scowling when Harry caught sight of him at the Slytherin table, and Harry offered him an apologetic shrug before starting towards his new house. Two steps later he froze. The Gryffindors had jumped to their feet and were surging over the benches — a tidal wave of enthusiasm led by the Weasley twins who were waving their napkins in the air like flags and yelling, “We got Potter! We got Potter!” and, “Hatsall!”

Harry’s eyes went wide and he back-pedalled away. Professor McGonagall shouted a protest at the interruption, but she was ignored as the excited Lions chased Harry around the end of the Hufflepuffs’ table.

A bench slammed into the back of Harry’s knees and he fell onto the seat with a painful thump that rattled his spine. Dazed, he looked around and found himself surrounded by Slytherins. Goyle was on his right, and beyond him Draco. Their faces were tense, wary — but they weren’t trying to pounce on him, which made all the difference to Harry’s mind.

“Can I sit here instead?” he asked weakly.

Draco’s face went slack. “You don’t know…”
“Huh?”

Before Draco could elaborate hands latched onto Harry’s arms and shoulders. The Gryffindors hauled him off the bench and back across the room. They patted his back and shoulders mercilessly, faces jubilant as his hand was seized and shaken. He struggled in their grip, panic simmering in his chest as his nails clawed at wrists and fingers until the last of them peeled away and he was free once more.

“Let me bite them!” Basil hissed, writhing as she tried to free herself. Harry pressed a hand over her head, pinning her in place and hoping that no one had noticed the suspicious rippling of his robes.

“Enough!” Professor McGonagall bellowed over the roar of her students. She was waving her list, the parchment flapping and creasing, small tears developing along its sides from the rough treatment. “Back to your seats this instant! I understand your excitement but there are students still waiting to be sorted!”

This was enough to send the younger students scurrying back to their seats, but the Weasley twins continued to egg the others on with a rowdy victory song they made up as they went. It was overwhelming, and Harry felt tears prickling at the corners of his eyes. All he wanted was for them to leave him alone!

“Harry!” Neville called, beckoning him over to the table where he’d claimed a seat one in from the end. He pointed to the empty plate on his left and Harry hurried over, sliding himself onto the end of the bench. It looked like he’d be swarmed again, but then Professor McGonagall took a menacing step towards them and the older students scattered, boldness no match for the irritation furrowing her brow.

As Harry panted, trying to calm his racing heart, the sorting started up again.

‘Weasley, Ronald,” the fourth and youngest red-head was the last of the new Gryffindor students, and he hurried over and slid into a seat across from Harry.

“Well done, Ron, excellent,” said the eldest of his brothers as ‘Zabini, Blaise’ was sorted into Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

At the high table, Albus Dumbledore rose to his feet and beamed down at them, his arms open wide, as if nothing pleased him more than seeing them all together.

“Welcome,” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

“Thank you!”

He sat back down to roaring applause, but Harry was all clapped out. Neville giggled, looking more at ease now that he wasn’t standing up in front of the entire school. “You were up there for a long time,” Harry said to him.

“Not as long as you,” Neville replied and then held a basket of rolls out to Harry which had certainly not been on the table just a few seconds before. “Bread?”

Harry’s mouth fell open, overenthusiastic housemates driven from his mind by the sudden arrival of their dinner. The golden plates on the tables were heaped with more food than he’d ever seen in one place before. There were whole roast chickens, pots of roasted potatoes, great tureens of gravy, and so many other things that Harry had no idea where to start. Was all this food really for them?
He looked up and down the table where the other Gryffindors were piling their plates full of slices of roast beef, candied carrots, and yams. It all smelt delicious, and Harry’s mouth began to water. Dudley would be in heaven if he were here, he thought. No doubt Crabbe and Goyle were as well. A quick look over his shoulder at the Slytherin table confirmed this. Even after eating that mountain of sweets on the train they had put so much food on their plates that the piles were visible even from across the room.

Harry took a little chicken and some green beans and ate slowly, savouring each bite. A basket full of Yorkshire puddings made its way along the table and he snagged one of those too. His aunt always forced him to cook them around Christmastime and he’d been desperate to try one since the age of seven. He put a dollop of gravy over it, and then half cut half squashed it until he got a piece lodged on his fork. It was just as good as he’d imagined, and he skewered another piece.

“Is that all you’re eating?” asked Ron Weasley from across the table when Harry set his knife and fork aside after ten minutes. His own plate was still piled high with meat and potatoes.

“I’m full,” Harry replied.

“But you hardly ate anything at all!”

Harry didn’t want to explain that if he ate any more he’d just end up feeling bloated and sick, so he shrugged and reached for a pitcher of pumpkin juice.

As dinner changed to dessert, talk at the table turned to the families of the first years. Harry learned that Dean Thomas, a tall black boy, was muggleborn; and that Seamus Finnigan had a muggle father and witch mother. No one asked Harry about his family, even Dean seemed to know Harry was an orphan. As the boys discussed their parent’s views on magic and the school, Harry let his eyes wander back up to the teachers’ table. There was Hagrid on the far end, overshadowing a tiny wizard next to him whose head barely cleared the table. Professor McGonagall was having a lively debate with the Headmaster, gesticulating so hard with her hand that she nearly overturned her goblet. On her other side was a reedy man with a large purple turban speaking to a teacher with greasy black hair and a hooked nose. It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past the purple turban and straight into Harry’s eyes — and a sharp, hot pain lanced along his scar.

“Ow!” Harry clapped a hand to his head. What’s wrong with it today? It’s never hurt like this before.

“What is it?” asked Neville.

“Nothing.” Harry kept his eyes on the hook-nosed teacher, whose pale lips had curled up in a sneer. “Who’s the teacher with the black hair? The one next to the man in the turban.”

Neville peered towards the staff table. “I don’t know. Though… he doesn’t look very happy, does he?”

That he didn’t. In fact, Harry swore the man’s black eyes were radiating pure hatred, all of it directed straight at him. It was unnerving, and Harry turned his eyes back to the half-eaten cream puff on his plate.

At last, the remaining puddings and tarts vanished from the golden platters and Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet again.
“Ahem — just a few more words now we are all fed and watered. I have a few start of term notices
to give you.”

Harry was starting to droop, but he did his best to pay attention as the Headmaster went over a short
list of rules and announced the date for Quidditch tryouts.

“And finally,” Dumbledore said, his face very grim. “I must tell you that this year, the third floor
corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a most
painful death.”

His pronouncement was met with ringing silence, broken only by a faint murmur as the Weasley
twins put their heads together.

“You will not!” exclaimed the eldest Weasley, his thin face pinched with anger at whatever plot
he’d overheard.

“Oh, shove off Percy—“ said the closest twin.

“Yeah,” said the other. “It was clearly a challenge.”

“Alas, Mr Weasley,” Dumbledore said, his voice echoing through the hall. “I’m afraid it is not a
challenge, but a most dire warning. This castle holds many secrets, some more dangerous than
others. It is my duty as Headmaster to see you all safely through the year, and part of that duty
entails ensuring you’re warned when a warning is necessary.” The twins’ grins faded, no match for
the Headmaster’s grave expression. The man regarded them all for another long, heavy moment
before a smile tugged at his lips. The students let out a breath of relief as the tension faded.

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!” cried Dumbledore. He gave his wand
a little flick and a long golden ribbon flew out, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself
snake-like into words.

“Everyone pick their favourite tune, and off we go!”

A cacophony of voices bellowed all at once, following along with the golden ribbon. Harry didn’t
shout, but he did murmur along obediently:

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please,
Whether we be old and bald,
Or young with scabby knees,
Our heads could do with filling
With some interesting stuff,
For now they’re bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we’ve forgot,
“Just do your best, we’ll do the rest,
And learn until our brains all rot.”

“That’s a funny song,” said Basil, her head having slithered up beneath his cowl. “Do they really think your head is full of flies?”

“What?” said Harry, but then they were being dismissed and Percy was shouting for the first years to follow him up to the Gryffindor common room over the scrape of bench legs on the floor.

Harry was just leaving the Great Hall when a hand snagged his elbow and he was tugged off to the side. It was Draco.

“So, you’re a Gryffindor after all,” he said, then sighed. “It will make things difficult.”

“Why?”

Draco’s eyes darted towards the stream of students filing from the Hall and he pulled Harry farther away, into a shadowed alcove. “Listen. Gryffindor and Slytherin are rival houses, we’re supposed to hate each other!”

Harry’s chest clenched painfully. “I don’t hate you. Do you…”

“Of course not! But it’s traditional for us to be at each other’s throats.”

“The Hat was considering me for Slytherin — really considering! Does that help?”

Draco sighed again and rubbed his brow. “Maybe? A little? I don’t know, I’m too tired to think about this right now.” Right on cue he yawned broadly and Harry followed suit a moment later.

“See you tomorrow?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Draco replied. “We’ll probably have classes together. Just be careful, your housemates might not like that we’re… friends.”

“They already know that,” Harry pointed out. Their year mates had all been there to see the confrontation with Hagrid. Between that and the procession outside their compartment on the train it shouldn’t come as a surprise to any of them.

Draco shook his head. “That was before the sorting. Just… be careful.”

“You too,” Harry said quietly, touched that the other boy was concerned about him. He yawned again. "Goodnight Draco.”

“Goodnight Harry.”

With that they split up, Draco heading down a stairwell to the dungeons while Harry found a group of Gryffindors to follow. Basil was singing the Hogwarts school song softly from beneath Harry’s cowl, and the sound followed him all the way up into his tower dorm room and ushered him off to sleep.
Harry woke to a loud shriek.

For a moment he thought it was his aunt come to wake him up, but the bed beneath him was too comfortable to be the cot under the stairs and the golden sunlight pouring across his face was from a gap in crimson drapes not the narrow slates in the cupboard door. He could feel Basil’s familiar weight as she coiled in her favourite sleeping place — head resting below his chin and body coiled on the blankets over his chest. She hissed in irritation, as she always did when woken before ten.

The shriek came again, and the events of the previous day returned to him in a rush. The train, the boat ride across the lake, and the voice of the Sorting Hat in his ear. He was at Hogwarts, in the first year Gryffindor dorm. He barely remembered arriving at his bed. There had been a painting that talked, and then a long twisting staircase into a circular room with five beds and an old cast-iron stove.

“Blimey! A snake!”

Uncomprehending, Harry blinked at the ceiling, his brain fuzzy with sleep. Basil was here, but that shouldn’t be a problem… except witches and wizards believed snakes were evil. There was a flurry of movement in the room and he threw his arm towards the small wooden stand next to his bed, groping blindly for his glasses.

His dorm-mates were silhouetted against the rising sun in the gap between the hangings, four tall figures, outlines blurry. “How’d it get in?” That sounded like Dean.

One of them dashed out of sight. “Don’t worry Harry!” they said, before returning with a thin object clutched in their right hand. “I’ll get it off you!”

He pointed his arm towards Harry’s chest and was immediately tackled by the others. “What are you doing Seamus? You’ll hit Harry too!”

Basil was still half asleep. “What’s going on?” she murmured. “Why are they making angry sounds? Are we in trouble?”

Harry couldn’t speak, his heart was lodged in his throat, hammering wildly. He pulled her body close with his left hand, still groping for his glasses with the other. Where had they gone? He couldn’t deal with this blind!

Basil coiled herself around his chest and neck. “I didn’t unlock the latch,” she said. “I promise!”

“It’s trying to strangle him!”

He threw a protective arm over Basil as a barrage of hands grasped and pried at them, catching his arm with their nails as often as Basil’s body and crushing him with their combined weight. He gave up the search for his glasses and curled into a ball. “No! Stop it!” he cried, finally finding his voice. “Leave her alone!”

The grasping hands didn’t relent. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying!” That sounded like Ron.

Someone caught hold of Basil’s tail and tugged hard. She let out a terrible hissing shriek and her head shot out from between Harry’s arms, grazing his cheek. There was a soft snap, and then a scream.
“It bit me!”

“Are you bleeding?”

Sniffling. “A little.”

A latch rattled, and then a gust of cool air brushed over him. “Quick, we can throw it out the window!”

The thought of Basil lying broken on the ground far below Gryffindor tower was too much. The panic rising in his chest boiled over into an insistent cold prickling that ran along his limbs. “No!” The word hissed from his numb lips, and he couldn’t tell whether he was shaking from cold or from fear. He wanted the hands to go away.

“Get off of me!”

A shockwave ripped the hangings from his four-poster with the sound of a cannon and sent them billowing across the room. The hands were gone from his body, and when he raised his head he could make out four blurs slumped haphazard against the wall and opposing bed, emitting soft groans. He jumped up, still clutching Basil tight and found his glasses where they’d been knocked to the floor. Jamming them onto his face, he turned a glare on his dorm-mates.

Neville’s back was against the window sill. He was clutching his thumb and looked close to fainting. Dean and Seamus had landed across Ron’s bed and were pushing themselves up slowly — blood oozing between Seamus’s fingers as he clutched a bump forming over his temple. Ron was half on his trunk, half on the floor. His face was snow white and he looked up at Harry with wide eyes.

“You were hissing,” he whispered, voice rough with nerves.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. Had he spoken in parseltongue? He couldn’t tell, but from the horror dawning on his roommates’ faces it seemed more and more likely that he’d messed up.

Ron pushed himself backward until he was pressed against the foot of his bed. “I heard you. Hissing.” A long, horrible pause followed where the redhead’s mind churned toward a single, damning conclusion. ”You're a parselmouth!”

Neville and Seamus gasped, blood draining from their faces. Dean, the muggleborn, just looked confused.

"A what?" he asked.

"A snake speaker!" Seamus hissed. "Means he's a dark wizard — just like You Know Who!"

Dean's brow furrowed. "Who's You Know Who?" he asked, clearly at a loss when it came to wizarding history.

Seamus looked at him like he was insane. "Only the most evil wizard of all time!" His voice dropped to a murmur as he laid out for Dean the extent of this feared wizard's evilness. Harry only caught snatches. His eyes were fixed on Neville — his friend.

"You can talk to snakes," Neville said weakly. "That's why you were asking about them in Diagon Alley."

"I'm not evil," Harry beseeched him. "Please… just believe me."
Ron growled. "You will be, though! All dark wizards are!"

"No... I won't…"

Neville's face crumpled, round cheeks buckling into a mask of despair as tears slid down his cheeks. He met Harry's gaze for a moment and said, "I trusted you."

It was worse than a physical blow. Worse than anything Harry had ever experienced. The hope he'd nurtured deep in his chest shattered, exploding into tiny stinging shards that burrowed through his flesh to burst out as sparks of hungry, aimless magic. The sheets of his bed smouldered where the sparks landed, and the stone walls hissed as though splashed with acid. His roommates backed away further, putting Ron's bed between themselves and Harry.

The door burst open, revealing Percy Weasley in a white nightgown.

"It’s six-thirty in the morning!" he shouted, swelling up like a bullfrog. "There are people still trying to— what in Merlin’s name happened here?" His eyes went from the downed boys to the ruined bed hangings and then finally came to rest on Harry and the snake in his arms. His mouth dropped open.

Harry didn't wait to hear what Ron's brother had to say. He scrambled around his bed and bolted for the door, bare feet slapping against the cold tiles. Basil bared her fangs and hissed at Percy, causing the older boy to stagger back enough for Harry to slip out the door.

Ron's voice chased him from the room. "He's a parselmouth!" he shouted for all the dorm to hear. Harry ducked his head and ran on.

There were other students standing on the stairs or peeking out of their rooms to see what the racket was about, but they were slow with sleep and Harry barrelled past them before they could think to grab him. He ran through the common room, dodging plush red armchairs and sneaky side-tables who seemed intent on tripping him as he made a break for the portrait hole. He slammed into the back of the painting hard, leading with his palms, and the voluptuous woman on the other side let out an undignified shriek as her painting flew aside. There was a crash, and the sound of breaking glass from inside the painted world, but Harry didn't look back as he picked a direction and ran.

He was halfway down the hall when the first Gryffindors spilled out of the portrait hole and took off in pursuit. Harry easily outpaced them, but they had the advantage of knowing the school's layout — its shortcuts, tricks, and dead ends, of which there were many as Harry discovered when he threw himself down a corridor, turned a corner, and slammed his knee against a bench sitting below a red and silver shield decorated with a trout jumping over a crescent moon.

He drew in a sharp breath between clenched teeth and dropped onto the bench, clutching his leg.

"Ow ow ow!"

"We are still being pursued," Basil warned. "Can you run?— Oh a mouse!"

Harry pried his eyes open and saw a small grey mouse scamper across the floor and disappear next to the bench's leg. He leaned down and peered beneath the seat. In the corner of the wall was a hole where one of the small stones had been pushed loose. The mouse vanished inside. It reminded Harry of his cupboard and the small hole in the corner — a threshold between the safe darkness and the frightening, cruel world outside — and suddenly he knew what had to happen.

"Basil, you need to hide!" he said, prying her off his shoulders and setting her down just beneath the bench. He pointed at the hole. "In there, quickly!"
"Why?" she asked, though her head snaked forward, tongue lapping at the scent trail the mouse left behind.

"Because they'll kill you if you're caught."

She looked between him and the hole. "You will not fit."

"I know. I'm not going with you."

"But you are my Speaker!" she said, rearing back. "I cannot leave you to fight alone!"

Footsteps echoed through the hall as the Gryffindors grew closer. "Please, Basil. They're coming. I'll be fine."

"I do not like this."

"I know. Please. I'll come back for you as soon as it's safe, I promise."

She stared him down. "If you do not, I will find those who hurt you and I will squeeze them until their breath stops. Every. Last. One."

"I'll come back," he assured her. "Now go!"

With a final disgruntled hiss, Basil slithered into the hole, eliciting a panicked squeak from the mouse who'd lingered near the entrance. Harry watched until her tail disappeared and then stumbled to his feet, turning to face the students just coming around the corner.

Percy Weasley was in the lead. When he saw Harry he planted his feet and held his arms wide, stopping those behind him in their tracks. They peered around the Prefect, but didn't dare push past him to come closer.

"Where is it?" Percy demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The snake!" Percy blustered. "I saw you holding it in the dorm. So I'll ask you once more: where is it?"

Don't look down, Harry chanted silently. Don't look down. Don't look—his eyes flitted towards the mouse hole, just to be sure Basil had remained hidden. He forced them away at the last second, choosing instead to stare at the faces behind the draping sleeve of Percy's night gown.

One of them was Neville's.

Like a breath of air on smouldering coals, the fear on Neville’s face fed the painful feeling of loss clenching Harry's chest until it flared up into anger. "I don't betray my friends," he snapped.

Neville flinched and looked away. He pulled his injured thumb closer to his chest, until it was covered by the folds of his housecoat.

Percy's face drained of colour. "Your friend? So you can speak to it."

"I told you so!" Ron said, ducking under his brother's arm and pointing a finger at Harry's chest. "I told you he was a parslemouth!"

Frantic muttering broke out among the gathered Gryffindors as the validity of Ron's claims were
questioned, discussed, and, in the end, accepted as truth. Harry tried to close his ears, but fragments wormed their way into his head and stuck there, feasting on his doubts and fears. He took a deep breath and limped forward a step, then another. The Gryffindors melted away as he grew close, pressing back against the walls.

He passed through the crowd uncontested, their reluctance to touch him a cold comfort in the face of their fear.

The Hogwart’s rumour mill was a terrifying contraption of faulty relays and crossed wires. It spanned between houses, a tangled web that tapped into every student and splintered the truth into a hundred differing accounts built and elaborated on by the imaginations of its captive audience.

Harry caught Ron boasting to the Ravenclaw first years outside their Charms class first thing that morning — telling them how he’d tried to toss Basil out a window only to be thrown away by a blast of magic. The Ravenclaws looked skeptical, but it didn’t stop them from keeping a safe distance from Harry during class.

By the time he walked into Defence Against the Dark Arts — his second class of the day — whispers skittered after him like a swarm of hungry spiders.

Professor Quirrell had donned the same absurd purple turban he’d worn at the Welcoming Feast. Now that they were trapped in the same room as him for an hour and a half they learned — much to their dismay — that it reeked of garlic and rotten eggs. He stuttered terribly, and when Ron accidentally knocked his text off the corner of the table, he jumped like a startled rabbit and had to take a minute to calm his nerves before he was fit enough to continue the lecture.

By the end of the class Harry had a pounding headache he attributed to Quirrell’s reedy voice and the stench of his turban. He’d kept his head down during the lecture, unwilling to draw attention to himself, but he’d still felt the man’s watery eyes studying him too often to be put off as a coincidence. It was unnerving, but Harry bit down on his discomfort and willed it away as yet another consequence of his unasked for fame. No, infamy.

Ten minutes after they were dismissed from Defence, Harry arrived at his History of Magic class and was once again witness to Ron’s boasting — this time to the Hufflepuffs. The story of the confrontation in the dorm had grown to an epic tale of wrestling a six foot monster snake and then fending off a wave of killer magic. The Hufflepuffs lacked the scepticism of their blue-robed classmates and listened with a wide-eyed awe that left Harry feeling like he was back on Privet Drive watching his aunt spread her lies to the neighbours.

After Ron was done the Badgers huddled together, well clear of Harry, seeking safety in numbers. Not that Harry would hurt them, but any attempt to explain that was met with blank, terrified faces and he quickly gave up.

Their History professor was the ghost of a stuffy old man who read the roll-call for a class ninety years graduated and droned on and on in a voice like nails on a chalkboard. It was worse than Defence, and Harry could barely pay attention to their primer on wizard-goblin relations. His only consolation was that no one else seemed able to either.

He didn’t attend lunch or dinner. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep anything down. His stomach was aching as though he’d eaten something rotten, and his headache from earlier lingered as tingling fingers and scalp. Worse than any physical woe, Draco would be in the Great Hall and Harry’s heart was seized with terror whenever he imagined losing his only other human friend.
It's better to wait, he decided as he plodded along unfamiliar halls. Maybe when I see him in Potions on Friday everything will have blown over. Maybe... he won't hate me.

It seemed a fool's hope. A beautiful, fragile dream that would be crushed mercilessly under the heel of reality. Still he clung to it, sheltering it beneath the weave of his fingers so it would live just a little bit longer.

His meandering path through the school led him past old classrooms — their desks draped with dusty white cloths — and supply cupboards full of rusting pails, wormy brooms, and jars of strange coloured goo with pictographic labels showing stick figures scrubbing floors, walls, and picture frames. He felt a peculiar kinship with these rooms, so obviously abandoned to the slow, destructive march of time. They'd been neglected, not through any fault of their own, but because they were unneeded — superfluous in a school whose population could fit into a single hall.

Much like a hero who could talk to snakes.

A pair of oak doors no different than the rest opened onto a balcony overlooking a labyrinth of bookshelves that put even *Flourish and Blotts* to shame. He stepped inside and walked beside the banister until he came to a staircase leading down to the main floor. Descending, he came out near an empty reception desk with an 'Out to Lunch' sign on its polished counter. The desk looked out over an open workspace full of equally empty tables and hard-backed chairs. It was lit by golden sunlight that poured through tall, arched windows running along the far wall. Shelves of books crowded against the outermost tables, pushing the four-legged obstacles aside in a turf war they were clearly winning.

Harry wandered into the shadow of the shelves and lost himself between rows of tomes wrapped in leather or stiff buckram. He'd always felt safe in libraries. They were one of the only places Dudley and his gang dared not tread. His cousin claimed to be allergic to books, but Harry didn't believe him. He knew Dudley was afraid of words, the longer the scarier — as spelling tests had always sent him running to the nurse’s claiming a stomachache. Whenever possible, Harry had spent his free time in primary school hiding behind the single low shelf in their tiny library.

This library was far more magnificent, and if he wished to disappear for an hour or a day, he was sure no one would ever find him in the endless rows of stacks.

This proved not entirely accurate as the librarian, Madam Pince, managed to corner him in the transfiguration section late that evening after a prolonged game of cat and mouse. When she found him the expression on her angular face was sharp enough to cut steel, and Harry didn't resist when she kicked him out and slammed the door shut hard enough to set his robes aflutter.

Sighing, he slowly made his way towards Gryffindor tower, dreading the moment when he’d face Neville and the other boys from the dorm.

Arriving at the portrait of the Fat Lady he realized he had another problem.

“Password,” she said, her swan-feather fan wafting gently below her double chin. The corridor was cold, but inside her painting it was summer, with a brilliant blue sky and trees hanging heavy with fruit.

Harry’s heart sank. “I don’t know,” he admitted. No one had told him the password. The portrait had been open when he returned from hiding Basil, and he'd missed the first year orientation the night before because he'd stopped to talk to Draco.

“I can’t let you in if you don’t know the password.” The Fat Lady looked at him pitifully.
“Don’t you recognized me?” he asked, hoping to find a loophole.

She peered at him, and for a moment Harry thought she’d open the passage, but then she shook her head. “Looks can be deceiving here in the castle. You can never be too careful.”

“So now what?”

“If you want to get in, you’ll need to find the password.” Harry stared at her blankly, and she took pity on him. “Ask one of your housemates, or go to Professor McGonagall. She’s the head of Gryffindor House.”

Harry slumped. He was no longer on speaking terms with his housemates and Professor McGonagall was too intimidating to approach. If he asked her for the password she might realize something was wrong, and that would send her digging into the truth behind the tall tales Ron spouted at every opportunity. If she learned they weren’t just the products of an overexcited imagination she could send him packing.

“There's no hidden third option?”

The Fat Lady tapped her fan against her plump lips. "Professor Dumbledore maintains a list of passwords," she offered. "But he's only to be disturbed in the event of an emergency."

Walking into the Headmaster's office would be even worse than seeking out Professor McGonagall. "It's not an emergency," he assured her. "I'll find someone to ask."

"You ought to hurry. It's nearly curfew and you don't want to be caught out of bed." She paused, then added. "If you can't find another Gryffindor, Professor McGonagall's office is down one floor, second-to-last doorway on the right."

Harry nodded, fixing the location of the office in his memory so he'd know to avoid it at all costs. He turned left and started down the corridor, retracing the path he'd run that morning until he was once again facing the shield with the jumping fish. There were no torches or windows nearby. The corridor should have been pitch black, but the moon painted on the shield was glowing softly, bathing the bench beneath it in silver light that gave the impression of shapes while withholding details from his straining eyes.

Basil was waiting impatiently for him. "You were away too long," she said, climbing onto the bench's seat. "Though it is good your den mates did not eat you, for I would not have been able to swallow them all, though I would have tried."

Harry snorted, but his mirth was short lived. He dropped down beside her and leaned back against the wall. "It's been a long day."

She raised her head. "There is pain in your voice."

He took a deep breath, his chest clenching as he admitted, "I don't think Neville's my friend anymore. He thinks I'm evil, just like the rest of them... Basil, I don't know if I can do this."

He didn’t want to leave, but he’d reached the brink of what he could bear and one more push would be enough to send him over. The thought of leaving the magnificent castle behind made his voice tremble. "I thought it would be different here, but it's just more of the same. Over and over again."

"You wish to return to your not-family?"
“No,” he said. But I don’t have anywhere else to go.

Basil’s head swayed and bobbed. “Then you must show these humans how foolish they are! If they believe you are evil, and that evil is causing harm, then you must do the opposite!”

It took a long moment for him to realize what she was suggesting, but when he did his brow drew down in incredulity. “You think I should... protect them?” he asked. “Protect them from what, exactly? This is a school, I doubt there’s anything dangerous lying about...” Except there was. Hadn’t the Headmaster warned them there was something deadly hiding in the third floor corridor?

“I doubt they’d need my help. They’ve been studying magic for years, after all.”

“I tasted them while you were gone,” Basil said. “Many pairs came to this place and tried to eat one another.” She paused. “Or mate, perhaps, though they were doing it wrong.”

“Did they see you?” he asked, ignoring the part about eating or mating as something he really, really didn’t want to touch.

“Of course not, they were far too busy!” she replied. “I could have slid beneath their robes without them noticing. I did not need to — so do not scrunch your face at me. Even from afar I could taste that their magic is buried so deep beneath their skins that it is nearly flavourless. They do not know how to call their power without their magic sticks — not like us.”

“It’s supposed to be hard to use magic without a wand,” he pointed out. “Nev— they told me that much.”

“And that is why you will be able to protect them,” she insisted. “Magic sticks are not reliable. You tell them to do one thing and they set your bed on fire!”

Harry winced at the reminder of his less-than-profitable practice sessions. “They can’t all be rubbish with their wands. They built all this, didn’t they? I’m probably just worse than most.”

Basil started to reply when there was a soft thunk and an even softer curse as someone stubbed their toe just around the corner from where they sat.

Harry jumped to his feet. “Quick Basil, get back in the wall!”

“I do not want to!” she protested. “I want to stay with you!” She coiled her powerful tail around one of the bench’s legs, intent on remaining where she was.

Footsteps now. Growing closer.

Harry scrambled to come up with a reason for her to get back in the mouse hole. He needed her to be safe, protected. To stay away from the students and professors the same way they were supposed to stay away from the third floor corridor. The idea that came to him was both brilliant and brilliantly stupid, but he didn’t have time to consider the possible outcomes.

“Basil, you’re right. The best way to get everyone to like me is to protect them, but to do that I need to know what they’re keeping on the third floor and I’m not allowed to go there.”

“I could find out,” she said, her coils loosening. “There are many paths behind the walls. No one would see me.”

“I don’t know. It might be too dangerous.”
"I can do it!" she insisted, sliding off the bench. "And when I have sought out this thing for you, you will not ask me to hide in walls anymore."

As her body vanished back into the mouse hole, Harry turned around and peered into the darkness beyond the painted moon's light.

"I know you're there!" he called. "Come out!"

A pair of gangly shadows appeared at the edge of the light. They stepped forward, revealing the identical faces of Fred and George Weasley, both of which were slack with amazement.

"You really can talk to snakes!" said Fred. Harry's stomach did an unhappy flip at the realization they'd been close enough to hear him speaking parseltongue, which meant there would be no bluffing his way out of this.

George shook his head in disbelief. "And here we thought it was just a show you put on to make dear Ronnikins wet himself."

They looked at each other and grinned. "Wicked!"

"It's not evil!" Harry protested.

They blinked at him in surprise. "Uh, no. Wicked, you know—"

"It means awesome."

Harry recoiled, taken aback. "You don't... hate me?"

"Potter, my man. Don't think so low of us—"

"You see, unlike the rest of the poor fools in this castle—"

"We see the bigger picture!"

Harry thought on that for a minute, but like the 'poor fools' the bigger picture eluded him. "What do you mean?"

Fred waggled his eyebrows. "Well, if you're really going to be the next Dark Lord—" he said.

"We'd rather be on your good side," finished George.

Harry clenched his jaw and took a step back, anger flaring up in his chest. "In the end you're no different than the rest," he spat. Confusion blossomed on their faces and he plowed on, words spilling from a dark place inside him. "You think I was born to be a Dark Lord just because I can speak to snakes? Well, what if I want to do something else with my life? What if I want to be a chef, or a gardener? Will you let me? Or will you keep pushing and pushing until I have no choice but to kill you all so you'll leave me be!"

"Whoa!" George raised his hands. "Easy there mate. We're only teasing."

"No one wants you to turn into a Dark Lord," Fred said. "I mean, you're Harry Potter. You're a hero!"

Harry's hands curled into fists. "Then why don't they trust me? If they're all so grateful, why does everyone turn their backs on me when all I want is to be their friend?" His voice wobbled dangerously at the end, and his eyes burned with unshed tears. He pushed up his glasses and rubbed
You were gone a long time," George said gently. "No one knew where you were or what you were doing, so we'd tell each other stories about how great and wise you'd be when you finally returned to the wizarding world. Our parents especially, they'd tell us how you'd lead us all to a brighter future. They were so... fervent, I guess. Even though we don't remember anything from the war they made us want to believe."

"I think," said Fred. "You just turned out to be a bit different than everyone expected, and they're having a hard time coming to terms with it."

Harry let out a harsh breath. "They don't know anything about me. They'd rather listen to your brother's stories than hear what I have to say."

The twins rubbed the backs of their heads. "Ron can be a right git at times—"

"But the others will calm down soon enough when they realize you're not as big and scary as they've come to believe."

Harry envied that they could see a light at the end of the tunnel, because no matter how hard he looked all he saw was darkness. "How long will it take?"

They shrugged. "Don't rightly know," said Fred. "If the sixth and seventh years join in the hysteria you could be in for a long haul, because if they're panicking everyone below them will too."

"What about the professors? Or the Headmaster?"

George snorted. "We'd have been expelled years ago if they weren't so good at turning a blind eye."

Behind the twins the darkness was pierced by flickering yellow shadows, as if someone beyond the bend had lit a candle.

"What did you do?" Harry asked.

George smirked. "Oh, all sorts of things—"

"Funny you should ask, really."

The shadows grew more pronounced and a gruff voice called, "Who's there!"

The twins snapped their mouths shut and scurried to the corner. Harry followed them and peered around their backs. A shabby man with stringy brown hair and a mean eye was shambling down the corridor, a lantern held aloft in his hand. He squinted in their direction, but couldn't see anything outside his circle of light.

Fred caught Harry's elbow and tugged him back towards the bench. "Crap, it's Filch!" he whispered.

"I know you're down there!" Filch shouted, and then they heard him draw a whistling breath in through his nose. "I can smell your fear."

That, Harry decided, didn't sound good at all.

"We'll need to make a break for it," George whispered, pulling the hood of his cloak up over his head. Fred and Harry followed suit.
"How fast can you run?" George asked him.

"Fast," Harry replied.

Filch was nearly at the corner, his lantern's light devouring the shadows that hid them. "Okay, keep close behind us. On three. One. Two. Three!"

They leapt forward all together, bolting through the puddle of light around the Hogwarts caretaker. Filch dropped his lantern and lunged at them, his arms snapping shut like a pair of shears. Fred ducked past, but George wasn't so lucky. Filch grabbed him by the shoulders, his mouth opening wide to let out a jubilant laugh when Harry took a step to the left and barrelled into his hip. Filch lost his balance, further aided by Harry who grabbed his belt and gave it a yank as he danced around behind him. His arms slipped and George struggled free, running into the shadows where his twin waited anxiously. Harry joined them and the three of them ran on before Filch could recover his balance and lantern.

"Get back here!" Filch hollered, then, "Alert! Students out of bed down the seventh floor corridor!" His voice echoed down the hall, magically augmented so every professor and prefect in the area would hear and come running.

Harry stumbled on the hem of his robes and hoisted them up in his left hand as he followed on Fred and George's heels, his speed more than a match for their longer legs.

They made a sharp left-hand turn towards a solid wall, and before Harry could shout a warning Fred slammed his hand against a rough brick and the wall slid aside to reveal a narrow dark staircase leading down towards the sixth floor. They plunged through the threshold and into true darkness as the door slid shut behind them. While the twins rustled through their pockets in search of their wands, Harry held out his right hand, imagining the pale skin growing paler and paler until it gleamed like the moon on a cloudless night, bathing the passageway in a soft silver light.

He blinked, able to see once again, and the twins gave up their search and started quick-stepping down the stairs. George glanced back over his shoulder and then did a double take, eyes wide as saucers.

"Merlin's beard!" he exclaimed.

"Keep running!" Fred chided. "Filch knows this passage as well as we do!"

Despite the threat, George couldn't stop shooting astonished looks back at Harry's glowing hand as they ran through the school. Filch's alarm had spread, and the halls were alive with the sound of professors and prefects hunting them down. On his own, Harry would have been caught five times over, but the twins seemed to know every secret passage in Hogwarts, and Harry quickly gave up being surprised when they ran headlong towards solid walls or ducked behind hanging tapestries.

Down and down they went, until Harry's legs were burning and he'd lost track of how many floors they'd passed. The pursuit was closing in behind them, following the rapid tap tap tap of Harry's shiny new dress shoes against the tiled floors. The twins ran silently, having changed into sensible footwear for mischief-making, and Harry couldn't understand why they hadn't left him behind as bait.

They skidded to a stop outside a door with a list nailed to its pitted face. Harry saw the words 'Illegal Items' in red at the top before Fred tapped the doorknob with his wand and mumbled a spell under his breath. The lock released with a click and they pushed inside. George pulled a leather bag out from beneath his robes and reached through the neck, drawing out a handful of black balls that
smelt faintly of manure. He and Fred rushed about, hiding them on top of a set of filing cabinets, on the chair at the beat up old desk, and in the links of a collection of chains hanging against one wall.

"What are those?" Harry asked.

"Dungbombs," Fred replied, tucking another of the balls into an umbrella holder by the door. Finished, he turned to Harry. "They'll give Filch a nice little surprise and— your hand is glowing!"

"I tried to tell you before!" George said. "But you wouldn't listen!"

"Better put it out," Fred advised. "Sounds like they're at the mouth of the hallway. Come on!"

Harry stuffed his hand deep inside his robes, muffling the light rather than extinguishing it in case they needed to make a quick getaway. They crept out the door and away from the bobbing wand lights growing ever closer. Ducking into an alcove they hunkered down to watch.

Five people were making their way down the hall. Filch was in the lead, followed closely by the dark haired wizard who'd scowled at Harry during the feast. A gaggle or prefects followed after them, holding their wands high in an attempt to be the first to spot their quarry.

The twins started bouncing with glee. “We’re gonna get Snape!” George whispered, clearly excited by the prospect.

“And Percy too,” Fred replied, pointing towards his older brother who was trailing two steps behind Snape.

"My office!" Filch yelled upon seeing the open door. The five wizards rushed inside and Fred — grinning like the cheshire cat — whispered another spell.

"Dispergat!"

There was a loud splat from inside the room and a dark, runny substance sprayed through the open door as the dungbombs detonated simultaneously. The stench of manure struck them like a battering ram, strong enough to make them gag — which from the sounds of thing was exactly what the people inside Filch's office were doing.

"Mission complete!" Fred said.

"Come on, time to get back."

Harry quickly pulled off his shoes and socks, tucking them under one arm as he followed the twins back up a mountain of stairs. Ten minutes later they popped out from behind a tapestry right in front of the Fat Lady.

"Password," she asked lazily.

"Caput Draconis," Fred replied. The Fat Lady curtsied and the portrait swung open, revealing the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

"Is that our password?" Harry asked as they scrambled inside.

"Didn't anyone tell you?"

"No," he admitted. "We aren't exactly on speaking terms."
The common room was empty except for a marmalade cat curled up on one of the armchairs in
front of the fireplace. It didn't rouse as they walked into the room, nor when the twins converged
on Harry, grabbed his glowing hand, and turned it this way and that, studying it. Harry dropped his
shoes in shock. They landed half on the plush red carpet and half on his left foot.

"No runes," said George, his nose nearly pressed against Harry’s palm as he squinted into the silver
light.

"But that means... That’s wandless magic!"

Their mouths dropped open in awe. "You can do wandless magic?"

Harry pulled his hand from their grasp and willed it to stop glowing. "Yes."

"How did you learn?" asked Fred.

"We've begged our parents to teach us for years, but they always made excuses," George
complained. "Told us we were too young, or that it was too dangerous."

Fred crossed his arms. "Not sure they know how themselves, honestly," he muttered.

Harry decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. They'd earned that much by not running away
screaming when they heard him speak parseltongue. "Basil taught me," he said.

The twins tilted their heads in unison. "Who?"

"My friend. She's a snake."

"A snake taught you wandless magic?" asked Fred incredulously.

"Well, a boa constrictor at the zoo helped too. He was really good at explaining everything so it
made sense."

The twins looked at each other in shock and a silent conversation must have passed between them
because they were both suddenly alert, eyes far too bright and reflecting a red gleam from the
embers glowing in the hearth. They looked devilish in the half-light and sweat tickled Harry’s
scalp as he imagined what that could mean for him.

"How about we make a deal?" said Fred. "Teach us wandless magic and we'll stick by your side
through thick and thin."

"Might even be able to stop the rumours circulating about you too," George offered slyly.

It seemed too good to be true. Harry didn’t know if the twins would be able to learn wandless
magic, but he wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "I don't know if I'll be a good
teacher," he said, "but I can try."

"That's all we ask," they replied.

Harry nodded. “Okay. It's a deal."

The twins held out their hands and Harry shook them, sealing their alliance.

It felt nice to have allies, he decided as he climbed up the stairs to his dorm. Even if they weren’t
really friends — or at least he didn’t think they were — to know that he’d be able to count on
someone being on his side was reassuring, and he’d do his best to keep it that way.
Harry slipped through the door of the first year dorm, shutting it softly behind him. His roommates had pulled the hangings around their beds closed, and while there were loud snores coming from Ron’s bed, candle light was reflected on the ceiling above both Neville and Dean’s. Harry crept past them and was surprised when he saw the hangings around his own bed had been repaired. They hung from the brass railings as though the confrontation that morning had never happened. Exhausted, he changed into his pyjamas and slipped under the covers.

He fell asleep feeling a little more hopeful that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel for him after all.
Professor McGonagall considered herself a practical woman. As the head of Gryffindor house, she was used to dealing with large, vibrant personalities and enough stubborn pride to choke a hippogryph. It was her duty to guide her lions as they strove for greatness, and when they inevitably stumbled and fell, to pick them up, dust them off, and set them back on the path. Mediating between inflated egos came as second nature to her now, all it required was a firm hand and unshakable countenance. She could proudly claim to weather the worst emotional breakdowns without batting an eye, and if she happened to enjoy a stiff drink or five in the evening... well that wasn't anyone else's business, now was it?

Emotions, she knew. Emotions, she could work with. So when Harry Potter arrived ten minutes late to his first transfiguration lesson, hands stained with ink and face closed off, she was worried.

When she noticed he was favouring his right leg, that worry changed to alarm.

She'd heard the rumours circling among the students, including one about a confrontation in the first year boys' dormitory. The house elves who'd been in to straighten out the room claimed it had been rocked by a strong magical discharge, but she hadn't wanted to believe this might be a sign of trouble brewing. Harry was Lily and James's son, and while his father had been a hellion in his youth, she was sure Lily's sweet demeanour would temper her husband's brash tendencies in their child. Yet, as Harry walked to the empty seat at the front of the room, his limp nearly hidden by his slow strides, she couldn't quash the foreboding that twisted in her breast and made her hackles rise.

Until Harry arrived the room had been full of quiet conversation, the mixed Gryffindor-Hufflepuff class not realizing she was the grey tabby cat perched on the teacher's desk. Those conversations died a swift death as soon as he appeared, and no one called out greetings or made an offer for Harry to sit beside them. For his part, Harry didn't seem to expect any different. He kept his eyes straight ahead and chose to sit alone at the front of the class.

She wished she could remain an anonymous feline and watch the class's dynamics unfold, but she had already delayed long enough waiting for Harry to arrive and if she didn't start her lecture soon they'd fall behind.

Gathering herself for the shift, she leapt gracefully from the desk. When she touched down on the floor she no longer had the dainty paws of a cat, but a pair of human feet encased in snug boots.

Gasps rippled through the class, but her eyes were only for Harry. He was dabbing at the ink-stained cover of his textbook with the sleeve of his robe and barely seemed to notice her transformation. Slowly he looked up and his eyes widened minutely.

"You're late, Mr Potter," she said, striding over to stand in front of his desk, and was rewarded by a look of genuine amazement crossing his face.

"You were a cat," he breathed. "How did you do that?"

She smiled. "I am what's known as an animagus, it is a—"

An arm shot into the air to her right and started waving frantically. The feline part of her brain was distracted by the movement, and her gaze zeroed in on her prey... student. On her student.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" she asked, while she tried to get her instincts under control.
The girl had bushy brown hair cascading around her head like a mane and she was perched on the very edge of her seat. "An animagus is a witch or wizard who can transform themselves into an animal at will," she said. "It takes months of arduous study to master, and if done wrong can backfire, leaving the caster trapped in their animal form."

She was a little put out that her explanation had been coopted, but she couldn't fault the girl for her knowledge — and wouldn't waste an opportunity to award her house some points. From the look of the hourglasses that morning, Severus had already been liberal with the rewards for his own house, and she was determined not to let him gain too much of a lead. "That is correct, Miss Granger. Take five points for Gryffindor."

Harry was looking down at his desk, a small, pensive frown on his lips. "You wish to ask me something, Mister Potter?" she asked.

He looked up at her with his bright green eyes, and she was relieved to see they weren't as distant as before. "Why'd you pick a cat?"

She smiled at the common misconception, but before she could reply she was interrupted again.

"An animagus doesn't choose their animal form," Hermione Granger said, not waiting to be called upon. "But discovers it through meditation as part of the transformation process. While no one knows for sure how the animal is determined, it seems to be influenced by the personality and physical characteristics of the witch or wizard."

_Oh dear_, she thought. The girl was one of _those_ students. She made a mental note to check on her after Severus's class tomorrow; he didn't abide talking out of turn, and would no doubt call her to task with his usual nonexistent tact.

"Indeed, Miss Granger. Though I would ask you to wait until I call on you next time." The girl's cheeks flushed and she squeaked out a quiet apology.

She turned her attention to the class at large. "I won't be teaching you about the animagi transformation until third year, once you've mastered the basics of transfiguration. I do not expect any of you to become animagi, few witches and wizards care to, however I hope that I have ignited your interest in the field of transfiguration."

"Mr Potter," she added quietly. "Please stay behind after class, I wish to have a word with you."

The colour drained from his face so fast she was afraid he would faint, but he kept to his seat and nodded stiffly. When she was certain he wouldn't end up on the floor, she moved to the free-standing blackboard to the right of her desk and slipped into lecture mode.

"Transfiguration," she said, "is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you'll learn at Hogwarts. Anyone fooling around in my class will leave and not come back. You have all been warned."

She then proceeded to turn her desk into a pig and back again.

The lecture portion of the class passed by quickly, and it pleased her that the majority of the students were attentive and took notes. After forty minutes she gave them a short break while she prepared for the practical segment of the class. Some of the students went out to stretch their legs, but the majority crowded around the cages and terrariums lining the room’s walls and peered in at the brightly coloured finches, rough-scaled lizards, and slim white mice who called them home. The orange-billed toucan in the aviary to the left of her desk was, as always, a crowd favourite as
he bobbed his head and clacked his beak.

Only Harry Potter remained in his seat. He didn’t stretch — didn’t move at all, in fact — except for a slight tilt of his head, as though he was listening intently to something. A smile flitted across his face and she traced the source of his interest towards a pair of large tanks full of grass snakes — a concession on Albus’s part, as he’d argued vehemently against the presence of any live snakes in the school. In the end he’d bowed to the pragmatics of keeping the reptiles as practice subjects, though she could tell her insistence had ruffled his feathers.

Ah, the joys of being deputy headmistress. She took a perverse pleasure in making the indisputable old man squirm, especially when he insisted on keeping the reasoning for his decisions so close to his chest that it left the rest of the staff turning in circles trying to figure out what they’d missed.

That same feeling of having missed a crucial piece of information plagued her as she watched amusement play across Harry’s face. It was subtle, as though he didn’t want anyone to notice the source of his interest, and if he hadn’t been sitting so close to the front of the class she was sure she’d have missed it altogether.

As she laid a match in front of Harry she strained her ears, but couldn’t hear anything except the excited chatter of the other students, and she was forced to set her curiosity aside.

The class resumed shortly after. Once they were sitting back in their seats she reminded them of the incantation and wand movements for the spell that would turn a matchstick into a needle, and left them to it. She walked through the class as they attempted their first transfigurations, giving help where it was needed, and keeping her ears perked as she glided silently behind the rows of seats.

"Did you see how he slumped when he learned you can't choose what animal you change into?" Ron Weasley said to Seamus Finnigan as they swished and flicked their wands over their matches. "Bet he was wishing he could become a slimy snake."

"Like he isn't one already," Seamus replied. "He can already talk to them."

A cold lump settled in her stomach. "Something to say, Mr Weasley? Mr Finnigan?" she asked, interrupting them.

They jumped in their seats and looked back at her, guilt written all over their faces. Ron's cheeks were as red as his hair and Seamus's match burst into flame. "No Professor," they said.

If she’d still had a tail, the tip would have been flicking in displeasure. Ron and Seamus hadn't been speaking quietly, and even with the classroom's current noise level they were close enough that Harry could have overheard them. She looked over at him, and though his back was to her, she could see his shoulders were hunched forward as he concentrated on his match. His left hand ran up and down his side, as if seeking comfort from the touch. It flitted to his collarbone, fingers tangling briefly in his cowl, and then back down to his hip.

"I hope," she said to the two boys in front of her, "you don't believe that is an appropriate way to speak about your schoolmates."

They had the good sense to look ashamed, though it was tainted with defiance. "No, Professor," they repeated.

By the time the bells in the tower tolled one o’clock, only Hermione Granger had successfully transfigured her matchstick into a needle. As the other students packed up for lunch and filed from the room, Harry remained frozen in his seat, his hands clasped together in his lap.
"This way, Mister Potter," she said, motioning to a narrow door at the back of the room. He slid reluctantly from his chair, hefted his bag over one shoulder, and followed her.

They entered her private office together. It was a small room done in the Gryffindor colours of red and gold, and decorated with the Quidditch paraphernalia she’d collected over the years. Hanging in a place of pride next to the door was a photograph from the last time her house had won the Quidditch Cup, the team hoisting the silver trophy high over their heads while she stood next to them, a huge smile on her face. Across from the photograph, her desk was catching the afternoon light through the single tall window set in the back wall. Outside, the misty outlines of the highland mountains were just visible through the cloudy glass.

She sat down in her desk chair and motioned for Harry to take one of those opposite her. "Please take a seat."

He studied the uncomfortable looking chairs dubiously, but slid into the one to her left. She hid her amusement as his face took on a hint of surprise. Those chairs were a great deal more comfortable than they looked, not like those abominations Severus kept in his office whose sole purpose was to make visitors leave as soon as possible.

Drawing out her wand, she flicked it towards the corner of the desk, summoning a plate of sandwiches and a pitcher of water from the kitchens. "That's better," she said, as she transfigured sheets of parchment into plates and goblets. "Now we can speak in a bit more comfort. Water? I'm afraid that after thirty-five years of teaching I've had enough pumpkin juice to last a lifetime."

Harry studied the food with a suspicious eye. She could see questions forming behind them, but they never reached his tongue.

"Yes please," he said.

They reached for the water pitcher at the same time, and there was a brief scuffle for the handle that ended when he drew back his hand as if bitten. "Allow me," she said, lifting the pitcher. "It's quite heavy."

She poured them each a cup, trying her best to ignore his confusion at being served, and then selected a tuna sandwich from the plate. He followed her lead, grabbing the first sandwich he touched. His stomach growled, but he merely placed the food on his plate and then looked at her, waiting.

"Please begin," she said, taking a bite from her own sandwich. Still Harry hesitated, only taking a small bite once she'd swallowed her first. The sense of foreboding returned, his behaviour tugging at something in the corners of her mind, but she couldn't place it. She was used to brash outbursts; this wary caution was unnerving.

"It has come to my attention that you've been missing meals," she said, focusing on the reason she asked him to stay behind in the hopes that everything would become clear in time. "As your head of house, your well being is my responsibility, and I'm sure you can see why this worries me."

"I wasn't hungry," he replied softly.

"You've skipped meals these past two days! A growing boy such as yourself cannot live on air, Mister Potter, and I'm not the only staff member who is growing concerned. Our school mediwitch, Madame Pomfrey, would like to meet with you."

Harry sat back in alarm. "I'm fine," he said, far too quickly. "There's nothing wrong with me. I don't
need to see a nurse."

"You don't need to be afraid of Pomphrey, Mister Potter. It's true that she can be a little overbearing when it comes to her patients’ health, but she is a truly kind woman, and she is bound by patient confidentiality to keep anything she learns about you secret."

Harry's eyes dropped to his plate and he muttered, "That's what they always say before they go and open their mouths."

She set down her sandwich and shoved aside her inner cat who was demanding more tuna now! "Have you had a bad experience with a medical practitioner in the past?" She hoped it wasn't true. If Harry had suffered in any way while under the care of those stuck-up muggles he had the misfortune to call family — after everything he'd already been through the night He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named came for him — she would be crushed by the guilt and knowledge that she might have been able to do something if she'd held her ground against Albus.

Harry looked to be deep in thought, oblivious to the conflicted emotions rushing through her. "The nurse wants to see me because I'm not going to meals?" he asked, and she nodded. "So if I go to meals I won't have to see her." he reasoned.

She pursed her lips, Pomphrey wouldn't be happy if she let him slip away. The mediwitch had come to her directly after the welcoming feast with concerns about Harry's height — far too short for a child his age — and began pushing her to bring him in for a full physical. Most children would have understood her suggestion wasn't really a suggestion at all, but Harry had taken her literally — leaving himself an escape.

_Slytherin, _her mind whispered. _This child is a Slytherin._ Where was Severus when she needed him?

"Go to meals and eat them," she said, tapping the rim of his plate with two fingers to draw attention to the sandwich that rested there, still nearly whole. "Three square meals a day, no excuses. If you can do that, I'll ask Madam Pomphrey to give you some space until you feel comfortable enough to speak with her."

He frowned, but nodded his assent.

"Good. I, or one of the other staff, will be watching to make sure you attend. I expect you to remain at the table for at least fifteen minutes, and to eat a healthy mix of vegetables, fruit, and meat. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor. May I go?" he asked, shifting in the chair as though preparing to bolt.

"Not until you finish your lunch," she replied firmly.

He sighed, but picked the sandwich back up and bit into it. A glob of mustard squeezed out from between the slices of white bread, and he lurched forward to keep it from falling on his robes. It landed on her desk instead, just shy of his plate.

He looked horrified, and started muttering apologies as he searched for a napkin. In any other child, his panic at such a small thing would have amused her, but her thrice-damned cat instincts were yowling that there was something seriously wrong.

She conjured a napkin before he could mop up the mustard with his sleeve and passed it to him with a reassuring smile. "It happens to the best of us," she said. "You should see me when the
house elves go overboard on the mayonnaise. Bits of fish everywhere!

"You aren't worried it will stain?" he asked, rubbing at the spot the mustard fell with a vengeance.

"This old desk has seen a lot worse than mustard spilt on it over the years," she replied, patting it fondly. It had been a gift from her late husband back when she’d first started teaching, and had seen her through thick, thin, and thinner.

It wasn't the time to be reminiscing about such things however, so she asked, "Did you fall while coming to class?"

Harry dropped the used napkin on his plate and took a drink of water. "Why would you think that?"

"You're covered in ink, and I saw you limping when you entered the room.” She left no room for negotiation in her tone, not daring to give him another easy out through a careless slip of the tongue.

"I tripped on the stairs and dropped my bag on my foot. It's a little sore, but nothing bad." His shoulders slumped. "The ink went everywhere though."

"Clearly," she said. "Hold up your bag for me, if you please."

He pulled the strap from his shoulder and struggled to raise the bag above the height of the desk. Originally the bag must have been a dark cream canvas, but now there was a huge black splotch covering the entire bottom and halfway up the front flap. She drew her wand and pointed it at the stain.

"Tergeo," she intoned.

As if the tip of her wand were a lodestone, the ink drew forth from the fabric in twisting ribbons and small black droplets. They were drawn into the tip of her wand and vanished, leaving the bag as good as new. She shifted her focus to his robes and hands, drawing forth streams of ink until not a single black mark was left.

Harry's mouth had dropped open and his eyes were glittering as he ran a hand down the front of the bag reverently. "Thank you," he said, meeting her eyes with his green ones. "What spell was that?"

"A charm to siphon off liquids. It's one of the basic cleaning spells."

"And the incantation is tre... ter..." He stumbled over the latin word, trying to sound it out.

"It's Ter-ge-o," she repeated slowly, so he could catch each syllable. "Though it may still be a bit beyond your capabilities right now. It's generally taught in second year charms."

Harry didn't seem to care. He opened his satchel and dug out his transfiguration text. Holding it at arm’s length, he drew out his own wand and a look of fierce concentration settled on his face.

"Tergeo!" he said.

She wasn’t surprised when nothing happened. Casting a spell correctly on their first attempt was difficult for even an experienced wizard. She started to offer her help when Harry set his wand down on her desk and raised his empty hand instead. His eyes narrowed and fingers flexed in concentration, staring down the stains as though he could will them away.

The small hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as the ink marring the book's cover trembled
and began to pull towards the tips of his fingers. It hovered a moment, a shining black ribbon suspended in midair, until with a lurch it jumped for Harry’s hand and vanished.

"It worked!" he cried, triumphantly holding his now unblemished book up to the light. He looked at her; wide, innocent eyes begging for the praise that had lodged frozen in her throat as memories of another child reared up to swallow her.

A Prefect had summoned her from her classroom, shouting about a prank gone wrong as they ran down a spiralling staircase. In the well at the bottom of the steps knelt a young girl — no older than eleven — clutching something small and furry to her chest. She wept as though the world had ended, and between the sobs Minerva heard a plea fall broken from between her trembling lips.

‘Don’t be dead!’

They were still two rotations above her when the bundle of fur twitched and a small pink mouth opened in a mockery of life.

The girl jerked into the air — toes dangling as she threw back her head and screamed.

Her body convulsed, twisting into grotesque shapes as it was ravaged by raw magic too powerful for her small body to contain. Minerva reached for her — pressed a hand against her shoulder and shouted that she had to stop. To let go. That she’d created something that would now destroy her.

The girl looked at her with terrified eyes, and she knew it was far too late. Magic arced from her limbs and between her lips, then flared bright as the sun.

Minerva dragged her hand back, skin red and blistering. Horror would not let her weep as she watched one of her students burst into flames. A single blinding instant and then the girl was nothing but ashes and blackened, fire-pitted bones. Her skeleton clattered to the ground, long-bones snapping under a fragile cage of ribs.

Behind her the Prefect had sunk to his knees, hands pressed over his nose and mouth as he tried not to breathe in the sickly sweet scent of burning flesh.

Within the ashes, movement.

A kitten shrugged off the chain of vertebra pinning it to the cobbles and looked up at her with cold, dead eyes.

She took a sip from her glass, suddenly wishing it was something stronger than water.

The cat was an inferius. A corpse bewitched to a semblance of life through the dark arts — but there had been no ring of tallow candles, no ritual circle with which to bind a soul to the small cadaver. There was only a girl, a muggleborn Slytherin, for whom the death of her pet had broken a wall deep inside her and sparked the magic that ripped away her life.

Her parents couldn’t have known the dangers of channelling too much unfettered magic — the burned out nerves that left fingers and toes numb, the disconnect from emotions that led even the kindest of children to spells best left uncast, and — in cases that had grown increasingly rare after the widespread introduction of wands — deaths such as the one she’d witnessed.

It was the reason no magical parent would teach their child to cast without a wand; children didn’t know their bodies well enough to judge when they were asking too much. As infants their magic was controlled by their unconscious minds, which strove to ensure their survival and continued health. It was only when they were old enough to discover that magic was a force they could bend
to their wills — the age at which accidental magic, as it was called, ceased to work — that they
could override the instinctual drive towards self-preservation.

Impatient and naive to their own mortality, they were more likely to try and fail than sift through
thousands of spells before finding the one that would produce the result they wanted.

The act of building magic into a spell chained its destructive power, and a wand’s core — taken
from a creature in whose veins magic flowed like lifeblood — bore the brunt of the casting,
allowing witches and wizards to bend reality in a way that would otherwise destroy them.

And so, wands were introduced early in a magical child’s life, and they were taught that wandless
magic was something so far beyond their capabilities that they wrote it off as impossible.

As a strategy it worked well enough, though her stomach churned whenever she wondered how
many children born in muggle homes died before receiving their Hogwarts letters. There wouldn’t
be many, having magic and being capable of using it consciously were two very different things,
but even one life lost was too many after their population was gouged during the last war.

Lives like Harry’s.

When she didn’t reply the boy wilted, eyes drifting down to his knees as he drew the book close to
his chest. His disappointment tugged on her heartstrings, but she knew it was for the best. Better
that he decide to stop using wandless magic on his own than for her to try and scare him out of it.
She wanted him to embrace magic safely — not repress it out of fear for his life until he was little
better than a squib.

“How long have you been using magic without a wand?” she asked cautiously, fighting to keep her
voice neutral.

“I… I guess it’s been a month or two,” he admitted, not meeting her gaze.

Not long, then. She leaned forward in her chair and pushed her plate aside. Taking her cup, she
poured a small amount of water on the empty stretch of wood just in front of her. Harry watched
the puddle settle warily, uncertain what she intended to do with it.

She smiled in an attempt to ease his nerves. “At Hogwarts we insist on students using their wands,”
she said. “I’d like you to try the siphoning charm again, this time with your wand.”

Harry sighed, but he picked up his wand and pointed it dutifully towards the water. “Tergeo!”

Nothing happened.

She worked with Harry for over an hour, painstakingly teaching him how to connect with his wand
and time the incantation to the movement of his hand. At first he seemed resentful at her for
forcing him to practice something he could accomplish instantly wandless, but as he started to see
successes his mood lightened and he became more involved — attempting the spell without her
constant prompting.

When the puddle of water on the desk finally leapt into his wand he let out a pleased laugh.

“It’s never worked for me before,” he said, running a finger along the pale stick of wood. “I didn’t
think it liked me.”

“The wand chose you, Mister Potter,” she said. “Out of all the witches and wizards in the world,
you were the only one worthy of wielding it. You'd be doing the wand a disservice by abandoning it without even trying, don't you think?"

“I guess.”

From outside came the deep peal of the warning bell announcing that classes would soon resume. Harry got up from his seat, clearly eager to be away though she knew he didn't have any classes this afternoon. As he shrugged his bag back over his shoulder she cleared her throat, catching his attention.

“Don’t forget, either myself or Madam Pomfrey will be watching for you at meals from now on.”

He pursed his lips, but nodded.

“And I want you to know that if you ever feel the need to speak to someone, I will be here for you. Understand?”

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," he said in a bland voice that told her exactly how many times he'd take her up on her offer.

It wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough.

But she didn't know how to change things.

She was used to large, vibrant personalities. This... this was beyond her.

His meeting with Professor McGonagall could have gone worse, Harry reflected as he made his way from the transfiguration classroom to the library. That he might catch the eye of the nurse, or mediwitch as he supposed she was called here, hadn't crossed his mind until this point, though in hindsight it wasn't entirely unexpected. The same had happened every couple years at his old school, and it appeared that considerations such as the health and well-being of a school's charges transcended both mundane and magical considerations.

When Professor McGonagall mentioned the mediwitch his stomach had lurched so violently he'd only just managed to keep his lunch from making an unsavoury return to his plate. Medical professionals tended to be nosy in all the wrong ways, and the last time he'd been unfortunate enough to encounter a school nurse his aunt had locked him in the attic until he cleaned and organized all the old mouldering boxes of magazines and clothes that had been thrown up there over the past decade and a half. It had taken him a full four days, and he'd developed a fever and wet, hacking cough that lingered for months afterwards. It was the only time he ever recalled being sick, and it wasn't an experience he wanted to repeat.

The Dursleys would already be angry with him for having run away to a magical school, he didn't need to do anything that would antagonize them further.

So he'd taken the option to attend meals, no matter how much he hated giving the other students an opportunity to gawk at him. Professor McGonagall had seemed displeased with his choice — or perhaps she'd been angry at herself for even giving him a second option — and he hadn't missed how she implied that he would be speaking to the nurse at some point in the year, though when you feel ready equaled never in Harry's mind, and with any luck he'd be able to put it off indefinitely.

At least one good thing had come of the meeting, he'd learned a useful new spell! Though, he
couldn’t understand why the professor had seemed so put off when he performed it without his wand. As he traipsed down a deserted spiral staircase he reflected that she might be jealous. He remembered becoming testy at his cousin and classmates when they flaunted their nice clothes, new school supplies, or tasty looking lunches in front of him — this could very well be the magical equivalent.

Which would make this the first time Harry had something for others to be jealous of.

She’d been adamant about showing him how to use his wand, which was, he supposed, a good thing. He didn’t want to flaunt his abilities in front of his classmates. They already resented him; jealousy would only exacerbate the situation and he wasn’t sure he could deal with any more hatred without people getting hurt.

More hurt, he supposed as his foot landed on a step dyed black by ink, as it had already begun.

On his way to transfiguration that morning, Ron Weasley had shoved past him on this very staircase. Harry had managed to save himself from tumbling all the way to the bottom by shoving his arm through the bannister and escaped with only a sprained ankle, sore head, and wrenched shoulder. His satchel had been less fortunate, and when he saw the ink ruining all his nice new possessions he’d nearly burst into tears. He doubted Professor McGonagall realized exactly how happy she’d made him when she taught him the \textit{tergeo} charm, or that she’d inspired him to brave Mme Pince’s reproving countenance and approach the librarian for a book on household cleaning charms.

With his new book in hand, he ensconced himself deep in the stacks and worked his way through several of the basic charms. It was amazing the things witches and wizards had invented spells for: there were charms to freshen, fold, iron, and mend clothing; charms to dust and sweep; polishing charms; charms to brush and braid hair; and some charms meant to clean objects, but that would cause soap to fill their target’s mouth if used on a human. The book also mentioned spells to vanish things completely, though it classified these as transfigurations and didn't go into much detail on how to actually perform them.

By the time the clocktower tolled half-past-six, he’d found limited success with several of the charms. He felt he could have done better, but reading a spell's incantation and effects in a book was no substitute for witnessing it in action. His lack of practice materials also played a role. He didn't dare do anything to his robes that might leave him unclothed in the library, and after an hour of trying to get his hair combed and laying flat he'd come to the conclusion that it was immune to both magic and gravity, and would only be tamed through the liberal use of concrete.

Leaving the safety and quiet of the library was hard, but he forced himself out into the bustling corridor and kept his head down as he followed the crowds to the great hall for dinner.

Reaching the doors to the hall he paused and looked down the Slytherin table, half-dreading Draco would march over to confront him, while his other half wanted to get it over with so he could stop fretting. Before he could come to a decision on which would be worse, a pair of arms looped under his shoulders and dragged him off in the opposite direction.

"Well, well. If it isn’t our favourite Dark Lord!" Fred cheered, grinning madly on his right.

George winked. "Come down to join us mortals at last, eh?"

"Where did you two come from?" Harry asked as he struggled in their grasp. For such wiry boys they were extremely strong, and all the Weasleys were tall for their age.
"Relax, oh evil one," Fred said. They dragged him over to an empty spot at the Gryffindor table and sat him down, taking up places on either side of him like sentries. They were sitting at the end of the table nearest the door, a prime position that was generally reserved for the sixth and seventh years. Harry felt very small when the older students stopped their conversations and turned their way, but the twins waved cheerily at them and they eventually turned back to their meals.

"We’re here to safeguard your dinner hour and make sure the old cat doesn’t march you off to the hospital wing." They pointed their thumbs towards the staff table where Professor McGonagall was indeed present and — judging from the slump of her shoulders — being reamed out by the school mediwitch in her towering white hat for letting Harry slip through her fingers.

Harry blinked. “How did you know about that?”

The twins smirked. “We were waiting outside your class—"

"And saw her keep you behind."

"You were listening at the door?" Harry was impressed at their nerve. He wouldn't have given much for their chances if Professor McGonagall had caught them.

"Of course we were!" they said together. George picked up one of the platters. They were no longer made of solid gold like at the feast, but were now very serviceable pewter or ceramic.

"So, how about it? Lamb, chicken, or shepherd’s pie?"

Harry let his plate be filled with food as it didn't look like he had much choice in the matter. He loaded his fork full of shepherd’s pie, which not only smelt wonderful, but was also full of minced carrots, peas, leeks, and corn — and therefore should count as ‘well balanced’ to his professor’s scrutinizing eyes. Even if he didn’t finish it all, it should appease his head of house that he was abiding by their agreement.

"You have Potions tomorrow?" Fred asked.

Harry didn't bother questioning how he knew his schedule. "Yeah, it’s my only class."

George grunted around a fork full of mashed potatoes. "Rough times."

"A word of advice. Snape likes to bait Gryffindors. Make them angry—"

"And then take off a ton of points—"

"He also likes to make Hufflepuffs cry."

Harry paused with his fork in his mouth, and looked at Fred incredulously. What sort of teacher liked to make children cry, he wondered.

"But we don’t talk about that."

The Snape kind, apparently. He sighed and leaned his elbow on the table, listening as the twins rattled off a list of advice for surviving Potions, which included: be early, only speak when addressed, raise your hand in class, don’t raise your hand in class, stir exactly the number of times listed on the board, ensure you can see the board, don’t throw spare ingredients at the Slytherins no matter how badly you want to unless you’re sure you won’t get caught, and most importantly don’t blow up your cauldron!
That was a lot of rules for a single class, and Harry wasn’t sure it would do him any good if Professor Snape hated him as much as he’d seemed to at the Welcoming Feast. Then again, it was possible the man fixed venomous glares on everyone. He glanced up at the head table and spotted Snape sitting, once again, on Professor Quirrell’s right. He was glowering at the bowl in front of him, not even his soup spared from his wrath, which seemed to confirm his generally unpleasant demeanour.

Fred leaned close to his shoulder, his voice dropping into a whisper as he asked, “Have you thought more on teaching us… that?”

Harry nodded. He’d gone over what he could remember of the boa constrictor’s explanation about magic, and wandless magic specifically, over the past few days and was confident he could explain it without Basil’s curious logic as backup. “I have. I think I’m ready to start,” he said, setting his fork down next to his plate. He looked between them. “You said you’d look for a place we can practice?”

“Looked and found!” George said. “We can start right away if that’s okay with you.”

“I’m fine with that,” Harry replied. “It’s not like I have any homework due tomorrow.”

Fred rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Great! I think we still have five minutes before you can leave without McGonagall flipping her skirt, so you might as well finish the rest of that up.” He motioned to Harry’s plate, in which Harry had only made a small dent. “We’ve been waiting years for this, another few minutes won’t kill us.”

Harry looked down at his food. Another few minutes might very well kill him, he thought as he scooped his fork back up and forced another mouthful of pie past his lips.

On the far end of the Great Hall, Draco sat between the hulking figures of Crabbe and Goyle, who were coveting his apple tart with hungry eyes despite the mountains of sweets piled on their own plates.

He stabbed the dessert in front of him mutinously, crushing its flaky crust under the flat of his fork.

Four days.

It had been four days since Harry started avoiding him and it rankled.

Admittedly, it was ridiculous to lose his composure over a boy he’d known for all of one day, but he was a Malfoy for Merlin’s sake — not some common low-brow Dodds or, gods forbid, a Weasley! He had nothing against possibly dark wizards, even if they did bolt at the sight of him!

He sneered at his crumpled pastry. He’d heard the rumours — even plucked up his courage to detour toward the Gryffindor table Tuesday morning to eavesdrop on Ronald Weasley who, despite being an obnoxious, blood-traitor git, was also a key witness to whatever mayhem had struck the Gryffindor dorm the morning before.

Sidling up behind a group of older Hufflepuffs listening avidly to Weasley’s story, Draco was astounded that anyone with half a brain believed it to be anything other than fiction.

Unfortunately, brains seemed to be in short supply at Hogwarts, further supporting his father’s opinion that Headmaster Dumbledore was the worst thing to happen to Hogwarts since Salazar Slytherin’s abrupt departure several centuries back.
Harry had brought a snake with him, but she was hardly the hippogriff-killer Weasley claimed to have fought. Later that afternoon Draco had brushed up on Britain’s native snake species — of which he discovered were surprisingly few — and was ninety-nine percent sure the snake he glimpsed on the Hogwarts Express was a common grass snake. While she might pose a threat to Weasley’s scraggly pet rat, the most she could do to the boy was snap at his ankles.

No, it wasn’t the snake that bothered him. It wasn’t even the so-called killer magic. What Draco couldn’t wrap his head around was the claim that Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived and Saviour of the Light, was a *parselmouth*.

It was so absurd — so utterly improbable — that it had to be true. While Weasley had shown himself to be an inventive braggart, Draco didn’t believe he was intelligent enough to have started the rumour on his own. It took a special kind of malicious cunning to use false information to intentionally destroy the reputation of a boy lauded as a hero by most of wizarding Britain – and in truth, claiming he was a parselmouth was likely the only effective way to go about doing so. He wouldn’t be surprised if Harry could have gotten away with manslaughter without his ardent fans batting an eye so long as the poor sod on the other end of his wand was even remotely ‘dark’.

Draco preferred to be on the good side of people with that kind of influence, especially since his family wasn’t exactly a paragon of all things bright and good.

His father agreed with his assessment, and Draco rested a hand on the pocket of his bag. The letter his eagle-owl Hermes had delivered that morning alongside the usual package of sweets from his mother creased beneath his palm.

He pulled it out and re-read his father’s elegant cursive, unconcerned about how his nosy housemates leaned in to peek over his shoulders. The letter was written on parchment emblazoned with the Malfoy family crest, and the charms hidden within the dragons flanking the green and black shield kept away even the keenest, most determined snoops.

*Dear Draco,*

*I know your mother has already passed on our congratulations for being sorted into Slytherin, but I wished to reiterate how proud we are that you have upheld the Malfoy family tradition. Be sure to mind your godfather, and do not hesitate to seek him out if you encounter any trouble with your schoolmates.*

*I received the statements you enclosed from Ms Parkinson and Mr Crabbe and Goyle about the discriminatory accusations made by the school groundskeeper. It would have been ideal to receive evidence from Mr Potter as well, yet given the turmoil currently surrounding the boy I understand why this was not possible.*

*I have lodged a formal complaint with the Board of Governors and expect little difficulty in bringing the groundskeeper up on charges of professional misconduct and slander. Dumbledore will no doubt defend his half-giant pet, and while it is unlikely he will be sacked, I am confident we shall be compensated.*

*As to the rumours surrounding Mr Potter, that a memento of the Slytherin bloodline may have survived the war is astonishing. Should the rumours prove true, you will be placed in a precarious situation. As a Slytherin student you are honour-bound to support Salazar’s heir in spite of his role in the last war. I have no fear that you will be able to put aside any personal resentment in order to cultivate a friendship with the boy, but several of your housemates may cling to old grudges and seek to harm him.*
Despite the risks, it is imperative you remain in Mr Potter's good graces. The Boy Who Lived is too powerful a symbol to abandon to Dumbledore and his misguided war.

Remain vigilant and Inform me immediately of any further developments.

Your mother sends her love and is counting down the days until Yuletide.

Continue to make us proud,

Lucius Malfoy

He frowned and tucked the letter away. The relief he’d felt at obtaining permission to continue his friendship with Harry had been rapidly overshadowed by frustration when the black-haired boy dropped off the face of the earth. He wasn’t working in the library or soaking in the last of the autumn sunlight, he wasn’t even attending meals! The only class they shared was Potions, and Draco couldn’t help but lament that Slytherins and Gryffindors rarely had a chance to work together.

He kept that opinion to himself, however. The rest of his house would no doubt disagree, and he had no desire to ruffle the upperclassmen's feathers so early in his first year.

A thick hand crept onto the table and edged towards his plate in a valiant attempt to rescue his apple tart from its undignified death.

“Get your own dessert,” he snapped at Goyle, who snatched his hand back and turned his eyes to his own mountain of sweets.

Across from him, Pansy Parkinson looked up from a small mirror she was using to reapply her lipstick. “What’s got your wand in a knot?” she asked, smacking her lips together to ensure the colour spread evenly.

“Nothing at all. You're imagining things,” he replied.

She rolled her eyes and drawled, “Like how Weasley imagined nearly being eaten by a snake? I’d have liked to see that – sounds kinky.”

“Kinky?” Draco repeated in confusion as Blaise Zabini, sitting on Pansy’s left, snorted into his pumpkin juice.

Pansy propped her chin up on her palm. “Oh Draco, you're so young.”

“I’m older than you by a month and a half!” he protested after a moment of mental math.

She smirked, her bright red lips framing a slash of white teeth. “I was talking about your mental age, love.”

Blaise, who had just managed to calm himself enough to attempt another drink of juice sputtered, swallowing it down the wrong tube and folding in two as he was seized by a coughing fit.

Draco finally stabbed a slice of baked apple and ate it, ignoring Crabbe and Goyle’s disappointed sighs as he glowered at the girl across from him.

“It’s better than being a crone,” he shot back. “At least I’ll remember this conversation an hour from now.”

Blaise managed to draw a clean breath at long last and raised his head, the dark skin of his cheeks
flushed darker from his exertion. “Are you two trying to kill me?” he asked.

Pansy huffed and picked at her nails, which were painted a deep purple. “It’s not my fault Draco’s pining over a lion.”

He opened his mouth, a denial on the tip of his tongue, when Blaise pointed towards the Great Hall’s double doors and said, “You mean that lion?”

Draco whipped around, forgetting subtlety as he scanned in search of a head of wild black hair among the equally black robes of his fellow students.

He spotted Harry walking between a pair of red-heads who could only be Weasley’s older twin brothers, and was off the bench before he was consciously aware of his decision to go after the elusive boy. Once on his feet he hesitated, torn. Running off would only serve as confirmation to Pansy that he was, in fact, pining… but Harry was right there!

It wasn’t as though he needed to go after Harry now, he reflected while taking a step away from his house table. They had Potions together tomorrow, and meeting Harry in class would keep him off the radar of the troublemaking Weasley twins who were believed to be responsible for coating Filch’s office — and one seething Potions Master — in a layer of dung.

As he battled with himself, Harry turned the corner out of the hall and passed from sight.

“Too slow,” Blaise sang. “Though I’m surprised to have seen him here at all, what with how he’s been avoiding everyone so far. Do you think he’s managed to get the house elves to bring him meals?”

“Meals?” Pansy asked dryly, glancing over at the dark-skinned Italian boy. “Have you seen how thin he is? I doubt he eats much at all.”

“Maybe…” Blaise agreed slowly, picking at his strudel. “Is he dieting?”

He glanced down at Pansy’s plate, which contained a single chocolate-covered strawberry and asked, “Are you? You didn’t take much at dinner either.”

As they began to bicker back and forth, Draco reflected on Pansy’s observation, staring at the place he’d seen Harry vanish. Despite her abrasive personality, he had to admit that — ever since they’d met when they were seven — Pansy was frighteningly good at weaselling out his secrets. But, if she was right, did it mean Harry was starving himself? He couldn’t fathom why anyone would choose to do that. He’d been really hungry once at a Ministry party after not eating for nearly four hours and he thought he was going to die. What would going without food for four days feel like?

He shuddered, not wanting to find out.

When he finally turned back to the table, Crabbe and Goyle were licking their forks and his plate had been scraped clean.
The Potion Master

The worry Harry felt when he contemplated his first Potions lesson turned out to be both well founded and not applicable. In fact, as he ghosted back to the common room late that evening, he concluded it had been one of the best things to happen to him thus far — which was saying a lot as it had also left him utterly perplexed and questioning things about himself he'd never before thought to question.

His housemates would have disagreed with his sunny disposition — having had an all-round terrible day themselves — but fortune was on Harry's side for once as they still refused to speak to him, and so there was no one to rain on his parade.

After his enlightening (and frightening) conversation with Fred and George the night before, Harry took their advice on appeasing the giant blood-drinking, point-stealing dungeon bat to heart. He arrived at the door to the laboratory as the clock-tower tolled the start of morning break — well in advance of the rest of his class. His memory of the hateful glare he'd received during the start of term banquet had grown darker and more ominous the closer he drew to the dungeons, and he was determined not to give Snape an opportunity to dock points right off the bat.

As it turned out, he arrived a little too early and was nearly bowled over when a sandy-haired seventh year with bleary eyes and green-trimmed robes pulled the door open and stepped through. So intent on grabbing a bite to eat from the Great Hall before his next class, he missed seeing Harry, whose most rebellious spike of hair was barely tall enough to become tangled in the lacing of his overcloak.

Fortunately, they had enough early-morning reflexes between them that neither ended up on the floor, though the bridge of Harry's nose throbbed from where the frame of his glasses had dug into the cartilage. There was a moment of confused apologies as a crowd gathered behind the Slytherin and peered around his shoulders for the source of the hold up.

They weren't sure what to make of the small, wild-haired child with a bulky satchel slung over his thin shoulders and a cauldron packed full of ingredients floating serenely at his side. They all recognized him as Harry Potter, and the more astute among them could even guess why he was standing outside the potions laboratory a full half hour before the start of his lesson.

No, it was the cauldron that stumped them.

"Is that a levitation charm?" the Slytherin at the head of the line asked. He stared at it in utter bewilderment, aware the first years wouldn't start on that charm until well into October.

Harry, who'd been expecting a fierce scolding, melted in relief that no one was yelling at him for being in the way.

He glanced between the cauldron and the young man. "Uh... probably?" he said, provoking a wave of dubious frowns from the gathered seventh years. He felt obligated to try and explain.

"It's just... it was really heavy, and there are so many stairs between here and the common room."

There were nine flights, to be exact. Some of which moved at inopportune moments — like the instant before he stepped onto a landing, leaving him dangling over a fifty foot drop. Navigation was a trial even with the shortcuts he'd learned from the Weasley twins. Doing so with a twenty pound cauldron over one shoulder and a five pound bag over the other had proved enough to turn
his legs into wet noodles before he'd made it more than thirty meters from the Fat Lady's portrait.

He saw a Ravenclaw girl nodding her head in agreement. The Ravenclaw common room was located in a tower even taller than Gryffindor’s, and she well understood the pain of running from one end of the castle to the other before her first class of the day.

Seeing he still had their attention, Harry continued, “I thought my arms were going to fall off, so I told myself it was floating. And, well... I must have really wanted it because it hasn’t stopped yet.”

To demonstrate, he prodded the cauldron with one hand. It drifted a couple inches, slowed to a crawl, then halted.

“I’m not even sure how to get it down,” he admitted.

He’d tried several times upon arriving at the bottom of the stairs, but a nagging voice in the back of his head had pointed out that if it stopped floating now he’d be in a pickle. He’d need to either carry it into the classroom later, or break the promise he’d made to himself not to flaunt his wandless magic when his classmates were there to bear witness. However, if the cauldron was already floating when they arrived they’d be none the wiser, and as a result, his de-levitation attempts were halfhearted at best and the cauldron remained buoyant as ever.

Understanding dawned on the faces of several seventh years, but before they could say anything a voice, all silk and venom, slithered over their heads.

“What are you all still doing here?” it asked in a tone promising a swift death to everyone between it and a strong mug of tea. “Class is over. Move along.”

Harry shoved his cauldron out of the way and pressed himself flat against the wall as the students surged forward, none of them willing to anger the owner of that deadly voice. Harry caught a glimpse of the man as he swept past, black robes billowing around him like smoke, and Harry was again reminded why he wanted to stay on Professor Snape’s good-as-possible side.

The classroom door swung shut behind the Professor and a lock clicked into place, resigning Harry to wait out the break at the base of the narrow, curving staircase. He sighed, and started to slump to the ground, when he realized that the sandy-haired Slytherin had remained behind.

“What may I try something?” he asked, motioning to Harry’s floating cauldron and drawing a long mahogany wand from his sleeve. A silver badge on the lapel of his cloak caught the flickering torchlight and gleamed bright as a beacon, but Harry’s eyes remained glued to the wand.

Harry tried to weigh his options, but the young man’s expression was pleasant and he didn’t look untrustworthy — which was a novelty considering his experiences of late — so he nodded his consent.

The young man crouched down and took the cauldron by its handle before tapping it with the tip of his wand.

“Finite,” he intoned. The cauldron shuddered then sagged in his grip, no longer floating. He set it down next to Harry’s feet, tucked his wand away, and stood up. “There,” he said. “Now you’ll be able to use it for brewing.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied, ducking his head as a warm feeling bubbled up in his chest. It was nice of the young man to help him, and it gave him hope that there might be some people in the school who didn’t hate him on principle.
The Slytherin caught Harry’s chin gently between thumb and forefinger, nudging it up until he had no choice but to meet his gaze.

“Keep your head up,” he said.

With that encouraging remark the young man left.

Harry rubbed his chin and wondered if this meant the older students hadn’t joined in the hysteria dogging the parselmouth rumours, and if the light at the end of the tunnel was approaching faster than he’d anticipated.

Harry was still wondering half-an-hour later when the clang of a heavy object barrelling down the stairs announced the first bump in the road of what had been an otherwise pleasant morning.

He pressed himself back against the wall as a cauldron ricocheted around the bend, spewing potion ingredients hither and thither, before it crashed against the door with enough force to leave them both sadly dented. It wasn’t the first dent the door had received, Harry realized as he peered closer, but the cauldron was otherwise pristine in its newness.

Feet thundered down the stairs and Harry was almost trampled again as Ron and Neville burst around the corner in pursuit.

“My cauldron!” Neville cried in a mix of despair at the damage and joy at having found it in one piece at all. A heavy bag tugged on his right shoulder as he tottered over and scooped the cauldron up. Ingredients crinkled beneath his palms — the fragile dried herbs and flowers crushed as he struggled to shove them back inside. He was so focused on reclaiming his scattered possessions that he didn’t notice Harry until he turned around and they came face-to-face.

Neville froze and the colour drained from his cheeks faster than Uncle Vernon’s patience. He stammered something that may have been a “hi,” or “hello,” but by that point Ron had decided he needed saving and blustered over. He pushed Neville aside and glowered down at Harry, whose height once again left much to be desired.

“This is your fault, isn’t it?” Ron said, jabbing a finger into Harry’s chest.

Harry bristled, the lingering warmth from the upperclassman’s kindness surging through his veins and infusing him with courage. His fingers flexed then curled into claws as Ron repeated the jabbing motion, catching him between ribs.

He’d had enough — enough of Ron’s arrogance — enough of his wagging tongue. He slapped the offending hand away hard enough to break skin and leave the redhead with four pink lines running from wrist to thumb.

Ron staggered back and stared in disbelief as drops of blood blossomed along the back of his hand. Having grown up with five older brothers he was used to playing rough. Between Charlie practicing to wrestle dragons and the twins’ cruel sense of humour, he’d been put through the wringer ever since he was old enough to crawl out of his mother’s sight. There was little mercy for the boy on the lowest rung of the familial ladder, but he’d never been hurt intentionally.

Not physically, at least. His mum had extracted oaths from the lot of them after the teddy-bear
debacle that left him terrified of spiders great and small.

Looking into Harry’s bright green eyes he saw a feral gleam that made no such promises.

Ron deflated and might have backed down if the rest of the Gryffindors hadn’t rounded the bend in the stairs. They looked between the three of them with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. The girls had heard of the confrontation in the dorm, but none of them had dared sneak into the boys' wing to get a look at the damage before the house elves set everything to right. Now it seemed a new fight was brewing, one which they would bear witness to — for good or ill.

With the threat of losing his status as a dorm-room hero looming over his head, Ron propped himself up for a second round. “You used magic to make Neville drop his stuff, you slimy snake!” he said.

"Snakes aren't slimy," Harry retorted. "They're actually quite rough."

"You would know, wouldn't you? Since you sleep with them."

Ron, whose many older brothers had — at times inadvertently — introduced him to such subjects, thought this to be a very clever insult. Harry, whose knowledge of the subject was more practical thanks to his schooling and Basil's stories of serpentine wrestling matches, took him literally.

"The same way you sleep with Scabbers?” he asked, referring to Ron's old grey rat who seemed to live on his pillow.

This caused Ron to flush bright red. "It's not the same!" he said, drawing his wand and waving it about. "Take that back or I'll curse you yellow!"

If Ron had thrown a punch he might have won. Years of conditioning had imprinted the futility of fighting a larger opponent so deep in Harry's psyche that he no longer had any control over when his body locked up.

Magic was a whole different story.

Harry's wand sang as he whipped it out, eager to prove it was as powerful as its brother. He gripped it tight — praying that the spell he’d learned from his book on curses and counter-curses would work — and pointed it at Ron's chest.

"Right then!” Ron said. "Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow—"

Harry didn't wait for him to finish. He jabbed with his wand, using what Professor McGonagall had taught him about coordinating his timing, and shouted, "Flipendo!"

A bolt of blue light blew Ron backwards. He slammed against the wall with a breathy oomph and then slid to the floor in a heap, clutching his ribs and moaning pitifully. Beside him, Neville was deathly pale and looked like he was about to be sick into his cauldron.

The girls shrieked while Seamus and Dean rushed to Ron's side and hauled him back to his feet.

Ron took several rasping breaths then staggered free of his friends' grip. His face was the same bright red as his hair, and there was a vein throbbing in the side of his neck as he readied his wand once more. Seamus copied him, brandishing his wand like a whip while Dean reluctantly followed suit.

It would have turned into a full-blown melee if Harry hadn't received some rather unexpected
reinforcements.

“Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow?” drawled Draco Malfoy as the Slytherin first years shouldered their way down the crowded stairwell. “That’s the most pathetic curse I’ve ever heard Weasley. Does it even work?”

Ron opened his mouth, ready to shout something in his defence when Draco cut him off with an upheld hand. “No, don’t answer that. It’s too early in the morning to be subjected to that level of stupidity.”

Harry drew into himself at the sight of Draco, almost missing how the other boy flashed him a quick smile.

It seemed he’d been fretting over nothing.

“Shut up, Malfoy!” Ron said, making the mistake of brandishing his wand at the Malfoy heir. Instantly, every Slytherin on the stairs had their wands out and pointed at the armed trio.

“Would you like me to show you some real curses?” Draco asked slyly.

“I’m not afraid of you, Death Eater scum!” Ron bellowed.

It was his second mistake, and by that point both Seamus and Dean realized they were in for more than they’d bargained for. They slunk back to the main Gryffindor group, all of whom were shifting anxiously — unsure whether they should get involved when in most cases their spell repertoires were limited to the *lumos* charm.

A girl standing beside Draco bared her teeth, a low hiss whistling through a small gap where a baby tooth had recently fallen out. Her hand quivered as it clenched around the handle of her wand hard enough to split wood.

“Too much, Pansy,” Draco warned, his voice low.

Pansy forced her painted lips back together, a false calm sliding over her face like a mask. A thickset girl in the second row pressed a hand on her shoulder. Their eyes met and Pansy nodded.

“You should be afraid,” Draco said, projecting for all the Gryffindors to hear, his wand trained on the crease between Ron’s brows. “After all, only a fool would face off ten against one without knowing any decent spells.”

Ron stiffened, and Harry could tell he was trying not to look away from the wands trained on him. He struggled for a heartbeat, but in the end nerves won out and he glanced over his shoulder. When all he found was a ghastly ill Neville pressed into the corner he realized how badly outnumbered he was and the blood drained from his face. He wet his lips with his tongue, faced with an impending decision between cowardice and hospitalization.

"You know," said Harry. “I think I’d much rather eat a dead chicken than a live one.”

The tension in the stairwell shattered as the others turned to him in confusion.

“What?” said Ron.

Harry blinked owlishly. “You called them ‘Death Eater scum’,” he replied. “But when you think about it everyone eats dead things. Bacon and pork chops used to be pigs, roast beef used to be cows, and bread used to be wheat.”
Ron was staring at him open-mouthed, so Harry pressed on. “You’re a Death Eater,” he said. “We’re all Death Eaters.”

No one said a word until Pansy murmured, “I’ve never heard that one before.”

“Wait!” cried a chubby Gryffindor girl with dirty-blond hair. Her face held an expression of horror. “Roast beef comes from cows? Like, real cows?”

“Of course it does, Lavender,” replied Hermione Granger, shaking her mane of bushy brown hair. “Where did you think beef came from?”

This revelation seemed too much for Lavender, who burst into tears and had to be comforted by her dorm mates.

Ron took the lull in open hostilities as an opportunity to get out of his unwise challenge. “Whatever,” he said, “I don’t have time to deal with this. Come on, Neville.”

The two of them slunk up the stairs, where Ron almost lost his own cauldron as Goyle lurched to the side and shoulder-checked him into the wall. Neville whimpered and ducked past as soon as Goyle was out of the way. He retreated out of sight, tail tucked between his legs. Ron limped after him.

The Slytherins watched them go even after they’d vanished from Harry’s sight. A dark skinned boy made a rude gesture with his hand whose meaning was unmistakable even in the wizarding world.

Once their ire had passed, Draco settled against the wall beside Harry, his back pressed into the oily film coating the bricks. He gazed straight ahead, watching the others silently squabble over who would get to stand nearest to the classroom door.

Harry picked at the hem of his sleeve, unsure of how he should greet a possible-friend after having spent the week avoiding them.

Apologies were, no doubt, in order.

He clenched the fabric between his fingers, needing something to hold on to as he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Draco raised his right hand and knocked the knuckles gently against Harry’s forehead, making him flinch.

“ Took you long enough,” he replied, a long-suffering smile pulling at the corners of his lips. “Here I was worrying I’d need to barricade you in Professor Snape’s storage closet to get a word out of you. Did you honestly believe we weren’t friends just because that weasel decided to run his mouth?”

It was exactly what Harry had believed, and he dropped his gaze, embarrassed at his lack of faith.

Once bitten, twice shy was a saying that had ruled Harry’s life up to receiving his Hogwarts letter. Betrayal after betrayal had led him to cast away the first part and proceed immediately to suspicion.

His experiences in the wizarding world hadn’t done much to change his views thus far.

“I just…” He searched for the words to explain the despair and suffocating loneliness that had gripped him Monday morning, but Draco interrupted him.
“You don’t need to make excuses,” he said. “No one here expects them. You owned your actions. That’s all that matters.”

Harry pressed his lips together, all too familiar with that rule. His relatives didn’t like excuses either. Unfortunately, he’d never been able to figure out the difference between an excuse and a reason. In the end it was safer and easier to keep his mouth shut. So he didn’t try to explain his feelings to Draco, even if they’d been the reason behind his abandonment.

They fell into a companionable silence, and Harry took the opportunity to study the children across from him.

Pansy had set her cauldron on the step at her feet. She was picking at the nail-polish on her left thumb, sloughing off slabs and flicking them to the ground, where they mixed with the clumps of dirt and sandy grit meant to keep the steps from growing as slick as the walls.

She looked up, sensing that she was being watched, and then quickly turned her head aside.

“Pansy Parkinson,” Draco whispered in his ear, having noticed the direction of his gaze. “Weasley’s lucky she didn’t curse him. She’s had her wand since she was nine and knows more spells than anyone in our year. I saw her hex a man’s eyes out once!”

“Why?” Harry asked, sure she must have had a good reason to do so. “Who was he?”

Draco rubbed his left shoulder. “Some low-life halfbreed looking to make a quick galleon.”

Harry didn’t understand, and after a moment of tense silence Draco surmised that living among muggles hadn’t prepared him for the realities of life as the heir apparent of a well-to-do family.

“He tried to kidnap me,” Draco said. “I’d… become separated from my parents at Diagon Alley. Quality Quidditch Supplies had received a shipment of Comet 360s and they were putting up a display in the window…” he trailed off as a grin pulled at Harry’s lips. “What?”

“You wandered off.”

Draco huffed. “Even if I did, it doesn’t make him dragging me off okay.”

That was a given. “What happened next?”

“Pansy happened, that’s what. He had one foot past the alley’s apparition wards when his eyes popped out and started bouncing around my head like bloody yo-yos. Apparently, she’d recognized the family crest on my cloak and hit him with the first debilitating spell that came to mind.”

“You’d never met her before then?”

“No. Our families weren’t allowed to associate because her father is—“ Draco cut himself off, and cast a nervous look Pansy’s way. She continued to pick at her thumb, oblivious to their whispered conversation, and Draco sighed in relief. “I shouldn’t be the one to tell you about that,” he said, and Harry accepted that it would remain a mystery unless he befriended the girl himself.

Everyone had secrets, he was no exception. It wasn’t his place to butt in and demand answers neither Draco nor Pansy were prepared to give.

“What about the others?” Harry asked, eyes skimming the rest of the children across from him. He didn’t recognize any of them — which wasn’t surprising as his focus during the Sorting Ceremony had been patchy at best. “Do you have exciting stories about them too?”
“I wouldn't call almost being kidnapped exciting,” Draco muttered even as he leaned in conspiratorially. “The boy to the left of Pansy with the bags under his eyes is Theodore Nott. We’ve known each other for years. He used to be cheerful, if you can believe it, but when his mother died a few years ago he shut down completely. Won’t even answer my letters. Now all he does is read and be generally unsociable.”

He looked at Harry pensively. “Maybe you could talk to him. You know, since you’ve both lost… parents.”

Harry raised one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “I don’t remember my parents at all. I’m not sure I could say anything that would make him feel better.”

And yet, looking across the way at the reedy, dark-haired boy, there was a niggling in Harry’s chest — a sense of wrongness coiling beneath his ribs — that whispered: look deeper, not everything is as it seems.

Straining, Harry looked.

The boy slumped against the wall, shaggy black hair falling in his face in jagged, feathered spikes too asymmetrical to be deliberate. Beneath his fringe, a pair of bloodshot eyes dragged themselves over the page of an old yellowed book propped open on the lip of his cauldron.

His outer robe was crumpled and had several long creases running its length. While the fabric was of good quality wool, there was a spattering of dried mud on the hem too old to have come from a romp around the loch at first light.

Surrounded by children like Draco, who had not a hair out of place, Theodore looked as though he’d crash landed from a different planet. Even Harry fit the proper schoolboy mould better than he did, which was astonishing to Harry who’d never looked proper before this in his life.

“What’s he reading?” Harry asked, eyeing the book, which he didn’t recognize from their course-mandated texts.

Draco shrugged. “I never got a good look at the cover. He found it in the library yesterday and hasn’t put it down – even to sleep.”

Harry wasn’t the only one curious. The tall boy with dark skin and the sly eyes of a fox leaned in to read over Theodore’s shoulder. He inadvertently cast the page into shadow when his head passed in front of an alcove holding a flickering torch.

Theodore swiped at him without looking up, catching him on the cheek and forcing him back to his own step. The tall boy shrugged at the girl standing above him and grinned, exuding charm. She giggled and her cheeks flushed pink.

“The one who looks like he stepped out of an article of Witches Weekly is Blaise Zabini,” Draco whispered. “He’s had more stepfathers than Weasley has brothers, none of whom came to a good end. The girl he’s smiling at is Daphne Greengrass – who should know better.”

Far above them, the bells ensconced deep within the rafters of the astronomy tower began to toll the hour.

The temperature in the stairwell plummeted. Clouds of vapour plumed from their noses and mouths as Professor Snape swept into their midst. He reached the door as the tenth bell sounded and pivoted on his heel to survey their pale faces.
“When I open this door, you will follow me to the storeroom in a calm and orderly manner,” he said without preamble. His voice was barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word. “Once there you will wait, silently, for further instructions. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” they chorused, Harry taking cues from the young Malfoy at his side.

Snape looked doubtful, but loath as he was to let them into his classroom, he couldn't keep them out forever. Turning back to the door he pressed his palm against the pitted wood and paused. “Oh, and Mister Longbottom?”

Neville gulped. “Y-yes, sir?”

“Ten points from Gryffindor for damaging school property.” He pushed the door open and vanished inside, leaving them scrambling to collect their heavy cauldrons and bags from where they’d deposited them.

Harry needed both arms to wrangle his cauldron high enough to get a good grip on its swollen metal belly, and even then he couldn’t move faster than a crawl as his knees wobbled beneath its weight.

He struggled and puffed to the front of the queue, filing through the doorway behind Draco, whose physique was as bad as Harry’s for lifting heavy objects.

Yet, Draco wasn’t one to suffer the indignity of a red face and sweaty brow. He’d once again managed to pass off that task to Goyle, who was lugging a cauldron in each of his meaty fists as though they were packed with down feathers rather than half a garden’s worth of plants, insects, and miscellaneous amphibious body parts.

They passed into a hub ringed by eight doors. Seven of them were labeled numerically, while the eighth had Storeroom printed in sensible letters across its face. It was to the latter door Snape led them, before he unlocked it with a complicated flick and shimmy of his wand.

When Harry thought of storerooms, he thought of the small crowded closets Dudley was so fond of locking him in during their primary school days. He was expecting mops, pails, and vats of cleaning products — or perhaps rows of jars overcrowding rickety shelves, like the apothecary in Diagon Alley. What he got was a cavernous expanse of hardwood panelling and the fragrant smell of sandalwood.

The room had eight sides. Seven were lined with tall wooden lockers, while the eighth held the door and two curving staircases that led to a balcony. Beyond the balustrade Harry could see yet another set of lockers. In the centre of the room was a thick pillar built of drawers, the highest of which were only accessible using one of the two ladders set in tracks round its base. The ladders were each equipped with a wicker basket and pulley, so students could transport their supplies up and down safely.

“Welcome to the student storeroom,” Snape said once they’d gathered before him and set their gear back down.

“Each year of students has been granted a wall of lockers. You will share your locker with one of your classmates until the end of fifth year, at which point many of you will not be coming back. Until that joyous day, you will brew potions and complete group assignments with your locker partner, so I suggest you choose them wisely once I’m finished speaking, Miss Brown!”

Lavender, who had started quiet negotiations with her dorm mates the moment he mentioned
partners, cringed and snapped her mouth shut.

“You will store all your potion ingredients here,” he said, his black eyes narrowing as they swept over the ashen-faced students before him. “Even the ones you’d rather I not know about. If you order fresh ingredients half-way through the year you will bring them here. If you receive ingredients as a gift you will bring them here. If I catch any of you brewing so much as a pepper-up outside your designated laboratory I will see you in detention for a week.

“Common ingredients, or ingredients needed in bulk, are provided by the school. These are found in the central pillar behind me, listed alphabetically. I expect you to treat these supplies with respect. Anyone found tampering with or intentionally wasting them will be charged the full cost for their replacement.” He paused to let the threat sink in.

“Admittance to this room is restricted outside your assigned class period,” he continued when no one raised any objections. “That being said, if you have a burning need to access your stores at some other point during the week, you may try to book an appointment with me. I also grant general access to this room from noon until five every second Saturday.

“Your lockers are those on the third wall moving clockwise from this point. You and your partner will put away all but one cauldron and your potion preparatory supplies. You have ten minutes. Begin!”

Chaos broke loose amongst the students, and Harry was jostled as people made a run for the lockers. “Upstairs,” Draco said in his ear, and Harry looked at his cauldron doubtfully. The Gryfffindors had come to the same conclusion he had, and had taken off towards the lockers on the main level, not willing to risk another flight of stairs.

Draco was unconcerned. “Crabbe, grab this for me;” he said to the second burly boy, who was standing next to Goyle while they waited for Draco to decide where he wanted to go. Crabbe grunted his assent and picked Harry’s cauldron up, and this time Harry didn’t complain about the unfairness of using the other boys like pack mules.

He followed Draco up the leftmost flight of stairs. “Are you excited for our first class?”

Draco skipped up the last three steps and twirled around to face him. He was beaming. “Of course I am! Potions are amazing! A lot of wizards look down on them, but they can do all sorts of things that are impossible with spells.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, curious. A lot of what he remembered from their first year textbook was about treating potion-induced injuries like boils, rashes, and the occasional bout of insomnia.

“Well, there’s the Wolfsbane Potion that keeps werewolves from going berserk when they transform,” Draco said, counting off on his fingers. “Felix Felicia that makes you so lucky everything will go your way until it wears off, and the Polyjuice Potion that lets you turn into someone else for an hour!”

“That does sound pretty neat,” Harry said as he crested the last step and fell in beside the blonde, who’d started counting the walls until they reached the one with their assigned lockers.

“Of course it does!” Draco replied. “And the best part is that you can use a potion even if you can’t brew it yourself. Licensed Potions Masters like Professor Snape can make a small fortune brewing healing potions on the side for St. Mungo’s Hospital. Some of them even accept owl-orders from private individuals!”
“Do you want to be a Potions Master when you grow up?”

Draco’s cheeks flushed. “Maybe… My father wouldn’t like it though. He wants me to go into politics, like him and grandpa.”

“Politics?” Harry echoed, thinking of election campaigns and waiting in long lines for his aunt and uncle to cast their ballots — except he’d never understood why as Britain had a Queen who couldn’t be voted out, and having an additional government on top of that was a bit superfluous.

Then he wondered whether witches and wizards were subjects of the monarchy, as he hadn’t yet been forced to stretch his vocal chords in a shaky rendition of God Save the Queen. Did the Queen know she had a conclave of magical peoples potentially swearing allegiance to the crown? If she did, she was very good at keeping secrets.

He snapped out of his musings when Draco cleared his throat. The blonde had the pointed look of someone waiting for a response, and Harry scrambled to remember what they’d been talking about before he was sidetracked. Something about Draco’s father wanting him to follow in his footsteps.

“You’ve never mentioned your grandparents before,” Harry said, evading asking Draco to repeat himself. “Are you close with them?”

Draco shot him a look that said he knew exactly what he was doing, but let it go. “They died before I was born. Casualties of the war…” he trailed off, words hanging between them, unspoken, but Harry knew how the sentence ended.

Casualties of the war… just like your parents.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, guilt rising in him unbidden.

“You don’t need to apologize for something you had no part in,” Draco said, stopping in front of their row of lockers. From beneath their feet came the rustle and thunk of the students below stuffing their lockers full of supplies. He ran his hand along the thick wooden door. “It isn’t like I remember them,” he said wistfully, and Harry understood full well that not being able to remember someone didn’t stop you from wanting to.

They studied the available lockers in silence, neither willing to carry on a conversation that had quickly turned depressing. They were the first to reach the upper landing, and while the rest of the Slytherins were filing up behind them, they had first pick.

They walked along the row, subdued as they opened each door and peeked inside.

The lockers were three feet wide and twice Harry’s height. They were split in two sections, the bottoms were open with a pair of pegs on which they could hang their cauldrons when not in use, while the tops were a series of shelves and cubic cubbies.

When they reached the final locker and pulled open the door, Harry knew immediately that this was the one he wanted.

A homemade wire rack hung at chest height, tucked between the bottom shelf and cauldron peg, that would keep their glass vials from knocking together or falling over. One of the locker’s previous owners had written labels in a neat, flowing hand and affixed them to each cubby.

There were a great many names Harry didn’t recognize, and he wondered whether this locker had once belonged to an upperclassman — perhaps one who’d gone on to be a Potions Master, like their Professor, or like Draco hoped to one day be.
Draco must have mirrored his choice because he waved Crabbe and Goyle over.

“Put our cauldrons here,” he instructed.

The two burly Slytherins set down their cauldrons without a word and trundled off to find their own lockers.

Draco had also chosen to pack his ingredients in his cauldron rather than his bag, and he now bent down to retrieve several neatly wrapped packages. He held them up to the light pouring down from an unseen source set back into the wall above the lockers, read their labels, and then slipped them into the correct spots on the shelves.

“I wish I was working towards a goal,” Harry said, reaching up to run a finger along the label for mugwort. “But I don’t know what sort of jobs are out there, and I doubt anyone would want to hire a…”

Draco’s eyes narrowed speculatively and Harry could see the cogs in his head turning. “A what?” he prompted, fishing none too subtly.

The word stuck in Harry’s throat, so he bent down to retrieve one of his own packages. It was the width of his wrist, and beneath the waxy brown paper he could feel a thick, knobby root. He brought it to his face and took a deep breath, smiling at the sharp tang of ginger that tickled his nose.

Draco huffed in annoyance at the delay. “I believe the word you’re looking for is parselmouth.”

So he’d heard after all.

Harry nodded, his heart sinking toward the floor. He braced himself, waiting for a palm to thrust against his shoulder as Draco pushed him away.

It never happened.

Thin fingers reached for the ginger still clutched in his hands and pried it free one digit at a time. They carried it up, and Harry’s gaze followed, transfixed as they deposited it on a shelf next to Draco’s own ginger root.

“Not everyone thinks badly of parselmouths,” Draco said as he drew back his hand, a small smile on his lips. “Some of us even admire them. I do.”

“What did you just say?” Harry asked weakly, not trusting his ears. It had sounded as though Draco looked up to him for being able to speak to snakes… but that couldn’t be true.

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Draco said, voice flat. “I know you heard the first time — and I expect you to keep that to yourself. There’s no shortage of people who’d blackmail me if it became common knowledge.”

Harry’s eyes filled with tears, and he pushed up his glasses to wipe them away.

To be admired, not for his role in a war he couldn’t remember, but for who he was – parseltongue and all… it made his chest ache with happiness and relief and gratitude that someone was willing to look beyond his past.

“Thank you,” he said, voice shaking. “Thank you.”
Harry threw himself into organizing, feeling better than he had in a long time.

He’d wanted to work with Draco, but had never expected it to happen. Draco was confident and well versed in the wizarding world — unlike himself. The young pureblood had grown up among friends like Crabbe and Goyle, and while they weren’t the most academically inclined individuals, they were familiar and their friendship wouldn’t require any extra effort to maintain. There was no reason he should choose Harry over them… but he had, and for the first time in his life Harry wasn’t *that* partner the kids at school were stuck with because everyone else was accounted for.

They made a game of identifying their ingredients by sight and smell alone, and while Draco won most of their exchanges — as he was far more familiar with plants used in the wizarding world — Harry scraped together a handful of points for herbs and flowers he’d tended in his aunt’s garden.

Harry laughed as he mistook newt’s eyes for pomegranate seeds. The sound was so infectious that soon Draco was chuckling as well, teeth flashing and eyes scrunched with mirth.

“Wormwood,” Draco said, tossing Harry a loosely wrapped packet. Harry pulled up one corner of the brown paper and peeked inside at a pile of bitter smelling silvery leaves.

He wrinkled his nose, which brought on another fit of giggles. “I think the lady two houses down from us had some in her garden,” he said, placing the packet away.

“What was a muggle doing growing wormwood?”

Harry rolled his eyes as he dug through his cauldron, carefully nudging supplies aside until he found a promising package. “Using it to divide orange nasturtiums and purple pansies so her eyes wouldn’t bleed each time she looked at the flowerbed,” he replied, holding the package under his nose. He paused a moment, then sniffed again. “Tarragon.”

Draco arched a brow as Harry tossed him the package. “Tarragon,” he agreed before tucking it away.

Before they could begin the next round, Pansy Parkinson poked her head around the edge of the neighbouring door. “Did someone call me?” she asked.

“Only if you’re a small purple perennial,” Draco said.

The girl sniffed and stepped around the end of her locker door. She towered over them, and when Harry glanced down at the hem of her robes he caught sight of a pair of kitten heels. “I’ll have you know that I look fabulous in purple. It matches my eyes.” She batted mascara-dark lashes Draco’s way.

Draco didn’t miss a beat. “Harry, this is Pansy Parkinson,” he said, motioning to the girl as he formally introduced them. “Pansy, Harry Potter.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Harry said, taking the initiative to hold out his hand.

A moment later he wished he hadn’t.

As their palms brushed Pansy jerked away, arm bending at the elbow to tuck behind her head. He
was left grasping at nothing, embarrassed and ashamed to have fallen for the fake out.

Pansy’s partner — a stocky, strong-jawed girl named Millicent Bulstrode who could have been Crabbe or Goyle’s sister if not for the spark of intelligence gleaming in her eyes — guffawed, drawing the attention of the ever-nosy Slytherins with them on the landing. The other students paused their organizing to peer over at the small group.

“Pansy!” Draco said, the alarm in his voice prompting Crabbe and Goyle to drop several packages and rush to his side. They took up flanking positions behind his shoulders. “What did you do that for? Do you want Harry as an enemy?”

In the silence that followed they could hear the low snarl of Professor Snape’s voice tearing into a Gryffindor as she pleaded with him about her locker situation.

“Some might call you a traitor,” Pansy said to Draco. “Befriending a Potter.”

“A Potter who is also a parselmouth!” he insisted. “A Potter who has Dumbledore’s sheep eating from the palm of his hand… when they aren’t running away screaming in terror.” He glanced at Harry. “No offence meant.”

Harry shrugged. It was, unfortunately, true.

“Imagine what you could accomplish with a friend like that. One who shared your vision for the world. You could keep our culture from degrading, or restore a name from infamy.” A sly expression slid onto his face. “Or even free something long locked away.”

Pansy froze mid-eye-roll. “Do you have any proof he's a parselmouth?” she asked, her previous disbelief tainted with reluctant optimism.

After giving such a passionate speech, Draco wasn’t willing to admit he was flying on a hunch. He grit his teeth, grey eyes pleading for backup, and Harry found himself in a most unhappy predicament.

The majority of his classmates would ignore him if he were a parselmouth, while the Slytherins, it seemed, would ignore him if he were not.

He’d be an outcast either way… yet even outcasts could have friends.

“I’ll prove it,” he said defiantly, straightening to his full height. “I’ll prove I can speak Parseltongue!”

“Just like that?” she asked, startled. “No bargains or delays? No vows of secrecy?”

“You should ask for the vow,” Draco advised in a low whisper. Harry stepped away from their locker, putting himself in the middle of the balcony. He shook his head.

“Everyone suspects me already and pretending to be something I’m not is exhausting. I may as well get it over with.”

The Slytherins crowded around him, suspicion riding their brows as he gathered himself, spine too straight and hands buried in the thick fabric of his cloak.

“What should I say?” he asked.

Draco hummed thoughtfully. “How about… Slytherin is the best house?”
Harry concentrated hard. He still wasn't sure how to switch between English and Parseltongue, but he'd done it easily enough with Basil. He brought up a memory of her coiled at the foot of his bed, watching as he practiced magic in the dimly lit interior of his cupboard.

"Slytherin is the best house."

Blaise scoffed. "You call that parseltongue?"

Harry’s shoulders drew up defensively and his face grew hot. "I can't tell when I'm speaking it!" he protested, frantically trying to remember all the times he'd spoken Parseltongue, and how they were similar.

The answer struck him like a bolt from the blue. He turned to Draco. "Let me see your crest."

The boy looked down at the breast of his overcloak, where the Slytherin crest lay. "Go ahead?"

The mascot of Slytherin house was a serpent, and on the crest a small green snake curled in a backwards letter 's'. Harry bent his head down until the crest was right in front of his nose. He heard some of the others sniggering, but he ignored it and focused on imagining that the embroidered snake was alive.

He took a deep breath and Spoke. "Slytherin is the best house."

He knew he'd done it right this time when the Slytherins burst into frantic murmurs.

"Merlin!"

"You really are!"

A bossy voice lanced over their heads from outside the circle. "What a curious language," it said. "Can you say anything else?"

They turned to see a girl with a mane of bushy brown hair and red-trimmed robes. Her arms were crossed and a full cauldron rested at her feet.

It was Hermione Granger.

"Is anyone up here missing a partner?" she asked, looking them over critically. "Only, there’s an even number of students and everyone downstairs is already accounted for."

She looked straight at Harry, and he had to fight off the urge to raise his hand even though he already had a partner — one he was more than happy with. He knew what it was like to be the person who was never chosen. He wouldn’t wish that on anyone, but in this case there was nothing he wanted to do to try and fix it.

None of the Slytherins admitted to being partnerless, and Harry saw them count themselves to make sure the girl hadn’t been mistaken. She beat them to it.

"There are eleven of you. And Professor Snape was very clear when he told me everyone needed a partner!" She looked bitter at having to search for a partner among the Slytherins, and Harry wondered if she was the one they'd heard arguing with the Professor when Pansy faked him out. If she was, then she was either a great deal braver than himself or had substantially less instinct for self preservation.

On the right side of the slowly disintegrating circle around Harry, Theodore Nott looked horrified.
His cauldron, easily spotted due to the book still perched on its lip, was all alone in front of one of the lockers.

The girl perked up at the sight of the lone book-bearing cauldron. She darted over, and before Theodore could stop her she’d picked up his book, glanced at the title, and then flicked it open to the thin strip of etched leather the scruffy pureblood had been using to mark his place.

He marched up to her, all signs of fatigue vanishing, his arm extended. “Did your parents not teach you to keep your hands to yourself?”

“This isn’t your book,” she said, holding it up and pointing to the large red and white ‘Property of Hogwarts Library’ sticker affixed to the back cover. “And my parents taught me quite well, thank you very much.”

He took in her black running shoes and the synthetic fabric of her satchel. “Thereby proving that muggles are only moderately more civilized than the average troll.”

The Slytherins jeered at the girl, who tossed her head haughtily. “My parents say that only people with low self esteem insult others.”

“Then you must have a low opinion of yourself, because your refusal to return my book is insulting.”

She snapped it shut and shoved it into his hands. “No need to be rude! I love reading. You must too if you have a book like that.”

Theodore didn’t say anything as he clutched the book to his chest and shouldered her aside, bending down to lean it against his cauldron.

“My name is Hermione Granger, by the way.”

“I don’t care what your name is, just go away…”

“But were partners!” she protested, making Theodore groan. He looked up at Harry with a ‘why did you have to go and mess up the numbers and get me stuck with her’ sort of look, and Harry hoped they’d both survive the year.

No help was forthcoming from Theodore’s housemates, who were torn between amusement at his plight and ill-disguised disgust at — Harry assumed — the girl’s brash personality.

He could only ponder this for a moment, as on the floor below them Professor Snape was watching the minute hand on an old pocket watch tick forward, and was growing tired of the delay.

“If you would all finish unpacking some time this century,” he called. “I still have a lecture to give.”

His cold reprimand snapped them back to reality and they remembered they were technically in class, and that it wasn’t wise to try their professor’s patience.

They rushed through the last of their organizing — accompanied by a great deal of grumbling from Theodore, who’d ended up stuck with Hermione after all — and then rushed down the stairs, where they found Snape and the Gryffindors waiting for them.

Pansy caught Harry’s shoulder during the stampede. “I apologize about earlier, it was petty of me. No hard feelings?”
This time she was the one to hold out her hand.

Harry shook it, preferring to make the girl an ally rather than an enemy. If she was as frightening as Draco made her sound, then he didn’t want her casting curses his way.

Snape didn’t look impressed at their lallygagging, but he wouldn’t reprimand his house in front of the Gryffindors, so settled for a short glare before leading them back through the hub and into laboratory one.

Their classroom was long and squat, befitting its location in the dungeons, with heavy wooden tables in place of desks and stools insidiously shaped to keep their backs ramrod straight. The walls were bare except for dark green chalkboards, while the porous ceiling shimmered like oil on water — rainbows imprisoned in Hogwarts’s deepest cell.

“This way,” Draco said, leading Harry to a table right in front of Snape’s desk.

Harry would have preferred to sit at the back, but he set down his cauldron and fished out *Magical Drafts and Potions* and *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. He wasn’t sure the latter text was required for the class, but after Dudley’s aconite misadventure he felt more secure having it on hand anywhere he had to deal with potentially poisonous plants.

Snape had a roll of parchment in his hands. “When I call your name you will answer, aloud. Now…” He started the call, working his way down the list until he reached Harry’s name.

“Ah yes,” he said. “Harry Potter. Our new… celebrity.”

The natural rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin had divided the room in two — the Gryffindors on the right, as far away from Snape as they could get; and the Slytherins on the left. His eyes scanned the Gryffindor tables and his lips curled.

Well, Harry mused, it was better than some of the other titles bestowed upon him over the years. “Present,” he said as loud as he dared.

Snape’s head whipped around. “Are you lost, Mr Potter?” His voice was deadly soft.

“No?” Harry replied. He jumped when Draco elbowed him in the side and then quickly corrected himself. “No, sir.”

Snape’s expression was unfathomable as he finished the roll call. He banished the scroll to his desk with a flick of his wand and then began to pace back and forth across the front of the room.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making. As there is little foolish wand-waving in this class, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses…” He paused next to a large cauldron tucked in an alcove and waved one pale hand through the thick green fumes rising from its surface.

“I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death — if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.”
His steps brought him back in front of his desk. He whirled on Harry, slapping both hands on the table as he leaned close. From this distance Harry could see Snape’s yellow teeth, and he could smell formaldehyde lingering on his billowing black robes.

“Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Harry fumbled through what he remembered of his texts and came up blank. “I don’t know, sir,” he said.

“Tut, tut — fame clearly isn’t everything.” Someone sniggered on the far side of the class and Snape looked gleeful, like Christmas had come early. “Thought you wouldn’t open a book before coming, eh, Potter? Let’s try again. Where would you look if I told you to find a bezoar?”

Harry’s heart gave a panicked flutter before he realized he knew the answer to this one. “In the stomach of a goat, sir,” he said. Then, feeling a bit bolder. “You use it to cure most poisons.”

Snape’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I know what it’s used for!” he snapped. “Once more! What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

Harry’s heart leapt with relief. He knew this one too! “They’re the same plant, sir. Also known as aconite.” When Snape didn’t reply Harry decided to press his luck.

“They’re very poisonous. Large doses cause instant death, and the poison can be absorbed through your skin if you’re not careful.”

The Potions Professor was staring at him as if he’d grown another head. "You're certain of your answer?” he asked, trying to trick Harry into changing his response.

Harry glanced around the room. The rest of the class was riveted, watching with the intensity of fans at a big football game. “Yes, sir.” He met Snape’s eyes again. “You see, my cousin picked some this summer. He and my aunt had to go to the hospital.”

“And… did they recover?” Snape didn’t look like he cared either way, so Harry went with honesty.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You don’t know?”

Harry shrugged. “They didn’t come back before I left for the train, sir.”

Snape didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Harry stared into the man’s black eyes with as much conviction as he could muster. To his relief, Snape soon straightened and resumed his pacing.

“As Mr Potter has so eloquently explained,” he drawled. “A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and will save you from most poisons.

“Monkshood and wolfsbane are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite.

“What he didn’t know is that asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. Well? Why aren’t you all copying that down?”
Unlike Professor McGonagall, Snape didn’t allow them a break after his in-depth demonstration on proper cauldron safety and ingredient preparation. No one minded, as they’d been forced to run through the evacuation drill five times over before he was satisfied most of them would survive if anything went catastrophically wrong.

Neville tended to trip over empty stools on the way to the door, while Crabbe and Goyle gleefully used their bulky frames to block the Gryffindor students inside until Snape — in spite of his favouritism towards the students of his house — ordered them to stay behind after class, which in Slytherin-speak equated to at least one detention spent scrubbing cauldrons.

They’d taken the drills seriously after that.

“I don’t think your head of house likes me much,” Harry whispered to Draco once Snape finally set them to mix up a simple potion to cure boils over an hour and thirty minutes into the class.

“Don’t be so sure,” Draco whispered back. “I think you impressed him by answering those questions. Most times no one does.”

Harry shook his head. He knew animosity when it was directed at him, and though he’d caught Snape off guard when he answered some of his questions correctly, there was still something not at all friendly in the man’s eyes. Thinking back, it had been there at the welcoming feast as well, before he’d felt a stab of pain in his scar… at least the pain hadn't returned.

He peered at the blackboard, where the brewing instructions were written in a small, cramped hand. “We need horned slugs, dried nettles, snake fangs, and porcupine quills,” he said, trying to ignore that the fangs would have come from snakes who'd once been very much alive.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your cousin picking monkshood before?” Draco asked as they joined the train of students making their way to the supply room. "That was hilarious. Serves those muggles right!"

“I don’t like talking about them… They aren’t very nice people.”

Draco looked curious, but to Harry’s relief he didn’t push. “Fair enough.”

They retrieved their supplies and got to work. An hour later they were well on their way to producing a finished potion, and Harry was enjoying himself in spite of Snape stalking between the rows, criticizing their efforts. He was especially hard on the Gryffindors, though he didn’t seem to know what to do with Harry. This was, no doubt, due to the fact he couldn’t say anything negative about Harry’s potion-making skills without it reflecting on Draco as well.

“You’re surprisingly handy at this for someone who's never brewed a potion before,” Draco remarked as Harry prepared their porcupine quills, grinding them to a fine powder with his pestle and mortar.

“Well, it’s a lot like cooking.” And it was, apart from the specific count and direction for stirring, and that it made a large difference whether you diced or chopped the ingredients.

“You can cook?” asked Pansy from the table behind him.

Draco looked scandalized. “But that’s servant stuff!”

Harry smiled faintly at them before turning back to his work. He'd reduced the quills to a gritty brown powder and, deeming them done, set them aside. “My relatives made me cook for them all the time. I can make all sorts of things.”
“Can you make pie?” asked Pansy. She sounded genuinely curious.

“Yes. Strawberry-rhubarb, and apple, and mince.”

Pansy sighed. “My grandmother used to say the mark of a proper lady was the ability to make a decent pie. She was so old fashioned.”

“So muggleborn, you mean,” said Theodore from the table to Pansy’s right. He’d given up trying to work with Hermione, who seemed more than happy to do it all on her own, and was once again reading his book. He scribbled down notes on a scrap of parchment every once in awhile, brow furrowed in consternation at its contents.

Pansy smacked his arm with her ladle in response. He sighed and calmly requested that she not burn holes through his robes.

Draco cackled. “Hear that Harry? You’re a proper lady.”

Harry rolled his eyes, having gained more silly epithets that day than he knew what to do with. No response came to him, so he checked their hourglass instead. “We’re at the five minute mark.”

Draco turned a dial at the base of their burner, extinguishing the bright blue flame.

Harry waited patiently for the potion's surface to still. The instructions on the board stated that it had to be taken off the heat before adding the porcupine quills, and he didn't want to risk ruining their work by rushing. When the last of the bubbles quieted he carefully poured the powdered quills into the cauldron. Draco was manning their ladle and stirred five times clockwise as soon as Harry was out of the way. The potion turned from brown to deep purple, and the steam rising from its surface took on a rosy hue.

Draco was grinning as he withdrew the ladle. He tapped it against the cauldron's rim to shake off extra droplets, and then set it aside.

"The colour looks right," he said, checking it against his text. "Though that's hardly a surprise with me as your partner."

Harry ignored his smug tone. Now that they'd finished brewing his mind was free to wander. It went back to their conversation in the storage room and the longer he pondered it, the more questions sprang up. Draco didn't seem the type to risk his neck on a whim, not without the promise of personal gain. He’d granted Harry permission to call him by his first name, which implied that they were friends of a sort, but Harry was in Gryffindor, not Slytherin. Even with the boons he'd pointed out to Pansy, were they enough to risk facing his schoolmates' ire?

"Hey, Draco..." he said, plucking up his courage.

Draco didn't look up from his text, but he tilted his head in Harry's direction to show he was listening.

"Why were you so sure I was a parsleymoon?" That caught his attention, and behind them Harry heard Pansy and Theodore's bickering die as they leaned in to eavesdrop.

Draco pursed his lips and tapped his index finger against the table. "My father says that no matter how farfetched a rumour is, it always contains a shard of truth," he said eventually. "I already knew you had a snake, so when people started whispering that the famous Harry Potter had set one on his roommates, I knew it was likely true." Harry opened his mouth to protest — he hadn't set Basil on anyone — but Draco was picking up speed.
"Then I remembered you whispering to yourself on the train. It sounded strange, more like hissing than proper English. It didn’t seem important at the time, but then I thought: what if he wasn’t talking to himself?" He shrugged. "It was still a bit of a leap, of course. Father wasn't aware of any parselmouths in the Potter line, and it couldn't have come out of nowhere."

Draco’s reasoning was sound considering the circumstances, but it was the last bit of his explanation that stuck with Harry. "Why would it matter if I'm the first Potter to speak parseltongue? I thought the ability was the mark of a dark wizard."

“If that were true, parselmouths wouldn’t be so rare,” Draco said. “There are plenty of dark wizards about, even here in Britain, but only those descendant from the Slytherin bloodline can speak to snakes.”

Harry tucked his toes against his stool’s crossbar and leaned back, eyes unfocused as he pondered this new information. It was a relief to find another person who didn’t believe speaking to snakes was evil, even if he hadn’t done anything to dispel Harry’s worries over being a dark wizard. From what he’d learned of the Slytherin founder from the twins, the man was considered quite dark, and if he’d passed that along to his descendants with his other abilities…

“Wait a minute!” He bolted upright and had to catch himself on the workbench as he nearly went too far the other way and toppled onto the floor. He fixed Draco with a wide-eyed stare. “So you're saying that only people who are part of the Slytherin family can speak parseltongue?”

Draco smirked. “Yes.”

“Which means… I must be a Slytherin!”

It was as though he’d been presented with pieces from two different puzzles and told to make them into a whole — nothing fit together. Neither of his parents could have been descendants of Slytherin; the Potters had no history of producing parselmouths, and his mother was born to muggles. Unless, of course, one of his parents wasn’t really his parent. The thought made his head spin.

“That’s what it implies,” Draco said, looking pleased that Harry had caught on so quickly. “But the real question is how. The family is supposed to be extinct. The last living member would have been —”

“Voldemort!” Harry exclaimed rather louder than he’d intended.

If Harry hadn’t been in the middle of an identity crisis he would have found the chaos that erupted in the wake of his utterance hilarious. Every child who grew up in a wizarding family jerked as if stung, some of them letting out startled squeaks or cries. Ladles and silver paring knives slipped from nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor, potions turned black as they were stirred in the wrong direction, and a loud splash announced Fay Dunbar’s mortar falling into her cauldron.

Snape, who was watching the ruin of his class with a profound grimace, swooped to her desk, scattering Gryffindors like leaves before a storm, and cast a containment charm in time to keep the potion from spewing mud brown froth over half the dungeon.

The Slytherins, many of who had been following Harry and Draco’s conversation, fared better than their Gryffindor counterparts, though there were still many bruised elbows and knees from where they’d collided with the hard surfaces of the workbenches.

“Merlin, don't just shout out his name for all the world to hear!” Draco hissed.
Harry came back to himself and looked around in bewilderment. “Sorry,” he said meekly. “I just...
do you think I'm related to him?”

Draco scanned the class, ensuring that the bulk of the students were still distracted by their own woes before confiding, “The Dark Lord never took a wife, but that doesn’t rule it out as a possibility.”

Harry slumped in his seat. "I don't understand. Even if Slytherin founded your house, why would you want to work with someone who could be related to Vol—“ He caught himself before he sent the room into another fit. “To the Dark Lord?”

Draco picked at a chip in one of his manicured nails, feigning disinterest, but Harry could see grey eyes watching him from beneath lowered lashes. "Only those loyal to his cause call him the Dark Lord,” he said, voice bland. There was a gasp from behind them, and Harry turned to see Pansy staring at Draco in alarm.

"But you call him..." Harry trailed off, his mouth dropping open. "Oh," he breathed as the implications sunk in. Draco had all but admitted to supporting Voldemort's ideals, and if Harry had any idea what those were he might have found enough heart to protest. As it was, he couldn't fault Draco for his choice, and looking around his green-clad classmates he wondered how many of their families had fought alongside the Dark Lord. How many had also lost parents, or siblings, or cousins to the war? How many more would have died if the fighting dragged on another year? Another ten years?

"Enough chatter!” bellowed Snape, making the students jump again. "Potter, twenty points will be taken for distracting your classmates.” Harry opened his mouth to protest, but the vicious look on Snape's face made the words stick in his throat.

The Potions Master stalked toward him, gait smooth and predatory as he wove between the desks without taking his eyes from Harry's frozen form. Harry fought against the urge to cower as the man leaned in close again, barely managing to hold his ground.

"Be glad my classroom is intact," Snape hissed. "Else I would have taken enough points to set Gryffindor into the negatives.”

Harry shivered at the thought of what his housemates would do to him if he set them into last place for the House Cup. Tensions were already running high in the common room — a betrayal of such magnitude would likely push them over the edge and land him in a world of pain.

"I understand, sir,” he said. "I won't let it happen again.”

"Don't make me empty promises, Potter,” Snape snarled, revving up for a rant that he was sure would put the misplaced Gryffindor into tears.

He never got to deliver it.

In the back row, Seamus’s cauldron erupted in clouds of acid green smoke. There was a hissing noise, a startled yelp, and then the Gryffindors jumped up on their stools.

Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus’s cauldron into a twisted chunk of metal. He was groaning pitiably — the potion had drenched him from the waist down and angry red boils were springing up on one of his hands.

The Slytherins burst out laughing. Harry, still in the shadow of his professor, didn’t dare make a sound in case it further incited the man’s ire. He wouldn’t have laughed anyway, those boils
looked painful, and Neville had been kind to him before everything started to spiral. Even if there was no chance of them moving past their current hostility, he would honour those few hours of companionship for the precious gift they were.

“Idiot boy!” Snape snarled. He let Harry be in favour of striding over to Neville and Seamus’s table, clearing the spilled potion away with a wave of his wand as he went. “I suppose you thought it wise to add new ingredients to a ruined and volatile potion?”

Neville whimpered, now bent double in pain.

“Take him up to the hospital wing,” Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded back on Harry, glaring as if this was all his fault — which it sort of was. He must have failed to come up with a new reason to take points, because he stalked back to his desk, slammed a roll of parchment down, and took up his quill.

“You have ten minutes remaining!”

Harry looked to Draco, who was still giggling, and held out a pair of small glass vials for their submissions. The melted cauldron at the back smelt terrible, like something had curled up and died, and he wanted to be out of the classroom as soon as possible.

Draco accepted a vial and clinked it against Harry’s. “Cheers.”
Behind Closed Doors

Chapter Notes

So, I think I’ve finally figured out how to add notes to individual chapters rather than the story as a whole (took me long enough, right?) and I wanted to thank everyone who’s left comments so far! Even if I haven’t gotten back to you, I really appreciate hearing what you think of my story! :)

This chapter will be full of secret meetings, during which I had an epiphany for how to spice up the dynamics a certain black-haired potions master has with his house.

I hope you enjoy!

“You could be named the heir, you know,” Draco said as he perched on the edge of a desk. His feet were crossed at the ankle, the tops of his polished boots forming a perfect V as he swung them gently. Behind his heels a white dust sheet stirred, rippling as the chamber’s air was disturbed for the first time in a decade.

Harry looked over from where he was studying a finned gargoyle — one of four set upon pillars at the corners of the old classroom. Above Draco’s head hung a cobweb infested chandelier strung with blue and green crystals that emitted a cold light. Once there had been candles as well, but the hard wax had crumbled to dust long ago. The crystals alone weren’t enough to light the room, and in the dappled shadows Draco’s pale skin and hair had turned an eerie, drowned hue.

“The heir?”

“You could be named the heir, you know,” Draco said as he perched on the edge of a desk. His feet were crossed at the ankle, the tops of his polished boots forming a perfect V as he swung them gently. Behind his heels a white dust sheet stirred, rippling as the chamber’s air was disturbed for the first time in a decade.

Harry frowned and turned back to the gargoyle, whose leering mouth displayed sharklike rows of teeth. “What’s the catch?” he asked, because there would be one. Nothing good ever came to him for free.

Draco hummed. “There would be expectations to the house and students, I suppose. There hasn’t been a named heir at Hogwarts since Slytherin left, but I’m sure someone knows the details.”

“…I don’t know.”

“Why not? It’s the best way to ensure at least one of the school houses has your back in public.”

Harry ran his hand along the column and felt a decade of dust and grit slough away under his fingers. The stone beneath was a glossy black. “I just…”

“It’s because the Dark Lord killed your parents, isn’t it?” Draco said, voice bitter. “You don’t want anything to do with him… or with us.”

His feet hit the ground and Harry spun to face him before he could reach the door. “That’s not it,” he said, freezing Draco with his hand on the knob.

“How couldn’t it be?”
“Because the war is over!” Harry said. “I know that people died. My parents, your grandparents, Voldemort and who knows who else, but isn’t that what soldiers do? Fight and die because they believe they’re making the world a better place?” A twisting tightness grew beneath his ribs and he clutched his chest. “Even when they end up leaving the people they care about behind.”

Draco’s hand slid from the doorknob and dropped to his side. “Yeah,” he said, voice shaken. He forced a smile. “It’s a shitty deal, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “Voldemort may have lost the war, but that doesn’t make the things he was fighting for worthless. If they were, no one would have joined him.”

They lapsed into silence.

“You’ll turn my hair grey if you keep saying his name like that,” Draco said with a sigh.

“It isn’t already?” Harry asked slyly, his expression one of wide-eyed innocence. “It looks silver from here, like fish scales.”

Draco scowled and ran a hand over his head. “This cursed candelabra makes us look like we’ve been dumped in the middle of the loch. Why did we choose to sit in here again?”

“Because it’s the only room we found with working lights.”

“It could use a good dusting—“

Harry’s hand shot into the air. “I’ll do it!”

“—by a house-elf.”

A sheepish grin spread across Harry’s face and then they burst out laughing — Draco at the absurdity of cleaning the room themselves, and Harry in embarrassment at forgetting that Hogwarts had house elves to handle all the menial chores.

When their laughter died down Draco pulled himself together and asked, “So what’s your real reason for not wanting to be named the Heir of Slytherin?”

Harry sobered. “I just… I don’t think I can be the kind of person they expect me to be.”

“You won’t know until you try,” he pointed out.

“Maybe. I’ll think on it, okay?”

Draco smiled, the chandelier painting his face with deep blue shadows. “I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

They split up after dinner; Harry up to an abandoned tower to tutor the twins in wandless magic, and Draco down to the dungeons to meet with his Head of House.

Draco had received a note during dinner, which requested his presence at exactly half-past eight. Having arrived too early, he bounced on the balls of his feet, heels clicking against the flagstone floor outside an armoured door more appropriate for repelling a siege than a few curious students.
He wasn’t acting refined — and he knew the upperclassmen would taunt him if they caught him at it — but he couldn’t help the giddy feeling bubbling in his stomach.

Severus Snape was both his professor and godfather, and Draco was anxious to hear what he thought of his potion. He’d done his best in class, and if the colour was a bit dark that could be explained away by the inexperience of his partner.

He desperately wanted his godfather’s approval — even if the man was a turncoat.

Severus Snape was England’s youngest ever potions master, a true genius at brewing. He’d been tutoring Draco during the summers for as long as he could remember, and to fail now would be beyond embarrassing.

The magically augmented bells of the clock tower struck the half-hour, their deep peal echoing from the tallest spire to the lowest dungeon, and Draco bruised his knuckles knocking on the monstrosity of jagged, beaten metal before him.

"Enter."

The anger simmering in his godfather’s voice fell on deaf ears as he pushed open the door and strutted into the office, careless of the brooding darkness that suffused the stuffy room. Fragile silver apparatuses perched in alcoves cut into the stone walls, translucent magical barriers caging them as they distilled and filtered potions so vibrant that staring into the crystal vials made Draco’s eyes water. The rest of the office’s walls were lined with jars of ingredients; dried herbs, plump mushrooms in oil, and dead things whose empty eyes followed his progress as he slid onto a hard-backed chair set in front of a heavy ash desk.

Draco didn’t bat an eye at their scrutiny, but he did startle when the door slammed shut behind him and the electric tingle of warding magic passed over his skin. His tailbone connected with the chair at an awkward angle, making him grimace and rub his now throbbing lower back.

It was only when he turned to glower at his godfather that he saw the fury in the man’s black eyes.

"What were you thinking?" Snape snarled, his lips twisting into a grotesque scowl.

Draco floundered, having no idea what had set his godfather off this time, but the etiquette lessons he’d suffered through since birth kicked in and kept him from stammering useless apologies.

Useless, because until he knew what had gotten Snape worked up there would be no appeasing the man. His temper was legendary, the kind that burned for years without fading. It was normally hidden behind powerful occlumency shields, and Draco could only remember two occasions when the veneer had cracked. Once when he’d accidentally melted his mentor’s prized platinum cauldron, and once when Severus and his father had gotten into an argument.

He couldn’t remember what they’d been fighting about, but the glimpse he’d caught of their faces before his mother ushered him out of the room had been enough to forever shatter his long-held belief that a friendship existed between his father and godfather.

When he was older, he’d learned it was because Snape had turned spy for Dumbledore just before the end of the war.

It surprised Draco that his godfather had lasted a decade without being assassinated, but Snape was in Dumbledore’s good graces and his father needed every ounce of support he could get to keep out of Azkaban. He wasn’t sure what Snape had gotten out of the arrangement, but suspected it involved galleons — because in the end it always came down to galleons.
And so Draco remained silent, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It didn't take long.

"Why, out of all the people you could have worked with, did you choose that boy?"

"I'm surprised you need to ask," he replied.

Snape's face twisted in fury. "If you think you can forge an alliance with Dumbledore’s golden boy you'll be sorely disappointed," he spat. "The child is completely under his thumb and will never befriend the son of a Death Eater."

Draco's heart jumped into his throat and he whipped around to look at the door, visions of nosy Gryffindors eavesdropping at the keyhole pervading his mind. The door, of course, was shut and very solid.

"You're not supposed to talk about that!" he hissed.

"As you so carelessly did in the middle of a classroom?" Snape said.

Draco gulped, his godfather had been halfway across the room when he'd hinted at his family's allegiance to Harry. There was no way the man should have been able to hear him. His eyes darted to the door again and Snape let out a humourless chuckle. "Do have a little faith, Draco. I know how to ward my own office."

"I didn’t say anything outright!" he protested weakly.

"You all but admitted your father served the Dark Lord! What do you think will happen when Potter goes to Dumbledore with his suspicions?"

“He won’t.”

“You don’t know that!”

Blood thundered in Draco’s ears, but he kept up his mask. “Says the traitor.”

Snape went still and lightning flashed in the depths of his eyes.

Pressure built in Draco’s head — the first and only warning of a mental assault — so he quickly broke eye contact and turned away, fuming.

In truth, he’d taken a great risk telling Harry as much as he had. They hadn’t spent enough time together for him to get a good feel for Harry’s political leanings — what little there could be considering his upbringing — but the fact he was so willing to help Draco with a public demonstration of parselmouth, without asking for anything in return, had tipped the scales between caution and truthfulness. In hindsight, admitting loyalty to the man who’d killed Harry’s parents wasn’t the best way to get the Gryffindor on his side, but he would have learned the truth eventually and in this case Draco preferred it be from a reliable source.

In the end it hadn’t backfired, and he’d even managed to weasel out a bit of Harry’s perceptions on the war — which turned out to be so pragmatic it left him scratching his head.

He’d thought Harry missed his parents. Had he been wrong?

“He won’t tell,” Draco said before his godfather could get a word in, and then, because it was the only other possible reason for Harry’s ambivalence he could see, “He’s a parselmouth!”

Snape ground his teeth, face flushed with anger. His fingers spasmed, reaching for his wand,
before he clenched them into a fist and slammed them against his desk hard enough to make his bottle of ink jump. A feather quill toppled from its stand, weighted tip snapping against the table and leaving a dark stain puddling like blood along the edge of a half-written letter.

Snape pushed back from his desk and began to pace. His robes billowed around his thin frame, filling up the small space and making him seem larger than he was.

“He’s a Potter!” Snape thundered. “The ability to make silly hissing noises does not make him a true parslemouth. He’s nothing but an arrogant, lazy child who’s making up stories to heighten his own reputation!”

Draco wanted to throw his hands up in exasperation, but good breeding and a healthy dose of fear kept them clasped in his lap. “By making most of the school too afraid to look him in the face?” he asked. Snape rewarded him with a look so dark Draco could feel it crawling over the sensitive skin of his scalp.

It was like arguing with a brick wall — one that was a hair away from toppling over and burying him alive — and he was forced to give the argument up as a lost cause.

“Was my potion any good, at least?” he asked.

Snape paused in front of a jar of pickled mandrake. His hands trembled as he reached up to straighten the label. “It was… acceptable.”

Knowing it was as much praise as he could hope for considering the circumstances, Draco nodded stiffly and excused himself from the room. His knees shook, and once he’d made it outside and the door had swung shut behind him, they gave out.

He slid down the cold wall, his hands leaving a clammy trail on the stone and his heart pounding rabbit-quick. Shutting his eyes, he leaned his forehead against the wall and tried to compose himself.

It felt like he was being torn in two.

With the rest of his extended family either disowned or rotting in Azkaban, Snape was the closest thing to an uncle he had. He was a mentor, a confident, and sometimes — on his less-prickly days — even a friend. Seeing him enraged, and knowing there would be no peace until he severed all ties with Harry, was almost enough to make Draco do it, just so things could go back to the way they’d been.

Yet, regardless of what his godfather might demand, Draco could do nothing if his father demanded the opposite; and Lucius Malfoy was determined to forge an alliance with the Saviour of the wizarding world. That much had been clear when he pulled Draco aside on the train platform and instructed him to take all reasonable measures needed to gain the other boy’s trust and respect. Those instructions had been renewed when he wrote home about the rumours surrounding Harry.

His father seemed to believe the fragile boy with the round glasses and easy laugh would be the next Dark Lord. Draco wasn’t as sure. Harry looked like a strong gust of wind could steal him away, and he had no clue how someone like that was supposed to stand against the Ministry of Magic and Dumbledore’s resistance fighters.

“I suppose I’ll need to help him,” he murmured.

The role of advisor was one that generations of Malfoys had perfected over the centuries; and in truth, despite his grandstanding among his Slytherin peers, Draco preferred to take a backseat role.
Let someone else make the hard decisions.

Life was less stressful that way.

Harry didn’t currently wish to be named the Heir of Slytherin, but when he changed his mind Draco would be ready.

Pushing himself up off the floor, he brushed the dust from the front of his robe. He’d need to move fast, plant the idea in his housemates’ imaginations, and learn all he could about how an heir was named and their role within the house — all while keeping his godfather off his back.

He wasn’t worried as he hurried down the drafty corridor, a plan forming in his head. Taking advantage of current events was the Malfoy way of life, and Harry’s little demonstration before class had given him the perfect opportunity.

He wouldn’t let this chance slip past — even if it meant dredging up enough courage to interrupt a prefect meeting.

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A knock sounded on the chamber door.

Once upon a time it had served as a cell, imprisoning overzealous witch-hunters and the occasional unruly student.

The door was a stalwart slab of blackwood. A hand thick, banded in iron and studded with countless rivets, it wouldn’t budge for anything less than a full grown dragon — a very angry full grown dragon. Several years after its installation, the jailers had chiseled a small window through the wood at head-height and fitted it with bars of folded steel so they could jeer at their charges without unbarring the behemoth and risking a break out. After years of neglect the bars were nearly rusted through, though they still retained a measure of strength deep in their cores.

Around the edge of the doorframe were runes of entrapment, protection, and vigilance. Once they had secured the door better than any key or bolt, but now they were silent, the blood used to activate them having long washed away in the damp dungeon air. Privacy wards had been erected in their place, bound to a small carved stone hanging from a leather thong nailed to the door’s inner face. The wards faced outward, meant to trap secrets rather than the people uttering them within the cool confines of the cell.

The cell itself was ten paces across with rough walls and a barrel-vault ceiling. The floor was packed earth overlaying a single slab of stone, which bore scratch marks along its smooth face from where desperate prisoners had tried and failed to dig their way out once the blackwood thwarted them. The cell hardly fit the six chairs and small round table that had been smuggled into it several decades before by an enterprising prefect who wanted a place to hold meetings without worrying that half his house was surreptitiously listening in.

That prefect was one Tom Marvolo Riddle, though few remembered him by that name, and even fewer knew of his role in setting up what was affectionately dubbed the ‘Chamber of Secrets’.

Inside, a small group of Slytherins paused their discussion. They weren’t expecting company, and might have gone on to ignore the sharp rap if it hadn’t sounded again, more insistent this time.
One of the group rose from her seat, stepped up to the window, and peered out through the bars. The person on the other side was too short for her to see more than the top of their head, but the platinum blond hair was identification enough.

“It’s Draco Malfoy,” she said, turning to look at a tall, blonde seventh year with a silver head boy badge pinned to the lapel of his robe.

The head boy quirked a brow. “I wasn’t aware the first years had been told the location of this room,” he remarked.

“He’s a Malfoy,” said a girl sitting on his left as she traced the veins on the back of his hand with her fingertips. “No doubt his daddy” — she sneered and her nail nicked his skin — “was quick to spill all our secrets. Just like he did after our Lord’s fall.”

“Your lord,” he reminded her gently, catching her hand in his own and intertwining their fingers. “Not all our families took part in the war.” An ugly look marred her face, but she didn’t pull away. Across from her a lean boy rocked his chair back on two legs.

“Compose yourself, Rookwood,” he said, a hint of Russian audible in his deep voice. “It wasn’t Malfoy Senior who got your father locked up. He was under the imperius curse, remember?”

Rookwood rolled her eyes. “Of course, the imperius curse. You of all people should know how weak an excuse that is, Dolohov.”

“It worked,” Dolohov pointed out. “And despite his faults he never actively passed information to the enemy.”

The pair sunk into a sullen silence, thoughts of another man — one much closer at hand — souring the air.

The head boy sighed and shuffled the papers strewn across the table into a pile, flipping the top sheet upside down so nothing was visible of their notes. “Well, we may as well see what the boy wants. Let him in Farley.”

The girl at the door nodded and drew her wand. She tapped it against the heavy iron handleset and the wards released with a soundless pulse that made the prefects ears pop. Working her jaw back and forth in an attempt to adjust to the change in air pressure, Farley pushed the door open wide enough for them to see the small boy on the other side.

He was standing at ease, exuding the confidence his family was known for, though looking closer there was a hint of nervous tension in the set of his shoulders.

“Selwyn,” he greeted, nodding respectfully to the Head Boy. His eyes trailed over the room’s occupants, then landed on Rookwood and Selwyn’s intertwined hands.

“Draco Malfoy,” Selwyn replied. “To what do we owe this visit?”

Draco’s attention shifted back to the head boy’s face. He took a deep breath. “I’d like any information you can provide on Slytherin’s heirs and their role within the school.”

The prefects perked up and exchanged knowing looks.

“Oh?” Selwyn said. “Is this information not something you could find in the school library?”

Draco froze. “…No, it is not.”
“If you haven’t bothered looking for yourself, don’t presume you have the right to barge into our meeting demanding answers.” Rookwood said, taking his hesitation as an admission that he hadn’t tried researching Slytherin on his own time.

“I’m more interested in why he wants the information to begin with,” Dolohov drawled, his voice bright with amusement. He leaned back further in his chair, the legs creaking as he pushed them to their limit. “It couldn’t be that our young Master Malfoy has discovered proof that Potter is a parslemouth, could it?”

Draco didn’t deny it, though he fixed Dolohov with an obstinate look that further amused the prefect. “Don’t be stubborn. As I heard it, Harry Potter was coerced into proving himself during your Potions class this morning. Something about Slytherin being the best of the four houses?

“Of course, I doubt any of you know what Parseltongue really sounds like. For all you know he was playing you like a fiddle.”

“He’s a Parselmouth,” Draco snapped, conviction burning in his eyes. “If you’d heard him, you’d know.”

Dolohov hummed. “A pity I wasn’t there,” he said, fingering the lacing on the front of his robe. His eyes grew hooded. “It’s supposed to be a sensual language.”

“Please remember the boy in question is eleven,” Selwyn warned, his voice cutting through the room like a blade. Draco paled and looks of distaste crossed the other prefects’ faces.

Dolohov didn’t look perturbed. “I wouldn’t forget.”

“He wouldn’t care either,” muttered Farley, drawing another wave of dark looks towards the Russian prefect.

“You wound me, truly,” Dolohov said, pressing a hand to his heart. “And here I was, concerned with restoring the glory of our once-noble house.” He looked to Selwyn. “Surely you, our great and illustrious leader, have inherited a clue as to how we can bind the Boy-Who-Lived to our cause.”

Selwyn drummed the fingers of his free hand against the table. “Any information I hold is for the prefects’ ears alone.”

Draco bowed his head, reluctant to leave. “Keep me in the loop,” he said. “After all, it will be my word that convinces Harry whether to support our house or abandon us.” He ignored the astonished silence that met his bold proclamation and use of Harry’s first name. Casting a final wary glance at Dolohov, he stepped back and turned towards the common room.

Farley shut the door with a loud click and reset the wards. “What a pretentious brat,” she said as she retook her seat.

“Did you expect any less from the son of Lucius Malfoy?” asked a burly sixth year who’d remained quiet up to that point. Soft laughter erupted around the table. Malfoys wore modesty like house-elves wore clothes — unwillingly, and only under great duress.

“That aside,” Selwyn said, retaking control of the meeting. He flipped the papers on the table back over. “As we already intended to verify the claims surrounding Harry Potter, confirmation that he willingly displayed his ability in front of witnesses makes it easier for us in the long run.”

“I’m still against it,” Rookwood said, her hand tightening around his until the blood was forced from his fingers.
Dolohov’s chair came back to the ground with a loud thump. He leaned forward, elbows propped against the table. “Oh come on, Rookwood. Aren’t you even a little curious about the kid? If he really is a parselmouth he might be a descendant of the Dark Lord.”

“I refuse to believe it!” she said. “There is no record of the Dark Lord taking a consort before or during the war.”

“Everyone knows that,” Dolohov replied. “But I never said anything about a willing partner.”

“Can we change the subject?” Farley interjected before Rookwood could take a breath to reply. “While I’m sure your lord’s carnal proclivities are a fascinating subject, I’d rather not sit around speculating when curfew starts in half-an-hour and we haven’t accomplished anything.”

“I agree,” said Selwyn. “Unless we can discover how Salazar Slytherin intended to test his heirs we’re faced with creating the most elaborate deception in the history of our house. In order to convince Dumbledore and the administration of its veracity the trial we create must feel authentic, must be thorough, and must be safe.”

“Safe be damned,” Rookwood muttered. “If he wants to pretend to speak to snakes let him. When they pump him full of venom he’ll have learned his lesson.”

“And have the wizarding world blame us for the death of their saviour?” Selwyn asked incredulously. He shook off her hand. “I’m sorry you feel the boy is responsible for your father’s imprisonment, but to bring that level of hatred down on our entire house because of a personal grudge is not acceptable! We’d never survive it.”

She shot to her feet, eyes flashing. “What do you know? You didn’t grow up with one of your parents being tortured into insanity in Azkaban! You don’t wake up every morning wondering how much they’ve degraded during the night — or if there will still be a person there at all when the Ministry decides they’ve taken up enough taxpayer funds and it would be more expedient to just end it all.” Her voice was shaking, and Selwyn shrunk back when she leaned down to cage him in his chair.

“I’ve seen my father once since his trial ten years ago because according to the Ministry convicted Death Eaters don’t deserve visitation rights! And you want to publicly support the light’s precious saviour? To pretend he isn’t the reason over a third of our students are missing a parent?”

Selwyn looked pained as he shook his head. “Yours wasn’t the only side to lose people to the war,” he said softly, raising his arms to gently pry her hands from the back of his chair. “The Dark Lord forbade most of the pureblood wives from taking his mark, ensuring that none of his followers’ children would become orphans; but children like Harry Potter lost both their parents.”

She pulled away from him, crossing her arms over her stomach. “And was no doubt sent to live in luxury, just as a hero deserves.”

Dolohov burst out laughing, shattering the tense silence that had fallen over the rest of the table. “Have you actually seen the kid?” he asked. “He’s nothing but skin and bones, and skittish as a colt in a werewolf den. If you ask me, whoever he was stuck with didn’t care much for his wellbeing.”

“That’s ridiculous!” she snapped, slamming her hand down on the table. Several of the papers took flight, slipping from the edge to lay scattered across the ground at her feet. “No one with ties to Dumbledore or the Ministry would abuse their precious Boy-Who-Lived. I won’t let you paint him as a victim in all this Dolohov! You also lost your father to Azkaban. You of all people should understand how much that boy has taken from us!”
He spread his hands placatingly and his brows drew up in false innocence. “If I did, you’d never hear me admit it,” he said. “Honestly Rookwood, if you inherited your father’s ability to conceal emotions it’s a miracle he lasted a day as a spy.”

The crack of a whipping hex echoed through the cell before the last word had left his lips. It caught him on the jaw, snapping his head to the side and leaving a thin red welt across his nose and cheek. The force of it carried him from his chair and into Farley, who let out a startled shout as he bounced off her shoulder and landed hard on the floor between their chairs.

“Touchy,” he growled, raising himself to his elbows and looking up along the length of Rookwood’s wand, which was trained on him over the table. His wand snapped into his right hand, propelled from the arm holster hidden beneath his robes.

There was a flurry of fabric as the other prefects drew their own wands and held them up defensively, ready to cast protective charms. The cell was too small for a duel to take place without bystander casualties, and the children of convicted Death Eaters were not to be trifled with. They had little to lose by practicing the dark arts. In the eyes of the Ministry they were already singled out as future security risks and would be treated accordingly, even if they foreswore magic completely.

“Don’t you dare speak ill of my father!” Rookwood’s face was twisted with equal parts rage and grief. Her wrist tensed in preparation to cast another spell, the tip of her wand flicking down in the first stroke of a rune that would unleash a cutting hex.

Selwyn jumped up. He grabbed her wand hand and pulled it to the side, putting his body between her and the Russian prefect.

“Enough,” he said, voice hard. “We are here to determine the future of Harry Potter’s relationship with Slytherin house, not to tear at each other like a pride of rabid Gryffindors!”

Rookwood tried to pull away from him again, but this time he held on, drawing her close to his chest and refusing to let go. She struggled for another moment before her body went limp and she slumped against him, her head coming to rest in the crook of his neck.

“Please,” she whispered, her plea so soft it was nearly swallowed by the dark fabric of his robes. “Please Alexander, don’t do this.”

“The boy has a right to prove his heritage, we can’t take that from him.”

She stiffened, and the hand that had snaked up to the breast of his robes curled into a claw. “I hate you,” she said.

Selwyn sighed heavily and stroked the back of her head, smoothing stray curls of hair back into place. “Only sometimes,” he replied as he let go of her hand. She turned away without looking at him and swept around the outside of the room, dismantling the wards with a vicious flick of her wand.

She yanked open the door, then paused. “I’ll prove you wrong, Dolohov,” she said. The prefect had retaken his seat and summoned a mirror in which he was studying the welt left by her spell. He glanced at her, eyebrows quirked.

“I’ll show you just how good a spy my father was.” Then she swept from the room, the promise in her voice leaving a sense of cold foreboding worming under their skins.

Selwyn didn’t retake his seat, nor did he order the door shut. “There is little more we will be able
to do tonight,” he said, idly pushing the documents to the centre of the table. “Keep thinking of possible trials we can use to test Potter’s parselmouth. We’ll hold another meeting in two days time. Dismissed.”

As the other prefects filed out of the room he bent down to retrieve the fallen documents. A pair of legs remained beneath the table, and when Selwyn straightened, parchments in hand, he found Dolohov watching him through hooded eyes.

“Only sometimes?” the young prefect parroted, a hint of mockery in his deep voice. “I’d ask how life as an engaged man was treating you, but it seems there’s trouble brewing in paradise.”

“You set her on a warpath.”

Dolohov picked at a smudge of grit that had become trapped beneath his thumbnail when he’d landed on the floor. “She was already on a warpath. All I did was make sure she’ll use the brain in her pretty little head rather than charge in and do something we’ll all regret.” He held his hand up to the light and scowled. “Damn, but this stuff sticks. What do you figure the floor in here’s made of? Bet it’s nothing pleasant.”

“Our mothers set up the engagement.”

“Ha! Don’t they always? But there’s no use pretending you aren’t fond of her. It’s obvious to anyone with eyes.” Dolohov grinned lasciviously. “Though at this rate I doubt she’ll let you bed her any time in the next decade. Is the little Potter boy really worth the effort?”

Selwyn arranged the documents in front of him and then tucked them away in his bag. “Is sex all you think about?” he asked blandly.

Dolohov laced his arms behind his head. “Does that surprise you? It wasn’t all that long ago you were my age, you must remember what it was like. Besides, there’s no harm in it.”

Selwyn straightened and turned his full attention on the other prefect, closing the space between them with two long strides. His shadow fell over Dolohov, stretched long by the magical globe glowing in the wall bracket behind him.

“Really?” he asked quietly — dangerously. “Then would you care to explain why several young Hufflepuffs went crying to their head of house yesterday about a ‘ghost’ harassing them in the shower?”

Dolohov sobered immediately, his face sliding behind a mask with all the warmth of marble. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Not yet. But as head boy all the prefects report to me, not just those from Slytherin, and as a result I am not as blind to the goings-on in the other houses as I once was.” Selwyn’s smile was grim. “Just a friendly reminder.”
He left Dolohov sitting alone and stony-faced in the Chamber of Secrets.

“Nosy bastard,” the prefect growled once the Head Boy’s footsteps had faded away. He let his head drop backwards until he was staring at the cobwebs clinging to the corners of the ceiling. “Friendly reminder my ass.”

He decided to linger in the cell, curfew be damned. No one patrolled this lonely part of the dungeons, and the silver prefect pin on his lapel would give him a free pass even if he were caught.

“Nosy bastard,” he repeated, his hand tightening around the grip of his wand.
A bang echoed through the dorm room.

Harry jolted awake, his hand closing around the shaft of his holly wand. He yanked it out from beneath his pillow as the hangings around the bed were tossed aside and raised his arm, aiming into the darkness beyond… only to be hit with a blast of freezing air.

Another bang, quieter this time, followed by the rattle of the old window butting up against its casing — its latch having once again given way to the elements.

He sighed and dragged a hand through his hair, which was wilder than normal from having spent the night tossing and turning. He couldn’t help it. Questions about his parents and Voldemort — about Voldemort possibly being his parent — plagued him, keeping him awake until the small hours of the morning as he tried to figure out the hows and whys of his ability to speak parseltongue.

In the end, his gratitude for the ability, regardless of its origin, was the only reason he drifted off.

No parseltongue meant no Basil, and no Basil meant he would have walked into the wizarding world blind to the wonders of magic… if the Durselys had let him walk at all.

He shivered as another gust of wind stole through the open window, carrying the scent of rain. Pushing himself out of bed, he winced as his feet landed on the cold stone floor, and then made his way to the sill.

Dawn was little more than a smudge on the horizon, a shock of red sandwiched between brooding storm clouds and the equally dark flanks of the highland mountains. If felt ominous, as though a monstrous eye watched as he wrestled the window closed and fastened the latch. He tried to ignore the feeling, reminding himself that it was only the sun rising, as it did every morning rain or shine.

Still, he couldn’t shake the apprehension that coiled in his stomach as he dressed in silence, pulling on a pair of slacks and thick woollen sweater in place of his school uniform. He packed his bag full of texts and then slid from the room, obediently making his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

True to her word, Professor McGonagall had attended every meal since their chat in her office, and Harry could feel her eyes on him as he ate.

It was strange having three meals a day. His stomach felt overfull even when he stuck to
traditionally light fare, leaving him sluggish and bloated. It didn’t help that there was just so much food at each meal. If he’d walked into the Great Hall at dinner without knowing any better, he would have pegged the population of Hogwarts at five times the actual number of students based on the plates stacked with an industrial henhouse worth of drumsticks, mountains of rolls, and vats of soup large enough to cause a small flood if they were all tipped over at once. Not only was there too much food, but it tended to be rich or greasy. Fried seemed to be the preferred preparation method, and even safe foods like salads tended to have heavy, creamy dressings. It was the puddings and mousses that appeared on the table after dinner that were the worst, however. They were rich enough to make his stomach roll right over and he couldn’t understand how his year mates managed to eat more than a spoonful without feeling sick.

The school breakfasts were just as overwhelming, and Harry had quickly learned to show up at the break of dawn, before the house elves had a chance to set out the spreads that would greet the rest of the students at seven-thirty when the breakfast hour officially began.

He arrived at the Gryffindor table and made his way to the end, where a stack of small cast-iron pans were set beside a basket of fresh eggs, sausages, tomatoes, and basic garnishes for an omelette. The pan fit easily in his hand, far lighter than the one he’d been forced to use at Privet Drive, and he set a small brown egg inside along with a handful of mushrooms and chives, a sausage, half a tomato, and a dollop of beans.

He set the laden pan down at his regular seat and waited as the elves whisked it down to the kitchen to prepare his meal. It reappeared less than five minutes later, the egg and garnishes now an omelette, the sausage nicely browned and the beans piping hot. A fried oat cake had been added to the mix, and Harry bit into it, savouring the warmth as he sawed the rest of his food into bite-sized pieces with the edge of his fork.

There were a few older Slytherins and a Ravenclaw girl in the hall with him, all of them enjoying their breakfasts in the peace and quiet only available when the rest of the school was taking advantage of the weekend to sleep in.

Even Professor McGonagall was absent from her tall-backed chair. The only staff member present was the school nurse, Mme Pomfrey. She was a portly older woman with a distinctive white hat that towered a foot over her head. Harry made sure to walk in the opposite direction whenever he saw it weaving his way through the corridors, not daring to put himself within arm’s range. To Harry, it felt as though they were playing a game of cat and mouse, one in which his small stature served him well for once, as he often spotted her hat before she spotted him.

He eyed the mediwitch warily until his fifteen minutes were through, half expecting her to try and accost him while there were few witnesses about to stop her. Indeed, she rose to her feet as Harry slung his bag over his shoulder, but he was sitting on the corner of the table closest to the door, and the only way she could beat him out of the hall would be to apparate — and apparition was impossible within the castle limits.

Harry hurried out. He cast a quick look back over his shoulder to make sure she’d given up pursuing him, and then darted up the main staircase and onto a landing lined with gleaming suits of armour. He jogged down the hall, counting the tapestries on his right hand side until he reached the fifth. A three-headed chimera standing in a field of bones met him, every inch of its body detailed in painstakingly neat stitches. It lunged towards his hand as he grabbed the corner of the tapestry; the lion roaring, the goat bleating, and the serpentine tail muttering about oil-stains discolouring their canvas and didn’t he know it was rude to grab without asking?

“An apology was on the tip of Harry’s tongue when there was a flash of white light and pain sunk
its serrated fangs into his feet.

“Ow!” he yelped, hopping from foot to foot. It felt like a mouse was chewing on the sensitive skin of his toes, but when he pulled off one boot — stumbling against the wall in his haste — there was nothing there.

Laughter rang down the hall behind him. He whirled around and caught sight of a pair of blue trimmed robes disappearing around a corner. Ravenclaws.

“I say,” said the painting of a rotund gentleman in a puce velvet doublet. “Are you all right young man?”

“Just great,” Harry snapped as he yanked his boot back on.

*So now they’re casting spells at me too*, he thought bitterly. *Couldn’t they have stuck to whispering?*

He didn’t give the chimera a second glance as he flung its tapestry aside and rushed up the staircase hidden behind the heavy canvas, heading for the library. He’d hoped to start his homework before the carrels filled up, but it looked like he’d be stuck hunting counter spells instead.

He started at the front of the library and worked his way back.

Without knowing what type of spell he’d been hit with, he was at a loss as to which section would contain its counter. It didn’t help that his left ankle was still sore from the sprain he’d received Thursday morning, and after two hours of unsuccessfully flipping through random books he wished he could float.

Turning into the dim astronomy section he heard something that gave him pause.

A broken gasp hung in the air, quivering — as though the person who’d uttered it was trying very hard not to cry.

His curiosity piqued, he moved silently along the aisle. Who could possibly be crying in a dark corner of the library at eight in the morning? He wondered, telling himself he’d just take a quick peek to see if he recognized them and then leave. Whoever was there wouldn’t be happy to see him, of all people, anyway. Of that he was certain.

He came around the end of a shelf and there, hunched up on the floor, was the bushy haired girl from the day before — only now there were streaks of black in her hair and she had a dark stain on the shoulder of her sweater.

He gasped. Was it *blood*?

The girl jumped and looked up with eyes red from crying. “Oh! Harry, it’s you.”

She rubbed her sleeve across her face, smearing her cheeks with the same dark liquid dripping through her hair. It was ink, he realized as it stained her skin, but he had no idea why she was covered in it. “You’re Theodore Nott’s partner in potions,” he said. “Granger, right?”
She let out a choked laugh and swiped an arm across her nose. “Not willingly, but then I doubt anyone…” Pain flashed across her face and Harry thought she’d attack Theodore, whose asocial personality was admittedly not the best partner material, but then she curled forward — her ink-heavy hair falling to shield her face. “…would want to work with me.” Fresh tears washed the ink from her cheeks, painting them with tiger stripes.

“Why not?” he asked, studying her. Yes, she’d acted stuck up and overbearing, but her clothes were well fitting, her skin — when not covered in ink — clean, and her school supplies new and of good make. In short, she was everything Harry hadn’t been in his previous school when the bullies had gravitated to him like sharks round a wounded seal.

She buried her face in her hands. “Because according to them I’m an insufferable…” She dragged in a breath, the effort of answering his question clear in the tremble of her shoulders. “An insufferable know-it-all!”

“Is that why you’re covered in ink?”

He expected her to start yelling. To tell him to go away. Instead, she sniffed loudly and said, “Fay Dunbar poured it on me. She was doing her Charms homework all wrong and I was just trying to help!”

It seemed Harry wasn’t the only one having trouble with his classmates.

“I see,” he said, giving in to his aching feet and sliding down the shelf across from her. He wiggled his toes, trying to work out the pain. “Why are you hiding back here instead of cleaning yourself up?”

Hermione looked down the aisle to her left, which may have led back to the library’s main entrance, though they were so deep in the stacks that neither of them could be sure. “I think she’s still out there, and how can I show my face like this?” She motioned to the ink stains and burst into a fresh wave of sobs.

Harry didn’t know what to do. He didn’t have much experience with people crying because they were sad — most of what he knew centred around pain or Dudley manipulating his parents — so he sat mutely and waited for her to compose herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said eventually. “I shouldn’t be crying. You’ve been going through so much more than me with all the nasty rumours floating around.”

Harry looked at the floor and traced his finger along a crack in the stone. “I try not to listen.”

He wasn’t sure how successful he’d been, with Ron as his roommate there was only so much he could do to escape the bragging. At least the other boys hadn’t tried leaving nettles or slugs in his bed — or if they had, that the house elves had gotten to them before he turned in for the night.

Hermione looked sad. “Oh, well… If it means anything, I don’t believe them.”

That was a surprise. “You don’t?”

She sniffled again. “No. They’re saying all sorts of rubbish. Like how you summoned a giant snake and ordered it to attack Neville before levelling your dorm with dark magic.”

Harry snorted. The ball pythons in Professor McGonagall’s classroom were twice Basil’s size, and who could actually believe he levelled a dorm? He supposed they’d also conveniently left out the fact that he was defending himself when Ron and the others jumped him.
Hermione wasn’t done. “And they say you’re just waiting for an opportunity to start cursing people because you’re a parslemouth, and that means you must be evil, which is stupid because most of them don’t even know where the ability to speak parseltongue comes from!”

"From the Slytherin family."

She nodded and a fresh trickle of ink escaped her hair. "You saw that footnote in *Hogwarts: A History* too?" she asked, wiping the ink away with her hand. "I wish they’d covered it in more detail, I haven't found much about the founders or their lives anywhere even though they were supposed to be the most powerful witches and wizards of that time. Did you read the part about the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall? It's a pity no one remembers how they did it. So much has been lost over the years. It’s hard to imagine what the next five hundred years could bring. I mean, will magic decline until—"

"I haven't read that book," Harry said, cutting her off when it seemed like she was going to keep rambling.

Her brow scrunched in confusion. "But then how did you know?"

"Draco told me, and the Weasley twins. Most of the purebloods seem to know." He shrugged. "Even Neville's grandmother mentioned that Voldemort was a parslemouth, though she didn't say it was because he was a descendant of Slytherin."

Hermione didn't flinch at Voldemort's name, but she did frown fiercely. "No one told me that! I had to research the Slytherin bloodline on my own from scratch!"

Harry blinked in confusion. They’d only been in school a week and she’d already researched an ancient wizarding family? He didn’t know where she'd found the time, or the resources. It took a moment for him to remember that they were leaning against shelves of books in a library, and that maybe this was the sort of place people went to do that kind of research. “Did you find anything interesting?"

She slumped. "Not really. The family name vanished around four hundred years ago, any modern descendants will be from the female line and whichever family they married into. But I did read that parslemouth isn't an ability native to the British Isles, they must have got it from somewhere else."

"They weren't the first to speak to snakes?"

"That's what the book I found implied. I was going to look around some more after I finished my homework but..." She gestured to her ruined clothes and her brown eyes welled with fresh tears.

Harry tilted his head back against the shelf. That there could be other bloodlines in the world that carried the parslemouth ability had never crossed his mind. Was it possible one of them married into the Potter family sometime in the last decade? Or could parseltongue skip generations — like red hair, or unibrows? It would make more sense than a familial bond between himself and Voldemort, and yet... when he thought back to how excited Draco had been about him potentially being the Heir of Slytherin, he couldn’t help thinking that it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Either way he wanted to know more, but Hermione’s attention had turned to the state of her sweater, which was bad enough to start her crying again and she didn't seem likely to stop anytime soon.
"That won't help," he said, watching as the collar of her sweater darkened with falling tears.

“I know that!” she said, hiccuping. “It’s just hard to stop. You know?”

The last time Harry had broken down and sobbed was three years ago when his cousin closed his hand in the car door. It had hurt so bad he thought his entire arm would fall off. His aunt had yelled at him for being noisy and threatened to have his uncle belt him if he hadn’t stopped by the time Vernon came home from work. Harry had stopped, but the threat lived on.

He shrugged.

“What are you doing back here anyway?” she asked. “I didn’t think anyone else came this deep into the library.”

Harry grit his teeth. “I got hit by a spell. I’m looking for the counter.”

“That’s terrible! But why not go to the hospital wing? I’m sure Mme Pomfrey could fix you up in a second.”

“No!” He’d just escaped the medi-witch and had no desire to walk back into her grasp. “I’m fine. I can handle this without her help.”

Hermione bit her lip. “I could help you, if you want,” she offered shyly.

He looked at her, trying to spot an ulterior motive, but she looked so miserable it was impossible to tell. He thought back to her piercing stare in the potions storeroom the day before. “Yesterday… you were hoping to be my partner, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, then sighed. “But I’m… glad Malfoy asked you, even if he is a Slytherin. You looked like you were having fun. More fun than you’d have had with me. All my partners get mad at me for doing better than them.”

Just like Dudley did, Harry thought. His cousin used to throw tantrums whenever Harry scored higher on a test then he did. It wasn’t hard to do honestly, Dudley’s head may as well have been full of sawdust. “I know what that’s like. I mean— I’d like your help. I haven’t really been paying attention to anyone in class, but you seem really smart.”

She smiled weakly. “Thanks, Harry. That’s real decent of you.”

She was the one being decent, not him. He studied her ink-stained sweater and then pulled out his wand. “I can help you with that if you’d like,” he said, motioning to her shoulder.

She hesitated, eyeing the tip of his wand warily, but then slowly nodded. He let the feeling of his wand’s warmth fill him, let it feed on his pain from the Ravenclaws’ spell, and then pointed it at her shoulder. “Tergeo!”

Just like in Professor McGonagall’s office, the ink came alive, tugged by an invisible force toward the tip of his wand. It took longer this time, as there was quite a bit of ink — and tears — to siphon away. By the time he’d finished, Hermione was looking at him in wide-eyed amazement.

She ran her hands through her hair and then twisted her head round to look at her sweater. “Wow! Harry! I haven’t read about that spell before. Where did you learn it?”

Harry tucked his wand back into his pocket. “Professor McGonagall showed me. She said it’s normally taught in second year.”
Hermione looked impressed. “You can already do second year spells?”

“I guess. I mean, I didn’t know it was supposed to be hard when I did it the first time.” He didn’t mention how long it had taken him to do it a second time.

“You’ll need to teach it to me,” she said. “But first let’s find you that counter spell.”

Hermione navigated card catalogues as though she’d sprung fully formed from one of their palm-sized drawers like Athena from the head of Zeus. In twenty minutes she accomplished what would have taken Harry all day. As they sat down at a table next to a window overlooking the sloping school grounds, a book of counter jinxes open in between them, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. She’d found the book just in time, as Harry had gone lame from the pain in his feet, which grew worse the longer the spell was in effect. The effort of limping after her as she scurried through the stacks had been enough to make his head spin and stomach tingle in a manner that precluded it’s imminent evacuation.

He fidgeted in his seat as she skimmed through the table of contents.

“Here’s one. The Toe Biter jinx.” She flipped to the middle of the book and then paused as her eyes descended the page. “Oh, ew. They say it should feel like mice chewing on your toes. That’s terrible!”

He’d never had mice chew on his feet before, but supposed it was an apt description of the pain lancing up his legs. Mice did have rather large teeth, after all. “I think that’s the one,” he said.

Hermione whispered the incantation to herself several times before drawing her wand. “Okay. Take off your shoes and socks.”

Harry did as she asked, swallowing hard when a wave of vertigo hit as he leaned down. He didn’t try to straighten up as he stuck his feet out past the lip of the table. It felt like his toes should be bleeding, but apart from a slight redness around the joints they looked their normal, bony selves.

“Cesso Mordens,” Hermione said, her voice confident.

There was a snap, like a rubber band hitting his skin, and then the pain faded away. He scrunched his toes and then flexed them out, sighing in relief. “Thank you. That’s much better.”

Hermione’s smile was brilliant, as though he’d handed her an award. She’d complimented him on performing a second year spell, but she seemed just as capable of magic, he thought. Maybe even more so, since she was able to locate the spells she needed rather than just picking them up on the go.

“So,” he said, sitting up. “What about parselmouths?”

“Homework first.” She was determined, a bossy edge seeping back into her tone — the self-depreciating, introspective girl from before vanishing as she rallied from her traumatic morning.

“But!—”

“I’m sure if we work together we’ll have it done in no time,” she said with decided finality. “Then
we can spend the rest of the weekend looking if you want.” She paused, and slowly flipped the counter-jinx book closed. “It isn’t like I have anything else to do.”

Harry thought of Draco, but they’d agreed last night not to act overly friendly with one another in public, at least not until the hysteria around Harry had died down to an acceptable level. Draco had been unhappy he wouldn’t be able to flaunt their friendship, but Harry insisted, and seeing how the Ravenclaws had treated him that morning he was glad he’d held his ground.

He knew how bullies worked — how they preferred easy targets. Compared to his exaggerated reputation as a Dark Lord slaying, snake summoning, dorm destroying juggernaut; Draco — who was only threatening in that he was the son of a rich, moderately dark family — was an easy target.

“Are you sure you want to be seen with me?” he asked Hermione, not certain she’d thought through how helping him would paint a target on her back. “There are a lot of people who don’t like me right now, and they’ll try to take it out on you if they can.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “I’m not scared of them,” she said, proving that beneath her overwhelmingly Ravenclaw drive for knowledge was an ocean of courage… or ignorance.

“If you’re sure,” he said, the temptation of learning the origins of parseltongue overwhelming his urge to put up more of a fight.

Homework took them until lunch.

Harry couldn’t remembered having so much assigned work at once ever, let alone in the first week of classes. They had to do readings for every class and paragraph essays for Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology and History of Magic. For Charms and Defence they were supposed to review the spell they’d be learning next week, not a difficult task for Harry because he could already cast the lumos spell and its counterpart nox without his wand.

Somewhere between slogging through a summary of the Wizengamot summit of 1230 and the start of the goblin wars, Fred and George Weasley turned up at their table and leaned casually against the surface.

“We heard you ran afoul of some Ravens this morning,” said Fred.

George grinned. “But it looks like you’ve handled yourself pretty well, Master.”

“Is there anything that stays secret in this castle?” Harry asked, ignoring the title they’d bestowed upon him during their first wandless magic lesson. He’d hoped the story of him being jinxed would remain a secret. It was embarrassing that’s he’d been hit, and he didn’t want any other students using him for target practice.

“No,” the twins said together.

“We figure its the paintings—“

“They do love to gossip.”

As did the twins. They hung around for ten minutes, regaling Harry and Hermione with a story of
how they lured the Head Boy into the firing lane of Peeves — the school’s noisy, mischievous poltergeist — who’d managed to procure balloons full of paint. They didn’t say it, but Harry had the impression that the balloons had come from them originally, and that there was a poor Slytherin somewhere out there dyed a brilliant pink with splotches of orange.

Harry hoped he knew the _Tergeo_ spell.

“Those are Ron’s brothers, aren’t they?” Hermione said when Mme Pince spotted the twins and chased them away. Apparently they’d upset her the previous year and she no longer trusted them as far as she could throw them. “It was nice of them to come check up on you.”

Harry wondered if they would have had a good chuckle at his expense had the spell still been plaguing him. They might be nice, but he had no illusions that he’d one day end up on the receiving end of one of their pranks. They pulled them so often, it was probably some kind of rite of passage in the school. “I suppose,” he replied.

“But I don’t understand why they were calling you Master.” She had a hard look about her that said she didn’t approve of it at all, though Harry didn’t understand why it bothered her so much.

“They asked me to teach them something. So it’s a bit like their my app— apprentices,” he stumbled over the unfamiliar word. “Which makes me their Master, apparently.”

There was a glint in Hermione’s eye. “What are you teaching them?”

“It’s not important,” he replied with a smile that prodded her curiosity to new heights.

“Harry!” she whined, but no matter how much she cajoled and begged him, he refused to tell.

Not long after the twins left, Harry caught sight of Draco entering the library.

He was with the rest of the Slytherin first years, all of whom were laden down with bags stuffed full of textbooks and writing materials. A handful of older students were herding them towards a set of tables at the back of the study area, and Harry watched as they split the younger students into groups and distributed them among the tables.

Hermione noticed that his attention was no longer on his essay, and turned to see what had distracted him.

“Peer tutoring?” she wondered, watching as the older students took their seats and pulled out scrolls full of notes.

“Peer… tutoring?”

“You know, when you get an older student to help you with your work rather than a parent or a teacher. It’s rather ingenious really that they’ve set up a group. I wonder why we don’t have anything like that available in Gryffindor. Do you think Professor Snape made it mandatory?” She sighed longingly as the Slytherins buckled down to start on their assignments. “Oh! I wish I could pick one of the upperclassmen’s brains about what it’s like to live with magic!”

“But you do live with magic,” Harry pointed out. “You’re a witch.”
“It’s different,” she insisted. “I didn’t know it was magic, and now that I do I want to know everything about it!”

“I forgot — your parents are muggles, aren’t they?”

She nodded. “They’re dentists.”

Harry had never been to a dentist, but he knew both Dudley and Vernon feared them with an unholy passion, and recounted horror stories about drills and needles for days after going in for a cleaning. It was the only sort of drill his uncle didn’t like, which was saying a lot as the man worked in a company whose sole purpose was the manufacture and sale of industrial drills.

“How did they react when they found out you were a witch?” he asked, wondering if she’d gone through the same things he had while growing up.

She thought about his question, idly flipping the page of her history book. “I think they were a little confused,” she said eventually. “They’re both very scientifically minded. I’d been doing magic accidentally since I was little, of course, but none of us realized what it was and they always managed to rationalize it away.”

“Did they ever get mad at you for using magic?”

“No. But they were always very busy. I think it was easier for them not to think on it too hard.” She met his gaze. “What about your family?”

Harry looked away. “They don’t want to believe in magic. If it were up to them I’d be a muggle.”

*Or dead,* he added in the privacy of his mind.

“It must have been hard for them when you received your letter,” she said, twirling her quill by its stem. Small splotches of ink appeared on the page beneath the tip, and Harry whisked them away wandlessly before she noticed they were there. However, his control of the tergeo spell was still dicey, and he ended up taking a little too much ink, leaving a curious blank circle half-a-thumb long part way up on her page.

Embarrassed, he tried not to stare at it.

“They burned it in the fireplace,” he growled instead, still bitter at the memory of his uncle’s smile as the man fed the letter into the flames. At least Vernon hadn’t made it through completely unscathed.

“They *burned* it?” She sounded appalled.

“Yeah, I didn’t even get to read it before it was ash. Luckily the school sent another and Basil helped me steal it before they could burn that one too.”

“Basil?” she asked.

“My best friend,” he said, then added, “She’s a snake, by the way.”

Hermione was at a loss how to respond to this revelation. Her mouth opened, closed, and then turned down into a thoughtful expression. Harry couldn’t fathom what sort of thoughts were forming under her mountain of bushy hair, but at the very least she didn’t seem to be talking herself out of helping him research the origins of parseltongue. Her eyes refocused. Then they slid over his shoulder and her posture went rigid.
“What is it?” he asked, scanning the seating area for danger.

Hermione nodded to a tall, thin Gryffindor girl with long brown hair. “Fay Dunbar,” she whispered. “The one who poured ink on me.”

Fay was weaving through the tables, her head on a swivel as she searched each student’s face. When she spotted Hermione she changed course, hurrying in their direction while she clutched her Charms textbook tight to her chest.

“What are you doing with him?”

Hermione tossed her head, her hair fluffing up like the mane of a lion. “Harry and I are working on a project together.”

Fay looked between them, and then took another step back. She bumped into a Hufflepuff boy sitting across from Hermione — who grunted in surprise. Fay stammered a red-faced apology before hurrying away.

“She’s scared of me,” Harry said, watching as she bolted through the library doors.

“Just ignore her! She’s not worth it!” Hermione said. There was a pause.

“Hey, what happened to my essay?”

Ah, so she noticed after all, Harry thought, projecting angelic innocence as she rubbed at the parchment and held it up to the light in an effort to figure out where the right side of her second paragraph had got to.

“Harry, this is your doing, isn’t it?”

He smiled broadly and twiddled his thumbs, admitting nothing.

They were forced from the library for lunch, not because they’d gone cross-eyed from the amount of work they’d completed — which was true for Harry, at least — but because Professor McGonagall was sure to notice his absence. Pulling Hermione away from books turned out to be harder than expected, and as a result they arrived in the second wave of students into the Great Hall.

Harry thought Professor McGonagall looked a little put out by his appearance, and he wondered whether she’d gotten in trouble with the mediwitch for allowing him to slip through her claws. It didn’t matter in the end. He had no intention of letting a nurse, magical or not, examine him. McGonagall would just have to live with that.

They returned to the library after lunch, raring to start their research on parseltongue, only to find their table had been taken over by a group of Ravenclaw fifth years, all of whom were studying furiously despite their OWL exams being a full year away.

Not daring to protest, they slunk off into the stacks, looking for somewhere they could work undisturbed. Eventually they found a lone spindly-legged table and a pair of chairs next to the
Defence Section. Insulated from the rest of the school, they quickly set themselves up, taking out quills and parchment, and prodding the bottle green hurricane lamp with their wands until it lit with a murmured *accendare* from Hermione.

As most of the wizarding world seemed to associate parseltongue with dark wizards, the Defence Section was the logical place to start as it housed a small selection of books on the dark arts and their practitioners. Unfortunately, they quickly discovered most of these were tragically vague — as though the authors were relying on hearsay rather than having any real background in the topic.

After forty frustrating minutes, Hermione embarked on a quest to the History Section on the far side of the library while Harry held down the fort. It was an easy task considering his only visitor was a nosy Ms Norris, whose lamp-like eyes seemed to accuse him of wrongdoing just by being there. But when Harry refused to be provoked she left without a fuss.

He’d just read through an interesting section in *Of Men and Monsters: The Rise of the Dark Arts in the Mediterranean* when Hermione returned.

"I'd like a basilisk," he remarked wistfully as she dropped a small pile of books on the table and moved to sit down.

Her hand froze on the back of her chair and she gave him an incredulous look. "A basilisk?" she parroted. "Harry, you do realize they're class five restricted creatures, right? Not only are they known wizard killers, but they're also completely uncontrollable, even for the most experienced wizards."

He grinned. "Not if you're a parselmouth."

She shook her head. "Aren't they huge? You'd never be able to house one even if you could control it."

"Adults can grow to fifty feet!" he said, bouncing with excitement. He couldn't quite picture how long fifty feet was, not without getting up and pacing it out, but he knew it was big. Big enough to make even his uncle or Dudley think twice about laying a hand on him. It wouldn't fit in the cupboard under the stairs, not once it was full grown, but that would take years and by then he'd be an adult and wouldn't need to rely on the Dursleys for a roof over his head.

"I'm sure my family has a manor house somewhere in the country," he reasoned. "According to Draco most of the old families do. If not, I could probably have one built once I come of age."

"But—they kill people with their eyes!"

"So, you ask it to keep them closed."

"Which will only work until it decides it doesn't like going about blind, at which point anyone looking in the face will die!" she said, tugging on a lock of her hair in agitation. The frizzy curls sprung back into place as soon as she let go.

"A basilisk's eyes are weapons," he countered. "They can't see anything with them, so it doesn't matter if they keep them closed. They use their sense of smell to navigate, and they have pits near their noses with membranes that let them see heat!"

He wondered if Basil could see heat as well, and made a mental note to ask when she returned. It seemed like a useful ability to have, especially when navigating in the dark.

Hermione crossed her arms and dropped into her chair, unhappy at being out-argued. "None of that
changes the fact that owning one is illegal. If the Ministry ever found out they'd throw you in prison for sure."

And there was the flaw in his grand design. He leaned against the table, resting his chin in his palm. "I know." He sighed. "Don't worry, I won't try breeding one in the boys dormitory or anything — even if all I need is an egg since Trevor is already there."

"You'd better not! You'd likely be killed, or worse, expelled!" It was a mark of how much Harry loved magic that he agreed wholeheartedly with her priorities.

"Where did you learn all that anyways?" she asked with a sullen pout.

He pointed at the book open on the table in front of him. "There's an entire section on basilisks in here."

She pulled one of the new books towards her, checked the title, and then flipped it open to the chapter list. Her tone was reproachful as she said, "I thought we were researching parselmouths."

"I am! See here, Herpo the Foul, one of the earliest known parselmouths and the first person to ever breed a basilisk. Born in Greece when time ran backwards, he laid the foundations for modern dark arts spell development — why are you laughing?" he asked, for Hermione had clasped her hands over her mouth in an attempt to suppress a sudden fit of giggles.

She managed to control herself long enough to say, "Harry, time has never run backwards," before breaking out anew.

He frowned. "But it says right here he was born in Epi…" he stumbled over the name. "Epidauria in 492, entered a sanctuary run by magoi in 484, then was kicked out in 475 when they discovered he was testing curses and rituals on muggle visitors." Herpo had actually been given the choice between exile and drinking hemlock, and had — quite sensibly, in Harry's opinion — chosen exile. According to his herbology text, Hemlock was poisonous, and he couldn't imagine anyone would willingly drink it knowing it would lead to their death.

She shook her head. "Those dates are based on the Christian calendar. Long ago a scholar decided to keep time based on the birth of Christ. The year he was born became year one, the next year two, and so on. However, they couldn't just ignore everything that happened before that, so it was decided that they would count backwards; just like how zero divides positive and negative numbers in math."

"Right now it's 1991, which means it's been one thousand nine hundred ninety-one years since the birth of Christ. Herpo would have lived before the so-called 'first year,' which is why the dates grow smaller each year rather than larger."

"I didn't know that," he admitted, and Hermione looked mollified at having known something he didn't. "I've never been to a church."

"Your relatives weren’t religious?"

"Well, they went to church… sometimes. But I think it was just to fit in with the neighbours."

Hermione looked surprised, so he added. "They did that a lot — trying to fit in. I guess it was hard to do with me around, but it never stopped them from trying."

"What about your parents?" he asked.

"They’re atheist," she replied. "My mother was brought up Anglican, but it didn’t last past her
introduction to science in grade school.”

“I wonder if wizards can be Anglican,” Harry mused, realizing he knew nothing about what magical folk believed in.

“I suppose some might be,” Hermione said, pensive. “Though if I had to guess they’d be… pagan, maybe?”

This opened up a new avenue of research, and Harry could see Hermione revving up to run off and find a whole new set of books.

“What did you find in the History section?” he asked quickly, hoping to keep her from becoming sidetracked.

She’d been rising to her feet, but at his question she plopped back down.

"I found a few promising books," she said, presenting them to him as she rattled off their titles. "There’s A History of Magical Developments, Magic Through the Ages, From Athens to Rome: An Overview of Magical Development in the Mediterranean, and a travelogue by someone named Irving Wander, though I'm not sure how useful that last one will be."

"Can I have the travelogue?" he asked, hoping it would prove more entertaining than some of the texts he’d struggled through before finding the section on Herpo. "I'll check it out once I've finished with this one."

She handed it over dutifully, looking relieved at not having to deal with the fallible and likely fanciful accounts of Wander's wandering herself.

They settled in for another hour of research, but were interrupted not ten minutes later by an interloper to their domain — Professor Quirrell, to be exact. Only, the professor didn't seem to notice them. He was completely engrossed with the books on the shelf across from their table, his turbaned head bobbing up and down as he hunted for a particular title.

A headache built behind Harry’s eyes. He rubbed his temples, attributing the nagging pain to the excess of reading he’d done that day.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione called pleasantly.

They watched, bewildered and alarmed, as Quirrell leapt a full foot in the air, body rigid as a board. He landed straight-legged on the trailing edges of his robes, which snared his feet as he tried to spin towards them and sent him toppling to the floor. Flailing wildly, he caught hold of the bookshelf at the last second and clung to it with the ferocity of a limpet in a storm as his long legs twisted together uselessly to his left. He looked over his shoulder and offered them a watery smile. "O-oh! M-miss Granger. Mister P-Potter. I didn't s-see you."

Hermione had jumped to her feet the second the man started to fall, making her chair tip over and clatter to the floor. Harry twitched at the sudden loud noise, his hand clenching reflexively and crinkling the page of his book. The blood drained from his face and he did his best to press it flat again.

"I'm so sorry Professor!" Hermione cried, rushing to Quirrell’s aid. "I didn't mean to startle you. Do you need help?"

Quirrell cringed away despite being wrapped up tight in his robes and quickly shook his head. "Ah. N-no, no n-need. I'm quite alright. H-happens all the t-time." His refusal didn’t stop Hermione
from hovering over him as he lowered himself to the floor to better untangle his legs. When he’d regained his feet, he followed her back to their table and his eyes darted over the books cluttering its top.

"W-working hard already, I see," he said, before his brow furrowed as he looked closer at the book titles. “B-but not anything on the current s-syllabus, surely.”

"Yes, sir," Hermione chirped. “We’re researching the origins of parseltongue.”

“T-the o-origins or p-p-parseltongue?” Quirrell exclaimed, quivering, his stutter so bad they could barely understand him. He looked terrified at the very thought, and Harry subtly shook his head at Hermione, hoping she wouldn’t reveal the reason for their interest. If Quirrell was this frightened of the idea of someone speaking to snakes, he might not survive a demonstration of the ability.

She plowed on, oblivious. “Yes, but we haven’t had much luck. Most of these books are rather vague on anything related to dark wizards. The only real mention of an early parselmouth we’ve found so far was” — she turned to Harry — “Herpo, was it?”

“Herpo the Foul,” he confirmed, slowly resigning himself to the fact that Hermione was going to tell Quirrell everything unless he intervened. Quirrell peered down at the book in front of Harry, which was still open to the tail end of the chapter on the ancient greek wizard and his brows rose, disappearing beneath the edge of his purple turban.

“Say, Professor Quirrell,” Hermione said. “You’ve studied Defence. Could you recommend any good books on Herpo or any other early parselmouths you know of?”

Quirrell’s eyes went very wide and began darting around the study space as though looking for spies hidden in the shadows, or an escape route.

Harry was betting on the latter.

The professor looked about to bolt when he flinched and squeezed his eyes shut. He whimpered as though in pain, a horrible grimace pulling at his lips as he curled in on himself, hands pressed to the sides of his turban. His fit didn’t last long, a few seconds at most, but it made Harry wonder if there was something wrong with him — some underlying illness that would account for his stuttering and constant nerves.

“T-those kind of b-books,” he said after a moment, “would be kept in the R-R-Restricted Section.”

Harry sighed and slumped forward against the table. It wasn’t an unexpected answer, but it also meant there was next to no chance of them getting their hands on the materials they needed. Taking a book out of the Restricted Section required a signed note from a professor, and there was no way any of them would hand something like that to a couple of wet-behind-the-ears first year students. Hermione also looked put out as she righted her chair and sunk into it.

“I see,” she said.

Quirrell looked between Harry and Hermione, fidgeting as an awkward silence settled over the three of them. “I c-could, I suppose…” he began uncertainly, then trailed off. Harry looked up at Quirrell and watched the man worry his bottom lip between his teeth. “T-there is one I k-know of, a translation of H-Herpo’s own works…” he trailed off again, then jumped as someone an aisle over coughed as though they’d inhaled a lungful of dust.

Harry and Hermione fixed him with pleading looks, hardly believing their luck.
“I d-don’t suppose it would hurt if you’re only l-looking at it for i-information on p-parselmouths…” The way he said it made it sound like they might find a great many other, less savoury things in the book as well. He turned his pale gaze on Harry, and as their eyes met Harry’s scar gave a sharp twinge.

“Please, sir,” Harry said quietly. “I need to know.”

Quirrell nodded, breaking eye contact and fished a scrap of parchment out of his pocket. He borrowed Hermione’s quill and wrote a quick note, signing the bottom. He returned the quill and passed the parchment to Harry, who accepted it reverently. “The t-translation has no official t-title,” he said. “B-but Mme Pince should k-know where it is.

“I d-don’t know if you’ll find what you’re l-looking for in it, but you may f-find other t-things of interest.” He suddenly grew pale. “Ah, t-though it would be best if you n-not mention this to anyone else. They m-might not agree with me letting you h-have that book, but a little knowledge n-never hurt anyone, heh?”

“We’ll keep it a secret, sir,” Harry promised.

Hermione also promised not to tell, though she looked uncomfortable at the prospect of lying to their other professors.

Quirrell skittered off soon after, having found the books he wanted, and Harry was left holding the note that would bring them one step closer to discovering the origins of human parselmouths. The professor’s writing was as jumpy as the man himself, but Harry could still make out the contents. It read:

I, Professor Quirinus Quirrell, hereby give Harry Potter permission to borrow the translated works of Herpo the Foul for use in a research project. No due date.

“Why did he only give you permission?” Hermione whined when Harry handed over the note so she could read it as well.

“I expect there’s only one copy,” Harry said. “Besides, I’ll let you borrow it if you want.”

“Good,” Hermione said, looking at the books on the table with new determination. “Do you want to keep reading these for a bit, or should we get Herpo’s works now?”

“Let’s go now,” Harry replied, flipping Of Men and Monsters shut and reaching for his satchel. “Mme Pince is kind of scary, and I’d prefer to face her sooner than later.”

Hermione laughed as she gathered up her own bag, and together they made their way out of the stacks.

Chapter End Notes

I know Hermione's explanation of reason behind the BC/AD dates was horribly inaccurate, but it isn't a main plot point and there's only so much brainy eleven-year-olds who weren't raised in a religious home can know. More importantly, Harry now has a book full of very dark, very fatal curses. This can't end well for anyone! :)
Hey look, finally a new chapter! This was originally meant to be the first scene in a chapter, but it kept growing and growing, and since I've been struggling with the following scenes I decided to post this rather than keep you all in suspense.

Thank you to everyone who reviewed, reading them raises my spirits whenever I run into a wall of writer's block!

The rusty deadbolt slid home with a screech like nails on a chalkboard.

Quirrell winced; he hated the old lock with its gritty, puckered surface. Hated how it left his fingers reeking with an iron tang too similar to fresh blood for comfort. But most of all he hated that he could not clean it. His fingers twitched towards his wand. A simple scouring charm would have it spick and span in under a minute, then a little oil to smooth the friction and he’d never need to hear its wretched squealing again.

His hand froze outside his pocket, quite of its own volition. A sharp hiss assaulted his ears, making him gasp and take a hasty step back.

“Leave it!” commanded a voice with all the warmth of a dementor’s kiss. It came from behind him, but Quirrell didn’t bother to turn. He knew the room was empty.

The apartment was new, at least to him. He’d moved in at the start of the semester, having given up his previous, pokey rooms in the Muggle Studies wing during his sabbatical, and had immediately regretted the change. While the apartment was large, the dark brown panelling and navy wallpaper sucked out the light and left the rooms gloomy as jail cells. The furniture was well used. Heavy leather armchairs brooded near a row of bookshelves, the fireplace gaped black and empty, and the oak desk crowded into the puddle of light that had snuck past the heavy blue curtains framing the window. Behind it, the door to his bedroom hung open, the end of the single bed just visible beyond his four-drawer dresser.

The rug’s colours had long since dimmed to muted plums, reds and silvers — except for a blackish streak along the left edge where the room’s previous occupant had been disembowelled and then partially eaten by an angry cat sith. No one had bothered to replace it, and so it sat. A morbid reminder that Defence Professors never lasted more than a year.

He whimpered, his desire to clean the lock near unbearable. “Master,” he whispered. “Please.”

Pain lanced through his head, bringing him to his knees. His palms pressed against the smooth stone floor as he heaved and gasped.

“I will not be caught unawares,” the voice snarled.

Quirrell’s arms gave out, dumping him — writhing — onto the floor. “Forgive me, Master!” His voice was a low moan. “I won’t ask again. Just… please…”

The pain cut out, leaving his body tingling with pins and needles. He rolled onto his back, then
quickly thought better of it and pushed up onto his knees. There was a dampness between his legs that caused his robes to cling uncomfortably, and this time his master allowed him to draw his wand and spell himself clean.

He wanted to ask why the wards he’d erected weren’t enough. His master had been pleased enough with them earlier, going so far as to reward him with a tidbit of arcane knowledge and a spell from his own repertoire. That had been two weeks ago. Since then, his master’s unpredictable paranoia had latched onto the door’s bolt as a physical manifestation of security. He’d try to clean it again in a week or two. Hopefully by then his master, the Dark Lord Voldemort, would have turned his attention to other worries.

Such as giving a book bursting with powerful dark magic to his nemesis.

“Remove your turban,” Voldemort ordered. “I wish to feel the air upon my face.”

Quirrell staggered away from the door and fumbled with the mountain of fabric on his head. It unraveled, dropping sachets of tangy spices to the floor as he rushed to obey his master’s command.

Voldemort had never been a patient man. A decade spent as a wraith possessing small animals in a bid for survival had tipped the delicate balance of his mind towards insanity — and with that insanity came a vicious glee at the suffering of others.

Quirrell likened him to the fable of the fox who lost his tail. Having come unto misery, his only solace was to make others as miserable as himself. Unfortunately, as he was the only person currently in the Dark Lord’s confidence, all the man’s ire was directed squarely at him.

If he’d known the trouble he was signing up for when he’d set off on his sabbatical, he’d have turned himself about and marched back to his comfy armchair by the fire and left the real exploring to other, more worldly individuals.

It began innocently enough — a shared drink in the local pub with Hagrid and McGonagall. That drink turned into two, then three, then four; and before he knew it they were all chin deep in firewhisky, and something stronger that Rosmerta kept hidden especially for his two companions. It was after Hagrid’s tenth cup when the subject of sabbaticals came up, and when the half-giant made an unfortunate, and rather antiquated, remark that there was no call for a proper Englishwoman to go traipsing about foreign countries on her own, falling into improper company and on the whole getting in the way. Adventuring was for men, he exclaimed, staring straight at Quirrell, who everyone knew had never gone on an adventure in his life. His triumph was cut short when McGonagall — in an impressive feat of drunken strength — slammed his head into the bar hard enough to crack the wood.

Throughout his years at school, Quirrell had been taunted mercilessly by the captain of his house’s Quidditch team for his slender body and mild, effeminate face. As such, Hagrid’s remark hit him surprisingly hard, and left him with a burning need to prove his masculinity. But how?

As he stared into his cup, he tried to picture the most daring, the most adventurous adventure in the world. Searching for lost treasures in the cloud forests of Peru, or hunting a dangerous magical beast across the plains of Africa!

No. No, he was sure someone else had done those before — he’d probably remember their names if his head wasn’t so fuzzy. What he needed was something so insanely bold, so impossibly reckless, that no one had ever dared attempt it before.
What was the world’s boggart? Impossible to tell, it was too big. Smaller then. What was Great Britain’s boggart? London’s?

The smile that grew across his lips in that moment was been one of rapturous enlightenment. Of course! How silly of him not to strike upon the answer immediately. To prove his manliness he’d discover where the Dark Lord had gone — for Dumbledore seemed certain he wasn’t really dead, and Dumbledore could be relied upon for such matters. It was a foolish man who failed to keep tabs on his mortal enemies, even the apparently-dead ones!

So powerful was his conviction that it survived the drunken stagger back to the castle, and the pounding hangover the next day. And once he felt himself fully recovered, Quirrell had set about discovering where the fallen Lord might have gone.

Rumours pointed to Albania, but the Balkan country was a long way to go on Quirrell’s meagre savings, so he opted for the closer option. As soon as the school year ended, he handed in his sabbatical request, packed his bags, and set out for northern Scotland — which had, once upon a time, also been known as Albania. Its name had changed since then, but Quirrell was sure there must still be people who knew it by its old name. Witches and wizards were notoriously conservative when it came to reform; that there could be a small town out in the Scottish wilds still stuck in the eleventh century wouldn’t surprise him in the least.

After a month spent trudging through mud and mist with monstrous blisters, he stumbled upon the object of his quest quite by accident while looking for a bush behind which to relieved his swollen bladder.

It seemed Voldemort had also considered the English Channel too great an hurdle in his current state — which was little more than a nebulous, sadistic cloud of misery and hate. He’d debated aloud whether melting Quirrell’s brain would make taking possession of his body impossible, quite unconcerned by the wet patch wending its way down the front of Quirrell’s robe. Quirrell didn’t notice either, too terrified to do much more than fumble for a spell that would work on a not-quite-ghost.

Fear robbed his normally clever mind of anything except a chorus of benedictions that would have made any priest proud if they’d been able to look past his painfully heathen robes and pointed hat.

Gratified that he could still strike fear into the hearts of men, Voldemort made him a proposition. Since it didn’t involve his brain being turned to soup, Quirrell latched on to it with the tenacity of a drowning man, not bothering to consider what was being asked of him.

A bargain was struck, and Quirrell escaped being turned into a vegetable by a hair’s breadth, which was alarming for the state of their future partnership, but in hindsight was not altogether unexpected.

His only consolation was that the Dark Lord kept his end of the deal, and on those rare occasions Quirrell pleased him he’d whisper a rare spell or the translation of an ancient text in his ear, and no matter how irritated or depressed Quirrell had been with his new lot in life, he was dragged back in, his thirst for knowledge wetted and begging for more.

In this way they co-existed. Not happily, but resigned to a state of mutual symbiosis.

As the last of the turban slipped to the floor a different scent suffused the room. The only way to describe it was white, like powdered bone or talc. Not unpleasant, but heavy. It clung to the inside of Quirrell’s nose and made his belly feel full of water. He bent down to retrieve one of the spice sachets and held it against his lips.
Behind him, Voldemort dragged ragged breaths into a small pair of lungs that had manifested as a result of the possession. They sat between Quirrell’s shoulder blades, swelling like blisters beneath the skin. In and out. In and out. The pressure made Quirrell dizzy.

A mirror hung on the wall adjacent to the door, and when Quirrell glanced in it he was met with two faces in profile. One his own, and the other — jutting off the back of his skull, noseless and pale as bone — Voldemort’s. He looked away and pressed the sachet closer to his face, trying to quell the nausea the sight of his deformed head spawned in his stomach.

When he felt well enough to move, he crossed the room and sunk into the chair at his desk. The top of his desk was cluttered with student papers he’d begun marking the night before. Irritation slunk over him, and his hands gained a life of their own, sorting the papers strewn over the wood into a tidy pile organized by class and last name, before setting them in his outbox for redistribution.

Quirrell let them do as they willed — or more specifically, what his master willed. Resistance resulted in pain, and he’d had quite enough of that for the day.

“Master,” he said hesitantly as his hands moved on to arranging his inkwells in a perfectly straight line alongside the blotter. “Was it wise to give the Potter boy access to Herpo’s work?”

His hand’s paused, and Quirrell felt the skin at the back of his cheeks bunch to accommodate the no doubt ferocious expression on the other wizard’s face. “You dare question my tactics?” Voldemort snarled.

“N-no,” Quirrell assured him, the stammer he’d adopted upon his return to Hogwarts finding its way into his voice. “I just… I don’t understand the benefit of giving the boy access to those kinds of curses.”

He knew he’d gone too far when his head exploded in pain, dropping him to the surface of his desk. He clawed at the wood as a high whine escaped his throat. It felt like an eternity before Voldemort released him, though from the pendulum clock on the corner of his desk he saw it had been less than a minute.

“Do you imagine a first year student will be able to comprehend even a third of that book’s contents?” Voldemort asked.

Quirrell gasped and levered himself up, arms struggling to support the weight of his upper body as he leaned back in his chair. “No, Master,” he replied obediently, though inside he wasn’t so sure.

He was hit with another wave of pain. “You’re lying.”

A gasp, and he was once again face down on his desk. He forced himself to concentrate. “The girl,” he moaned. “The girl with him was—“

“A mudblood, and therefore of no significance regardless of her supposed intelligence!”

“As you say, Master! Please…”

The pain cut out, though the memory of it lingered in his aching head. He doubted it was mercy on his master’s part. Rather, his train of thought had slipped from punishing Quirrell to his current obsession.

“Let the boy try to learn,” Voldemort murmured. “Let the magic consume him body, mind, and soul. Herpo is nothing more than a distraction, a tool to keep him from seeking out the philosopher’s stone.”
“Why would Potter seek the stone?”

Voldemort’s cheek spasmed and Quirrell twitched in surprise. “Because Dumbledore wishes him to.”

“I don’t understand,” Quirrell admitted, always two steps behind when it came to anticipating the headmaster’s intentions. Part of him wished his master was more open with his plans, while the rest worried that learning what the wizard intended would ruin his peace of mind.

He felt Voldemort raise his eyes to the ceiling. “Why else announce the stone’s location to all and sundry? Why else instruct us to devise menial tasks he knows I could defeat in my sleep? He is not building safeguards, but a gauntlet! A set of trials meant to fool witless children into believing they play the hero while he leads them by the hand into my grasp.”

“He cannot believe Potter will defeat you, Master.” It was a safe response, and Quirrell expected his master to scoff at his stating the obvious, but the wraith went silent.

“Belief.” Voldemort said after a long moment. “In the years since my… disembodiment, is it possible his belief in the boy has only grown? If it stays his hand, who am I to complain? No, let him play his games, we shall slither beneath them, leaving only enough of a trail to make him believe all his pieces are still in place.”

Quirrell didn’t understand what his master was talking about, and he got the feeling that asking would cause him more trouble than it was worth. “And Potter?” he said. “How shall I treat him?”

“Do as McGonagall asks.”

He was caught off guard. The deputy headmistress had called the teaching staff together over the weekend and dropped the bombshell that Harry Potter was capable of wandless magic. He could see the fear in her face, and knew she’d once witnessed the death of a student from a burst of unfettered magic, and was afraid of it happening again. She ordered them to keep an eye on him in class, to prompt him to use his wand and help if he was struggling.

“You want me to help him?” Quirrell asked.

“His life is mine.” Voldemort snapped. “I will not have him expire in a magical accident… though the despair on Dumbledore’s face should his saviour perish in such a senseless manner would please me. In any case, if the boy comes to trust you he won’t expect the knife in his back.”

Quirrell’s heart sank. In truth, he liked the Potter boy well enough. He was polite, quiet, and most importantly, interested in learning — even if the topic of his inquiries was related to parseltongue.

“And if the boy is… yours?” he dared ask, voicing the question that had plagued him ever since he’d heard the rumours circulating around Potter.

“I have said as much,” Voldemort replied.

Quirrell’s heart nearly stopped cold in his chest. “Harry Potter is your son?”

There was a beat of silence before Voldemort exploded. “You dare suggest that child shares my blood? The blood of the noble Salazar Slytherin?”

“But you said—“

“The boy and his life belong to me!” Voldemort roared. His voice, unused to shouting, was hoarse
and rough. The back of Quirrell’s robe billowed as the Dark Lord heaved with fury. “He lives because I allow it, and he will die because I demand it! He is not, and will never be, my kin!”

Quirrell hastened to undo the damage his assumption had wrought before the pressure in his head turned once more to pain. “I-I understand,” he stammered. “I didn’t know if the rumours were true— b-but of course they aren’t— I wouldn’t suspect you of, um…”

“Impregnating a mudblood?”

“Yes,” Quirrell squeaked, wishing he could be anywhere but here with his master. “I mean, no. I wouldn’t suspect you — it’s preposterous! And you’d remember if you had — not to say you would — but they’re only rumours after all — no truth at all.” His words tumbled into nervous laughter as he waited for his master to cut in with another stinging rebuke, but none came.

“I would remember,” Voldemort said into the silence, but he sounded uneasy and a horrible, cold feeling crept up Quirrell’s spine. “I was never so far gone to have lost control of myself… I couldn’t have been. And yet, if the boy is truly a parslemouth, there is no other way he could have inherited Slytherin’s memento. I am the heir, the last true member of the bloodline. He could not have received it from anyone else.”

Quirrell remained silent, his mind following the course of his master’s thoughts to their inevitable conclusion.

Voldemort clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “They are still only rumours,” he said. “Even if the boy was mine in the way you suggest, it would not change our goal.”

Quirrell slumped in his chair.

“You are not pleased?” Voldemort asked. “It is an honour to help your master destroy one of his greatest foes.”

Quirrell looked over at the stack of marked papers, thinking about each of the students who’d handed them in. “I didn’t become a professor to kill children.”

There was a pause, and then Voldemort said, “No one does, I suspect.”

The hint of compassion in his master’s voice was surely a figment of Quirrell’s imagination.
Oh my goodness, I'm so glad to finally have this chapter done! It gave me a ridiculous amount of trouble considering I've had the outline for it done for the longest time now. Oh well, all's well that ends well!

Thank you again for your lovely comments, I'm glad you're all enjoying the story!

Next chapter will be the flying lesson, and we'll finally get to see what Neville thinks about everything that's been going on.

The first year Astronomy class took place on Hogwart’s tallest spire between eleven o'clock Wednesday night and one-thirty the following morning.

Harry had groaned around a mouthful of bacon when he saw it sneak onto the second week of his timetable early Monday morning. Despite his occasional late night escapades with the twins, he didn’t look forward to sitting in a dark classroom for three hours in the middle of the night muddling through complicated diagrams and the lengthy mathematical formulas containing more letters than numbers he found sprinkled throughout his textbook. Having never encountered algebra before, he found these formulas as fascinating as they were whimsical, though he had no idea how they worked or what they might tell him when they did.

To make matters worse, Astronomy was scheduled right before his longest day of classes for the week. On Thursdays he had Charms at eight with diminutive Professor Flitwick, followed by three hours of transfiguration, and then another late starting class — flying — slotted in after lunch.

His only consolation was that he’d share the new classes with Draco, as Gryffindor and Slytherin had been paired up for flying lessons, and Astronomy was taught with all four houses together.

Fred and George assured him that sitting out under the winter stars for three hours wasn’t as bad as it sounded. The tower was shielded from wind and rain, and Professor Sinistra kept cauldrons full of piping hot chocolate, cider, or tea on hand as an incentive for them to stay awake.

Astronomy also gave them a valid reason to be out of bed after hours, and if the twins were good at one thing it was milking the system for all it was worth.

The third years had Astronomy on Monday evenings, and when Harry saw the twins the next morning they looked tired and horribly smug. The reason behind their satisfied smirks was revealed when Filch ran into the Great Hall during breakfast, bellowing about the suits of armour on the third floor walking about with toilet seats in place of shields.

“We had to raid every washroom in the school to get enough,” whispered Fred, who’d strong-armed Harry into staying at the table long enough to witness the fallout of their prank. “And even then it was pushing it close.”

While the Professors rushed off to round up the hollow knights before they could wander away, the twins wrote a cheeky letter to their younger — and only — sister, dedicating the prank to her
and promising to do something even more extravagant when she started school with them next year.

Tuesday flew by except for the hour and a half he was trapped in History of Magic, a class that would have been engaging if it hadn’t been taught by a ghost who droned on and on about early Goblin-Wizard political relations in a scratchy voice devoid of inflection. Even Professor Quirrell’s stuttering was more tolerable, which was astounding as half the time his students weren’t sure what he was trying to say.

Wednesday morning went just as quickly with a dawn Herbology class alongside the Hufflepuffs, in which Harry tuned out Professor Sprout’s demonstration on the proper way to use pruning shears. Hermione noticed his attention was elsewhere and started to scold him when the practical part of the class began — only to be struck dumb when Harry picked up his shears and had the miniature rosebush they’d been given to practice on trimmed perfectly in a matter of seconds.

It earned Harry five points for Gryffindor and a beaming smile from Professor Sprout, who was overjoyed whenever she found a student with a natural green thumb in one of her classes. Harry didn’t bother telling her it had less to do with talent and more to do with the years of practice he’d gotten at the Dursleys’, where having the most beautiful garden on Privet Drive was one of the many ways the street’s inhabitants fought for supremacy in their never-ending war for perfection.

At the table across from him Neville looked flabbergasted, and Harry remembered this was the class the other boy had been looking forward to most. He hoped it was living up to his expectations. Even if they were no longer on speaking terms, his expedition with Neville through Diagon Alley had been one of the highlights of his life, right alongside talking to the boa at the zoo and mastering Basil’s spell, and he’d remember it fondly regardless of how things had turned out in the end.

After Herbology, Hermione roped him into reviewing their astronomy text with a promise that she’d help decipher some of Herpo’s book afterwards, which had turned out to be both dense and opaque in its wording and had left Harry pulling at his hair in frustration on more than one occasion.

Hermione had struck upon the idea of rewriting the translation in comprehensible English, which was both brilliant and completely beyond Harry’s current abilities. She’d taken one look at his handwriting and stolen his quill to prevent him polluting the page of her notebook with any more ‘nonsensical scribbles that might have made sense to an alien species but were beyond the ken of humankind’.

They made little headway in the end, but having a plan was better than having none, so Harry didn't mind their slow progress. It wasn't as though he needed to give the book back any time soon.

At ten-thirty that evening, Percy Weasley bustled into the boys’ dorm and began the arduous task of rousing his brother from a dead sleep.

Harry, who hadn't bothered trying to catch an extra few hours rest before class, was still awake and dressed. He watched the other boys trudge after textbooks and quills through a small gap in the hangings around his bed. Disorder ruled their small stakes, piles of half-finished essays and lecture notes made finding even a blank sheet of parchment a trial. Fortunately for them, they didn't need
to contend with the mess of dirty laundry. The house elves saw to it that any article of clothing left out, even if it was clean, was whisked off to the laundry to be washed, dried, and pressed.

Ron finally came awake, only to mutter something about singing kettles, roll over, and fall straight back to sleep; much to his brother’s ire. When all other attempts proved futile, Percy summoned a bucketful of freezing water from the tip of his wand and dumped it on Ron’s head, which succeeded in sending a howling Ron and Scabbers bounding from their bed before the droplets could sink in.

No one bothered to check on Harry, and while they were busy with their own preparations he slid his textbook into his satchel, straightened his winter cloak around his shoulders, and walked out of the dorm.

He found Hermione waiting for him on a padded bench near the Fat Lady’s portrait. She looked excited in spite of the shadows forming under her eyes, and nearly drove Harry to distraction reciting astronomical facts in the manner of a person trying very hard to stay awake.

Percy took it upon himself to lead them up to the astronomy tower, which was fortunate as only Harry, Hermione, and a girl named Padma Patil could maintain the _lumos_ charm for more than a minute at a time — and of the three of them only Padma was willing to play guide for the others.

Harry would have preferred the eldest Weasley stay behind. He hadn’t forgiven him for leading the charge against Basil, but understood that as far as risks went he had little to fear from Percy unless he was caught breaking a school rule. Percy was predictable, and therefore safe. Not like Ron’s anger, which flared without warning or, as far as Harry could tell, reason.

They met the Slytherins at the base of the astronomy tower and there was an awkward moment when Percy and the young man shepherding the snakes squared off against one another.

“Weasley,” greeted the Slytherin, giving a polite nod of his head. For a moment his face was illuminated by the light of his wand, and Harry recognized him as the young man who helped cancel the levitation charm on his cauldron.

“Head Boy,” Percy returned with a stiff nod of his own.

The head boy looked them over, taking in the hastily donned uniforms, unkempt hair, and petulant expressions with disinterest. “It’s admirable you’ve taken the time to guide your young lions to class,” he said, and his eyes drifted to Harry for a moment. “Few prefects take their responsibilities seriously in this day and age. It’s good to see you aren’t one of the majority.”

Percy puffed up with pride, wariness and suspicion sloughing off at the unexpected praise. This was his first year as prefect, and it seemed recognition of a job well done trumped even inter-house rivalries and the natural suspicion Gryffindors held for their green-clad classmates.

Harry caught Draco’s eye from across the way and the other boy made a show of rolling his skyward while grimacing.

“In fact,” the head boy continued slyly. “I was hoping to meet someone with your initiative. I heard a rumour that the Ravenclaw prefects have left their students to their own devices, and I would hate for them to lose their way. The school often seems a wholly different world at night.”

Percy was startled. Then, anticipating the response the head boy wished from him, he huffed with outrage, his wand trembling in his hand. “How irresponsible! Someone should go find them and make sure they’re all right.”
The head boy’s face lit up, as though he had struck upon a solution. “Someone like you, perhaps?” he asked. “I can take over guiding your students to class, another ten is hardly a burden, and knowing someone I can trust is looking after our misplaced ravens would make me feel worlds better.”

Harry’s face wasn’t the only one to slacken in surprise when Percy gave in without a fight. Behind the head boy, the Slytherins wore smug grins as Percy rushed off towards Ravenclaw tower, his wand held high in the air as he scanned the dark corridors for any sign of the potentially missing students.

When Harry’s housemates realized they’d been abandoned to a snake — one with the power to assign detentions no less — they drooped, sinking into a sulk that made their feelings on the situation clear. The dirty looks they shot at the students across the hall fell into shadow when Harry crossed the small gap to stand beside Draco, taking his wand’s light with him. Hermione followed hesitantly after him, uncertain she’d receive anything resembling a warm welcome.

Draco was obviously pleased that Harry preferred his company to that of his housemates, and offered him a quiet “good evening,” which Harry returned. He then threw a supercilious scowl Hermione’s way, which she ignored — her attention caught by Pansy Parkinson, who was tracing her wand through the air in wide arcs, its tip leaving a hypnotizing neon afterimage trailing through the air in its wake.

Harry tried wagging his own wand, but all he managed to create was a painful glare that flashed across the lenses of his glasses.

The head boy looked over his surly new charges and the pleased expression slid from his face. “I expect you all to behave,” he warned. “I’d hate to see you pick a fight you have no hope of winning.” He flashed a terrifying smile Ron’s way, strong teeth gleaming in the light of his wand. Ron paled and drew back behind Seamus and Dean, neither of whom looked happy at being used as a shield.

“Or of making accusations you have no way of proving,” he continued lightly. “It would be a pity if one of Hogwarts’ students was put out in the cold because they were found guilty of defamation and their families forced to pay the price. Even a term in Azkaban wouldn’t be impossible, and I’m sure none of you want that.”

By now Ron looked ghastly, his face so white Harry thought he might faint. The head boy continued to stare at him for a long moment, to be sure the threat sunk in.

“How did he find out?” Hermione whispered to Harry, having finally torn her eyes away from the neon light at the tip of Pansy’s wand.

“Because we told him, obviously,” muttered Theodore, who was standing nearby. Once again he was weighted down with a hefty text, which was open to a page smack dab in the middle. His wand was tucked behind his right ear, the tip glowing just enough to illuminate the page if he held it up close to his face.

Hermione looked surprised. “That was very sensible of you,” she said. Theodore frowned and turned back to his book, not happy at having her agreement on anything, even good sense.

Harry didn’t see what was so sensible about it. Telling an adult about your problems was certain to make them ten times worse as they assigned blame in all the wrong places. Draco and the others had been lucky the head boy believed them, nothing else. He glanced towards the older Slytherin and found, to his surprise, that he was being watched.
The head boy smiled again, and this time it was genuine. “I hope your cauldron didn’t give you any further trouble,” he said, drawing the others’ attention as they tried to figure out what he was talking about.

“No, sir,” Harry replied, ducking his head in embarrassment.

“I’m not one of your professors, Potter. You may call me Selwyn.”

Harry nodded. He felt nervous, but didn’t understand why. Apart from his brief encounter with Percy, he’d never really interacted with a teenager before. Everyone he’d known at Privet Drive were adults, like his aunt and uncle, or children his own age. He understood them. The children would torment him, and the adults would turn a blind eye to his suffering. Selwyn was something new, and Harry didn’t know what to make of him.

“Thank you… Selwyn.”

Climbing the astronomy tower was a trial unto itself. The stairs seemed to go on forever, up and up in a dizzying spiral whose top was lost in darkness. Those brave enough to peer over the bannister could see the lights of the other first years weaving like will o’ wisps far below as they trailed them up to class.

Harry didn't have time for such observations as he found himself the target of pleasant banter by Selwyn, of all people. The head boy was far too curious for Harry's liking about what his favourite classes were and whether he was having trouble completing his homework. Harry tried to shift the conversation several times, painfully aware that every student in their party was listening in, but Selwyn was a practiced conversationalist, and led him back each time.

Harry's relief upon reaching the top was palpable, and he didn't protest when Selwyn disengaged to walk across the landing and open a door set with gemstones that gleamed like stars.

The room on the far side had no walls or ceiling, though a high railing ran the circumference of the circular space. Broad tiers of seats sank gently towards a central stage, upon which stood a massive armillary sphere made of golden hoops and rings.

Professor Sinistra stood next to the sphere, glass orbs orbiting her like moons and giving off a faint light. She had a dark complexion, with hard eyes that gleamed like flint and a mouth not given to frivolity. Her harsh appearance was quite at odds with the promised cauldrons of hot chocolate set up to either side of the door, which hinted that perhaps she wasn’t as hard and foreboding as she appeared.

The students rushed the cauldrons, eager to have a mug of something warm clasped between their hands.

It was not a pleasant night. Overhead, the sky was overcast with thick wooly clouds that blocked out the stars and turned the moon into a ragged puddle of liquid silver. There was no wind, but even without its bite the air was cold enough to raise goose-pimples on the arms of the foolish few who’d forgotten or refused to bring along their winter cloaks.

“Behave!” Selwyn called to their backs, lingering a moment longer in the doorway before turning to leave.

As soon as Selwyn was gone, Draco pulled Harry aside. “Have you thought about my offer?” he asked.

Harry hadn’t, but he didn’t want to admit that to Draco. He’d been so excited at the prospect of
Harry becoming the Heir of Slytherin it didn’t feel right to give him anything less than a well-considered answer.

“What offer?” Hermione asked, having crept up behind them. The boys jumped in surprise and spun around.

“None of your business,” Draco snapped, but Hermione had a stubborn look on her face that said she wouldn’t give up until she knew what was going on.

After they fetched their drinks, she trailed them up to one of the middle tiers and the three of them sat down in a row, Harry in the middle. He felt trapped as they glared at each other along the desk and hugged his satchel tight.

The benches themselves were wonderfully comfortable, with thick padding on the seats that radiated a warmth that sunk into their bones and stilled their shivers.

The other students were filtering into their seats as well, and much like their potions class, the Gryffindor students chose to sit as far from them as possible. They took up positions on the opposite side of the amphitheater, far enough away that their outlines faded into the wooden desks behind them.

“What offer did you make Harry?” Hermione asked again, persistent in her need to know.

“You’re such a busybody,” Draco said. “I’ve already told you it’s none of your business.”

She frowned and turned to Harry, her eyes pleading, but Harry was too relieved at the sudden moratorium on the topic to risk reopening it. He shrugged apologetically and hoped she wouldn’t be too mad.

She huffed in irritation, glowering. But when it became obvious that neither of the boys would give in, she had no choice but to let it slide. With a measure of ill grace she busied herself with pulling out her quill and parchment as a new wave of students shuffled through the classroom door.

The Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students had arrived — the latter led by a proud Percy Weasley who had, as Selwyn predicted, found them wandering the corridors alone. They’d argued they knew perfectly well where the classroom was, but Percy was having none of it and swept them up in his determination to be proved a proper prefect. Once free from his clutches, the ravens hurried as far away as they could get, rushing past the Slytherins to claim the quadrant of seats across from the door.

As they were settling in, the last few Slytherins emerged victorious from the crowds around the cauldrons and filled up the seats around Harry and his small group.

Theodore started to shuffled in beside Hermione but stopped when he realized who he’d be sitting next to. “What are you doing here?” he asked, not at all pleased.

She unrolled a sheaf of parchment with deliberate care, pinning the top corners down with her text and a bottle heavy with ink. “Waiting for class to begin,” she replied.

“And you can’t do that on the other side of the room?”

“If sitting next to a muggleborn makes you uncomfortable, maybe you should be the one to go across the room.”

He set his hot chocolate down hard enough for a wave of foam to cascade over the mug’s rim
before dropping into the chair — pride or stubbornness not permitting him to leave and thereby prove her right.

While Hermione was distracted with Theodore, Draco lowered his head and Harry, sensing a need for secrecy, leaned towards him.

“I don’t mean to push you for an answer,” Draco said. “It’s just that things are a bit more complicated than I expected, and I may need to call in the favour you owe me.”

Harry sat up, suddenly alert. He’d almost forgotten he owed Draco for keeping Basil’s presence a secret. It hadn’t made a difference in the end, but the fact he’d kept his word left Harry feeling obligated all the same. “What happened?”

Draco grimaced. “Remember when I went to meet with Professor Snape after dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it turns out he doesn’t like you at all, and it’s possible he’ll do something to make my life… difficult unless we cut ties. Not that I’d consider giving in to him,” he added quickly as Harry’s face fell. “But until you’ve been accepted as the official heir, none of my housemates will back me up and Professor Snape will be able to go on doing whatever he likes.”

“He threatened you?” Harry asked, horrified that he’d brought Snape’s wrath down on Draco’s head.

“Yelled mostly. He was too angry to threaten me in any way that mattered, but now that he’s had time to calm down and think things through we should both start worrying. I don’t know what you did to him, but he’s carrying a massive grudge.”

“I haven’t done anything!” Harry insisted. “I’d never seen him before the start of term feast!”

Draco shook his head, pensive. “There must be something. Maybe I can ask father, it might not have to do with you at all.”

Harry fidgeted. If not him, then what? What could make someone he’d never met despise him to the point he’d threaten a boy less than half his size. A moment later he realized he already knew. There were myriad examples from his own life with the Dursleys. Even his ability to speak parseltongue had triggered fear and hatred in people he’d never met.

Did Snape hate him for an ability he had no control over? It didn’t seem likely. Snape had hated him from the moment their eyes met at the feast, hours before Basil was discovered.

But if not that, then what in the world had he done to the man to inspire such loathing?

“What are we going to do about it?” he asked, shelving the mystery of Snape’s grudge as insoluble without further information.

“This may sound strange,” Draco said. “But I need you to pretend to hate me in potions class.”

“You want me to… hate you?”

“Pretend to hate me,” he stressed. “Snape rarely leaves the dungeons, and he doesn’t gossip with the other professors. So long as he doesn’t have any evidence we’re friends he won’t try anything in case it backfires.”
Draco sounded confident, but his fingers were twisting the barbs of his feather quill into dreadlocks, ruining its sleek silhouette, and Harry didn’t believe him.

“What happens if he finds out it’s a trick?”

The blood drained from Draco’s face. He hesitated, then met Harry’s gaze. “He’ll tell my father I want to do a mastery in potions, and that he’s been training me to that end since I was eight.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. It was horrible Snape would take advantage of the trust Draco had granted him, and yet he couldn’t reassure Draco by telling him it was impossible the man would go through with it. It was very possible — likely even.

“I know he thinks highly of me most of the time,” Draco continued wearily. “But I can’t predict what he’ll do if he’s angry. If he thinks he can get me to roll over through blackmail he’ll do it without a second thought.”

“Hold on,” Hermione interrupted, leaning all the way onto the table as she looked over at Draco. “Did you just say Professor Snape is blackmailing you?” Theodore looked over as well.

“Goddess you’re nosy!” Draco said, nearly snapping his quill in two. “You really can’t leave well enough alone!”

“But he’s a Professor!” Hermione protested. “He wouldn’t do that to a student.”

Draco let out a bark of strained laughter. “Yes, well, he’s also my godfather.”

“He’s your godfather!” both Hermione and Harry said in surprise.

“If you would all please settle down,” Professor Sinistra called from the centre of the room, her voice naturally magnified by the tiered seating. Hermione and Harry were forced to bottle up their questions as the conversations around them died away.

The professor began by calling the roll, which took longer than usual due to the large number of students. It was too quiet for Harry to question Draco further about Snape without being overheard, and his thwarted curiosity gnawed at his mind and left him fidgeting in his seat.

Part of him was screaming that this was Draco's way of cutting ties without risking an ugly fight. The line between pretence and reality was thin. It wouldn't be hard to slide from one into the other, a transition so gradual he wouldn't think to struggle until it was too late.

Draco might even be justified! Harry didn't know what a godfather was precisely, but he supposed it was like family. And why would Draco go against his family for the sake of a stranger?

His dark thoughts were interrupted by their professor, who'd finished calling the roll and was now pacing around the armillary sphere.

“Welcome to your first Astronomy lesson,” she said. "I am Professor Sinistra, and for the next five years I will guide you towards an understanding of the night sky and all the wonders it contains. In this class I will teach you to identify and predict the movements of celestial bodies. Moons. Stars. Planets. Each may affect us in subtle ways. Picking milkweed under the new moon gives it the power to cure gout, while a curse cast when Mars and Venus are aligned will last seven generations. Without an understanding of the cosmos you will never unlock the secrets of ritual magic — and the wonders of spell creation will remain veiled to your eyes.”

Not able to stand the suspense any longer, Harry turned back to Draco. “Why pretend? Wouldn't it
be easier to leave me behind?” he whispered. Below them, the professor continued her introductory speech.

Draco recoiled. “What kind of person do you think I am?”

“A ruthless opportunist,” Theodore whispered over Harry and Hermione’s heads.

“I think you’re nice,” Harry admitted, which made Draco’s neck and ears turn bright red with embarrassment.

“That’s because you’re far too good a person, Harry,” said Hermione.

“I believe naive is the word you’re looking for,” said Theodore.

“Which is exactly why you need me,” Draco insisted. “I promised to teach you everything you’ll need to know to survive as the head of your household once you come of age, and a Slytherin doesn’t go back on their word!”

“Unless it benefits them to do so,” said Theodore, earning a glare from Draco.

“Why don’t you tell the Headmaster that Professor Snape threatened you?” asked Hermione. “I’m sure he’d sort everything out without needing to deceive anyone.”

“Tell the Headmaster?” Draco echoed. “Are you daft? He doesn’t have the highest opinion of Slytherins, if you hadn’t noticed. Besides, if I did that my father would find out for sure. You don’t understand how spiteful Snape can be when something sets him off.”

Hermione shook her head. “So what’s your plan?”

“We need to stage an argument,” Draco said. “Something bad enough he’ll believe we hate each other.”

“What about during class?” Hermione asked. “You’re partners. Won’t he notice something’s off if you get along well enough to brew a potion?”

They all fell silent in thought. “Wait,” Draco said. “You and Nott are partners, right?”

“Unfortunately,” said Theodore, then his eyes lit up with the first real interest Harry remembered seeing in them and he leaned forward in his seat. “You’re thinking we should switch.”

“It’s the best option.”

“Will it be forever?” Harry asked, disappointed.

“I don’t know.”

There wasn’t much choice, not if he wanted to keep Draco out of trouble. “Okay,” he relented. It wasn’t all bad. Hermione was his friend too, and while she’d never be his first choice, he wouldn’t mind working with her in potions.

Professor Sinistra cleared her throat, drawing their attention back to the front. She was staring straight at them.

“Perhaps one of you four would care to repeat the phases of the moon for the class.”

The three boys exchanged blank looks, but Hermione jumped in, saving them.
“New, waxing crescent, first quarter, waxing gibbous, full, waning gibbous, third quarter, waning crescent,” she said without hesitation. Then, in typical Hermione fashion, she added, “It takes between twenty-nine and thirty days for the moon to complete one cycle from new moon to new moon, or full moon to full moon. This cycle acts as the basis for synodic lunar calendars.”

Professor Sinistra looked surprised. “That is correct, Miss…?”

“Hermione Granger.”

“Very well Miss Granger. Take five points for Slytherin.”

It didn’t register at first. Hermione had received enough points during the first week and a half of classes that this was nothing new. It was only when she shot to her feet that Harry realized what was wrong.

“But I’m a Gryffindor!” she protested.

Professor Sinistra squinted up at her, and then the people sitting at her sides. It was dark enough, and they were sitting far enough away, that she’d mistaken the colour on Hermione’s crest and assumed her house based on where she’d chosen to sit. “My mistake,” she said. “I will keep that in mind next time.”

Hermione dropped into her seat to a round of applause from the Slytherins, who were pleased her intelligence and need to answer questions had aided them. Put out, she crossed her arms and refused to raise her hand for the rest of the lesson, to the great relief of her classmates.

While Harry struggled to calculate the position and movement of the planets, Basil was faced with a practical, if no less vexing, conundrum.

She could count well enough to know that one mouse and one mouse and one mouse was three mice, and understood that if mice could come in threes, then other things could as well. Like the ground. Though why humans insisted on building grounds on top of grounds rather than being happy with the space they had was beyond her. Burrowing was understandable in places soft enough to allow it — but not even birds were foolish enough to make their nests where there was no tree to support them.

This strange human behaviour hadn’t concerned her until she tried to find the ground — or floor — that would allow Harry to protect the other children, and she realized there were still many things about humans she didn’t understand.

The third floor was the last of three floors, that much was easy enough to understand. But three floors from where? The bottom? The top? From his new den? Harry seemed to know instinctually, the same way she knew how to unhinge her jaws around a large frog. They’d never spoken on either topic, and so she set out to check every nook and cranny in the castle. She was determined not to fail. Anything to ensure Harry couldn’t order her away again — even if it was for her own good.

Unfortunately, in the ten nights since they’d parted ways, she’d had little luck.

The castle’s lowest floors were flooded with cold black water that rippled as predators skimmed
beneath the surface. Their milky eyes gleamed like pebbles as they waited for an unsuspecting rat — or snake — to approach in search of a drink.

The third dry floor was still far below ground, and contained little of interest apart from a row of statues with an unpleasant aura. She moved on. Warnings were only useful if the place in question was visited often, and it had been so long since humans set foot in the statues’ deserted halls that their taste had vanished completely.

Two floors up from that was another statue, this time of a gigantic snake. It coiled in the middle of a pool that tasted of old magic and whispered gentle nonsense to her as though alive — its voice little more than the whistle of wind through summer leaves.

Further still was a room that stank of rot and pungent chemicals she recognized from the apothecary at Diagon Alley, though she had no name for them. There was great anger in those rooms. The taste of it lingered in the air alongside Harry’s own, and for a moment she turned back towards his den to ensure he was unharmed. Then she remembered she hadn’t found anything of value yet and, grumbling about stubborn speakers, continued to explore with new determination.

As she reached the more populated floors, she was forced to keep to the walls during the day, moving through the maze of pipes that ran through the heavy stone blocks. This was not an inconvenient way to travel, as the majority were large and dry and there was plenty of mice and rats about for her to hunt — and plenty of holes through which she could peek out into corridors and classrooms when a curious taste tickled her tongue.

There was the occasional pipe fouled with human waste, but these were capped with spells that made anything foolish enough to pass through them disappear. She lapped at these, tasting the magic with her tongue, but didn't dare pass through them herself, even if the alternative was to backtrack to an intersection and find a new way.

Nights in the castle were silent. Only when the last students had made the trek back to their dens did she dare leave the safety of the walls.

She wasn’t the only one. Mice and rats spawned from generations of pets allowed to wander freely used the cover of darkness to raid corners for forgotten crumbs. When hunger overwhelmed her need to find the castle's secret, she took to hunting them instead.

She still lamented that Harry had scolded her for desiring to eat the Neville boy’s toad. But it would be unpleasant if he became so angry that he stopped speaking to her, so she resisted the instinctual urge to gobble it down. Not that she'd seen the toad since the train, but even knowing it was sitting in Harry’s den, all nice and fat and slippery, was a hard temptation to resist. How easy it would be to sneak over the invisible walls keeping it trapped in its little garden. Sliding up — all fluid motions and quiet breaths — then snap! Jaws in its throat and body coiling round and round, squeezing until its breathing stopped and legs fell still.

She wanted it badly, but until there was no chance of being caught she would make do with mice and small rats. Quicker, furrier, and with far sharper teeth, they posed a small threat. If one were to struggle loose she could receive a nasty bite! But she had years of experience hunting them, while they rarely had more than one chance to learn to escape.

The mouse she was currently stalking was a feral, shifty creature who kept one ear tipped in her direction, but who wasn’t yet afraid enough to run.

It paused a the feet of a hollow metal man, nose twitching as it scrabbled at the ground. It found a piece of bread, and as it’s small paws lifted the food to its lips, Basil closed the gap. She made no
sound over the stone floor as she eased into position to strike.

Her jaws were easing open when the mouse bolted upright, whiskers aquiver and gaze turned to the far end of the hall, where a pair of large, yellow eyes gleamed mirror-bright in the moonlight.

It was a cat — one that Basil recognized instantly. She was a scruffy beast, with dust grey fur and a long bushy tail. Basil had seen human children run from her as she patrolled the halls, confident as though she owned them. Basil had also seen her fetch her human — an equally scruffy man with a loud, angry voice — so quickly that she suspected him to be waiting around the corner, anticipating her call.

The cat pounced, crossing the distance between them in a single bound. There was a *crunch* as the mouse’s neck snapped in her jaws, and she shook it once, ensuring it was dead, before dropping it at her paws.

Basil recoiled, her hunger gone as she raised her head and hissed threateningly.

The cat took a small step back, hackles rising as they studied one another. Basil wasn’t a small snake. If she could catch the cat in her coils for long enough there was a chance she could kill her — and they both knew it.

The cat backed up another step, then let out a loud chirruping call that echoed down the hall.

Vibrations rolled against Basil’s belly as heavy footsteps thundered against the stone, and she knew she’d been bested.

The cat chirruped again as Basil turned tail and slithered away as fast as she could. The stalemate broken, the cat lunged after her, claws extended, and Basil had to twist and contort her body to avoid being scratched.

Fire lit upon the walls as the cat’s human burst from behind a colourful hanging cloth. He bellowed when he caught sight of her, the alarm and fear in his voice masked with bravado, and then charged after them.

There was a door ahead. Having no where else to run, Basil darted beneath it. It was a close fit, and if she’d caught and eaten the mouse she’d never have made it.

The cat’s claws raked her tail, scoring her scales and drawing blood, but then Basil was through and all the cat could do was scrabble at the door with her paws. The man caught up and rattled the knob, but it did not open.

This was for the best, because looming in front of Basil was a monster.

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Harry yawned as he made his way down from the astronomy tower. They’d spent the last hour of class identifying the constellations and planets shown in the professor’s armillary sphere, sketching them on a circular worksheet due at the end of class. It was slow going, their heads rotating up and down like the arms of a see-saw as they checked each planet was in its place, the quiet, repetitive movements broken only by the sniff of running noses or the sharp *thud* of a head dropping onto a desk as its owner nodded off — only to jolt back upright, ink smudged across their faces. Crabbe and Goyle were snoring softly in the row behind Harry, having given up the pretence completely,
and Hermione was staring at her work with glassy eyes.

Even Harry’s eyes felt gritty as Professor Sinistra tapped a silver mallet against the armillary sphere — causing it to ring with a crystalline note — before she dismissed them. Friends were shaken awake, or poked with elbows, and they filed down the steps towards her to hand in their worksheets — all in varying states of completion. At the last moment Harry realized he’d mislabelled Mars and Jupiter and ran back to his seat to correct them as the rest of the class staggered from the room — blank-eyed and moaning as they thought of soft pillows, pyjamas, and beds warmed by magic.

He was alone by the time he’d packed up and started down the spiral staircase, though he could still hear the tired voices of his classmates and could see the soft glow of lumos charms casting long shadows in the dark atrium far below.

Harry kept his wand in his pocket. He didn’t need it to find his way back to the common room. It felt safer to travel in the dark, and made it harder for patrolling teachers and prefects to pinpoint his location.

It was a long walk. The only path he knew back to Gryffindor tower forced him to zigzag down to the third floor. He was heading for the secret staircase half-way along the central wing when he heard voices behind him accompanied by yellow lantern light.

“Miss Norris found it,” said a man with a scratchy, ill-humoured voice that Harry quickly identified as belonging to Filch, the caretaker. “Cornered it in that room she did, Professor.”

Harry froze. What professor was accompanying Filch? Was it Snape? Would they give him a detention despite having a valid reason for being out of bed? The secret staircase was too far for him to make a run for it, and the rest of the hall was empty but for a handful of suits of armour standing at attention. He ducked behind the nearest as Filch and the professor came around the corner, flattening himself against the wall and drawing up his hood.

They were walking at a brisk pace, and Harry let out a breath when he saw McGonagall at Filch’s side. She would understand where he’d been, though he’d still prefer they not notice him.

Filch must have dragged her out of bed, as she was wearing a tartan dressing gown thrown over a long nightdress. Her wide-brimmed hat was absent and her hair trailed down her back in a braid. Filch looked the same as always in his ragged trenchcoat and greying shirt.

“Could you tell if it was venomous?” she asked tartly, clearly unhappy he’d chosen to wake her rather than one of her colleagues.

“Dunno,” Filch replied, scratching the side of his head with the handle of a spade. Its edge gleamed in the light, as though he’d sharpened it, and a sick feeling twisted in the pit of Harry’s stomach. “Didn’t get a good look at it before it slithered ‘neath the door.”

Slithered? Were they talking about a snake? Had they found Basil? And what was Filch planning to do with that spade? He stopped breathing as they passed less than five feet from him, holding himself perfectly still.

“I couldn’t open the door, as it’s locked magical-like and all.” Filch hunched his shoulders. “Since, you know…” He sounded uncomfortable.

McGonagall sighed. “I understand, Argus.”

They didn’t see him as they made for the far end of the third floor, towards the wing Professor
Dumbledore had declared out of bounds at the beginning of the year. Harry slipped off his shoes — whose hard soles clicked against the stone floor no matter how lightly he tread — and crept after them, his body strung tight as they approached a pair of thick wooden doors. McGonagall unlocked them with a tap of her wand and they swung open, creaking ominously.

Torch flickered to life, illuminating a snarling stone gargoyle perched on a pedestal in the centre of the floor like a guard. The two adults passed by without a glance in its direction and Harry followed, heart hammering beneath his ribs.

He was terribly exposed. Once past the gargoyle there was nowhere for him to hide, and thanks to the automatic torches he’d be caught if either one of them glanced back over their shoulders. But Basil was more important than a detention, and Filch was carrying the spade in his right hand like a dagger.

Ms Norris was waiting for them outside an iron-bound door. Her lamp-like eyes peered back at Harry and she mewed. Filch assumed she was greeting him and bent down to scratch her behind her tufted ears.

“Not much longer, my sweet,” he crooned as McGonagall pulled out her wand.

“Better stand back, Argus,” she warned. “It might be awake.”

Awake? Were they still talking about Basil? Surely they weren’t that afraid of her.

McGonagall tapped the door and said, “Alohomora.” There was a click, like a key turning in a lock, and she took hold of the handle and pulled it open.

Behind the door something huge shifted in the darkness. There was a snuffling sound and then a deep growl shivered the air.

“Stand back,” McGonagall whispered, pushing Filch behind her and taking a step away from the door. She pointed her wand into the darkness. “Lumos.”

Six huge eyes blinked in the light.

Harry was rooted in place, unable to look away as the heads of three gigantic, snarling hounds lunged into the light. They collided against the doorframe, fighting amongst themselves to be the first to push through the gap and sink their fangs into McGonagall. To tear her apart — rend her limb from limb.

Harry felt sick with fear. He started to shake and black spots danced in front of his eyes as his breath stuck in his throat. He hated dogs, with their wet noses and maws full of sharp teeth. Their claws that clacked on linoleum as they chased him, snapping at his heels — always snapping! Like Ripper, his aunt Marge’s prized bulldog, whose sole purpose was to take a chunk out of his legs. She would laugh and encourage him while Harry ran for his life, over fences, under bushes, and up trees. Anywhere to get away from those jaws.

The jaws of the hounds beyond the door were far bigger. Big enough to swallow him in a single, well-aimed bite.

The middle head broke free from the melee and lunged at Professor McGonagall, snarling and baying, fangs flashing as it rammed it’s thick snout through the doorway, flinging strings of thick, goopy drool over the floor.

A dark, sinuous body streaked from beneath its chin, away from the snapping jaws. It wove
beneath Professor McGonagall’s gown and between Filch’s legs as he staggered back from the ferocity of the hounds’ assault.

"There it is!' cried Filch, stomping his booted feet in an attempt to pin the snake in place. He missed and caught Ms Norris's tail instead as she shot past in pursuit. She let out a horrible scream and launched into the air, her body contorting like an acrobat to sink her claws into Filch's shoulder.

"Aah!” Filch flailed, trying to dislodge his furious cat. "I'm sorry my sweet! Please don't be angry!” He slipped on a puddle of drool and went down in a tangled heap of limbs. His lantern hit the floor and shattered, a burning puddle of oil leaking from its base and setting the stones alight.

Professor McGonagall was forcing the hounds back, all her attention and magic focused on closing the door. The hounds were putting up a good fight, pushing back an inch for every two she won.

Harry couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. He tried to call out to Basil, to let her know he was here and she’d be safe, but all that came from his throat was a strangled creaking sound.

It was enough — or perhaps it was the smell of him, sweat thick with the scent of fear. Her head came round and she charged towards him. She whipped under the hem of his robes and spiralled up his trouser leg to his waist.

"Run!” she cried. "Run! They have a monster in the room!"

Harry ran.

He pounded down the corridor, legs like jelly and socks slipping on the thick layer of dust covering the floor. He slipped, fell, and scrambled back to his feet. Professor McGonagall shouted his name but he didn't slow. If only he could make it to the hidden stairway!

A spell, invisible but for a tremble in the air, shot past him and struck the door leading out of the forbidden corridor a second before he slammed against it. It didn’t budge and he bounced back, landing hard on his tailbone with a yelp of pain. His lower back was numb as he clawed his way up the door, pushing and pulling the handle with growing desperation. It had been unlocked a moment ago! Why couldn't he get out?

He whirled around and saw Filch bearing down on him, face demonic in the flickering torchlight. The man had abandoned his broken lantern, but the spade was still in his hand.

"What do we have here?" he growled. “A little student out of bed, sneaking about where he shouldn't be!” He grabbed Harry by the arm and hauled him away from the door, nearly lifting his feet from the ground.

"Hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me.” Filch's fingers were like nails driven into his shoulder and Harry's mind went blank with terror. Suddenly he was no longer standing in the long forbidden corridor at Hogwarts, but in his aunt and uncle's sitting room, and Filch's face was that of uncle Vernon — twisted in loathing and rage.

"…Hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days…” The words were cutting in and out, drowned by a roaring in Harry’s head.

"…Or the lash, I still keep it oiled up nice. Gods, how I miss the screaming…”

Harry knew better than to argue, arguing only got him beaten worse and he had nowhere to run.
The far wall shook with loud, echoing booms as the hounds threw their massive bodies against the stone.

*I'm bored, Dudley* said Piers.

*Dudley grinned and his tiny eyes glinted malevolently. "How about a round of Harry Hunting?"

Desperate flight.

*A face twisted with savage glee peering at him from under the hydrangea.

Pain. So much pain.

"Let go." The quavering voice that emitted from Harry's mouth felt like it belonged to someone else. "Don't hit me. I promise I won't do it again."

Filch shook him and pushed his face right up to Harry's. "I don't think so, boy. You're in trouble now."

"Let go." The words were more urgent, pouring from him like a torrent. "**Let go!**"

Just like in the dormitory, there was a **crack** like cannon fire. Filch flew backwards, skidded ten feet along the floor, and then slammed into the gargoyle’s pedestal.

He groaned, clutching his head as he pushed himself up. "What the devil?"

Professor McGonagall was in front of Harry then, her dressing gown puddling about her knees as she knelt on the floor. Her face was pale and her eyes wide with terror, though whether she was afraid of him or for him, Harry couldn't tell. He backed away until the door pressed into his spine.

"Don't hit me," he said.

The burst of magic had taken his fear with it and he was left feeling a strange hollow detachment. Like someone had torn out his heart — only the memory of the emotion remained, wisp-like and fleeting.

"**Mister Potter no one is going to hit you!**"

Her own fear turned to anger and she glared at Filch. "And you, Argus! You will refrain from terrifying my students!"

"**He attacked me!**" Filch protested, but his words went unheeded.

Harry clutched the front of his robes tight in his hands. "He said he has a lash."

"**Mister Potter, I can personally assure you that the punishments Mister Filch described were banned long ago,**" she said. "**And that in all my time as a teacher we have never flogged a student for rule breaking!**"

Harry peered at her, not sure she was telling the truth, but unwilling to put it to the test.

"That being said, I would like to know why you were following us. I believe it's safe to say you just finished your astronomy lesson. Why aren't you with your classmates?"

She reached out for his shoulder with one hand, but Harry stepped aside. "Don't touch me." She looked startled as she let her arm fall back to her side. He was grateful when she didn't reach for
him again.

"I mixed up Jupiter and Mars, and stayed behind to fix them. Then I heard you talking… and I was curious." He looked past her, to where dust was raining down from the ceiling with each of the resounding booms. "Why are there dogs behind the door? What if they get out?"

"It— they won’t get out Mister Potter, of that you can be sure," she said empathetically. "Now, regardless of your curiosity, this corridor is out of bounds and you should have known better than to follow us in. Twenty points will be taken from Gryffindor, and I want your word that you’ll keep what you saw tonight a secret from your schoolmates." Her face was grim and Harry’s heart sank. He’d lost his house twenty whole points! What would Hermione say when she found out? She’d worked so hard to earn the points she had, and here Harry'd gone and lost over half of what she’d earned in a week.

His hand went to his side, seeking comfort in the feel of Basil’s coils, and he forced the guilt away. Her life was worth much more than twenty points. Hermione would just have to forgive him.

“Some of your classmates share your inquisitiveness," Professor McGonagall said, mistaking his silence for confusion. "I fear they would investigate despite the risks to their own safety. I do not want their lives on your head, understand?"

Harry thought of the Weasley twins and could imagine them running straight for the door at the end of the corridor, eager to see the monsters, only to be torn apart by three gaping jaws. It made him feel sick to his stomach.

“I promise,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Filch stomped up to them. “That’s all well and good, but it doesn’t change the fact that this boy attacked me and I want to see some punishment!”

Professor McGonagall imposed herself between them, stopping the caretaker in his tracks. “We do not punish children for accidental magic!” she snapped. “And you would do well to remember that!”

“That weren’t no accident!” Filch leaned around her shoulder and sneered at Harry, baring his crooked, yellow teeth. “That was intentional, that was! Bet there’ll be smoke pouring out from under that fancy robe soon. A pretty little candle.”

Harry had no idea what Filch was talking about, but McGonagall went rigid, the muscles of her neck taut as steel wires. Filch opened his mouth to spew forth another wave of abuse and McGonagall’s hand flashed. She struck him across the cheek with the flat of her palm with a ringing slap that echoed along the hall until it was lost beneath the baying of the monstrous dogs. His face dropped in astonishment and Ms Norris, sulking by his feet, hissed a warning.

“You petty, ignorant, incompetent squib! Don’t you dare jest about the wellbeing of my students,” she growled, her voice thick with an emotion Harry couldn’t name. It frightened him and he edged back along the door, away from her.

“You can’t go tellin’ them—!”

She loomed over him. “One more word, Argus, and I’ll have you out of the castle faster than you can blink. Do you understand me?”

Filch’s face was white with anger, but he held his tongue.
An ominous *boom* rattled the corridor and the door at the end of the hall nearly jumped from its frame.

McGonagall straightened her dressing gown. “Go fetch Hagrid,” she ordered, once she'd regained control of herself. “He’ll need to calm it before the entire school comes down to investigate this racket.”

“But we didn’t catch the snake!” Filch protested in a final attempt at contrariness.

“You will leave that to me,” she snapped and pointed her wand at the door, unlocking it. Filch scowled at her, but he slunk out into the dark hall, Ms Norris trailing at his heels. Professor McGonagall waited for him to get a head start before turning to find Harry. She looked embarrassed now that her outburst was over.

“I apologize you had to witness that,” she said.

Harry shrugged. He didn’t like Filch much, and seeing her take him down a peg hadn’t bothered him at all, even if it was a bit scary. He wanted to ask what Filch had meant about the candles, but was afraid she’d slap him too. So he held his tongue.

She looked him over carefully. “You are unhurt?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And do you remember what I spoke to you about last week after class?”

“That I should…” he hesitated. They’d spoken of several things, but only one of them seemed to apply to the current situation. “Use my wand?”

She gave him a shrewd look. “And did you?”

“No, ma’am. Sorry.” It wasn’t as though he knew any spells capable of repelling a full grown man, but he decided not to mention that. It sounded too much like an excuse, and like Draco had said, it was better to own up to his actions.

“Very well then. I will escort you back to the Gryffindor common room, and I expect you to go straight up to bed and — wherever are your shoes?” She was staring down at his feet, where the tips of his white socks were peeking out from beneath the hem of his robes.

“Umm.” Harry’s eyes wandered as he tried to come up with a plausible excuse. Professor McGonagall sighed.

“Nevermind. *Accio* shoes.”

There was a *whoosh* and then his shoes were hurtling out of the darkness and right into her outstretched hand. He accepted them meekly. “Thank you, Professor.”

When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, Professor McGonagall stopped him. “One last thing. Did you happen to see where that snake went?” she asked.

“No, Professor,” he lied, then bid her goodnight and hurried through the portrait and up to bed.

“Thank goodness you’re okay, Basil,” he whispered once he was safely beneath the covers. “I missed you!”

Basil’s body was a shadow against his bedspread. “Good. Because if you ask me to hide in walls or
go looking for monsters again I will eat your thumbs, and then you will be very sorry!"

“I won’t, I promise,” he said, and he meant it.

Mollified, she began to tell him of all the curious things she’d discovered on her tour through the castle, and he in turn told her about Draco and Hermione, about Herpo’s book, and — in a whisper — about the possibility that Voldemort was more than just a man who’d killed his parents.

Dawn was approaching when Harry drifted into sleep, a smile on his lips. Their plan to make the Gryffindor’s like him was a bust, as he’d never willingly approach the horrible room with the hounds ever again, but he had Basil back, and at the end of the day he’d take her over all the well wishes in the world.
The Rememberall

Chapter Notes

Has it really been seven months since the last time I updated this story? It feels like I blinked and all of a sudden the seasons changed. I'm honestly not sure where all the time went.

I'm sorry it took so long! Hopefully you enjoy Harry's airborne misadventure!

It took a herculean effort for Harry to drag himself out of bed the morning after his escapade down the forbidden corridor, and he only accomplished it by pretending Aunt Petunia was prowling outside his bed hangings, eager to screech abuse at him. In reality, his dorm-mates would have been overjoyed to fill her role, but they were all still asleep despite the clock above the door proclaiming their first class started in half and hour.

Basil grumbled when he crawled over her to pull on a fresh set of robes, but remained fast asleep even when he coiled her up and tucked her into the front pouch of his school bag. The kerchief he’d used to conceal her in the muggle world now served as her bed and, he hoped, would protect her from being jostled by the books and writing supplies in the bag’s main compartment. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but he’d never forgive himself if some nosy student or professor snuck into the dorm and discovered her while he was in class. There were no locks on the doors after all, inside or out.

He sat rigidly in Charms, listening hard for the clack of claws in the corridor outside — afraid that at any moment the hounds would break free from their prison and tear along the hall in search of warm blood and the blueberry scones thoughtfully provided by Professor Flitwick when two thirds of the class showed up in a state of disarray and distress twenty minutes into the lesson. Every thump and scrape had his head twitching towards the door, and his legs were shaking so badly when Flitwick dismissed them that he nearly collapsed. It was only his desire to get as far away from the third floor as possible that allowed him to follow Hermione beneath the lintel and down to the Great Hall for a mid-morning snack before their next class.

Hermione didn’t notice his distress, lost as she was in her own. Ever since they’d walked past a group of Ravenclaw first years talking about what they expected from their first flying lesson later that evening, she’d lost her head.

“I don’t think I can do this!” she moaned, clutching her match so hard the wood began to splinter. The collar of her robe was cockeyed and her hair flew wildly about her head. “I’m going to fail! Harry, what do I do?”

They were sitting in Transfiguration, right at the front of the class so he couldn’t see the other students glowering at him. It was a strategy he’d adopted at the start of this week, in part because it helped him ignore his classmates. The other, more deciding factor, was Hermione’s keenness for learning. Harry had quickly realized she was a bona fide teacher’s pet when she dragged him front and centre in their first class together, positioning herself strategically to be the first to catch the professors’ eye whenever they asked a question. He’d never seen her stumped by anything — which made her current behaviour utterly bewildering.
“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly.

“But what if I fall off?”

He had no answers for her. Silently, he pushed his glasses back and set his head down on his desk.
His eyes were gritty and dry, and the bright afternoon sunlight pouring in through the arched windows was giving him a headache. He rolled his match between the fingers of his left hand, his wand held limply in his right. He imagined the match growing sharp and slick, the square edges smoothing out while Hermione continued to fret beside him.

“A curious technique, Mister Potter,” Professor McGonagall said.

Harry jerked up, blinking rapidly. “I wasn’t asleep Professor, I swear.”

She arched a brow. “I did not say you were, for which we can be thankful. You wouldn’t like the precautions we put in place against sleepcasters.”

“Huh?” He looked down at his left hand and was startled to see a needle clasped between his fingers. “Oh!”

Professor McGonagall held out her hand and he passed it over dutifully. “A little thick,” she remarked, holding it up in front of her nose. “Better for cross stitching than sewing. Were you using your wand like I asked you to?”

Harry hesitated. “I think so… Maybe?” She sent him a stern look and his shoulders slumped. “No,” he admitted glumly.

“Try again,” she prompted, producing an extra match from the sleeve of her robe. “And this time let me hear the incantation.”

“Yes, Professor.”

Hermione’s anxiety grew worse during lunch, to the point where she gave up forcing herself to eat. Harry managed eight bites of his sandwich to her two, which left him feeling an odd, rather pleasant sense of accomplishment.

At three-thirty that afternoon they trudged down the front steps and onto the school grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns away from the dark forest and towards the lake. A solitary oak towered over the field in which their lesson would be held. It groaned as the wind plucked at its crown of brilliant red leaves, snatching away the odd leaf and turning it over like a young child examining a new toy before tossing it carelessly into the dark waters of the loch.

The Slytherins were already there along with twenty brooms in two neat rows on the grass. They were sitting on their cloaks, the thick black fabric keeping off the damp that clung to the ground in spite of the sunny weather. Draco looked up as they approached and raised a hand in greeting. He looked exhausted. The skin around his eyes was dark and he was squinting as though the sunlight hurt. He was sitting next to a broom that had clearly seen fewer worse days than the rest, as the majority of the twigs in its tail were still pointing in the right direction.

Harry waved at him but didn’t stop, even when Hermione did. He wanted to give Basil a chance to sun herself, and the large smooth rocks at the shore of the loch were just the place.

“Are you nervous about today’s lesson?” He heard Hermione ask Draco before their voices were
Basil shifted in the bag, poking her head up against the flap as Harry knelt on the shore. Her tongue flicked out through the gap. “I taste water!” she said in excitement, and was out of the bag before Harry could fully undo the tuck locks. She dropped onto the grass and her flanks swelled as she took a deep breath.

“Do you like it?” Harry asked, smiling as he watched her slither over the rocks to the water’s edge. Small fish flitted through the shallows, sunlight glinting off their backs like molten silver as they glided around half-submerged leaves and feasted on algae. Her head tracked their movements predatorily, but at his question she turned back to look at him.

“Oh yes! It is so long since I last swam, and think of all the fish I shall be able to eat!”

“Just don’t go out too deep. Hermione says a giant squid lives in the lake.”

“A squid? What is that? Is it like a fish?”

“Not quite. It’s got lots of arms and squirts ink. I’m not even sure how one got here. I think they normally live deep in the ocean.”

She sounded slightly put out as she said, “So I cannot eat it?”

“Not unless you grow another fifty feet before my flying lesson’s over.”

She looked down at the hem of his robes dubiously. “I do not know where I should grow fifty feet. I do not have any at the moment, nor legs to put them on.” As Harry snorted with amusement she turned her attention to his shoulders. “How will you be flying? Will you use magic to grow wings?”

“No, we’ll be flying on brooms. They’re just back there on the lawn, so you’ll be able to watch if you want.”

“Brooms?” she seemed taken aback. “Aren’t brooms those long sticks you use to clean the ground?” When he nodded she said, “Humans are strange, if you wish to fly you should at least have wings. I do not know how you will stay up otherwise. No wings! So silly.”

“I think Hermione agrees with you.”

“Then she is wise. I look like a stick, and you will never see me flying.”

He grinned. “We’ll be learning how to make things float later this year. Maybe I’ll practice on you.”

Basil reared back. “You would not dare!”

“You never know, it might be fun.”

“I am going to catch a fish now,” she said haughtily. “If you do not fall out of the sky, I expect you to come find me before the sun sets. I may even save you a fish.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he said with a small salute before picking up his bag and turning back towards his classmates.

The Gryffindors were visible as a dark clump making their way down the lawn when he arrived back at the brooms and took up a place to Hermione’s left, across from Theodore — who was slumped over a book and appeared to be fast asleep. She was still pestering Draco for advice and
had driven him to the end of his rope, his fledgling diplomatic skills not yet equal to such a sustained assault.

“Just one tip?” she begged.

“Don’t let go,” he deadpanned.

“But that’s obvious!”

“You asked for one tip, so I gave you one tip. Don’t let go. Easy!”

“You can’t just—!”

“Merlin’s fucking tits!” Pansy exploded. “Would you two shut up? I’m too tired to deal with you yelling at each other across the bloody lawn! When did you get so chummy anyway?”

Both Hermione and Draco were struck dumb and there was a thump as Theodore lost his grip on the book and jerked awake. He looked around in bewilderment, as though he couldn’t understand what he was doing outside. Then his eyes fell on the broom to his right and Harry watched his shoulders slump in a deep sigh.

“We’re not chummy!” Draco protested, finding his voice at the same time Hermione said, “You shouldn’t swear.”

Pansy tsked and gave Draco a withering look. “Right, and I’m a Gryffindor. Oh, afternoon Potter, by the way. Finished whatever you were doing by the lake, have you? How are you bloody chipper enough to walk all the way down there for no good reason?”

Harry started, caught off guard by the turn of her attention. He floundered for a believable excuse and settled on, “It keeps me awake.”

“They should have scheduled this class in yesterday afternoon when we were doing shit all,” she lamented. “Just watch, someone will end up nodding off in the air and crack their skull open.”

Hermione’s face drained of colour. “Driving tired is second only to driving drunk!” she wailed in horror. “We’re all going to die!”

Harry frowned. Across from him, Theodore tried to stand, wobbled, and then gave up, choosing instead to press his forehead against his knees in the hopes of getting a few more minutes rest before their professor arrived.

“I won’t,” Draco said stubbornly. “I’ve been flying on my family’s estate for years. I could do it in my sleep.”

Pansy opened her mouth to tell him how ridiculous that was when Blaise cut her off.

“Look alive, snakelings,” he said. “We’ve got company.”

The rest of the Gryffindors had made it onto the field and were drawing level with the far end of the Slytherin line. They were crowded around Neville, who held a glass orb full of swirling red smoke in his hand.

“Red means you’ve forgotten something, right?” Ron asked him. “You really can’t remember what it was?”

Neville stared deep into the orb, as though the answer might be found swirling within it. “No.”
“But it’s been like that since breakfast,” said a dark haired girl named Parvati.

“I know that!”

Their chatter died when they noticed Harry standing in their line. He raised his chin defiantly and shoved his hands into the pockets of his robe. His right hand wrapped around the handle of his wand and he ran his thumb over the wood. If they wanted a fight, he’d be ready.

They didn’t, but there was a frantic shuffle as they tried to avoid taking the open broom on his right side. Neville lost, and as he slunk into line Harry could see his shoulders shaking.

Was Neville really that scared of him? Harry wondered, his heart sinking.

Before he could dwell on it their flying teacher, Mme Hooch, arrived. She had a hawkish face, with short salt-and-pepper hair and fierce yellow eyes set under thin, angular brows. She was currently smiling.

“Good afternoon, class,” she said once the Slytherins had dragged themselves to their feet. They chorused a greeting back, all on their best behaviour. There was no sense in making a bad first impression, after all.

Her eyes took them in, missing nothing. “Welcome to your first flying lesson! I see you’ve already chosen your brooms. Good. I believe in a practical approach to learning, so I won’t ask you to take any notes in this class.

“Some of you will have flown before, perhaps even unsupervised. However! Regardless of your skill level, none of you are to fly outside of your designated lesson times. Am I clear? I’d like to prevent any broken necks this year.” That made it sound like people had broken their necks in the past and Harry shivered as he and the others nodded their assent.

Mme Hooch proceeded to pick up Millicent Bulstrode’s broom and went on for some time pointing out its parts, giving them a basic description of the history of flying brooms in Britain, and listing off the various types of magic they were imbued with. It was a complicated mix of spells, and Harry tried his best to follow along despite the growing fog in his brain. The sunlight felt lovely and warm on his head and shoulders, and it was lulling him to sleep.

“Now,” Mme Hooch said, “I want you to step up to the left side of your broom, extend your right hand over it, and say ‘up!’”

Glad to be doing something active at last, Harry stuck out his hand and copied her. “Up!”

His broom leapt eagerly into his hand, much to his surprise. His was one of the few that did. Draco had gotten it on his first try, but beside him Hermione’s broom only rolled over lazily and Neville’s didn’t move at all.

“Again,” Mme Hooch said. “With feeling this time!”

It took several more tries before everyone in the class managed to coax their brooms off the ground. Then they were instructed to mount them, and waited as she went around correcting grips so no one would slide off the end while in the air. Draco had apparently been doing it wrong for years and his cheeks flushed a light pink when Ron and Seamus broke into quiet fits of laughter.

“Now, I want each of you to take turns pushing off from the ground hard, hovering a moment, and then leaning forward slightly to come back down. We'll start with Mister Goyle.”
Harry watched as each of his classmates kicked off the ground and hung in the air with varying degrees of success. Mme Hooch hovered at their sides, ready to grab anyone who started to fall off and shove them back onto their broom. She had to do this with Crabbe, and for a moment Harry worried she'd be crushed, but there must have been a lot of strength in her lean frame because she heaved him up with only a slight grunt of effort.

Harry's heart-rate picked up as his turn approached, and then she was next to Neville, raising her whistle to her lips. "On three, she said. "One, two—"

Neville pushed off hard before the whistle sounded and shot into the air like a cork out of a bottle of champagne. Mme Hooch lunged for his foot but he was rising too quickly and she caught only air. He squeaked in fright as she shouted, "Mister Longbottom! Come back down immediately!"

But Neville didn't seem able to. His broom span in circles, rising ten feet, then twenty as he clung to it, his pale face growing smaller and smaller each second.

"Potter, your broom, quick!" she shouted.

Harry kicked off the ground and soared after Neville.

Mme Hooch shouted for him come back, but her panicked voice was drowned out by the howl of wind in his ears as he bent low over the broom’s handle and accelerated straight up.

As the wind tangled his hair and whipped his robes out behind him he was seized by a fierce joy that sang through his veins and set his nerves alight. The world stretched out below him in a patchwork canvas of brown and green, and he could see it all! An expanse of possibilities he’d never known in the five-by-ten foot world of his cupboard.

He wanted to loop and dive, to test these wings — more natural to him than even magic had been — but Neville was close above him now, ghastly pale and shaking. He couldn’t let him fall, not if he could help. He already had the weight of one death on his conscience, another might sink him entirely.

Neville’s broom was whirling like an angry wildcat, but Harry edged up beside it, slowing his ascent to match Neville’s. Darting forward, he grabbed Neville’s broom by the handle as it spun his way, putting his own body in its path. It was like trying to catch a falling tree. His arm crumpled and the wild broom slammed into his hip, pushing so hard he had to lock his legs together to keep from being flung from his broom.

He tried to fight it, clenching his teeth and pushing back until he feared his leg would snap, but the wild broom was having none of it, and he was forced to surrender and let it push him in a wide circle around Neville.

Neville was panting, his panic spurring the broom on, and Harry realized the only way to take back control would be to calm the boy down. He looked up into Neville’s eyes, and for the first time since the morning Basil was discovered, Neville’s fear wasn’t directed at him.

“Harry!” his voice was raw with terror and he latched on to the arm Harry was using to stabilize himself. “Help!”

Neville’s grip was like a vice and he was shaking so hard he risked pulling Harry off his broom. Harry leaned closer, using all his meagre weight to keep his seat.

“Neville, calm down.” He kept his voice level. “I can't help unless you let go of my arm. Remember the grip Madam Hooch showed you? One hand in front of the other.”
Neville screwed his eyes shut, shook his head frantically, and held on tighter. Harry once again tried to reverse the direction he was spinning, using the pressure of the broom handles digging into his right leg to secure him in place enough to risk letting go of his broom and pry at Neville’s fingers.

“Look, it isn’t so hard,” he said, pushing Neville’s left hand back into place. “You can do this.”

The ground continued to fall away. They had cleared the tallest of Hogwart’s spires and the air was growing thin when Neville looked down.

“Don’t!” Harry shouted, but he was too late.

Neville gave a faint whimper. His eyes rolled back in his head and then his body was sliding off the side of his broom.

Harry lunged.

He caught Neville’s arm with both of his and hung on, his knees locked tight around his broom as he hung upside down. His muscles screamed in protest and every joint was stretched to their limit.

The sleeve of Neville’s robe started to slip through his fingers, and in a horrible, heartrending moment Harry realized he’d need to let go or risk being pulled down with him. He fought it as hard as he could, until his legs were numb and the strength went out of his hands.

“Potter!”

A black shape barrelled up from below and he caught a flash of yellow eyes as the weight of Neville’s limp form vanished. A hand clamped around his arm and pushed him back right-side-up. He clung to his broom until his limbs recovered enough to sit upright, and when he did he found Mme Hooch hovering beside him, Neville draped over the front of her broom like a sack of potatoes.

Her mouth moved, but he couldn’t hear anything over the thundering of his heart. The world was sharp and crisp and far too bright. He saw each strand of hair on her head, standing stiff in the breeze; the shadows on the clouds above, blue, silver and green reflected from the surrounding forests; and the flash of sunlight on glass as the small orb Neville had been clutching before class slipped from his pocket and dropped back to earth.

It was going to break.

Harry didn’t think. He tipped his broom down and plunged after it.

His body felt weightless, tingling, like when the Gringotts cart had plunged over the edge of the chasm, only this was ten times— no, a hundred times better.

This time he was the one in control.

He saw the glass orb and the rolling green of the lawn. He heard screams on the wind where it parted around him, bent low over his broom’s handle. He reached out his hand and closed his fingers around the orb.

The ground was hurtling towards him, but he wasn’t afraid. He leaned back, pulled up on his broom handle and straightened out, his toes only a foot from the wavering tips of the grass.

He held the ball up to the sky, letting the sun shine through it. For a moment the rest of the world
ceased to exist. Then the smoke turned red.

Red?

“Harry, you idiot!” Hermione was in tears as she threw herself at him, bowling him from his broom in a tight hug. “I thought you were going to die!”

Harry locked up, his mind blanking and body going rigid as her arms wrapped around him. It was suffocating, crushing the giddy rush of flight as surely as he was being pressed into the damp grass.

He heard Draco give an order, and then Hermione was being lifted off him by Crabbe and Goyle. She let out a cry of protest, flailing helplessly against their arms as they held her suspended above the ground, but they didn’t so much as blink.

Harry remembered how to breathe and sat up. He offered Draco a smile of gratitude before wobbling to his feet.

“That was an impressive catch,” Draco said, then his eyes narrowed. “I thought you’d never flown before.”

“I haven’t,” Harry admitted.

“Bull!” Pansy said. “There’s no way that was your first time on a broom!”

Harry didn’t protest, but he did grin with pleasure that he was apparently good enough to make them doubt. Even the Gryffindors looked impressed, though they kept their distance. Ron’s face wasn’t its usual shade of indignant red and several of the girls were staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

“Harry Potter!”

The shout came from across the lawn, and the happiness inside Harry deflated like a punctured balloon when the Slytherins melted away to reveal Professor McGonagall charging towards them. She looked furious.

“Never— in all my time at Hogwarts—“ she was almost speechless with shock. “You foolish boy — you might have broken your neck!”

“Minerva!” Mme Hooch was gliding back to the ground, the unconscious form of Neville still draped over her broom. “Minerva, he—“

“I was watching Rolanda. To have stayed on his broom even with Mister Longbottom…” Professor McGonagall’s glasses were flashing, and Harry’s heart sank. Heroics, it seemed, weren’t enough to keep him out of trouble.

“And to have caught that…” Mme Hooch was looking at the ball in his hand, and he remembered that he should return it.

“Here,” he said, holding it out. “He dropped this.”

Mme Hooch accepted it wordlessly and weighed it in her hand. Harry felt vexed and confused when the smoke turned white again. What had Ron said before the lesson about red? Red smoke meant he’d forgotten something. But what in the world had he forgotten?
"Was that your first time on a broom?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied. "Will Neville be all right?"

"He’ll recover," she said, then she gave him a sharp look. "Why didn’t you give me your broom when I asked for it? Why did you feel the need to fly off yourself?"

Oh. Was that what she’d been asking him?

"I thought you meant for me to get him."

Mme Hooch shook her head. She looked at Professor McGonagall. "Minerva. This boy…"

"I know," Professor McGonagall replied wearily. Her hand landed on his shoulder, clasping it hard enough to keep him from pulling away.

He flinched at the sudden contact.

"Mr Potter, come with me now," she said. She was steering him around, back towards the castle, when Hermione called her name.

Professor McGonagall didn’t look amused when she saw one of her lions suspended several inches off the ground. "What are you—? Put her down this instant!"

Crabbe and Goyle blinked dully, and in an astounding show of either loyalty or stupidity, looked to Draco for instructions.

"Oh, put her down," Draco said. "I doubt she’ll tackle him again now."

Hermione glowered at him, but as soon as her feet were on the ground she rushed to block Professor McGonagall’s path, throwing her arms out wide as though she’d physically stop the woman from dragging Harry off.

"Harry can’t be in trouble!" she protested. It was the first time Harry had heard her challenge one of their Professors and he was touched that it was on his behalf, though he had little hope of her doing anything but provoking McGonagall to a further state of ire. "Without his help Neville might have died!"

"That’s enough Ms Granger!" Professor McGonagall snapped, fulfilling Harry’s prediction. "Out of the way."

Hermione held out for a moment longer, but she couldn’t resist the full weight of authority and stepped aside reluctantly.

Harry let himself be pushed back towards the castle. He felt numb now that his feet were back on the ground, like a cage was closing in around him. Professor McGonagall stared straight ahead and her fingers dug into his shoulder so hard it almost hurt as they climbed the front steps of the castle and passed out of the sunlight.

She led him up staircases and down corridors with such swift purpose that he soon lost track of where they were, and only regained his bearings when they stopped abruptly in front of the Charms classroom. Judging from the sound of Professor Flitwick’s voice, class was in session, but this didn’t stop Professor McGonagall from opening the door and poking her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick," she called during a short pause in the lecture. "Could I borrow
Wood for a moment?"

Harry shifted uneasily, wondering if he was about to be caned.

A few moments later a burly fifth-year boy came out of the class, looking confused. "Professor?"
he asked, shrugging his satchel over his shoulder. His eyes snapped to Harry, who was standing in
McGonagall's shadow, and his confusion morphed into concern.

"Follow me, you two," she instructed, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood watching Harry
warily.

They arrived at her office and she ushered them through the door, securing it behind them. There
were papers scattered carelessly across her desk and a half-drunk cup of tea perched on a china
saucer. Her tall-backed chair was sitting at an angle, as though she'd left in a hurry. Glancing out
the window, Harry saw the rest of his flying class clustered by the old oak tree, little black dots
against the green of the lawn, and he wondered how Professor McGonagall had run all the way
down to the grounds in the short time he and Neville had been aloft. It couldn't have been more
than five minutes at most.

She turned to face the two boys, looking pleased as a cat who'd gotten into the cream. "Mister
Potter, this is Oliver Wood the captain of Gryffindor’s quidditch team. Wood — I've found you a
Seeker!"

"What?" they both yelped, looking at each other in alarm.

Wood recovered first. "Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," she replied crisply. "This boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Not only
did he keep Mister Longbottom on his broom when it went out of control, but he also caught a
rememberall after a hundred foot dive without obtaining so much as a scratch. Was that really your
first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He sunk onto the chair he'd occupied after his first transfiguration class, the
strength having gone out of his legs. It sounded like Professor McGonagall had just given him a
position on the Gryffindor quidditch team, but surely that couldn't be right. She'd been furious out
on the lawn. Why wasn't she punishing him?

Perhaps this is my punishment, he reflected. He knew that victory or defeat in quidditch often
revolved around the seeker's ability to catch the tiny golden snitch, and the other Gryffindors
would feel justified blaming him if they lost.

Wood's thought seemed to be running along a similar track. "But what if he throws the match to
Slytherin?" he protested. "Everyone knows he was— well..."

"He was what, Mister Wood?" she asked sharply. "And be aware that if I discover you've been
spreading malicious rumours about this boy I'll pull your captaincy before you can say 'Quidditch'."

Wood's face drained of colour. "That he was... sorted into the wrong house," he finished meekly.

"Sorted into the wrong house!" McGonagall exploded. "And where, pray tell, do you say he should
have gone?"

"Slytherin," Harry said quietly, drawing their attention. Wood slumped in relief, glad the answer
had been taken out of his hands. Professor McGonagall, oddly enough, sobered immediately and
sent Harry an unreadable look.
"And they wouldn't be wrong, exactly. The Hat was considering me for both houses, but Gryffindor came out on top in the end."

"Well, you certainly proved your bravery today," McGonagall said. "As well as a certain measure of reckless abandon. The Sorting Hat has never chosen wrong before, and I do not share Mister Wood's concerns about you colluding with the Slytherins. We're going to win the Quidditch Cup this year! Even if I need to buy you a broom. I can feel it!" She grasped the back of Harry's chair, her eyes burning with determination. "I can’t wait to see the look on Severus’s face when we thrash him!"

Professor McGonagall, Harry decided after a moment of contemplation, was absolutely nuts about quidditch.

She bustled about the office, pulling open one of her desk's drawers and riffling through the files inside it. "I want to keep his participation quiet until the first game," she told Wood, steamrolling over any concerns he might have raised. "He'll need extra time to practice in the evenings, of course. I'll set up extra pitch bookings with Rolanda and let you know the times." She extracted a sheet of parchment, glanced it over, then set it on the desk in front of Harry.

"Here, Potter. A team waiver form. I need you to look it over and then sign on the bottom."

He studied the form warily, as if it might grow fangs and bite him before picking it up and slowly starting to read.

_I, the undersigned, elect to participate in the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Quidditch House League voluntarily and of my own free will._

_I acknowledge and fully understand that I will be engaged in activities that involve risk of serious injury or death, and that any injury might result not only from my own actions, inactions, or negligence, but the actions, inactions, or negligence of others; the rules of play; the conditions of the premises; the weather; or any equipment used._

_I agree not to hold Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry responsible for any injury or death resulting from my participation. I also agree that signing this form shall bind my relatives, by blood or marriage, to release, hold harmless and take no legal action against Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, its staff, governors, or representatives._

_I take full responsibility for any violated rules, and understand that penalties will be implemented with no exceptions._

"It sounds dangerous," he said once he'd made it to the end. He didn't move to take up the quill sitting point-down in the inkwell on the corner of her desk, not sure he wanted to paint such a large and obvious bullseye on his back. Not that there was anyone to take up a suit on his part if he _did_ die, but it was the principle of the thing.

"No more dangerous than your classes," Professor McGonagall replied. "Goodness knows that as much as I fault Severus his teaching style, he’s the only Potions Master we’ve had who’s never lost a student."
"People have died in Potions?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "We lost two during my time in school. My own subject has seen its share of fatalities as well — students horsing around and turning vital organs into rutabaga or tea cosies. Hence my warning at the beginning of the year." Oliver Wood grunted in what might have been agreement. He looked resigned and was trying to blend into the shelves to the right of the door.

Harry frowned. He wondered why, if classes were so dangerous, they didn’t have to sign a waiver for those as well. He was sure one hadn’t come with his letter, and he didn’t remember anything about risks of death or injury on the confirmation form.

It probably wasn’t important, he eventually decided. Besides, if he hadn’t signed away his rights he could technically hold the school accountable for anything that happened to him in class. Not that he expected anything to come of it. In his experience schools were good at ignoring problems they didn’t want to deal with, but it was nice to have the option now that he knew lessons weren’t quite as benign as they originally appeared.

He looked at the quidditch waiver again and contemplated whether it was something he actually wanted to do. He wasn’t a fan of team sports or crowds, and quidditch had both; but he wanted to fly again. As he cast his mind back to those few exhilarating moments where the world was spread out beneath him, his troubles little more than specks on the distant patchwork of green and steely grey, he felt a rush of anticipation. It would kill him if the only time he could fly was during lessons on Thursdays, held back by the progress of the rest of the class. This was his opportunity, he realized, to get a better deal.

“If I join the team, I want to be able to fly outside of class times,” he said. “For practice.”

Professor McGonagall frowned, but it was clear she wanted Harry on the team more than she cared about the flight restrictions set out for first years when she nodded her assent. Harry cheered internally, though he kept the triumph he felt at this small victory from showing on his face.

“On one condition,” McGonagall said. “You must wait until after your debut match to fly where other students might observe you. I’d like to keep the element of surprise for as long as possible.”

“Okay, I’ll join.” Harry picked up her feather quill and signed his name on the line for participants. There was a second line at the bottom of the waiver, but this one was marked ‘guardian’.

“Do the Dursleys have to sign this as well?” he asked, staring dubiously at the blank spot.

“Yes. As a minor you cannot legally enter into any contracts without parent or guardian approval. I will send the form on to your guardians with an explanation of the sport, though I doubt they will give us any trouble.”

Probably not, Harry agreed, but for very different reasons than whatever the professor had in mind. The Dursleys would rejoice at hearing Harry’s skull had been bashed in by a rogue bludger, or that he’d been knocked from his broom and plummeted to his death. No, there wouldn’t be any opposition from that corner.

“If that’s all Professor, I’d like to return to my class,” he said.

“Of course, off with you both. I’ve kept you long enough. And remember, not a word to anyone outside the team!”

They murmured their assent and then slipped out the door.
As they turned into the hallway Oliver Wood stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “Don’t make us regret this, Potter.”

Harry didn’t reply. He stepped past the older boy, keeping a wary eye on his wand hand, and slipped into a passage behind a rusty suit of armour, heading for the entrance hall, and from there, the sky.

Neville woke slowly, his body leaden with exhaustion and chilled from drying sweat. The bed he lay in was stark white with a hard pillow and thin cotton sheets folded down across his stomach. Someone had removed his school robes, folded them neatly and stacked them on a narrow rolling table at the end of the bed. They had been replaced with a pair of light-weight blue pyjama pants and an open-backed shirt fastened by a tie behind his neck. He raised a hand and ran it over his stomach, letting the fabric bunch around his chest.

_Hospital gowns_, he thought as his throat tightened painfully. _The same as mama and papa’s._

The starchy gowns were the only clothes he’d seen them wear outside of old photographs, and as his palm rested against the soft fabric old nightmares returned.

When he was younger, he used to dream that he was as mad as his parents. That he hadn’t been spared the torture that destroyed their minds. In those dreams he lived alongside them in the Janus Thickey Ward, staring at the blank walls or turning slow circles around the long room lined with beds.

Sometimes he wished it was true. Nothing would be expected of him there; not smarts, or boldness, or good looks. Not even magic. It was, after all, a ward for hopeless cases, and what could be more hopeless for an old pureblood family than having their scion be born a near squib?

If it were true he wouldn’t have been pushed off piers, or locked in root cellars, or dangled out windows; and he would have been able to listen to his grandmother’s castigations without feeling shame or remorse that he’d never live up to her expectations.

He would dream and dream, and when he finally went to visit his mother and father he would look into their vacant eyes and those dreams would shatter. There was nothing charmed about their lives — if their current existences even merited the use of the word.

The plants in Neville’s greenhouse back home reacted more to their environment than his parents did.

His hand clenched around the gown and he forced himself to breathe deeply. He wasn’t mad. He wasn’t.

But he could have been.

He struggled upright, his muscles stiff and unresponsive, and swung his legs from the bed. Privacy curtains had been set up around him, a small enclosure open only to the tall window against whose sill the metal headboard rested. The sun had dipped a hands-span towards the horizon since the abrupt end of his first flying lesson and was now balanced on the peak of a distant mountain, making the snow gleam like molten fire.

He didn’t remember how he’d come to be here. Didn’t remember much of anything beyond a whirling horizon and Harry — tiny, courageous Harry — yelling at him not to look down. His head sunk into his hands and he sniffed, trying not to cry as a wave of guilt engulfed him.
When they'd met outside St Mungo's, Neville had been starstruck despite Harry's scruffy, unkept appearance. Here was the orphan-hero he'd heard tales of since he was old enough to toddle in the wake of his grandmother's skirts, and Harry was speaking to him! Not haughty or stuck up, but quiet, almost meek despite his courage at having come to London alone. Neville expected to be ignored, but Harry had listened to him, even when he rambled on about things that seemed inconsequential.

They had only spent that one day together, but Neville already felt like he’d found his best friend, and he couldn’t wait for Hogwarts to start so they could see each other again.

September came, and Harry saved him by standing up to Marcus Flint in the train corridor. Neville had been overjoyed until the compartment door slid shut and he discovered that his new friend had fallen in with Draco Malfoy — the nephew of the woman who’d put his parents in St Mungo’s. He’d nearly run from the carriage, but Malfoy’s two cronies were guarding the door and Harry seemed perfectly content to remain and let Malfoy teach him about pureblood etiquette and politics.

The train ride was the longest six hours of Neville’s life, but by the end he’d been able to admit to himself that Malfoy wasn’t as bad as his grandmother made out, and if it meant staying next to Harry he’d try to separate the boy from the actions of his relatives.

When the sorting came, he was struck with a new terror. Harry would never be a Hufflepuff, he was far too brave. So Neville had argued with the Hat until he was blue in the face, begrudgingly using what he’d learned from Malfoy to win a place in Gryffindor. He wasn’t disappointed. Harry was sorted into the lion house, and Neville glowed in the feeling that he’d one-upped Malfoy, who was looking distinctly disgruntled.

It was perfect. They would get up in the morning and go to classes together, like real friends. But as with all Neville’s dreams, this one too had shattered; leaving him grasping at shards of hope and wondering how it had all gone so wrong.

Easing to his feet, he hobbled to the pile of clothes and slowly began to dress, tossing the hospital gown and pants on the bed, not wanting to touch them any longer than necessary. His robes were stiff as he pulled them over his shoulders — one of the school house elves having no doubt cleaned and pressed them while he was unconscious. As he smoothed them down his hands slid over too-thin pockets and his heart gave another lurch.

His rememberall was gone.

He checked all his pockets twice over, and even bent down to look under the bed, but the small glass orb was nowhere to be found.

“Gran will kill me,” he moaned, slumping against the bed frame. Her gift hadn’t been in his possession a day and it was already gone, now likely nothing more than chips of broken glass scattered across the school lawn.

“I hope it shouldn’t come to that,” said a kindly voice. “We have, after all, nearly lost you once already.” Neville startled, banging his knee on the metal frame and whipped around

Professor Dumbledore was standing behind him. He was holding the privacy curtain open with one wrinkled hand, his canary yellow robes clashing horribly with the teal drape. In his other hand was Neville’s rememberall, which he held out to him accompanied by a warm smile.

“It’s okay!” Neville breathed, accepting the small glass ball reverently. He clasped it tight, and
didn’t even care when the smoke swirling inside immediately turned bright red.

“I believe you have young Harry Potter to thank for its well being,” Dumbledore said. “I’m told he caught it after a rather harrowing dive.”

Neville hung his head as the guilt dragged him back under. "He saved my life."

"He did,"Dumbledore agreed solemnly. "At great risk to his own safety. But, all’s well that ends well, and while I believe Professor McGonagall has had words with Harry, you needn't worry about him facing punishment for taking action on your behalf."

That Harry might have been punished made him feel even worse.

"I didn't deserve it," he said. How could he, when he hadn't even been strong enough to stand by Harry after it came out that he was a parslemouth?

The terror of that first morning seemed far away now, tempered by a great deal of reflection and remorse.

His grandmother had taught him that all parslemouths were dark wizards, and that dark wizards were evil and mean; but Harry wasn't either of those things.

Was it possible to be a nice dark wizard?

Neville knew Harry hadn’t cursed anyone, his snake hadn’t been eight feet long with fangs dripping venom, and that while the magic he’d used in the dorm room was impressive, it was surely accidental.

Ron and Seamus were to blame for most of the rumours. Neville had heard them bragging to anyone who would listen about how they’d valiantly wrestled the giant serpent into submission before Harry knocked them away with dark magic. They were being treated like heroes in the common room. The older students kept coming back to hear more. Even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs had taken interest, approaching them on the grounds or in the dining hall.

On the rare trips Harry made to and from the dorm he passed through the common room like a ghost, footsteps light and face void of emotion. He never cried, not even late at night when the rest of the boys had fallen asleep, and never confronted anyone.

Neville knew that what Ron and Seamus were doing was wrong, but they were both loud and brash, and he was too intimidated to stand up to them.

Dumbledore stepped through the curtain, letting the cloth fall closed behind him and placed a gentle hand on Neville's shoulder. "We all deserve help, from the greatest wizard to the meanest of muggles," he said. "And when someone has granted us their time and compassion, it is up to our consciences whether we choose to accept their gift, or scorn them for it."

Neville looked up into the Headmaster's face and met a pair of sad blue eyes. They drew him in, like drowning in a glacial spring, and he found he couldn’t look away. "I'll never be able to repay him. He was so kind to me and I... I was..."

A coward.

He should have apologized, but he was terrified Harry would turn him away. So he waited, hoping the green eyed boy would come to him, would broach the topic himself. But Harry never did. He had let Neville go without looking back, as if the end of their brief friendship didn't bother him.
Harry had turned to the Slytherins for companionship, and despite the traditional enmity between their houses, Neville could only watch with envy as Harry bantered with the snakes during potions class, looking far happier than he had the rest of the week. In the evenings he would vanish alongside Ron’s twin brothers, doing whatever it was the Weasley troublemakers got up to after hours. During the day the twins preceded him down the halls, scattering students as they loudly announced his presence. Then, just last weekend, Hermione Granger and Harry began eating meals together and disappearing off into the library to do some sort of research project.

Harry had replaced him. Perhaps it was a failing in himself that Neville couldn’t do the same.

Dumbledore gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze before letting go and moving to the window overlooking the Scottish highlands. He was a shadow against the setting sun, his tall form wreathed in a halo of light. He looked invincible, and in that moment Neville understood why the aged headmaster was the only wizard You-Know-Who had ever feared.

“I do not believe Harry expects repayment,” Dumbledore said. “He flew after you on instinct, a selfless act of bravery born too swiftly to be the result of subterfuge or careful machinations. But, if you still feel you owe him a debt, then stand by his side as a friend, for his destiny is not an easy one and he will need steadfast individuals on whom he can rely before the end.”

Neville’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, sir? What end? The war is over.” He almost added that the prophecy surrounding Harry had already been fulfilled but hesitated at the last moment, unsure if the Headmaster was allowed to know of its existence.

Dumbledore turned from the window and clasped his hands together before him, long fingers intertwining. “Ah, forgive the ramblings of this old man. I did not come to weigh you down with such onerous topics, but to ensure that you are well recovered,” he said, which was no answer at all.

“Mme Pomfrey will, of course, check you over before you are released, no matter how eager you are to be off.” He eyed the discarded gown and pants with amusement twinkling in his eyes. “But I wished to make certain of your condition myself before I wrote a letter explaining your misadventure to your grandmother.”

Neville paled and swallowed hard. Returning home for the holidays suddenly didn’t seem like such a good idea. She would have him by the ear quick as a cat and would scold him until she was sure it had sunk in.

“I have already heard what happened from Madam Hooch,” Dumbledore continued, “but I would like to hear it from you as well. Do you remember what you were feeling when you pushed off the ground?”

“I was scared,” Neville admitted. “I’d never been on a broom before. Gran never let me. Everyone else was doing fine, and I didn’t want to be the only one left behind, so I pushed off hard… too hard, I suppose. Then everything started spinning and I panicked. I think I grabbed Harry when he came up beside me, but I don’t remember much past that.”

Dumbledore nodded. “That’s quite all right,” he said as he slowly crossed back to the split in the curtains, passing close enough that the hem of his yellow robes brushed Neville’s shoes. “Sitting a broom will come to you with practice, as it does for us all. Do not give up hope because of one mishap.”

“I’ll try, sir,” Neville said, though he wasn’t sure he’d ever take a broom in hand again. Heights didn’t agree with him. He was much happier with his feet firmly on the ground.
Brushing the curtain aside, Dumbledore stepped out of the enclosure, gentle smile back in place. “Madame Pomfrey will be with you directly. Have a good evening, Mister Longbottom. Give my regards to Harry.”

Then Dumbledore was gone, and Neville had a few moments to wonder why the headmaster was so certain he’d seek Harry out before the medi-witch bustled in and began checking him over.

He wanted to live up to Dumbledore’s expectations, but when he saw Harry that evening in the Great Hall all his anxieties came back. He tried to go to him, to apologize, and thank him for saving the rememberall and his life, but his feet felt glued to the ground and there was a buzzing in his head that turned his vision white.

He gulped, swayed, and then turned and walked out of the hall — no longer hungry.

What a coward he was.

He didn’t want to be rejected — but couldn’t blame Harry if he was.

Neville slowly made the long climb back up to Gryffindor tower, crawled into bed, and, overwhelmed by emotion, cried himself to sleep.
Deception

Chapter Notes

Happy Canada Day to all my fellow Canadians out there! And good luck to everyone else taking part in this month's Camp NaNoWriMo. As a special treat, have another chapter!

That night Harry dreamt of flying.

He soared and swooped, chasing the long wispy clouds scudding across a pale summer sky. The highlands stretched out beneath him, so far below that his eyes could take in the humped backs of mountains and the dark sliver of water winding between their arms all at once.

The wind danced around his body. It tugged at his sleeves, beckoning him to let go of the broom and cast himself into its embrace. His hands twitched as the call sang in his chest, nearly lifting free to spread out from his sides like wings. He embraced the moment of temptation before a small smile twitched at the corners of his lips and he tightened his grip on the handle.

He wasn’t afraid of falling, but letting go was too much like surrender and his heart and mind recoiled from it.

At the edges of the panorama spread beneath him the soft curve of the horizon was bleached and faded, as though seen through fogged glass. At first Harry didn’t notice when it began to spread, sucking the vitality from the land as it closed in around him, but then the wind picked up and what was once playful tugging turning to violent blows meant to unseat him by force.

His broom shuddered, like an animal in the throes of death, and began to fall. Harry pulled up on the handle as hard as he could but the broom’s magic had fled. It picked up speed, accelerating until he was hurtling towards the ground.

A mist rose up to meet him, and from it reared three massive black heads. Pointed ears swivelled his way as he screamed and hauled uselessly on the broom’s handle. Six gleaming red eyes lit with excitement. Three fanged maws opened wide to receive him.

He bolted upright in bed, his heart pounding and body cold with sweat. Panting, he scrabbled at the bed hanging, desperately clawing it aside until his hand closed around his glasses on the bedside table. He pushed them on and then sat rigid, peering out into the dorm room.

The embers in the pot bellied stove were glowing, and in the faint red light he assured himself that there was nothing lurking in the shadows between the beds opposite or peering in through the crack beneath the door.

“What is it?” Basil asked sleepily, having come awake when he sat up and dislodged her from her spot on his stomach. “Are we being attacked again?”

“No.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “No. I had a bad dream, that’s all.”

“It is very early.”
“I know,” he replied and lay back down, pulling the covers up to his chin.

He tried to go back to sleep, but the dream haunted him. After staring at the ceiling for twenty minutes he decided it was pointless and shuffled off to the communal washroom at the base of the stairs to take a much needed shower and prepare for the day ahead.

A storm had whipped up overnight. The wind moaned against the walls of the tower and rain lashed its windows as he headed down to the Great Hall for an early breakfast. Pausing at a window on the third floor, he looked out over the grounds. The surface of the loch frothed, white spray flinging itself onto the shore as though trying to escape. Beyond the trees of the dark forest heaved, branches rattling like skeletal fingers as the last of their leaves were stripped away.

Harry shivered as a finger of cold air reached through the casing to brush against his cheek. Was being able to circumvent the first year flight restrictions worth joining the Quidditch team? He could have suffered through one year. Waited until he could fly whenever he wanted without putting himself out in front of the entire school. What if he was rubbish at the game? He could fly well enough, he supposed — but to compete against people who knew what they were doing? Who’d no doubt been playing for years!

What if he made a fool of himself?

He wrapped himself in a tight hug and picked up his pace, almost running to the hall even though his stomach was twisting so badly he doubted he’d be able to keep anything down.

Far worse than any mistake he might make or injury he might receive would be Professor McGonagall’s disappointment in him if he backed out now. She’d set her heart on him competing, and Harry knew that the moment an adult made up their mind about how something should be, they were unlikely and unwilling to change it. She’d even mentioned buying him a broom. Him! Who she’d known for less than two weeks.

No — he didn’t dare tell her he was having second thoughts. He’d have to learn to live with it.

Not long after he sat down at the Gryffindor table he was accosted by Fred and George Weasley.

“Harry!” Fred said, sliding onto the bench beside him, a huge grin plastered across his face.


“What you’ve been named Seeker, of course!” Fred exclaimed, not bothering to keep his voice down. Harry looked around quickly, dreading that someone would overhear him, but they were the only three there.

“He was practically weeping when he told us,” George said. “Kept blubbering something about throwing the matches to Slytherin.”

They fixed him with identical suspicious stares.

“You don’t plan on throwing any matches, do you?”

Harry glowered at them. “I don’t have a death wish,” he muttered.

The twins relaxed, smiles returning to their faces. “That’s what we thought.”
There was a minute of silence as their breakfasts appeared on the table, sent up by the elves in the kitchen. The twins slathered their hash browns with ketchup and dug in while Harry chased the yolk of his egg around the plate, unsure if he wanted to know the answer to the question that had sprung into his head.

“Has anyone died playing Quidditch?” he asked, figuring it was best to get it over with.

George chewed thoughtfully on a strip of bacon. “Not for a while. I think the last one was Havana Flynn during the USA-France championship match three years ago.”

“I meant at Hogwarts.”

“Aww, are you worried?” Fred asked, reaching out to pinch his cheek.

Harry pushed his hand away. “I’m serious.”

“There have been some broken bones and concussions,” George said. “But I bet the other teams will be so frightened you’ll go all ‘evil dark lord’ on them that they’ll fly the other way when they see you coming!”

“Besides,” added Fred. “You have us to protect you! So there’s nothing to worry about.”

Harry didn’t believe them. In any game with so many moving pieces there would always be something to worry about, and it wasn’t as though the twins could hover around him throughout the entire match. They had their own roles to fulfill — he couldn’t expect more than a passing regard as to his wellbeing.

He finished his breakfast in silence and then retreated to the dungeons, whose dark, twisting corridors provided the solitude he needed to begin sorting through the tangle of doubts and fears laying siege to his mind. He couldn’t find the words to explain even half of his anxieties to Basil, though she was once again tucked away in his school bag, and so he remained silent. She in turn held her tongue, though she dearly wished to know what was troubling him now and whether it could be solved through the liberal application of fangs.

Ten o’clock came too quickly. As the bells in the clocktower tolled the hour, Harry turned his steps towards the potions classroom and a new, niggling sensation took root in his mind. It was small, barely formed — a single thread of an idea or memory — and yet, for reasons he couldn’t begin to explain, it filled him with a sense of impending doom. It was the feeling of having forgotten something important, like locking the windows at the end of the day or failing to put water in the coffee machine before turning it on.

When he arrived at the classroom door the first thing he noticed was that Hermione looked even more out of sorts than she had the day before. Her skin was flushed and her shoulders rigid as those of a soldier about to march into battle. She pushed past her dormmates and accosted him before he could reach the flat at the bottom of the stairwell.

She tried to speak but her voice caught in her throat. She gulped and tried again. “Are you ready?” she asked in a whisper.

The niggling sensation grew stronger. He felt he should know what she was talking about — he must! His hand pressed down on the top of his bag. He had his assignment — he’d double checked it was in his bag before leaving the dorm — and all his books. A surge of panic raced up his chest, burning like stomach acid. Did they have a quiz today? Is that why Hermione looked like she was preparing to march to her death? Because they hadn’t studied? What would he do if Snape put him
on the spot again? It was a fluke he’d been able to answer his questions last class. He’d never be that lucky a second time!

As he stared at her in mute horror, Professor Snape and the Slytherins arrived.

Draco was walking at the Professor’s heels and Harry recovered enough to offer him a weak, “Good morning.”

Draco stopped in his tracks, his thin face looking even thinner in the flickering torchlight. He bristled and shot Harry a look of pure loathing. “You have a lot of nerve!” he snapped. “Did you think you could get away with it?”

Harry froze, a cold lump sliding down his throat to settle in the pit of his stomach like an iron ball. “W-what?” he stammered.

“Don’t what me, Potter. I heard what you’ve been saying about my family behind my back. And here I thought I could trust you. That we could be friends!”

“I— I don’t—” Harry couldn’t think, everything had gone topsy-turvy and his head was full of white static. He sagged back against the wall, clutching at the slick stones.

What was happening?

Snape smiled at him, an ugly expression full of dark amusement. He looked pleased, and Harry was struck with the sense that he should have expected this. Nothing ever worked out for him.

“Friends?” Hermione cut in, locking Harry’s arm with her own. “That’s rich. Everyone knows you were using Harry for his name, Malfoy.” She leaned forward. “You’re nothing but a vile, loathsome little cockroach!”

A strange emotion flickered across Draco’s face as the other Slytherins gasped. A Gryffindor jeered, adding his own insult to Hermione’s. A Gryffindor jeered, adding his own insult to Hermione’s. It sounded like Ron.

“How dare you speak to me like that, you filthy mudblood!” Draco shot back, drawing a new round of gasps before rounding on Harry. “And you! No matter how much you want to be a pureblood, you’ll never be anything more than half. Half-blood. I’m embarrassed I spend any time on you.”

It was too much. Every fibre of Harry’s being was screaming run! Tears filled his eyes as he tried to pull free from Hermione’s grip, but she held on with a vengeance that bordered on terror and he couldn’t break loose.

Trapped.

The tears spilled over, streaking down his cheeks.

“Is that supposed to make me feel sorry for you?” Draco sneered. “Merlin, you really are nothing more than a weak, pathetic little nobody who thinks getting hit with a curse when you were still drooling in diapers makes you a hero. Well guess what — you’re not!”

From the base of the stairs, Neville stumbled forward. His face was ashen and his entire body trembling. “D-don’t speak about him l-like that!” he stammered, his voice ending in a high squeak.

“D-don’t s-speak a-about him,” Draco mimicked. “Give me a break, Longbottom. You’re as pathetic as he is!”
Neville’s mouth was tight. “I— I’m not—“

“Not what? A coward? Give it up, Longbottom.” Draco swept his arms open to encompass them all. “We all know you ran away with your tail between your legs. You couldn’t even thank him after he saved your worthless hide. What? Too afraid he’d call in a life debt?”

“No… I—“

Ron barged forward,shouldering Neville aside. “He doesn’t owe nothing to a slimy snake like you!”

“I’d rather be a snake than a scruffy weasel.” Draco said. “Tell me, has your family learned what a bath is yet, or do they still lick themselves clean?”

The Slytherins hissed at Ron and the Gryffindors growled at Draco. Ron’s face flushed bright red and Seamus pulled out his wand.

“Settle down,” Snape drawled, though he looked like he was enjoying himself greatly. “Mister Finnigan, you have five seconds to put your wand away before I do us all a favour and snap it in two.”

Seamus shoved it back up his sleeve, not foolish enough to test whether it was an idle threat.

Hermione turned up her nose. “I think you’re all foul.”

“If you think Potty’s so great then you can have him,” Draco said. “I’m done with being his partner.”

“Fine. Come on Harry, let’s go to class.”

As Hermione turned, her grip on his arm loosened enough for him to yank free. He bolted up the stairs, shoving past those students who weren’t quick enough to step aside. Professor Snape called his name, but only once, and with no real desire to see him return.

Harry didn’t know where he was running until he burst past a door whose hinges squealed in agony and a cold blue light washed over him. It was the room he’d found with Draco after their first potions class. The one they’d planned to clean up and turn into a secret base. A place to get away from the constant, prying eyes of their schoolmates.

He slammed the door shut and threw the bolt, then sunk back against the wood and slid slowly to the floor. A small cloud of dust rose around him, and above him the crystals of the ruined chandelier tinkled dully. The gargoyles set in the corners of the room leered at him as he pressed his knuckles against his lips and tried to keep the tears at bay.

“Harry?” Basil asked, poking her head out of his bag. “Harry, what is it? What has happened?”

He buried his face in his hands. He didn’t want to talk about it. Talking would make it real.

Why would Draco suddenly hate him? What rumour could he have heard that would be worse than the ones already circling Harry like hungry sharks? He’d never spoken badly of Draco’s family.

True, they’d been on opposite sides during the war, but that was so long ago it could hardly matter now!

He shook his head again. It must have been his fault. Something he’d said in ignorance, not understanding its importance and Draco too polite or too hurt to call him out at the time. As the
loss and loneliness washed over him he berated himself for being caught off guard. He should have expected this. He’d never been able to keep friends before, what made him think Hogwarts would be any different? Neville had already turned his back on him, he should have been used to it by now.

No amount of acceptance could stop the pain and he remained in the dark room for a long time, silent except for when he sniffed to keep his nose from running. He knew he’d missed lunch. It was the first time he’d skipped a meal since his meeting with Professor McGonagall, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

When he was sure the rest of the school had dispersed to their afternoon classes he forced himself to his feet and trudged towards the library. He’d promised to do homework with Hermione, and no doubt she expected an explanation for why he’d ran off after she stood up for him.

He frowned, pausing on the staircase and causing the fourth year Hufflepuff behind him to stumble. She swore as she stepped around him, but he barely heard her.

Hermione had insulted Draco in front of a professor — and not just any professor, but Snape, who was known to dock dozens of points from any Gryffindor foolish enough to so much as look at him crosswise. He’d been too distressed before to realize how odd that had been. Hermione didn’t do anything to lower herself in her professors’ eyes. She respected them too much — sometimes it seemed to border on worship — and she would never risk losing points.

What had prompted it? It couldn’t have been on his behalf, could it? She’d jumped in so quickly, it was like she’d been looking for a fight.

Why did that thought not surprise him as much as it should?

When he arrived at the library he saw the Slytherin tutoring groups were once again set up at their preferred tables near the entrance to the stacks. Draco’s pale head of hair wasn’t among them and he let out a small sigh of relief as he scurried past. Selwyn looked up from where he was attempting to help Goyle with his transfiguration homework — without much success if Goyle’s agonized groans were anything to go by — and Harry looked down quickly, not wanting to meet his eyes.

When he turned into the Defence section he was surprised to hear voices coming from the direction of his and Hermione’s table.

“Do you think we should go look for him?” asked Hermione. “He’s been gone a long time.”

Harry stopped just out of sight around the end of the stack. Who was she talking to?

“We’ll never find him,” replied a boy, and Harry’s stomach lurched at the familiar drawl. It sounded exactly like Draco.

“The castle is huge,” the boy continued. “He could have gone anywhere. Besides, if we leave the library without permission our prefects will skin us alive. It’s a miracle none of them have come looking for us yet.”

“It’s better than what they’ll do to you when they find out you made Potter run off in tears!” said a second girl whose voice was familiar, but which he couldn’t place. “Selwyn likes him well enough, and you know how seriously he takes his role as head boy. You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t turn you over to Professor McGonagall.”

“He wouldn’t tell her!” Draco protested, though he didn’t sound entirely sure. “Besides, the tears
were a nice touch. I’m pretty sure they’re the only reason Snape didn’t give us all detention.”

“Whatever he was blackmailing you with had better be worth it,” Hermione said crossly. “I’ll need to answer questions for a month to make back all the points Gryffindor lost!”

**Blackmail.** Harry’s head came up as the cloud of despair blanketing his mind cleared.

“I’m such an idiot,” he groaned as fragments of memories returned to him. So much had happened during the last day that he’d completely forgotten the conversation he’d had with Draco at the start of astronomy! No wonder Hermione was worried when he showed up at Potions this morning. She’d been anticipating the argument and was no doubt dreading Snape’s reaction.

His fingers tightened around the lip of the shelf. What had she thought of him when he failed to play his part? What had Draco?

He bit his lip. At least they believed it had been an act. They didn’t know how many children had turned away his friendship before or how badly it had hurt him, and he wasn’t going to tell them.

He took a deep, steadying breath, pasted a smile on his face, and then stepped around the end of the bookshelf.

Hermione was sitting at their table with Draco while Pansy stood beside her housemate, her arms crossed and a thunderous expression on her face. All three of them froze until they realized it was him.

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, jumping to her feet and rushing over to him. “Thank goodness! I was worried when you didn’t show up for lunch. I thought you might have gotten lost in the dungeons.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have left you to do all the classwork on your own.”

“It was probably for the best,” Draco said, wrinkling his nose. “If you’d stayed we would have had to throw stinkbugs at each other all class.”

Harry forced a laugh. “I guess Professor Snape gave me a zero for the practical work.”

“I tried to hand in a vial with your name on it,” Hermione admitted, ushering him over to the table and offering him her chair, “but I don’t think he accepted it.”

Harry declined the seat, happy to remain standing after having spent hours curled up in self-pity. Pansy marched around the table until she was towering over him, hands planted firmly on her hips. He looked up at her hesitantly as she scrutinized his face.

“Are you really all right?” she asked, and Harry’s stomach gave a lurch. He was glad it was empty. “Yes, of course.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Liar,” she said under her breath, then pretended she hadn’t said anything at all.

Harry stood rooted to the spot as she turned to leave.

“Are you coming Draco?” she asked.

“One moment!” Draco finished writing something on a piece of parchment, blew on it, then stood. “Here,” he said, handing the parchment to Harry.
“What is it?”

“Today’s homework.”

Harry looked down at the words and was surprised to find a half-page essay on the use of moonstones in brewing.

“Just be sure to copy it out in your own hand before turning it in,” Draco advised. “All the information is from chapters six and eleven in our book.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, folding up the parchment and pocketing it, the rest of his irritation melting away at the kind gesture. Having an essay off his plate so soon and with so little effort of his own was a huge relief. Who knew, Snape might even give him a good grade!

Hermione bristled like an angry cat. She looked incensed. “Harry! You can’t accept that! How will you learn if you don’t do the work yourself?”

“Says the person who tried to hand in a potion for a partner who wasn’t even there,” Draco called over his shoulder as he and Pansy walked away.

Harry’s grin was more natural as he watched them vanish into the stacks. “Bye Draco. Bye, er…” He realized at the last moment that he didn’t remember her surname, Draco always called her Pansy.

Pansy stuck her head out from behind the bookcase. “It’s Parkinson, but I suppose we can be on a first name basis.”

Harry sighed in relief at not having offended her. “Okay, bye Pansy.”

She raised a hand in farewell. “See you around, Harry.”

Once the pair of Slytherins had left Hermione turned to Harry in confusion. “Why couldn’t you call her Pansy before?” she asked.

Harry settled into the seat Draco had vacated and pulled the potions essay back out, determined to read it over before starting on the rest of his homework. If he could absorb even a little of the style or composition he felt he’d be much better off.

“It wouldn’t be polite,” he replied. “Wizards are very serious about that sort of thing. And handshakes. You don’t want to mess those up.”

She sat down across from him, perched on the edge of her chair, her eyes wide. “What happens if you do mess up a handshake?”

Harry was obliged to abandon the essay for a time as he did his best to explain some of what Draco had told him on the train. Hermione listened, dubious but attentive.
Harry’s dreams were untroubled that night, and he would have slept straight through to sunrise if Basil hadn’t nudged his cheek insistently at half past six. He groaned and threw an arm across his eyes, determined that for once in his life he’d sleep in.

“I think they want to eat me,” she whispered.

“What?” Harry’s mind chugged, slowly turning her words over as he tried to make sense of them. It was no use. He raised his arm and peered blearily in her direction. “Who wants to eat you?”

“The owls.”

“What owls?”

Harry resigned himself to sitting up. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and pulled open the curtains surrounding his bed. Sliding his glasses onto his nose, he discovered a parliament of owls crowded on the room’s single tiny windowsill. They held a long, thin package in their talons, the end of which bumped and scraped against the tower wall as they tried to shuffled closer.

The package was too long. Harry caught a glimpse of a bulbous lump at the far end before it swung out from the wall and dipped out of sight as the hefty set horned owl on the end lost his balance and tumbled backwards off the ledge. The owls grasping the other end of the package rocketed upward, and there was a great deal of flapping, screeching and ruffled feathers before they all regained the sill. Once they were settled a large, unamused snowy owl tapped her beak against the window pane. She was staring at the latch in irritation, as though it had wronged her, and Harry remembered with a small surge of guilt that he’d wired it shut the night before. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. He was tired of being jolted awake in the middle of the night when the strong highland winds inevitably forced it open. Owl post had never crossed his mind. It wasn’t as though he were likely to receive a letter, not knowing any wizards living outside the school. And all the post he’d ever seen had arrived during breakfast.

“Do you have to let them in?” Basil asked, coiling around herself until she was an unhappy knot of scales.

“Yes,” he replied. “They have a package.”

Basil hid under his pillow as he slid out of bed and began the painstaking task of untwisting the wire holding the window shut. It was tight, and its unfiled ends jabbed cruelly into the tips of his fingers until, with a great heave, the window burst open on its own, snapping the one remaining loop and nearly taking Harry’s head with it.

The owls stumbled inside in an ungainly line, almost losing the horned owl on the end a second time as they negotiated the package through the narrow window.

Harry hopped back up on his bed as they dropped gracelessly to the floor, not trusting his toes anywhere near their sharp beaks and talons.

“Who opened the window?” croaked Ron as he emerged from his bed. He’d wrapped his blanket around his head and shoulders like a shawl, pulling it tight against the cold seeping into the room.
The others began to rouse as the chill morning air circulated through the dorm, easily overpowering the heat from the coals in the stove. Their initial irritation at being woken before dawn dissipated quickly at the sight of the owls, and they crowded around to study the unusual package. Harry was curious as well, but he remained where he was, happy to have a handful of owls between himself and the others.

“That looks like a broomstick,” said Ron — and as soon as he’d said it, Harry realized he was right. The package was long and thin with a bulge on one end, just like a broom would be if it had been wrapped up in brown packing paper.

“Who’s if for?” asked Seamus.

Ron reached down towards a tag tied to the shaft with a length of twine, but the owls snapped at him. He snatched them back a hair too slow, blood blossoming on the knuckle of his index finger. He pressed the wound to his lips and sucked on it petulantly. “Bloody hell,” he grumbled. “You don’t hafta be so mean about it!”

The snowy owl hopped onto Harry’s bed with a silent flutter of wings and held out her leg, showing off a scroll sealed with a dab of red wax. He retrieved it cautiously, ready to jump back the second her beak twitched in his direction, but she remained calm and still, as though eager to prove her professionalism after their awkward arrival, and he was able to retrieve it without injury.

Harry suspected he knew the identity of the sender even before he saw the waxy imprint of a cat wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a jaunty plume trailing back towards the feline’s curled tail.

He pulled his wand out from beneath his pillow, careful not to expose Basil, and wondered how in the world he was going to keep this a secret from his dormmates. Muttering the *lumos* charm, he unrolled the scroll and began to read.

*Mr. Potter,*

*This parcel contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand. I trust you will keep your promise to be discreet and not reveal its existence before the time we agreed upon.*

*I will contact you again with the date of your first training session.*

*Regards,*

*Professor McGonagall*

“It’s mine,” Harry said, tucking the note away in the pocket of his pyjama pants.

Their duty fulfilled, the owls filed back out the window and flew off one by one. The snowy lingered behind, butting his hand insistently until he summoned enough courage to scratch her head. She twittered at him, sounding terribly pleased with herself, before waddling to the edge of the bed and throwing herself into the air. Once her tail-feathers had cleared the window frame, Ron and Seamus pounced.

“It is a broomstick!” exclaimed Seamus as he tore off the brown paper.

“It’s not *any* old broomstick,” breathed Ron, pointing at the handle where the model name was etched in golden cursive. “It’s a Nimbus Two Thousand!”

Seamus’s mouth dropped open. “How in the world did Potter get a broom like this?”
Ron was running a hand over the wood reverently, his eyes misty. “It’s not like he deserves it.”

“Give it back, Weasley,” Harry said. He held out his hand, but Ron ignore him.

“I don’t think I will,” he replied.

Harry stomach sank. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy. Not that he’d expected Ron to just hand it over, but it would have been nice to start the day without getting into a fight. He sighed. There was no helping it. Professor McGonagall wanted the broom kept a secret, and that wouldn’t happen if Ron paraded it through the school like a trophy — which he would. He wouldn’t be able to help it.

Harry gauged the state of the room. Ron was fawning over the broom, Seamus was kicking the ripped paper towards the door, Dean was rubbing his arms while looking at the stove, and Neville was shifting his weight nervously near the foot of Seamus’s bed. It was now or never. Harry lunged forward, his hands snatching at the broom, but Ron was quick. He twisted aside, putting his body between them and using his longer reach to ward Harry off.

“You’d just get it confiscated,” Ron said, dropping his blanket and dancing away as Harry launched a second assault. “First years aren’t allowed to have brooms, after all.”

“You’re a first year too!” Harry protested. “Now give it back!” He lunged under Ron’s arm, but Ron tossed the broom over the stove to Seamus, who caught it and traced the gold writing on the handle in amazement.

“A real Nimbus Two Thousand,” he said, before tossing the broom to Dean, who passed it back to Ron.

Around and around it went, always just out of Harry’s reach as he scrambled after it. They were laughing, and Harry was growing frustrated. He’d bumped into the stove twice, and despite the coals having burned down hours ago the metal was still hot enough to leave his skin smarting. He was on the verge of trying to will the broom back with wandless magic when Neville stepped forward, the set of his face nervous but determined.

“G-give him his broom back, Ron,” he stammered.

“What’s gotten into you, Neville?” Ron asked, holding the broom above his head with one hand as he fended Harry off with the other. “Since when do you stick up for him? This isn’t about what that snake Malfoy said yesterday, is it? About how you owe him your life? Because that’s poppycock in my books.”

“No!” Neville rasped. His face was ashen and beads of sweat traced lines down his temples. “What you’re doing is w-wrong. Harry isn’t a bad person!”

Harry was so surprised by this declaration he froze in place, allowing Ron to slip away.

“What are you talking about?” asked Ron. His voice was hard, and a red stain was creeping up his cheeks. “He’s a parselmouth. Of course he’s a bad person!”

Neville took a deep breath and clenched his fists. “You’re wrong!” he said, taking a step closer to Ron. They were nearly of a height when Neville stood up straight. “Harry’s a good, kind person and you—” He gulped, his lips trembling. “You’re a bully!”

There was a moment of tense silence as Neville’s words sunk in. Ron’s face was scarlet, Seamus gaped like a fish, and Dean — lowering his eyes in sudden shame — quietly busied himself with finding a clean set of robes. Harry remained frozen, unsure if this was a clever trick to throw him
off his guard. If it was, it was working.

Neville jabbed a shaking finger at Ron. “Give Harry back his broom,” he ordered. “Now!”

Ron’s entire body was rigid, full of defiance and self-righteous anger. “No,” he growled, barely able to form the word his teeth were clenched so hard. He swung a leg over the broom’s handle. “No. I think I’ll take it on a little spin.”

Harry finally lurched forward, but he was too late to catch Ron as he pushed off and raced across the room, nearly crashing into the wall before he yanked the broom hard to the right and ducking out the open window.

Harry, Neville and Seamus ran to the window and watched Ron weave towards the shadowy outline of the Quidditch pitch as the sun peeked over the horizon.

“Professor McGonagall is going to kill me,” Harry moaned. He turned on his heel and ran barefoot out of the dorm. He heard a pair of feet bounding down the stairs after him, but he didn’t slow until Neville shouted his name.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Neville was coming after him, his long nightshirt flapping and sleep cap askew. He jumped from the second-to-last stair and landed flat-footed with a loud thump.

“Harry!” he repeated, already panting. “Let me help you!”

The common room was deserted as they ran past the plush armchairs and out the portrait hole. Harry pressed his lips together and didn’t answer. Once bitten… how could he hope for a better outcome the second time round?

He expected Neville to give up before they reached the first flight of stairs, but the other boy refused to be shaken off, doggedly throwing himself down the steps in a desperate attempt to keep up until Harry was obliged to slow down or risk Neville hurting himself.

“Why do you want to help me?” he asked, bracing himself for disappointment. “Why now?”

Neville’s lips were quivering. “Because… because I want to be your friend. I always have. And I’m sorry, for everything.” He looked up at Harry, eyes wild with desperation. “Please forgive me!”

Harry was taken aback by the intensity of feeling in Neville’s voice. It sounded like the truth, but did he dare he believe him?

“You don’t think I’m evil?” he asked.

Neville shook his head frantically. “No, I was just… I was scared. My parents are… they were…” He struggled to find some way to express his feelings on the matter. “I lost them because of You-Know-Who, and it’s hard knowing that you, well…” He motioned to the wand clasped in Harry’s hand. “Your wands are brothers, and you can also talk to snakes, and— he wheezed as they started down another flight of stairs — “And I’m sorry it took me so long to realize that you aren’t like him at all!”

The offer of a renewed friendship was tempting, and Harry felt some of his reservations slip by the wayside. The stairwell ahead of them shifted, and they were forced to stop as the base of the stairs swung in a slow arc towards the fourth floor’s east wing.

“It might be more than that,” he said, cursing himself for being unable to leave well enough alone.
“What do you mean?”

“Your grandmother is wrong, Neville. Being able to speak parseltongue is inherited, not a sign that a person’s magic is dark or that they’ll turn out bad in the end. There are plenty of dark wizards around, and most of them can’t speak to snakes!”

The staircase ground into place and they took off at a light jog. As they turned into the fourth floor corridor the portrait of a primly dressed lady yelled at them for running around the castle in their nightclothes. They ignored her.

“I guess so…” Neville agreed hesitantly. “But then, why can both you and You-Know—“

Harry knew the exact moment Neville put the pieces together. The other boy froze mid-stride, a gasp tearing from his lips before momentum carried him forward and straight onto the floor.

“Are you okay?” he asked as Neville groaned and rolled onto his side, clutching his ribs.

Neville looked up at him with watering eyes. “You don’t really think that You-Know-Who is—that he’s—“

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “But it’s possible, isn’t it?”

“But he was so old!” Neville protested, scrambling to his feet as Harry pressed on towards the entrance hall. “He must have been around the same age as my Gran.”

“Really?” Harry glanced back at Neville, startled. “Are you sure? I thought he was supposed to be some super powerful warrior, not an old man.”

“I think so. I mean, no one really knows who he was before… so I guess he might have been younger than that. But Gran said that no one could become that powerful without a lifetime of study, even if they were really, really smart. So he must have been old.” Neville’s voice dropped, and his next words were nearly lost beneath the slap of their feet against the cold stone floor. “My uncle say he was a monster. That he wasn’t even human!”

Old, bitter memories of his aunt whispering to her lady friends at the corner of Privet Drive surged up in Harry. “So, if someone told you I was a thieving delinquent you’d believe them?”

“What?” Neville’s eyes widened in surprise. “Of course not!”

“Then why would you believe that Voldemort is a monster?”

Neville stumbled at the dark lord’s name, catching himself on the railing of the stairs. His voice was high with confusion when he said, “But I know you!”

“So you’ll believe anything about someone you don’t know?” Harry’s voice echoed down the stairwell, magnified until the air seemed to shake with his indignation. “Don’t you get it? People lie all the time! You were hanging out with Weasley, you know what he was saying about me! Would you want people believing that of you without bothering to get to know you first to see if there was any truth in it?” He jumped the last three steps down into the entrance hall and stomped towards the door so violently that Professor McGonagall’s note slipped unnoticed from his pocket and fell to the ground. “The only opinion you can trust is your own!”

Neville trailed after him, his eyes wet and miserable. “You’re right,” he said quietly after a long moment. “I guess I’d never really thought about it like that before.” He hung his head. “I’m sorry. I wanted to make things right… but all I did is upset you.”
Harry sighed. “Just… help me with this door.”

The massive double doors leading out to the school grounds were shut tight, Filch not yet having roused himself to unbar them for the day, and no matter how hard Harry and Neville pushed or tugged they didn’t budge an inch.

“How are we going to catch him without brooms?” Neville asked, his feet squeaking as he tried and failed to gain purchase on the smooth floor.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied, hauling on one of the iron ring pull handles with all his might. “We’ll think of something.”

“You’ll never open the door like that,” called a voice from behind them. Startled, they whipped around.

A boy was leaning against the newel post at the base of the grand staircase, his clothes impeccable and his dark eyes alight with amusement. He raised his hand, a small scroll held casually between his fingers. Harry’s hands flew to his pockets, patting them down, and he paled when he realized Professor McGonagall’s note was gone.

He wet his lips. “Can I have that back, please?”

“This little thing?” The boy pushed off the post and sauntered towards them, raising the scroll to peer at the imprint on the seal. “I suppose I could return it,” he mused. “After you tell me why the two of you are trying to leave the castle in little more than your pants.” His eyes raked over them in a way that left Harry feeling exposed. Beside him, Neville twisted the fabric of his nightgown anxiously. The boy grinned, showing off straight white teeth. “A bit indecent, wouldn’t you say?”

Harry frowned. He didn’t think pyjamas were that indecent, at least not enough to make a fuss over. “It was Weasley,” he began. Then, remembering how many Weasleys were in the school, added, “Ron Weasley. He stole a broom and flew it out the tower window.”

The boy laughed. “How naughty of you! First years aren’t allowed to have brooms. Perhaps I should turn you in?”

“Harry!” Neville squeaked, pointing at a silver badge on the boy’s collar. “He’s a prefect!”

“That I am,” he replied. “What do you think, should we go wake Professor McGonagall? She was out patrolling late last night. Probably hasn’t had much sleep.” He paused in mock contemplation and tapped a finger against his lips. “Perhaps it would be kinder to take you to Snape.”

The blood drained from Neville’s face so fast Harry thought he’d drop in a dead faint then and there. He crossed his arms. “You shouldn’t tease him — and I never said it was our broom!”

The prefect quirked a brow. “True enough. So your housemate steals a broom — which definitely wasn’t yours — and now you’ve got to get it back before anyone notices it’s missing.”

“Basically,” Harry agreed, and was caught off guard when the prefect held the scroll out to him. He snatched it quickly, afraid the boy would change his mind, and shoved it deep into his pocket.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, we still need to retrieve the broom.”

“We?” Harry asked.
“As your friend pointed out, I am a prefect.” He shooed Harry to the side and tapped his wand against the door. There was a loud click as the lock disengaged. “Come along,” he said, pushing one of the doors open just enough for them to pass through. “Let’s find your idiot housemate before he breaks something.”

He strode out into the early morning light, leaving Harry and Neville to stare at each other in confusion. Harry moved first, running to catch up with him at the bottom of the front steps. While he wasn’t thrilled the older boy had decided to involve himself, it might not be such a bad thing to have an extra witness. And he didn’t seem hostile. A bit sarcastic, maybe, but Harry didn’t think he was doing it to be cruel.

“Who are you?” he asked warily, stopping a short distance away. The prefect studied him through half-lidded eyes, a small smile pulling at his lips.

“Grisha Dolohov. Fifth year.” He raised his right arm so the green trim of his robes caught the morning light. “Slytherin, obviously. There’s no need to ask your name, you’re quite famous — or infamous, depending on who you ask. Though we can go through the trivialities of a formal introduction if you’d prefer.”

Formal introduction, which meant handshakes — or possibly fake-outs. “No thanks,” Harry replied. They had more important things to do than stand around figuring out who was on whose side.

Dolohov shrugged. “As you wish. Now, did you see which way your housemate went? I assume it wasn’t straight down, or you’d have fetched the mediwitch rather than run all this way yourselves. At least, I hope you would have fetched the mediwitch — or possibly an undertaker,” he added dryly.

“He was flying fine,” Harry said. “It looked like he was heading for the Quidditch pitch.”

Dolohov looked up over the castle roof, shaded his eyes and let out a low whistle. “That’s a bit of a walk.”

Harry didn’t intend to walk.

Before the chill in the air could settle into his bones and set him shivering he turned on his heel and broke into a run. Stones pricked the soles of his feet and dew from the grass soaked the hems of his pants as he flew across the lawn, eyes fixed on the distant ribbon of the path climbing a bluff up to the pitch.

Neville scrambled to keep up, hopping every few steps with a small yelp when one of the stones Harry breezed over jabbed him. Dolohov sighed. “Kids,” he muttered, bringing up the rear.

The hill leading up to the pitch was steep enough to deplete even Harry’s stamina, and he happily rested at the top for a few minutes while Neville and Dolohov caught up.

“Aren’t your feet sore?” Neville asked once he’d caught his breath. His face was pale and he looked as though the trek had left him physically ill. His feet were bright pink beneath a layer of grass and mud, and he winced whenever he shifted his weight.

Harry lifted his left foot and peered at the sole, which was dirty and a little scuffed, but otherwise unharmed. He shrugged. “I only wore shoes when I had to back with my relatives. Besides, the grass here is a lot softer than pavement, and the stones aren’t as sharp as bits of glass from bottles, or whatever.”
“I should have put on my shoes…” Neville lamented before shivering. “And my coat.”

A loud, joyous *whoop* from within the pitch confirmed that Ron hadn’t grown cold or bored enough to return to the tower. Harry pivoted, his wand coming to his hand as he scanned the sky above the stands ringing the pitch. A white blur rose beyond the nearest blue-draped tower only to dive back out of sight a second later. Harry marched towards the pitch’s entrance, a dark archway at the base of the tower, through which he could see the uniform green of a short, manicured lawn.

Something cold slapped the back of his neck, and he made it half a step before he was jerked back by the collar of his shirt. He flailed his arms behind him, but his hands met nothing but empty space.

Twisting around, he found himself looking up the length of Dolohov’s wand. “Hold your horses,” the prefect grumbled. He looked less put together than he had in the entrance hall. His short hair had slumped forward over his brow and his outer robe had shifted slightly to the right. “If he sees you he’ll fly off again, and I don’t feel like chasing him back across the grounds on foot, understand?” He flicked his wand to the right and the magic holding Harry in place dissipated.

“What were you planning to do with that wand, anyways?” he asked. “I doubt you know any spells strong enough to stop a broom this early in your first year.”

Harry crossed his arms. “I can cast *Flipendo* pretty well.”

“What would be lovely if your goal was to knock your housemate off his family tree, but slightly less practical in this situation.”

Neville winced. “We don’t want to hurt him,” he said quietly, and Harry was forced to agree. Professor McGonagall liked Quidditch a lot, but probably not enough to justify accidentally killing someone to keep the element of surprise. Not that it was likely to remain a surprise for long, since Dolohov was a Slytherin and it was more than likely he’d read her note before handing it back. Harry pursed his lips. He doubted he could bribe the older boy to keep it a secret from his house’s quidditch team. He had nothing of real value apart from the gold in his vault and his status as the Boy-Who-Lived. The former of which he needed for school, while the latter had easily been overwhelmed by the fact he could speak parseltongue and was therefore, in Harry’s eyes, next to worthless in the grand scheme of things.

“Do you have a plan?” he asked, curious in spite of his misgivings at allowing the prefect to become more involved in this fiasco than he already was. Dolohov was a fifth year after all, and therefore knew a great many more spells. Perhaps, if he paid close attention, he’d be able to pick up something interesting.

Dolohov looked up at the stands thoughtfully. “Follow me,” he said after a moment. “And keep out of sight. We wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

They snuck around the outside of the pitch until they came to a tower decked out in Gryffindor red. There was another archway onto the field at its base, and Dolohov lead them in and up a rickety set of stairs built into the scaffolding supporting the four tiers of bleachers ringing the pitch.

“What does it matter where we went in?” Harry whispered. Other than the colour of the banners stretched taught between the wooden beams he could see no obvious difference between this section and the one closer to the school.

Dolohov shot a sly look back over his shoulder. “Traps work best if they’re placed where you least expect them, don’t you think? Now, keep low. The railing in front of the first row of seats is hung
with banners, but they aren’t fastened at the bottom. Make sure not to bump them. That goes double for you, Longbottom,” he added. Neville gulped, his eyes fixed on the brightening patch of sky above them. He was trembling, but from cold or nerves Harry couldn’t tell.

“You can stay here if you want,” Harry offered.

“No!” Neville exclaimed, and then clasped his hands over his mouth. “No,” he repeated, quieter. “I want to help.”

“Come on then,” Harry said, motioning to the narrow walkway in front of the first row of bleachers where Dolohov was waiting for them. “Just pretend you’re playing hide and seek.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever played hide and seek,” Neville whispered, but he followed Harry obediently out into the open air.

Dolohov mouthed the incantation of a spell as the tip of his wand traced a complicated pattern in the air. The bleachers swelled, clear varnish cracking like a layer of fine ice, before the entire structure beyond the walkway sagged. Harry pressed a hand to the wooden bench and was surprised when it dipped easily under the pressure.

“It’s squishy,” he remarked, removing his hand and marvelling at how the bench sprung back into shape. “Like a sponge.”

Neville poked at it experimentally as well. “But how are we going to convince Ron to come over here?” he asked, peering out a narrow gap between two of the banners. Ron was circling the goalposts on the far end of the pitch. He mimed throwing a ball through one of the golden hoops and then pumped the air with both his fists, clearly pleased with his imaginary goal.

Dolohov’s grin was frightening. “With a little bait, of course. Can either of you use the wand-lighting charm yet?”

“I can,” replied Harry.

“Good. When I give the word, I want you to cast the spell and move the tip of your wand back and forth in front of this post.” He leaned in close enough that Harry could feel his breath on his cheek. “Like this.” Taking hold of Harry’s wand hand, he led it in short, jerking movements from side to side. Harry flinched at the sudden contact and fought off the urge to pull away.

“I can stop if this makes you uncomfortable,” Dolohov said, his voice low and smooth.

“No, it’s fine,” Harry replied, swallowing hard and pushing back his reaction in order to focus on what he needed to do. “Back and forth, I got it.”

Dolohov nodded and let go. He pointed his own wand in the air. “Now,” he said.

“Lumos,” Harry whispered. The tip of his wand lit up and he began to flick it in a clipped, arhythmic pattern. At the same time, he watched as a puff of black smoke billowed from the prefect’s wand to curl lazily in the morning air.

“We’re pretending there’s a fire?” he asked, putting two and two together.

“Exactly,” Dolohov replied.

It took less than a minute for Ron to notice the smoke and flickering light.
“He’s coming over,” Neville whispered from his post behind the split in the banners.

There was a rush of wind as Ron flew over to investigate. He hovered on the far side of the railing, just out of reach, and Harry could hear him muttering to himself as he tried to decide whether to fetch a professor and risk a detention for flying unaccompanied, or try to deal with the fire himself. Harry knew what he would have chosen to do in Ron’s place, and wasn’t surprised when Ron appeared above them, looking as though he was about to land. When his eyes fell on the three of them they went wide and he tried to reverse back into the air.

Dolohov was too quick for him. He jumped to his feet, jabbing his wand forward like a fencer’s sword. “Retraxi!”

The air around Ron warped as everything slowed down. His mouth crept open millimetre by millimetre in a parody of a scream as the broom slowed to a standstill and they were suspended in the air.

Dolohov’s wand carved a circle in front of him and then snapped the tip downward. Time restarted, but Ron was no longer moving up and away. He and the broom were dragged out of the sky, following the trajectory of Dolohov’s wand. They fell onto the softened bleachers and bounced. Ron lost his grip on the Nimbus and the broom spun from his hand, arching towards the railing.

It was going to fly over!

Neville jumped to his feet and lunged after it. His fingers grazed the shaft, fumbling for a handhold as his momentum nearly carried him straight over the rail. He slumped against it, and for a moment Harry feared he’d lost the broom, but then Neville straightened up with the Nimbus in his hand and a giant grin on his face. Harry let out a sigh of relief.

“That was amazing!” he said to Dolohov as they watched Ron flounder on the altered bleachers, unable to get his feet under him long enough to make his way to the solid floor of the walkway. He was cursing blue murder, but he must have forgotten his wand in the dormitory, because none of those curses manifested. Harry ignored him. “What kind of spell was that?”

Dolohov gave him an appraising look. “Make it worth my while and I’ll teach you.”

Harry sighed again, this time in exasperation, and fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I don’t have anything to offer in exchange.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” the prefect replied, a glint of something dark and hungry in his eyes.

“Hey, snake!” Ron yelled, drawing their attention back to his struggles. “Who do you think you are? Let me up already!”

Dolohov fingered his prefect badge, tilting his head so Ron couldn’t fail to see it. “The name’s Dolohov.” He grinned and leaned towards the trapped boy. “And I think the more important question now is: what happens next?”

Ron paled and redoubled his efforts. “I’ve heard of you! Your father was one of You-Know-Who’s Death Eaters! I won’t go anywhere with you.” He began sliding over the bleachers like a seal out of water, and was making good headway towards the stairs when Dolohov levelled his wand at him once more.

“Levicorpus,” he said lazily. Ron was dragged into the air by his ankle and hung there suspended,
his sleeping robes falling about his head revealing a pair of worn pants beneath. He shrieked and tried to cover himself up, only partially succeeding.

“Is that true?” Harry asked the prefect. “About your father?”

Dolohov was studying him again, his dark eyes unreadable. “Yes.”

“What… what happened to him?”

“He’s being driven insane in Azkaban — the wizard prison,” he added when he saw Harry’s confused expression.

Neville gasped and turned away, his hands shaking. Harry spared him a puzzled look before turning back to the Slytherin prefect.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. It must be horrible, he thought, to know one of your parents was suffering while you could do nothing about it. In a way it was worse than death. At least the dead were beyond pain… probably. He still wasn’t sure where ghosts fit in, but then, not everyone left a ghost behind, so maybe it wasn’t all that important.

“Does the Ministry know?” he asked. “Maybe they could help him?”

A funny expression crossed Dolohov’s face and he burst out laughing. “The Ministry’s the one who put him in there.” He shook his head. “Do they know? Ha! You’re a strange kid, Harry Potter. It’s most intriguing!”

“Uh, thanks. I think?” He glanced over at Ron, whose face was red as a tomato. His eyes were growing bloodshot and a trickle of blood was tracing a path towards his hairline. “What are you going to do with him?” he asked.

Dolohov leaned back against the railing. “I’ll take him to Professor McGonagall. I’m sure your head of house will have a few choice words for him.”

“No!” Ron protested. “You can’t! She’ll write my mum!”

“You should have thought of that before you stole a broom and flew it out a window. Though I suppose it’s all I should expect from a Gryffindor.” He glanced at Harry. “No offence meant.”

“Er, it’s fine,” Harry replied, realizing that flying out of the tower in ones nightgown was probably only a little more crazy than running out of the school wearing the same with the intent of catching said person on the broom.

Neville quietly handed him his Nimbus while Dolohov got Ron down, and Harry got to feel the polished wood for the first time. It was a truly amazing creation he reflected as he traced the gold lettering on the handle. He hoped he’d prove worthy of it. He couldn’t let Professor McGonagall down after she’d bought him such an amazing gift.

“Thanks for catching it, Neville,” he said.

Neville’s answering smile was wobbly, and his eyes kept drifting to Dolohov, who’d caught Ron by the ear when he tried to bolt. “You’re welcome,” he replied.

“Ow!” Ron yelped as he was marched down the stairs. “That hurts! Lemme go already!”

“Stop complaining,” Dolohov said as their small party exited the pitch before hitting him with a
well-placed silencing charm.

In the sudden silence, Harry heard the pealing of the bells in the clocktower, their deep voices carrying over the highlands. With a jolt he realized that their first class of the day would be starting soon.

“How am I going to get this back inside?” he wondered in dismay. He’d prefer to not try and fly it back into his dorm. For one thing, he didn’t know which of Hogwarts’s many towers was Gryffindor’s, and even worse, with the sun now firmly up he was guaranteed to be seen.

“Go around the side of the pitch until you reach a low shed,” Dolohov instructed. “That’s where the Quidditch teams store their brooms when they aren’t in use.”

“I never said I was on the Quidditch team!” Harry protested.

Dolohov’s grin was all teeth. “Neither did I.”

Yep, he definitely knew, Harry realized with a sinking heart. “Thanks again for your help,” he said.

“It was my pleasure,” Dolohov replied, shaking Ron by the ear until the redhead was wincing, his mouth opening and closing uselessly under the charm.

They split up, Harry and Neville hurrying to find the broom shed while Dolohov dragged Ron back to the castle, whistling a jaunty tune as he went.

Ron’s premonition that Professor McGonagall would write his mother was proved true the very next morning. He received a horribly unpleasant sort of letter by owl post, which Harry later learned was commonly known as a howler. Howl it did, for all the great hall to hear, in spite of the heroic dash Ron made for the exit.

“Ronald Weasley!” bellowed a woman’s voice that shook the rafters and send several students diving for cover. “How dare you steal a broom! Flying around the grounds in the dark, in nothing but your nightgown. You could have broken your fool neck!”

Ron threw himself out the door and into the entrance hall, but not before they heard a final parting shot.

“You wait until I get a hold of you! This is not how your father and I brought you up!”

Fred and George cackled at each other over their porridge. “Oooooh! Ickle Ronnikins is in for it now.”

“And here I thought we’d get the first howler of the year.”

“We’re losing our touch, Fred my man!”

“Why do you want your mother to yell at you?” Harry asked.

Fred waggled his finger at him. “Ah, see. It’s not about the yelling. It’s about keeping her life interesting!”

George nodded before he leaned in and added in a mock whisper. “Also, if we don’t remind her why she spent so many years counting down the days until we lot were out of her hair, she gets all sorts of sappy over the holidays.”
“It’s terrible. You’d swear she hadn’t seen us for years.”

George shook his head. “It’s no wonder Bill and Charlie got jobs out of the country. Harder for her to come and visit.”

Ron no doubt wished he could follow in his eldest brothers’ footsteps come their first transfiguration class, where it became painfully obvious to everyone in class that not even assigning a week’s worth of detentions had been enough to temper Professor McGonagall’s ire. Harry, who remembered what she’d done to Filch when the caretaker got on her bad side, admired her restraint for not smacking Ron over the head with the ruler he was supposed to be using to verify the diameter of his transfigured doily, but was instead using as a long, rather stiff moustache in a competition with Seamus for who could make the silliest face. Instead, she made a point of asking Ron a set of very complex theoretical questions during the lecture, well aware from grading their essays that he wasn’t particularly studious and that it would be a miracle if he’d read even half of the week’s assigned chapter. After allowing him to stammer helplessly for a few moments she’d turn to Hermione, who could always be counted upon to have the right answer, even if her delivery was a little too keen for some of their classmates’ tastes.

Outside of lessons, Fred and George took to transfiguring Ron’s possessions into spiders. His bloodcurdling shrieks whenever one skittered out of his bag or across his pillow provided them all with ample amusement until they started turning up in inconvenient places. Upon opening his trunk one morning to find a stocky black monstrosity the size of his hand making a nest among his socks, Harry very politely asked the twins to stop — or at least ensure that they changed back after a bit! Living outside a cupboard had reduced his tolerance for cobwebs plastered to his possessions, and besides, Basil had nearly choked on one of the spiders when it transformed back into a sock halfway down her throat. She’d been spitting mad for days afterwards. Harry was just glad it had been a sock rather than something larger and harder, such as a book or a bottle of ink.

Ron would have taken his growing frustration out on Harry, who he blamed for the entire fiasco by virtue of having received the broom that kicked it all off, except, with Neville’s defection, the balance of power in the dorm had shifted and he suddenly found himself up against evened odds. Seamus still had his back, but Dean, who’d been a reluctant accomplice at the best of times, had quietly excused himself from their acquaintance. He no longer interacted with any of them outside of what was required for their classwork. Instead, he spent his time talking about football teams and movies with a group of other muggleborn students down in the common room, whom Harry appreciated if for no other reason than their indifference toward him. None of their parents had been killed or imprisoned in a magical war, after all. Why should they fear curses, or dark lords, or boys who could speak to snakes?

Neville didn’t find as warm a welcome at the roundtable in the defence section, though to his credit he didn’t seem to expect one after having turned on Harry in a way Hermione described as a “despicable act of cowardice”.

“Honestly,” she scolded. “If it had been my broom that went out of control, I would have thanked Harry as soon as I was out of the infirmary!”

Neville looked miserable. “But I... we weren’t really talking at the time.”

Hermione tossed her head. “What does that matter? If Draco was the one to save me, I’d thank him. No matter what I really think of him.”

Draco looked up from his history essay and pulled a face. “If you want to show me some of this alleged gratitude you can lend me your copy of A History of Magic. Goyle spilt orange juice on mine this morning.”
“What, again?”

Harry perked up. “I can fix it!” he offered.

“Harry,” Draco said patiently. “The last time I let you fix one of my books you erased half of chapter nine.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Harry protested. “And it wasn’t a very interesting chapter to begin with. So, really, I was doing you a favour!”

“You can borrow mine if you’d like,” Neville offered, nudging his book across the table. Draco accepted it with just enough grace to be polite and a truce was called — at least for the evening.

The most surprising thing about the fallout of the *Nimbus Incident*, was how little his Slytherin peers knew about it. They’d heard about Ron’s misadventure, of course, but he heard not a peep about his position on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, which led Harry to believe no one had told them.

The only ones who *did* seem to know were the members of the Slytherin team. He’d caught Marcus Flint, the team captain, sizing him up whenever they passed each other in the corridor, and a few of the others had started showing up to breakfast at the same time he did. They seemed to be watching how much he ate, which made it even harder than it already was for Harry to fulfill Professor McGonagall’s ‘balanced meal’ quota.

Harry persevered through all these changes, happy that his life was finally settling into a comfortable rhythm, when he ended up at the centre of yet another event that shook the student body to its core.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun! Yes, I left it off on a cliffhanger. Luckily, since the next chapter is all but finished, you shouldn't have to wait months to find out what trouble Harry will find himself in next! :)

And yes, the sassy snowy postal owl was, in fact, Hedwig.

Thank you to everyone who followed or left a comment or kudo on this story! I know I don't update it too often, but I really appreciate all the feedback!
“Today you will learn how to turn reptiles into coin pouches,” Professor McGonagall said at the beginning of their transfiguration class.

It was halfway through October, and after two weeks of intensive practice they’d all managed to turn their mice into snuffboxes — or trinket boxes, as McGonagall begrudgingly called them after someone in the Ravenclaw-Slytherin class had challenged her on promoting the use of tobacco by minors. Harry didn’t care what they called them, he was just relieved his own box had turned out well and didn’t squeak in displeasure when he packed it full of a mix of dried nettles and thyme. Neville wasn’t so lucky, and had left the class with a skinned knuckle from where the box had snapped shut on his finger in protest.

Harry heard Neville groan in dismay from his seat in the row behind at the prospect of creating yet another container capable of eating his fingers, and for once not even Harry’s excitement at learning a new spell could fully dispel the similar sentiment crawling up his throat.

“Will you be okay?” Hermione whispered as they rose from their desk and joined the throng pushing towards the terrariums lining the right side of the room.

The glass tanks were full of lizards and snakes, the latter of whom were watching the students’ approach and hissing anxiously amongst themselves. Their voices crashed over Harry as he drew near, and he didn’t dare answer Hermione; afraid that if he opened his mouth parseltongue would come out.

Together the three of them fought towards the nearest tank of geckos, but the rest of the class had the same idea and they were met with an impenetrable wall of bodies that defeated all attempts to wiggle past. By the time they made it to the front, all the lizards were accounted for and they had no choice but to select one of the snakes.

“You could ask to trade,” Hermione suggested. “I’m sure one of the Hufflepuffs would agree to—“

Harry cut her off with a sharp shake of his head and focused all his attention on her face. “No,” he said carefully, feeling out the word with his tongue. “It would look suspicious. I’ll just have to be careful. Kick me if I start hissing, okay? Maybe Professor McGonagall won’t notice.”

“You could just tell her,” Hermione pointed out.

Harry sighed. “None of the professors know,” he reminded her. “And I don’t want them to. Things are hard enough for me now. If they get involved it will only get worse.”
“You don’t know that!”

Aware they’d never see eye to eye on this particular topic, Harry didn’t offer a reply. It was easier than engaging her directly, as she became incredibly stubborn once an idea had lodged itself in her head. Instead, he raised the lid of the terrarium and reached inside, easing a reluctant grass snake off its log. Its scales were a muted brown and it was only a foot long fully uncoiled, less than half Basil’s length. The second it passed the lip of the terrarium it went limp in an attempt to play dead. Harry bit his lip. To him it was clear the snake wanted no part in this, but Professor McGonagall was looking their way, no doubt eager to commence the lesson, so he pushed down his apprehension and handed the snake to Hermione, who hesitated only a moment before holding out both her hands to accept it.

Harry lifted another snake, this one a misty green, and let it curl around his hand.

“No, no, no,” it hissed, its tiny voice high in distress. “Not again. The moon has not completed its cycle! Why so soon?” Harry’s hands trembled at the raw fear in its voice. The snake clung to him, its coils tight enough to send a low ache through his bones. It refused to budge when Harry tried to set it down on his desk, opening its mouth and hissing a warning. Harry let it be. He rested his arm against the top of the desk, keeping enough distance between them to give the snake as much space as he could.

There was a rustling from his bag and it bumped against the leg of his chair. He looked down in time to see Basil’s tongue flick out from beneath the flap. He tried to nudge her back inside, but she pushed her nose between his fingers.

“What is it?” she called. “What do you fear?”

Harry’s snake shifted restlessly, scanning the top of the desk. “Where are you? Why are you still free?” it asked.

“I am in this bag,” Basil replied.

“Then you have been captured too,” his snake lamented.

Basil bucked against his fingers. “Of course not! Harry does not capture snakes and put them in tanks — he lets them out!”

“A two-legs would never free us.”

“Harry would, for he is a Speaker. And that is almost as good as being a snake!”

"A Speaker?” asked his snake, turning to look up at him. It wasn’t the only one. A whisper spread back through the class and Harry had the horrible feeling every snake in the room had swivelled around to stare at him. Even Hermione’s had given up its pretence of being dead in favour of peering up at him. “I have heard of those from one of the flat wall-snakes. Are you truly a Speaker, two-legged boy?”

Hermione elbowed him in the ribs, jerking his attention back to the front of the room, where he found Professor McGonagall staring at him expectantly. He panicked, looked at the chalkboard, then back to Hermione. Had the professor asked him a question?

"The incantation, if you please, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall repeated.

Harry swallowed and focused on her face. It wasn't serpentine. Not in the least. But the snake wrapped around his left hand was hissing in excitement and trying to climb up the sleeve of his
robe and it was distracting. Harry gently pushed the snake back down, took a deep breath, and willed himself to speak English. “Sac—“

“Sacculifors!” Hermione shouted, making him jump and snap his mouth closed. A pair of Hufflepuff boys to their left sniggered into their hands.

"Very good, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said, but her face was stern and she didn't award any points. "Now, as I'm sure you all remember, the key to transfiguration is a steady wand hand and clear pronunciation…"

"He is a Speaker!" the classroom snakes cried in excitement. “We have found a real Speaker! We will be saved!”

Hermione looked anxious as she scribbled a line on the corner of her notes and pushed it across the table at him.

'I'll answer for you.'

He scribbled back. 'If she asks, I have a sore throat and lost my voice.'

She glanced at his reply, nodded, and then dabbed ink over their silent conversation until it was nothing but a long black blob on her parchment.

"Please stop them, Speaker! Don't let them practice their secrets on us," his snake begged, nuzzling his wrist. "I don't want to become a stomach! My skins are not meant to shed that way!"

"It hurts," said Hermione's snake. "It hurts worse than eating a too-big mouse. All my muscles go twitch-twitch and my scales stretch enough to burst!"

Harry took a shaking breath and copied the wand movement Professor McGonagall was demonstrating at the front of the class.

He wasn't going to be able to do this. He wasn't, but he had to. Otherwise she'd know something was off. Why couldn't he be failing transfiguration like Neville? If he were, he could pretend to cast the spell and she wouldn't care that nothing happened.

"Please stop them Speaker!" The snakes called to him, desperation to escape their fate in every soft, sibilant voice.

"Harry would not use a secret that hurts you," Basil assured them, blithely oblivious to the enchanted diagram on the chalkboard, which showed a lizard swelling up and folding into itself until it had become a small, scaled pouch and back again.

Harry swallowed hard as he stared at the shifting illustration. Basil had faith in him, and yet… how could being turned into a pouch not hurt? The more he thought about it, the more horrified he became. What happened to the snakes’ hearts, lungs and minds when they were transfigured? Neville's snuffboxes had still squeaked. Did that mean they could still feel? That they knew they were mice despite no longer having a head, legs or tail? How could wizards justify forcing that kind of transformation onto another living creature? With a surge of guilt he realized he hadn't cared when they'd been working with beetles and mice. They'd been nothing but animals to him. If he wasn't a parslemouth he might have felt the same way about the snake before him now. He wouldn’t have known they had a language, or that they had hopes and dreams of their own.

They deserved more than a life spent in fear of becoming a test subject for a bunch of unskilled eleven year olds.
Behind him his classmates raised their wands. They chanted the incantation in chorus while Harry sat frozen, overwhelmed by the surge of sibilant screams that followed when the spells struck the snakes’ scales. One of the screams shattered, cut off by a loud tearing sound and a wet *plop*.

Human screams joined those already echoing in Harry’s ears, and Hermione's hands flew to cover her mouth.

"Don't turn around!" she said. "Harry, whatever you do…"

His snake constricted around his wrist as though trying to embed its scales in his skin. "*Brandy! No!*" it cried.

Professor McGonagall made a tutting sound with her tongue. "Mister Finnigan your pronunciation was off." She drew her wand and Harry’s eyes were drawn involuntarily along its path.

The world slowed down, as though he’d fallen into the loch, and Harry forgot how to breathe.

Golden sunlight continued to stream in through the windows, illuminating the specks of dust dancing through the air in Professor McGonagall’s wake, but it had lost all its warmth because two tables back, laying in front of Seamus, was a lump of bleeding flesh and intestines. A snake turned inside out.

It vanished with a wave of Professor McGonagall's wand, leaving nothing behind to mark that a snake had just died.

Harry’s lungs expanded, but the air wasn’t enough to stop the spinning in his head. He clasped a hand over his mouth. It felt like he was going to be sick. Hermione touched his shoulder but he shrugged it off, withdrawing into himself as he began to shake.

"Fetch another and try again," Professor McGonagall instructed Seamus. "And this time be sure to put the emphasis on the second— Mister Potter, are you all right?"

He couldn't stop shaking. He pressed his hands to his ears, but the serpentine scream rebounded inside his head. It was deafening.

"Mister Potter?" she asked again, stepping towards him.

Her words didn’t register. His world had shrunk to the sight of Seamus’s hand as it reached for the lid to the snake terrarium. In his mind’s eye the hand twisted, merging with the carnage of the snake’s body, the pale skin tearing into a pulp of viscera and bone. His head ached and there was a roaring in his ears, like a dragon clawing at the inside of his skull, trying to get out.

His fingers twisted in his hair, tugging at the roots. "*Stop,*" he whimpered as Seamus lifted the lid. The words seeped from behind his clenched teeth in a broken hiss. "*Stop it!*"

The dragon in his head gave a final, mighty slam and his vision went black. Pain erupted along the scar on his forehead and his heart stuttered. For a moment he felt giddy, triumphant. Then the pain overwhelmed him and he slid sideways off his seat.

A bloodcurdling shriek rent the air as Seamus doubled over, gagging and clutching his right wrist. Blood poured between his fingers from the mass of mangled flesh hanging uselessly from his arm. It pattered against the floor in quick bursts, pushed from broken veins by his racing heart.

His hand had been turned inside out, just like the snake.
Harry slipped in and out of consciousness as the room descended into chaos.

The Hufflepuff and Gryffindor students jumped to their feet. Some yelled, some cried, and some bent over sick.

Professor McGonagall rushed to Seamus’s side, but the wound was beyond her. All she could do was transfigure the sleeve of his robe into a tourniquet. She raised her wand and a silvery cat burst from the tip, its body speckled with points of light that twinkled like stars. She spoke to it. “Pomona, there’s been an accident in Transfiguration. Get here as quickly as you can!”

As the silvery cat streaked off McGonagall eased Seamus to the ground, keeping his hand elevated. Even with the tourniquet it was oozing a stream of blood down his arm.

Hermione and Neville worked together to pull Harry up off the floor, but as soon as he came back into sight Ron pointed an accusing finger his way. “He did it!” he shouted. “Just like in our dorm. It’s his fault!”

He drew his wand and the students around him followed suit, goaded into action by the rumours of the confrontation in Gryffindor tower and their horror at the creeping pool of blood around Seamus’s prone form.

“Put your wands away!” Professor McGonagall ordered, but they ignored her.

“We have to avenge Seamus!” cried round-faced Ernie Macmillan. The tip of his wand was shaking, but his eyes were burning with determination. “Diffindo!”

“Neville, get down!” Hermione yelled, dragging Harry behind their desk as a dull white spell rent the air where her head had been a second before. They hit the floor hard, and the impact jarred Harry from his stupor in time to see mushrooms sprout from Neville’s hairline as he was struck by a sickly yellow spell.

One successful hit was all the students needed to unleash bedlam. The classroom strobed with spell-light as every jinx and hex their first year class knew ricocheted off the walls and the polished surfaces of the desks. Spells collided in midair, their energy twinning together and triggering dozens of small explosions that burst like fireworks, showering nearby students with a rain of hissing, sparking magical energy.

“Wands down!” bellowed McGonagall, brandishing her own like a lasso. Before she could utter another word a rebounding spell caught her in the back and spiders began crawling from her mouth. She sputtered and spat, unable to speak around their hairy, skittering legs.

“Flippendo!” Hermione cried, jabbing her wand towards the largest group of spell casters. A bench flew into the air, bowling three of them over before crashing against the wall. “Harry, help me! Do something!”

Harry tried to reach for his wand, but his limbs were full of lead. A spell glanced off his shoulder, leaving his robes smouldering, yet he couldn’t summon the strength to pat out the flames even when he felt the heat of the fire on his skin. He felt disconnected — numb.

“The two-legs are attacking the Speaker!” cried the snakes. They’d sought shelter between the heavy wooden legs of the desks when the fighting began, but now they darted out into the fray.

“Stop them!”

“Squeeze them!”
“They must not harm the Speaker!”

The snakes coiled their small bodies around the students’ ankles and sunk their tiny, razor-sharp teeth into their skin. The students shrieked and danced about wildly, caught off guard by the appearance of this new threat.

“He’s ordered them at us!” shouted Justin Finch-Fletchley as he pointed his wand at his feet and set his robes on fire in his panic. His head had been encased in a pumpkin by a rebounding spell and it made for a haunting sight as smoke billowed up around him.

“Kill them! Quickly!” Ron kicked off the small brown grass snake trying to get under his robes and stomped down on its head. There was a crunch as its skull shattered. Its body spasmed once and then went still.

Harry stared as one snake after another was caught beneath his classmates’ feet or struck down by spells. The numbness was wearing off and a horrible tightness grew in his throat until he feared he’d choke. He gasped for breath, his hands trembling as he clasped them over his ears to block out the screaming. It didn’t help.

“Harry!” Basil hissed, launching herself from his bag and slithering to his side. “Harry, are you well? Did they hurt you?”

“They’re dying… because of me.” He couldn’t tear his eyes from the carnage. “Stop!” he cried. “Don’t attack! Hide!”

“He’s giving them more orders!” shouted a voice and Harry looked up into the tip of a wand pointed over his desk.

“Do not hurt my Harry!” Basil hissed. She tried to lunge beneath the table, but Harry caught her by the tail and hauled her back, curling his body around her protectively. A spell struck him along his spine, splitting the skin in a long ragged tear before Hermione blasted the student away.

Her front teeth had lengthened nearly down to her collar and her eyes were red. A steady stream of blood trickled from her nose. “Are thoo othay?” she asked, words muddled.

He gasped, unable to answer. The pain in his back was nothing compared to the wrenching in his heart as the few remaining snakes limped towards him beneath the desks.

The door burst open, revealing Mme Pomfrey in her tall white hat, and she was not alone. The roar of exploding spells and high-pitched shrieks of children had drawn out the professors from nearby classrooms, and both Professors Quirrell and Flitwick followed close behind her. Filch brought up the rear. He was clutching Ms Norris in one hand and a heavy ruler in the other.

“Stop this at once!” Mme Pomfrey shouted, deflecting a rogue spell with a shimmering barrier of light. “Minerva, where are you?”

Professor McGonagall staggered to her feet, finally having cleared the spiders from her throat. “Pomona,” she croaked. “Over here! Mister Finnigan’s hand is—” She ducked as a blue tinged spell shot towards her head. It knocked off her hat, which began to flop like a fish out of water when it struck the floor.

Professor Flitwick waded into the chaos and within a matter of seconds had disarmed those students still able to grip their wands around cut and swollen limbs. The rest were slumped on the floor moaning as their adrenaline wore off and they began to feel the severity of their injuries.
Pomfrey rushed to Seamus’s side. Mercifully, he’d fallen unconscious and couldn’t see the dismayed expression on her face. “Was he struck by a curse?” she asked McGonagall.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see a spell. He was going to fetch another snake after he failed his first attempt at the transfiguration when his hand everted.”

Pomfrey’s face was tight. “I can’t risk a healing spell if he’s under a curse. It could cause it to spread.” She looked from the unconscious boy to the rest of the children sprawled across the room.

“T-they’re suffering from multiple negative spell interactions,” stammered Quirrell as he knelt beside Ron, who had weeping purple pustules bulging from his chest and stomach.

“I can’t treat them all,” Pomfrey said. “Quirinus, send word to Saint Mungo’s. Tell them we need an emergency team sent over right away!”

“O-of course!” He bolted from the room, eager to get away.

Pomfrey took a deep, steadying breath. She had seen injuries in her time as school mediwitch, but never this many at once, and never this severe. Without quick, decisive actions they risked losing the children under their guardianship. “Fillius, help me stabilize as many as you can. Minerva, send messages to Severus and the Headmaster, we’ll need them here when the medical team arrives. Argus, call together the prefects. Have them keep the halls clear. I want the rest of the students back in their common rooms until we finish moving the injured!”

The professors jumped into action. McGonagall sent off two more shimmering cats while Pomfrey and Flitwick moved through the students, helping those they could, and taking note of those they couldn’t.

Harry remained behind his desk, overlooked and out of the way, surrounded by dying snakes. He tried to help them, but he knew nothing of healing magic and the severity of their injuries was beyond his ability to imagine away. In the end, all he could do was hiss softly and watch as, one after another, their eyes grew dull and vacant.

“You are hurt, Speaker,” whispered a tan snake whose tail had been crushed by a heavy boot and now dragged limp and useless behind her, the skin along her sides split and bulging viscera.

He stroked her head gently. “It’s nothing. It doesn’t matter. Please... save your strength.”

The snake leaned into his touch. “I am dying,” she said. “No amount of shedding will stop it now. All I can do, is this.” The snake struggled to raise her head. Harry placed two fingers beneath her chin, trying to help, and a pulse of blue light ran up his arm from the point of contact. He felt the magic of the snake’s secret pool in the gash on his back. It itched, like being bitten by a thousand fleas. He wiggled and clawed at the wound with his free hand, and beneath his straining fingers he felt the skin knit together.

“You healed me,” he said, feeling both grateful and guilty that he couldn’t do the same.

The snake didn’t answer.

She had died.

“Harry,” said a soothing voice, and he looked up into the face of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. The headmaster’s face was grave in contrast to his soft tone, and Harry was struck with a sense of wrongdoing.
“I tried to save them,” he said, hunching his shoulders. “It wasn’t their fault. They were just trying to protect me. They never should have died.”

He heard a gasp. Professor Flitwick was staring at him, wide-eyed. The short wizard didn’t even need to duck to see beneath the desk Harry had taken shelter behind.

“You need to speak English, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “We cannot understand you otherwise. Now, are you hurt?”

Harry shook his head, too tired to berate himself for speaking parseltongue in front of the headmaster. He looked around to Neville and Hermione, both of whom were worse for wear. Hermione was propped up against the leg of the desk, her arms wrapped tight around her chest and her eyes unfocused. Neville had slumped to the ground, his pale skin misshapen with colourful boils and sprouting fungi. They were positioned to either side of him, and Harry’s breath caught as he realized they’d fought to protect him. Their injuries were his fault. If they died it would be his fault. He lowered his head, ashamed. He didn’t understand why they’d risked their lives for him. Why any of them had. He wasn’t worth dying over.

Professor Snape appeared at Dumbledore’s side. He glared at Harry. “Headmaster, the team from Saint Mungo’s is ready for the last group.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said, his gaze not leaving Harry. “Have Mister Longbottom and Miss Granger moved into triage. Harry, I would like you to wait in Professor McGonagall’s office for further instructions. I will have one of the prefects wait with you.”

Harry nodded and scooped Basil up in his arms. For a moment he saw Dumbledore’s eyes flash with an emotion cold as the depths of the loch and hard as ice, but then the man’s attention was called away by one of the green-clad medi-wizards.

As Hermione and Neville were bundled away, Harry trudged into Professor McGonagall’s office and pulled the door shut.

It felt as though an eternity passed before Harry was joined by a girl with long, curly black hair and a Slytherin robe. She pulled out the chair next to him and sat down without saying a word.

Harry was curled up with his knees tucked against his chest. He kept his eyes riveted on the quill sitting upright in Professor McGonagall’s inkstand as he battled to undo the tight knot of emotions wracking his chest. Basil was wrapped around his shoulders, just beneath his robe, the feel of her scales on his neck a constant reminder of all the snakes who’d died.

“I’m Adella Rookwood,” the girl said in a gentle tone. “I hope you don’t mind me sitting with you. Professor Dumbledore asked the Gryffindor prefects, but they were all mysteriously occupied.”

Harry sighed and dropped his chin onto his knees. Of course they were. None of them wanted anything to do with him.

There was a long silence before Rookwood folded her hands in her lap and leaned forward to catch his eye. “I’ve heard a great deal about you from my fiancée but haven’t had the chance to speak with you yet. He thinks quite highly of you.”
“Your… fiancée?” Harry asked, slowly turning his head in her direction. She didn’t look old enough to be getting married. Adults got married, not students like himself. His brow furrowed.

“Yes, Alexander Selwyn, the head boy. We’ve been engaged these last two years and will be getting married once we’ve both graduated.”

“You’re going to marry Selwyn?” Harry asked, sitting up a little in his seat. Selwyn had always been nice to him, even if he did sometimes ask too many questions. Harry couldn’t dislike him, and this girl was going to be his wife, which meant she was probably likeable too.

She smiled at him, and Harry was too mentally and emotionally drained to wonder if she had an ulterior motive.

“Will you tell me what happened?” she asked.

“I…” It was hard to find the words, everything was blurred together in his memory, but he tried. Both his actions before the fight and his inaction during it weighed on his mind, crushing him slowly. He wanted advice, or at least for someone to tell him that he hadn’t been entirely in the wrong. While Basil could offer him many things, she didn’t understand human morality. For that he’d need another human.

In broken sentences he told her what had occurred in the classroom.

“I think I turned Seamus’s hand inside out,” he admitted quietly at the end. “What do they do to students who hurt other students? Will I be expelled?”

She looked pensive. “Did you use your wand?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I didn’t use it all class.”

“Then they have no way to prove it was you. As long as you don’t tell them, they’ll never know.”

“You won’t tell them, will you?” he asked.

She held a finger up to her lips. “It will be our little secret.”

There was something ominous in her small smile, but before Harry could focus on the implication of her words Professor Snape burst into the office. His face was red as a beet and he looked ready to tear Harry’s throat out with his teeth. Harry sunk into his chair, trying to make himself a smaller target.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” he bellowed, flinging spittle all over Harry’s face. Some of it flew past Harry and landed on Rookwood’s sleeve. She wiped it away daintily, her face twisting with disgust. “The Headmaster and Professor McGonagall are currently at Saint Mungo’s being hounded by the press! The fact you triggered a riot at Hogwarts will be plastered over the front page of the Daily Prophet come morning!” He ground his teeth together so hard Harry thought they would shatter. “By this time tomorrow the entire wizarding world will know you’re a Parselmouth! They will demand we expel you! And you should be expelled!”

Harry’s breath lodged in his throat as the knot in his chest constricted. He hadn’t wanted any of this to happen. He couldn’t go back to the Dursleys’ forever. It would kill him to give up the small freedoms and friendships he’d found — the only ones he’d ever known.

The sound of a throat being cleared interrupted Snape’s tirade and the professor spun towards the door, ready to unleash his fury on whoever had dared to interrupt him, then his face froze and a
strange coughing sound uttering from his throat as he bit back the words on the tip of his tongue. Harry had never seen Snape look so out of sorts. He glanced back over his shoulder.

There was a tall black man standing in the doorway. “Professor Snape, I presume,” the man said, his deep voice carefully neutral.

“Auror,” Snape replied, sounding very much like he’d just bitten down on a lemon.

The auror walked into the room, coming to stand behind Harry’s chair. He placed a hand on the backrest and Harry watched it warily, not liking how close it was. The man’s nails were cut close to the quick, and there was a heavy golden ring bearing the image of a gazelle on his index finger. “Severus Snape. How shall I interpret the fact that you are badgering my witness before I can question him officially? You, of all people, should know better than to interfere with auror business.”

That sounded too personal to be a mere warning, and Snape reacted as though he’d been struck — flinching away and grabbing his left arm before forcing his hands back to his sides. Beside Harry, Rookwood was holding her breath.

The auror pulled out the chair on Harry’s right and sat down. His expression was grave and very serious, but not unkind. Nothing at all like Snape’s had been during his tirade.

“My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt,” the auror said, speaking directly to Harry. “And I am in charge of the investigation into the fight that broke out a short time ago in your transfiguration class.” Harry nodded to show he understood. He wasn’t sure what an auror was, but it seemed to be a little like a police officer, and it was best to be polite to people with the ability to arrest you.

“Normally I wouldn’t question a minor without their guardian present, but I understand both your guardians are muggles, and these are trying circumstances.” He looked at Snape in obvious dislike. “As the headmaster and deputy headmistress are currently occupied, the head of Slytherin house will suffice as a witness — if he can reign in the vitriol I could hear from the corridor outside.”

Snape pressed his lips together. He looked torn; half of him wanting to get as far away from Harry as he could, and the other half wanting to stay in order to interject his own opinions into whatever questions the auror was about to ask. In the end he decided to stay, sweeping into Professor McGonagall’s chair and folding his hands on her leather desk pad.

Rookwood took this as a dismissal and stood to leave. “You’ll be fine,” she said to Harry quietly. “Don’t forget, there’s no evidence you did anything wrong.” She closed the door behind her and Kingsley waited until her footsteps had receded before casting a privacy ward over the room. He then pulled a notebook and quill from his pocket. The book he set on the desk, open to a blank page. He sucked on the tip of the quill a moment, and then set it upright on the page, balanced on its tip.

“October tenth, nineteen ninety-one, eleven forty-eight in the morning. Hogwarts, transfiguration classroom. Interview with one Harry Potter. Professor Severus Snape acting as witness,” Kingsley said to the quill, and Harry had grown so used to magic since the summer that he was not surprised when it copied the auror’s words out in a neat, precise hand. After verifying that his quill was working correctly, Kingsley turned back to Harry.

“Now lad, I need you to answer some questions for me clearly and honestly. Do you think you can do that?” he asked.

Harry tightened his grip around Basil, taking comfort in the feel of her scales against his chest.
“Yes, sir,” he replied quietly.

“Good. We’ll begin with something easy. What is your name?”

That was easy. Harry relaxed a little. “Harry Potter.”

“And how old are you now, Harry?”

“Eleven.”

Kingsley nodded. “Did anything unusual happen this morning before your transfiguration class?”

Harry stopped to think about that one. “Not to me, sir.”

“Did something happen to someone you know?”

“I don’t think so. At least, no one said anything to me. There could have been, though. I guess. Unusual things happen here a lot.”

Kingsley hummed. “No doubt. Now, Harry, I want you to tell me what happened during your transfiguration class this morning. Tell me everything you can remember from the moment you arrived in the room. Even small things that don’t seem important. Do you think you can do that?”

Harry repeated what he’d told Rookwood, carefully leaving out the fact he feared himself responsible for Seamus’s injury. The auror’s quill scribbled furiously and Harry did his best not to watch it. It was distracting, and he didn’t want to lose his train of thought and have to start all over again. There was a moment of silence once he’d finished as they waited for the quill to catch up, and he did his best not to look over at Snape, whose anger was almost palpable, hanging over the small room like a storm cloud.

“Thank you, Harry,” Kingsley said, flipping the book to a new page and replacing the quill. “Now I’d like to check your wand for the previous spells cast.” He drew out his own wand, which was carved from a heavy reddish wood. “This does not mean we suspect you,” he explained. “We will be checking the wands of all your classmates as well to determine what spells were used during the fight so we can better treat their injuries.”

“Okay,” Harry said, hoping Rookwood was correct in her assurance that they wouldn’t be able to identify magic used without his wand. He drew his wand and then hesitated. He didn’t want to hand it over to the older wizard. Deep down there was a small part of him that feared the man would snap it in half the second it left his hands.

“Please hold it up, pointing towards me,” Kingsley instructed. Harry did as he asked and the auror pressed the tips of their wands together. “Prior Incantato.”

Harry’s wand jittered in his hand, struggling against the foreign magic seeping into its core before, with a great lurch, it spat out a glowing ball of light. The bubble of light drifted gently through the still air of the office and was quickly joined by a second, and then a third.

“The last spell you cast was the lumos charm?” Kingsley asked, his brows drawn down in puzzlement. Clearly this wasn’t what he’d expected to find.

“Yes,” Harry replied, relieved that he’d turned down the twins’ offer to take a turn of the castle with them the night before, which would have been more enjoyable than what he’d really done, but also far more damning in this situation. “I didn’t finish my reading for tomorrow’s potions class until late and didn’t want to disturb my roommates.”
He hadn’t actually been reading his potions text, but he’d promised Professor Quirrell he’d keep Herpo’s journal a secret, and the way Snape bristled at the suggestion that Harry was trying to keep up in his class was more than worth the risk of being caught out.

Snape lurched forward and growled, “He’s lying! He must have overwritten his wand’s memory!” His black eyes were burning. “Potter cast a spell in that brawl, mark my words!”

Kingsley looked at the man in distaste, but he couldn’t deny the possibility of a wizard — even one so young — knowing enough to hide their tracks. “Please keep your wand steady,” he instructed Harry, who was forced to grip the handle with both hands when his wand jumped as if kicked and then began vibrating so fast it hummed.

The fourth spell took a long time to appear, and Snape had begun to crow in triumph when a line of glowing red numbers flowed from the tip of Harry’s wand, spelling out a time: 22:00 — ten at night.

Kingsley broke the connection between their wands and the numbers faded away. “The tempus spell confirms your story, Mister Potter,” he said. “As I’m sure your professor is aware, it will always show the current time when cast, and cannot be manipulated.” He gave Harry a searching look. “Did you have any other classes this morning that would have required you to use your wand.”

“No, sir,” Harry replied. “And we aren’t meant to use our wands in the corridors.”

“Minerva — Professor McGonagall has seen him use magic wandlessly,” Snape hissed, leaning forward over the desk, determined to score a point. “His memories must be turned over to the auror department and consulted.”

Harry felt a chill seep down his spine. Turn over… his memories? As in, take them out of his head? If they did that, how much would they be able to see? Would they be able to hear his thoughts as well?

“Professor McGonagall always insists I use my wand,” he said quickly. “She’s very strict.”

Kingsley studied him. “And do you know why she insists you use your wand?”

Harry blinked slowly. He couldn’t remember if she’d given him a real reason, just that it was what was expected of students. In retrospect, that didn’t sound like a very convincing reason not to do something, so he turned to the only other reason he could remember hearing mentioned. “Because it’s dangerous.”

Kingsley nodded gravely. “Indeed it is. Especially for a growing wizard such as yourself. We wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself, would we?”

Hurt… himself? Harry dropped his eyes. Shouldn’t they be more worried about him hurting others? The sight of Seamus’s hand was etched on the backs of his eyelids, and his stomach burned with guilt — and worse than that, fear. What if he’d been looking at Seamus’s head instead? He didn’t like the other boy much, but he didn’t want him dead! And he doubted even a magical hospital could do anything to help someone whose skull had been turned inside out.

“I can only do small things without a wand, like making a light in my hand or making light objects float. Would I have been able to do something like—” He motioned vaguely towards his right hand.

Kingsley stroked his chin. “It is unlikely, at least without causing yourself a great deal of harm.
How are you feeling?"

“I’m fine,” Harry replied evasively. In truth he was exhausted, and now that the strange numbness
that had gripped him had worn off, his heart was fluttering in his chest as he realized how close
he’d come to losing Basil and his friends. Why hadn’t he fought? He might have been able to
protect the snakes, or Neville and Hermione, if he hadn’t collapsed like an invalid.

“I should have done more,” he said aloud, his hands bunching into fists. “I should have fought.
Maybe then some of them would have survived.”

“No one died, Mister Potter,” Kingsley said.

“Yes, they did.” He pressed a hand gently over Basil’s head, holding her close to his heart.

“I already promised you I would not try to bite anyone else today,” she complained, wiggling
slightly in an attempt to free herself. “You don’t need to squeeze me!”

“I’m sure your classmates will all make full recoveries,” Kingsley said. “There’s no need to write
them off so soon. Saint Mungo’s has dealt with far worse magical injuries than a little spell
interaction.”

That’s not what the professors had seemed to think before the room was cleared, but Harry didn’t
have the energy to argue. “May I go?” he asked.

“Of course not!” Snape snarled, slamming a fist on the desk. “You’ve offered no proof that you
weren’t involved!”

“Actually, he has,” Kingsley said, rising to his feet. “The aurors may have further questions for you
Mister Potter, but for now you may leave.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry’s legs were shaking as he rose to his feet, but he avoided tripping over the
leg of his chair as he walked slowly to the door.

“A moment!” Kingsley called, and Harry froze, his hand on the doorknob suddenly clammy. The
auror came up close behind him and lay a hand on his shoulder. Harry held perfectly still as he felt
the man’s large fingers examine the seared tear in the back of his robes. The auror stepped back.
“Forgive me, I was concerned you’d been injured when I saw the damage to your robe, but it
appears you were very lucky. Still, you should report to the hospital wing to be checked for shock.
Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, pulling the door open and stepping out of the office.

The classroom was in shambles. Chairs had been reduced to splinters, tables were smouldering,
there were scorch marks on the walls and smears of blood, slime and putrid smelling pus on the
floor. A handful of aurors bustled about, holding their wands out in front of them while notepads
and quick quote quills floated in their wake, recording their observations. They stopped what they
were doing to stare at Harry as he made his way towards the exit, and Harry could feel the weight
of their eyes on him.

He didn’t look at the desk he’d sheltered behind. If he saw the dead snakes again he might start
crying, and this was no place to break down.

He ignored the instructions to go to the hospital wing, instead turning towards the entrance hall and
beginning the long trek down to the dungeons. The cool air felt nice on his skin as he slipped into
the abandoned room that was slowly transforming into a secret base, and clapped his hands twice
to activate the chandelier. The blue crystals flickered to life, revealing the snarling gargoyle in the corners and the old cloth-covered desks.

He ran his fingers along the wall, the grit clinging to the stones rough against his skin, until he came to his favourite of the four gargoyles. It had a long forked tongue that jutted from between snarling lips to curl back up towards its equine nose and a chipped, blackened fang. He sat down at its feet, sighed, and rested his head back against its scaled legs.

Basil slithered out of his robes and rested her body across his lap. “You are not well,” she said.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “No,” he agreed. He really wasn’t.

He felt useless. What was the point of learning so many spells if he froze the moment they’d be useful. Even Neville had fought harder than he had, and Neville’s magic was unreliable at best. Harry knew he could have done more — he should have done more — and in that moment he made himself a promise. No matter how scared or surprised or hurt he was, he would fight. If he didn’t, how could he face his friends again? They’d fought for him, expecting he’d do the same, and he’d let them down.

And the snakes who’d died — he’d let them down too. They’d asked him to save them, to put an end to their suffering, but in the end they were the ones who gave their all to save him.

“Hey, Basil?” he asked. “Why did the snakes fight for me? They must have known they couldn’t win. Was it just because I’m a Speaker?”

Basil raised her head, propping it up on his hand as his fingers traced the scales on her back. “Perhaps they wished to speak with you as well,” she suggested.

“That’s all? There wasn’t anything...” He wasn’t sure what he was trying to convey. Forced wasn’t a strong enough word — he hadn’t bullied the snakes into fighting — but it was close. “There wasn’t anything magical about it? Like a spell that made them obey?”

Basil flicked her tongue. “When you speak it can be... compelling,” she admitted.

Harry’s heart sank. “So you have to obey me? Whatever I say? Even if it’s stupid, or you don’t want to?”

Her tail twitched in irritation. “Of course not. I can do whatever I like!”

Why did he feel she was bending the truth? “Really?”

She hesitated. “Most of the time... except for when you Speak as you did during the fight. Then it is hard, but I still can! I just chose not to since you were so afraid.”

“Thanks, but... I want you to promise you won’t get into any fights on my behalf if you know you can’t win.”

“I cannot let you be eaten!” she protested. “It is so much more interesting with a Speaker around! Since I met you I have been to curious places I would have never seen and learned clever things I would have never known if I’d stayed under the flower bush. You even let me steal your body heat!”

“Please, Basil! Just promise me!” he begged.

She gave a little huff of displeasure, but eventually caved. “Very well,” she grumbled. “I promise.”
He mustered enough energy for a smile and stroked her back. “Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

She turned her head away. “No doubt you would drown in spiders!” she quipped, and Harry let her have the last word.

Chapter End Notes

So much action in this chapter! And could this be the event that finally gets Harry to stop being so passive in his interactions with the other students?! Only time will tell!

Hopefully no one found the chapter too traumatic. I know I always get misty-eyed when the snake heals Harry's back right before dying - and she doesn't even have a name!

Thank you to everyone who has stuck with this story in spite of my erratic update schedule! Every kudo and comment brightens my day. :)


Draco walked briskly down the deserted dungeon corridor, a copy of the morning paper tucked under one arm and his front pocket bulging with a long, hastily written letter from his father that had left him feeling very well informed and bursting at the seams to boast about it. His buoyant mood had been punctured briefly when he realized many of his housemates were just as well informed as he was and had no interest in listening to a first year’s opinions on the matter. Chastised, he’d spent a good five minutes frowning at his eggs, which were sunny side up and far too cheerful, before rallying his spirits and setting off to find someone who would care.

This didn’t prove as hard as he’d feared. Stopping outside the door to his and Harry’s secret base he leaned down, pressed an ear to the old-fashioned keyhole and was relieved to hear the soft murmur of a voice on the far side. Straightening up, he made sure the collar of his robe was sitting neatly across his shoulders before pushing the door open.

“I figured I’d find you here,” he said, sauntering into the dimly lit room. Harry was sitting cross-legged on top of a small island of desks, a plate of food at his knee. He looked well for someone who’d been caught in the middle of a brawl the day before. A little washed out, perhaps, but that could have been a trick of the light, which was still as deep and gloomy as it had been the day they found the old abandoned classroom.

Harry let out a series of low hisses that sent a shiver of excitement running up Draco’s spine. Something long and thin shifted near his collar and Draco hurried closer, eager to finally get a good look at Harry’s elusive snake friend, but by the time he’d hopped up onto the edge of the nearest desk she’d vanished into Harry’s robes. Draco huffed in disappointment, but Harry had turned his attention to his food, plucking a half-eaten piece of bacon off his plate, and didn’t seem to notice.

“Your breakfast will be grey before you’ve finished it at this rate,” Draco said, pointing to the dust motes swirling up from the drop sheets blanketing the desks.

Harry frowned and raised the bacon in front of his eyes. He peered at it, blew on it a few times, shrugged and then popped the rest into his mouth. “If someone would help with the cleaning charms rather than leave it to house elves, who don’t seem to want anything to do with this place, it might not be so bad,” he said between bites.

Draco felt his cheeks heat up and he turned his head away. “But that’s servant stuff,” he insisted.

“No, that’s anyone-who-doesn’t-like-dust stuff,” Harry replied, eating another piece of — slightly dusty — bacon.

“You don’t seem to mind,” Draco remarked dryly.

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t feel like sitting in the hall this morning, is all.”

Draco relaxed, resting his weight on his hands. “I only lasted about ten minutes myself,” he said, glad to have moved past the topic of domestic housework and on to something far more interesting. “It’s a complete madhouse up there. There are owls and papers flying all over the place, and you can’t hear a thing over the shouting. I brought you a copy of the Daily Prophet, by the way,” he
added, holding the paper out to Harry. “You made the front page.”

Harry leaned away from him and curled his hands up into his sleeves. “I don’t think I want to read it.”

Draco rolled his eyes and waggled it in front of his face. “You might not want to, but you should. My father says that knowing the public’s opinion of you is the first step in turning it in your favour. After all, you can’t fix something if you don’t know how it’s broken.”

“You really think I’ll be able to fix this?” Harry asked skeptically.

“Harry, when it comes to the public you can fix anything with the right amount of persuasion.”

The corners of Harry’s lips twitched. “Did your father tell you that as well?” he asked, and Draco was almost certain he was being teased.

“He’s made a living out of it,” he replied haughtily before flicking the newspaper open and holding it directly in front of Harry’s face. “Come on then, don’t be a scaredy-crup.”

Harry slowly reached up and took the paper from him. He tilted it to catch the faint light from the chandelier and, with a final beleaguered look at Draco, began to read the article taking up all of the front page.

Draco leaned back and kicked his heels up onto a neighbouring desk as he waited for Harry to finish, taking a moment to enjoy the peace and quiet after the chaos of the great hall. He already knew the article by heart, and could guess how far Harry had gotten from the expressions flitting across his face.

*Boy Who Lived: Lauded Hero or Dangerous Dark Wizard?*

*Cries of outrage echoed through the halls of St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Illnesses yesterday as dozens of parents were notified that their children had been admitted for injuries ranging from a bad case of the Melofors jinx to a ghastly hand wound that may leave one young wizard unable to use a wand.*

*You may ask, dear readers, what could have happened to cause such a tragedy? The same question was racing through my mind as I arrived at St Mungo’s yesterday afternoon to discover the truth — and what a truth it is!*  

*You no doubt remember how You-Know-Who commanded legions of slithering spies during the last war, using common snakes to snoop on the good witches and wizards of Great Britain. Nowhere was safe from their prying eyes, not even our own homes, where nests of adders would set up beneath floorboards and inside walls — watching, listening, waiting!*  

*What relief You-Know-Who’s defeat brought! After suffering in silence for ten years we believed we were finally free to speak our minds. However, in a twist of fate that left me trembling, I learned yesterday that the well-known dark ability has reappeared in one of our nation’s children.*

*Harry Potter is a parselmouth!*  

*‘He set a snake on us in our dorm on the first morning of classes,’ wheezed one Ronald Weasley, the poor boy barely recognizable beneath a mass of painful purple pustules. ‘We managed to fight it off, but we knew it would only be a matter of time before he started cursing us.*

*Weasley’s wise prediction came true yesterday when the ability reared its ugly head during a*
Transfiguration class where, instead of turning his snake into a handbag, Harry Potter set it on his fellow students!

You can imagine the panic this would have caused Hogwarts’s youngest charges! Barely out from under their mother’s skirts and already forced to fight for life and limb against an army of slippery, scaled soldiers with a handful of spells learned in secret when the school refused to teach these young witches and wizards how to defend themselves.

‘I saw Potter fling a boy against the wall with magic like it was nothing!’ exclaimed Gryffindor student Parvati Patil as a stream of slugs crawled out her nose. ‘But the professors refused to teach us spells like that, so we had to learn on our own.’

The parents of the injured children are calling for young Harry, age eleven, to be thrown from the school. But in a strange turn of events Albus Dumbledore, the current headmaster and well known advocate against the Dark Arts, has blocked their request.

‘Not all dark wizards are parslemouths,’ he said, pointing to his defeat of Gellert Grindelwald in the mid 1900s. ‘Likewise, not all parslemouths are dark wizards. I believe Harry’s ability to speak Parseltongue is a reaction to having been touched by dark magic on the night he vanquished [You-Know-Who], not a sign of a malevolent or evil nature.’

Other advocates for Harry Potter included Augusta Longbottom, whose grandson was also being treated for injuries. ‘We encountered him on our way to Diagon Alley late last summer,’ she explained. ‘He was a perfectly polite boy.’

‘He saved my life,’ said young Neville Longbottom, his eyes filling with tears at the memory of his brush with death. ‘In our first flying lesson my broom went out of control and he flew after me and kept me from falling until our Professor arrived.’

Hogwarts has agreed to destroy the remaining snakes so that such a tragedy cannot happen again. As for Harry Potter’s fate, the school will perform an in-depth inquiry into the events surrounding yesterday’s attack before taking any action.

Until then it will be up to you, my dear readers, to decide.

Harry Potter: boy hero, or dark wizard in the making?

Your favourite news reporter signing out,

Rita Skeeter.

“They’re going to kill the snakes?” Harry said in alarm, his entire body going rigid as he reached the end of the article.

“You were almost labelled a dangerously deranged dark wizard in the papers and that’s what you’re worried about?” Draco asked, astounded. “Do you realize how many reputations that Skeeter woman has ruined over the years? Mother says she wrote for a gossip rag before she managed to get a job at the Prophet a few years back. She doesn’t consider an article good until someone’s reputation has been smeared, and once she sets her eyes on you nothing will stop her. She won’t even take bribes! It’s scandalous!”

Harry didn’t seem to hear him.

“But the snakes didn’t do anything wrong!” he insisted, leaning forward. “Most of them were still in their tanks. They’re innocent!”
Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. “And you aren’t?” he asked as Harry scooped up his bag and leapt from the cluster of desks. He was halfway out the door before Draco realized he was being abandoned. “Hey!” he called, scrambling to his feet. “Where are you going?”

Harry caught the door frame with one hand, his momentum nearly spinning him to the floor as he poked his head back into the room. “I need to get them out of there!” Then he was gone, and after a moment’s hesitation Draco threw decorum to the wind to chase after him.

“Are you mad?” he called to Harry’s quickly retreating back as they pelted along the deserted corridor. “Do you have any idea what the press will do to you if they find out? You’ll be crucified! Harry! Slow down, would you! They won’t do anything right away.”

Harry skidded to a stop at the base of the stairwell leading up to the next floor long enough for him to catch up. Draco pressed a hand to his ribs, breathing hard. Harry, on the other hand, was breathing hardly at all.

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I am,” Draco panted. “It’s going to be a complete circus. The parents of the injured students have petitioned to watch, which means the press will weasel their way in too. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if it makes headlines on the continent. It isn’t every day a new parselmouth appears and an entire class of students land themselves in hospital, after all.”

Harry’s hand tightened around the bannister. “They’re going to celebrate,” he said, his voice tight with disbelief and the seeds of anger. “Like it’s some kind of party?”

“Obviously,” Draco replied. A moment later he regretted his flippant tone when Harry fixed him with a glare so furious it would have given Snape a run for his money. “Don’t look at me like that,” he whined. “It’s true.”

“You make it sound like a good thing!”

“Isn’t it?” he asked, trying to salvage the situation. “With so many outsiders in the school the headmaster will have to attend, but he’s been called into meetings with the Board of Governors and won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest.”

Harry’s face softened as he mulled over the scenario Draco had provided. “How do you know that?” he asked.

“My father wrote me, of course.” Draco patted his robe, drawing Harry’s eyes to the corner of the envelope peeking out of the front pocket. “He’s one of the governors, remember?”

Harry nodded slowly. “So I have a day and a half,” he murmured.

Draco took a step forward. “You aren’t seriously going to try this, are you?”

“I can’t just sit back and watch them be destroyed!” Harry replied fiercely. He pressed a hand to his chest. “This is my fault, so I’m the one who has to fix it. I made a promise — no more running away.” Turning on his heel he began bounding up the stairs two at a time. “Thanks for the paper, Draco,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll see you later!”

Draco watched him disappear around the bend, wondering what on earth he’d just set in motion. “This isn’t what I meant when I suggested you try to fix things,” he said to the empty stairwell, well aware Harry could no longer hear him.
With a goal firmly in place, Harry spent the remainder of the day staking out Professor McGonagall’s classroom. Or trying to, at least. Despite classes having been cancelled while the staff focused on dealing with angry parents and worried board members, the transfiguration room was still swarming with activity. Aurors in their armoured black robes made coordinated sweeps of the room. They held their wands out before them like dowsing rods, making note of each time the tip lit up in shades of red, blue or green. Others were interviewing the classroom portraits, though when Harry caught a glimpse of the heavy gilt frames on one of his passes all he could see was a wall of faces as the figures of half the castle’s paintings tried to get in on the action. Even the Fat Lady was there, her bright pink ball gown hiked up around her waist to keep it out of the way of a gaggle of hags puffing on long-stemmed pipes.

Harry wasn’t bold enough to walk directly up to the door to check whether the snakes were still in their tanks, and when one of the aurors noticed him lingering outside for the sixth time that hour he was forced to duck his head and hurry away without looking back in case they decided they should interview him again too.

He didn’t slow down until he’d climbed two flights of stairs and cut through a secret passage hidden in an alcove across from a dejected looking suit of armour with an upside-down funnel on its head and joints fuzed solid by years of rust. Pushing aside a final tapestry, he emerged near the upper entrance to the library and stumbled upon Professor McGonagall giving what looked to be a very stern lecture to Hermione who, judging by the way her eyes kept flicking restlessly towards the library doors, was fresh out of the hospital wing and eager to get back to her studies after a day and a half of forced bedrest.

“I expect you to behave yourself from now on,” Professor McGonagall said. “Self-defence is well and good, but a brawl like that one only gets worse the more spells are cast. It was sheer dumb luck you avoided a trip to Saint Mungo’s.” She caught sight of Harry standing awkwardly next to the wall and fixed him with a stern stare. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about you, Mister Potter. You may not have been injured, but you’ve landed yourself under enough public scrutiny to crush an abraxan. A full inquiry — it’s really too much! If I find out you’ve put so much as a toe out of line between now and the end of the year I’ll see you in detention until you graduate!”

That didn’t seem too bad to Harry, who would take detention any day over being expelled. Professor McGonagall hadn’t even threatened him with the hospital wing. “Okay,” he agreed easily.

His nonchalance on the matter must have been alarming because Hermione’s face suddenly drained of colour and Professor McGonagall pushed back her wide-brimmed emerald hat and rubbed her temples.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” his professor said wearily. She started to leave, but turned back before she’d made it five steps.

“Ah yes, I nearly forgot. I heard from the aurors that your wand turned up clean, Potter. So take twenty points for doing the right thing and keeping out of the fight.”

Harry opened his mouth to refuse — how could he accept a reward after letting both his friends and the snakes down when they needed him the most? — but there was a fire burning in Professor McGonagall’s eyes that stole the words from his lips. It was the same look she’d worn the time
she’d dragged him off to become part of the quidditch team, the one that wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Upon reflection, the hourglass showing Gryffindor’s house points had been rather low this morning. Miles behind both Ravenclaw and Slytherin, and only just above Hufflepuff. Suddenly her insistence on rewarding him became clear to Harry, and he decided not to kick up a fuss. He doubted she’d listen in any case.

“As for you, Miss Granger…” McGonagall paused a moment, her fingers twitching slightly as she calculated the number of points still needed to get her house anywhere close to being back in the running. “Take twenty points as well — for outstanding spellwork under pressure.”

Once she’d left Hermione turned to him, a dismayed expression on her face. “You’re going to do something reckless, aren’t you?”

“Of course not,” he replied, unable to meet her searching gaze.

In the end, Hermione was too persistent for him to shake. When he snuck down from his empty dorm room late that night she was sitting in an armchair near the fire — a book in her lap and frown on her face.

“What’s so important you need to sneak out now?” she whispered as she followed him out the portrait hole. “You heard what Professor McGonagall said— detention for seven years!”

He clutched his satchel tight enough to feel Basil shifting her coils through the sturdy fabric. They had come up with a plan in the quiet of his four-poster after curfew. Harry would get the snakes out of their tanks, and Basil would lead them into the hidden maze of pipes she’d discovered while searching for the secret of the third floor corridor. From there the snakes could leave the school if they wished or continue to dwell in secret, emerging at night to hunt the feral rats and mice infesting the castle’s many forgotten nooks and crannies.

“I need to save them,” he said. “That’s all that matters.”

Hermione’s brow scrunch up in confusion. “Save them? Save who, Harry?”

“The snakes. You read the paper, right? They’re going to be killed if I don’t do something.”

“You can’t risk seven years of detention over a bunch of snakes!” she exclaimed as he checked the next hallway for patrolling prefects. “Harry!”

She tried her best to dissuade him, but Harry wouldn’t budge, not even when her whispers turned so desperate he might have mistaken it for Parseltongue if he’d been able to understand her.

As they reached the transfiguration corridor Harry shushed her with a finger to his lips. Her jaw clicked shut as she realized she was also currently out of bed after curfew and likely to get in just as much trouble as him would if they were caught.

Together they peeked into the hallway and Harry’s heart sank. A lantern was flickering outside Professor McGonagall’s classroom. It had been set on one of two three-legged stools. The other stool held the castle caretaker, Argus Filch. Ms Norris was curled up on his lap and Harry could hear the low rumble of her purring as Filch alternated between stroking her back and scratching behind her long, tufted ears.

Harry pulled Hermione back around the corner, thinking furiously of a way to get Filch to leave. It was clear he was acting as a guard, and therefore wouldn’t abandon his post willingly or for long.
A dungbomb might have worked to get him away from the door, but the stench could be ignored long enough for him to come back and catch Harry in the act, especially if he expected someone to try and break into the room.

Harry wasn’t carrying dungbombs in any case, so it was a moot point. Apart from Basil — who he would never send up against either Filch or Ms Norris, let alone both of them at once — the only tool he had at his disposal was his magic, and he wracked his brain for a spell that might help him.

“This is a bad idea!” Hermione hissed below her breath.

“Go back to the common room then,” he growled. “I’ll think of something and make it back before they realize the snakes are gone, you’ll see.”

His voice must have carried through the silent halls because Ms Norris let out a yowl.

“Who’s there?” called Filch. The puddle of light cast by his lantern spread across the floor as he stood up and shuffled down the hall towards their hiding place.

Hermione looked at him with terrified eyes and tugged his hand, begging him to run, but he pulled away and shook his head. He couldn’t give up. Not now. There had to be some way he could get past Filch — if only he could think of it!

A strange look crossed Hermione’s face and then she nodded to herself, having come to a decision. She pushed Harry back against the wall — into the shadows beside the door frame — pulled up her hood, and then stepped out into the hall. When the lantern light brushed the hem of her nightgown she spun around and took off at a run, slippered feet slapping the stairs as she took them two at a time, leaping from step to step.

“Stop right there!” Filch bellowed, sprinting after her. He was past Harry in an instant and continued on down the stairs, never looking back.

Harry didn't wait for the light from Filch’s lantern to disappear before making a run for the Transfiguration classroom. He nearly tripped over Ms Norris in the dark, who had remained at the door like a miniature sentinel. She hissed at him as he drew his wand and pointed it at the handle.

“Alohomora!” he whispered. The lock clicked and he pushed the door open, sliding inside. He tried to shut Ms Norris out, but she was too quick for him, slipping past his feet and into the room where she hissed and growled, stalking him as he jogged to the snakes’ terrariums.

“Wake up!” he called to them. “I’ve come to let you out, but you need to go now!”

The snakes stirred slowly, their blood sluggish in the cool night air. “We go?” they asked drowsily.

“Yes, but you need to hurry! They'll kill you otherwise.”

That had the snakes' attention, and they roused quickly as he pulled them from the tanks and set them on the floor.

Ms Norris’s fur was standing on end, nearly doubling her size. She swiped at the smaller snakes with her claws, but Harry aimed a foot in her direction and she was forced to hop backwards to avoid it, glowering and spitting all the while.

While he worked to free the snakes, Basil slid from his satchel, her long body allowing her to nose the floor before dropping down to the cool stone. The snakes scattered around her, intimidated by her size, but when she didn't strike out they edged closer.
“We knew the Speaker would come for us,” some said.

“Where are we going?” others asked.

“I will show you the best places to hide and hunt,” Basil told them.

“Hunt?” they asked, crowding closer, intrigued. “We do not know how to hunt. We have always eaten corpses.”

“You do not know how to hunt?” Basil reared back in shock. For a wild snake the idea that any one of her kind didn’t know how to get their own food was astounding.

“No,” they replied. “Will you teach us?”

“Of course, but… this is very unusual.”

Harry finished ferrying the last of the grass snakes out of their tank and moved on to the larger terrarium, which contained two ball pythons. They were heavy enough to make his arms shake when they both jumped on him at once, eager to get out like the others. Once they were on the floor one of them lunged at Ms Norris, causing her to yowl in fear and bolt from the room.

Quickly, before she could fetch Filch, Harry replaced the lids of the terrariums and tiptoed towards the exit, making sure not to step on any of the snakes half-hidden in the gloom. He poked his head out the doorway and looked up and down the corridor.

“It's clear,” he said to Basil.

“Then we will go. Be careful on your way back to your den,” she replied before the snakes slithered from the room.

“Thank you, Speaker,” they said as he waited for all of them to pass so he could close the door. “We will remember your kindness. We do not know much, but if you need anything ask us and we will do our best to help you.”

When the last snake's tail cleared the jam, Harry pulled the door closed and took off back towards Gryffindor Tower at a light jog. The snakes went the other way, towards one of the few mouse holes that would be big enough to fit the thick bodies of the ball pythons.

Harry kept an eye out for Filch’s lantern and for Ms Norris's eyes, which glowed like lanterns themselves, but Hermione must have evaded him long enough to draw him far from the Transfiguration wing because Harry didn't see a soul until he turned a corner and bumped into someone travelling as quickly and quietly as he was in the opposite direction.

Harry bounced off them with a startled oof and tumbled to the floor. The person he'd hit fared only a little better, cartwheeling their arms to remain upright.

“P-P-Potter!” stammered a familiar anxious voice.

Harry looked up at Professor Quirrell with wide eyes as he rubbed his bruised elbow. Quirrell had been moving in total darkness, and the near silent step of his soft shoes had completely slipped Harry's radar beneath the sound of his own footsteps.

“Hello Professor,” he greeted the man meekly, stumbling back to his feet.

“W-what are you doing out of b-bed at this hour?” Quirrell asked, nervously straightening his
“I was…” His mind went completely blank, all the prepared excuses the twins had provided him slipping through his fingers, intangible as the wind. “Stretching my legs,” he finished lamely, then added. “I couldn’t sleep. You’re stuck doing rounds tonight Professor?”

Quirrell fidgeted. “Y-yes?” He sounded as guilty as Harry felt, and Harry looked up at him in confusion.

Was Professor Quirrell also out doing something he shouldn’t be? Harry wondered. He studied the man’s pale, thin face, but all he took away from his scrutiny was the start of a headache.

“W-well,” Quirrell began awkwardly. “I suppose I should see you b-back to your common room?” He sounded uncertain, as though he didn’t do this very often, and Harry contemplated bolting past and hoping the timid professor would fail to report him in the morning.

As though he’d read his mind Quirrell reached out quickly and grabbed him by the shoulder. Caught off guard, Harry lurched away — the sudden movement causing Quirrell’s knuckles to brush against the bare skin of his neck. The contact lasted less than a second, but in that moment it was as though a red hot brand had been pressed to Harry’s brow. He cried out in surprise and clasped his hands over his scar, certain it was about to explode it hurt so bad. He staggered away from Quirrell, backing up until he collided with the base of a nearby window frame. As the pain faded and he was able to lower his hands he saw there was blood on his palms.

He looked up at Quirrell who was groaning pitifully and clutching his right wrist. In the gloom Harry could see something wrong with his knuckles. The skin had darkened and grown shiny lumps — like blisters.

“Did I do that?” he asked in dismay as the blisters slowly crept up the back of Quirrell’s hand. He had nothing against the man, and had no idea why he would have reacted so strongly to being grabbed, but after what had happened to Seamus the day before he couldn’t shake off the small voice in the back of his head that whispered he’d done it again.

Quirrell whimpered. He was biting his bottom lip hard and his shoulders jerked in a noncommittal shrug.

“Who’s there?” called a voice Harry had hoped not to hear again that night moments before Filch turned the corner behind him, towing a pale and shaky Hermione by the collar. Ms Norris minced along behind them, looking superior in the way only cats and Malfoys could.

“Aha!” Filch crowed in triumph when he saw Harry. “Caught another one have we?” Then his face contorted in confusion. “I didn’t know you were on rounds tonight, Professor.”

Quirrell straightened, quickly hiding his injured hand in the loose sleeve of his robe. “Ah, y-yes,” he stammered. “Figured I should h-help keep an eye on things while everyone else is p-preoccupied.” He giggled, the sound high and far too tight to be natural. It might have been pain, but from the way the man’s eyes were darting around the corridor as he spoke, Harry was once again struck with the sense that his professor was also up to no good this evening, though it still didn’t give him any clue as to what the man was trying to do. He was forced to put the question aside when Filch snagged his collar with two long, dirty fingers.

Out of the two adults with them in the corridor, Harry would have chosen to burn Filch, no questions asked. But the strange reaction he’d had to Professor Quirrell brushing his neck didn’t repeat itself, and so he remained caught. He exchanged a defeated look with Hermione and
mouTHEd 'sorry' to her. She glared in a way that said 'I told you so' and then turned her head aside, nose in the air.

“No matter,” Filch said, dismissing Quirrell in favour of sneering at Harry and Hermione. “I think Professor McGonagall will be very interested to see the two of you. Bring up a light if you would Professor, I lost my lantern chasing this one.” He gave Hermione a shake that had her squeaking in protest and trying to straighten her nightgown, which was pulling over one shoulder.

Quirrell hesitated before bringing out his wand and lighting it silently.

“What happened to your hand?” asked Filch, staring at Quirrell's blistered skin. The wound looked ghastly in the light — red and raw, like a burn. “Was it this miscreant?” He gave Harry a shake as well.

Quirrell wet his lips, glancing quickly at Harry as he did so. Harry tensed, expecting the worst.

“N-no. N-nothing like that,” Quirrell said. “I… knocked over a cauldron earlier. C-clumsy of me, hee hee.”

Filch’s lips pulled back, baring his teeth in a ferocious scowl. His hand tightened around Harry’s shoulder, his short nails biting into Harry’s skin, but Harry was too astonished to notice.

Professor Quirrell had just lied to protect him, and to another adult no less! It made him feel even worse for having unintentionally burned the man.

“Pity,” Filch growled. “I’ve been looking for a reason to get this thing out of the school. Attacking a Professor might ‘ave been enough.”

“You can’t just call someone a thing!” Hermione protested. She tried to pull away from his hand but Filch was tenacious and dragged her closer.

“Shut up!” he snarled, tightening his grip on her as well. “You don’t get to talk back to me.” She winced and tugged at his wrist. “Stop it! You're hurting me!” Tears were gathering in her eyes, but Filch didn’t let go.

“You’ll have a lot more to complain about once Professor McGonagall’s through with you,” he said before giving them both a rough shove. “Come on. Walk!”

Harry was sure Professor Quirrell would take the opportunity to flee and was oddly relieved when, instead of running, the man fell into step with them as they started up the stairs towards Professor McGonagall’s private quarters.

Each step felt like a noose tightening around Harry's neck. It had been less than twenty-four hours since she warned him not to get into any more trouble, and here he was — in trouble.

At least the snakes got away, Harry reminded himself. In the end, that was what really mattered.

Filch pounded on Professor McGonagall's door for a full five minutes before the Gryffindor head of house emerged, her hair in a messy bun and a heavy green shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Dark bags had developed under her eyes since Harry had seen her earlier that day, and he wondered
if she’d been running back and forth between Hogwarts and St Mungo’s ever since.

“I hope this is important Argus—” she began to say, but then her eyes landed on Harry and Hermione corralled between the two adults and her mouth froze part way open. Colour flooded her cheeks and she drew herself up, suddenly looking wide awake. She stepped aside, pushing the door fully open, and held her arm out towards the interior of her quarters. “In. All of you.”

Harry and Hermione slunk past her into the room, moving to stand in front of a low coffee table set with candles and a small cat figurine. A pair of leather sofas flanked the table, but neither of them dared sit down as Professor Quirrell and Filch filed in behind them. Professor McGonagall clapped her hands and the candles on the table sprung to life, casting small globes of light about the room. Then she shut the door with a firm click and whirled on them.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

For once Hermione didn’t jump in with an explanation. When Harry peeked at her from the corner of his eye, he found she was staring resolutely at her toes, a frown on her face and her hand massaging the shoulder Filch had manhandled.

Harry took a deep breath and forced his shoulders down from where they’d been hunched protectively beside his neck. Don’t run, he reminded himself. Saving the snakes was the right thing to do. I have nothing to be ashamed of. He untucked his right foot from where it had been pressed against his ankle and set it firmly on the ground, dropped his hands to his sides and tilted his head back, meeting his professor’s eyes directly.

This was the second time Hermione had put herself at risk to help him. It was time he returned the favour.

“It’s half-past two in the morning,” he said.

“And remind me, Mister Potter. When is the first year curfew?”

“Nine at night, Professor.”

“Well, since you clearly haven’t been confounded, perhaps you’d care to explain why you felt the need to break the rules after I clearly told you to behave yourself?” She crossed her arms, waiting.

Harry saw Hermione glance his way and he shook his head, not bothering to disguise the movement. It wouldn’t have worked in any case. Not while they were being watched so closely.

“Nothing to say for yourselves?” Professor McGonagall asked when it became clear they would both hold their silence.

“No, Professor,” Harry replied.

McGonagall turned to Filch and Quirrell, the latter of whom flinched when her eyes landed on him.

“Where did you find them?” she demanded.

“I found this one down near the transfiguration classroom,” Filch said, motioning to Hermione. “She bolted when I saw her, but she couldn’t outrun me.”

“My classroom?” Professor McGonagall’s brow furrowed. “And where did you find Mister Potter?”
“Found him and Professor Quirrell here at the base of the east stairwell.”

Everyone turned to stare at the timid defence professor, who withered under the sudden scrutiny. Harry could see the man’s shoulders shaking and his eyes kept darting towards the door. Again he wondered why the man hadn’t made his escape when he had the chance. He offered his professor what he hoped was a reassuring smile and was relieved when the corners of his lips twitched up in response.

“W-we sort of b-bumped into each other,” Quirrell offered meekly.

“And you have no idea what they were doing out of bed?”

Quirrell shrugged, helpless.

“Nothing good, that’s what,” Filch growled.

Professor McGonagall walked to the sofa across from the door and sank wearily onto the cushions. “Well,” she said. “I hope you’re comfortable because I expect an answer out of you, even if it takes all night.”

Harry wasn’t sure Professor McGonagall would last that long. Her eyelids were already drooping, the dark circles ringing them even more pronounced now that her face was fully illuminated by the candlelight. With nothing to lose he settled in to wait it out.

The standoff might have lasted hours if not for Ms Norris.

When it became clear to her that her human was unhappy with the lack of punishment taking place she jumped up onto the coffee table and wove around the cat figurine, stopping directly in front of Professor McGonagall. Her bushy tail coiled and flicked behind her as she pawed the woman’s knee and let out a plaintive meow. When Professor McGonagall didn’t react immediately she meowed again, louder, and batted her leg.

“What is it, my sweet?” Filch asked his cat. One of Ms Norris’s ears twitched back in his direction, but she otherwise ignored him, keeping her eyes locked on Professor McGonagall’s face.

Professor McGonagall looked down at the cat for a long moment, considering her. She took a deep breath and then, without a word of warning to her guests, she melted.

That’s how it appeared to Harry, at least, who’d been preoccupied during his first transfiguration lesson and had missed the majority of Professor McGonagall’s animagus transformation. Now he watched, fascinated by the way her body folded in on itself, the fabric of her dressing gown dissolving into a mesh of short fibres before darkening into black and grey fur.

The transformation was over just as quickly as it had begun, leaving two cats perched on the coffee table - Ms Norris, and the lean grey tabby Professor McGonagall had become.

The tabby made a chirruping mew and flicked her ears forward. Ms Norris warbled back, a long string of incomprehensible cat sounds accompanied by tail-flicks and head-bobs.

A cold weight settled in Harry’s stomach as he realized Professor McGonagall was talking to Ms Norris. From Hermione's muffled gasp, she'd realized it too.

As the warbled conversation in front of him continued, his mind raced back to all the times he’d seen cats basking in the heat of the common room fire or stalking the corridors for a late night snack. It was hard to bring them to mind, cats were so common in the castle he’d long since
stopped paying attention to them. His heart sped up as he wondered whether those cats had reported to Professor McGonagall as well? A whole army of furry spies hidden in plain sight, always watching.

Suddenly, the fear Rita Skeeter had written about in her article was no longer impossible or ridiculous. If snakes really had been used as spies during the war he wasn’t sure he could blame witches and wizards for being wary of them. It didn’t make destroying them right, of course — he wouldn’t try to kill off the castle cats just because one of them might catch him doing something he shouldn’t be — but now that the possibility had been raised in his mind he knew the slight sense of unease would stay with him and he’d spend more time checking over his shoulder, just in case.

By the time Professor McGonagall transformed back Harry had admitted he’d been totally outmaneuvered and had resigned himself to bearing the brunt of her anger.

“Mister Potter,” she said sharply. “I have just been informed that you released the snakes in my classroom.”

Professor Quirrell made a strange choking noise, but no one paid him any attention.

Harry kept his head up and looked Professor McGonagall in the eyes. “You were going to kill them!” he said. “Not because they were dangerous or did something wrong — but because a bunch of scared people told you to. They were innocent!”

Professor McGonagall’s shawl had slipped down one shoulder without her noticing and Harry could see her anger in the rigid lines of her neck. “That does not give you leave to break into my classroom — or to have dragged Miss Granger into helping you!”

“Hermione has nothing to do with this,” he argued. “She was trying to talk me out of it, Professor.”

“Only to then lead Mister Filch on a wild chase through the halls in order to give you enough time to sneak past him.”

“There was no time to think it through,” Hermione said quietly, finally breaking her silence. “I panicked. I’m sorry.”

“She really was trying to talk me out of it,” Harry repeated, determined not to drag Hermione down with him any further than he already had.

With a sharp movement that reminded Harry of the irate flicking of a cat’s tail, Professor McGonagall flipped the right side of her shawl back over her shoulder. She looked them both over once more, clicked her tongue in disapproval, and then finally leaned back into the cushions.

“No matter how noble your intentions,” she said briskly, “the two of you broke a school rule tonight and I’m very disappointed in you.”

Hermione gasped in pain, and when Harry looked over at her he saw there were tears in her eyes. He turned a glare on Filch, who was standing behind her left shoulder, but the man appeared to be keeping his hands to himself for once, leaving the source of Hermione’s sudden distress a mystery to Harry.

“As such,” Professor McGonagall continued. “I will be taking ten points each, and you will both serve two weeks’ worth of detentions with me.”

“What?” Filch shouted, outraged. “That’s not nearly enough. I want to see some real punishment!”
“Enough, Argus!” she snapped. “I am their head of house, not you. And as such I will be the one to determine what is or is not an acceptable punishment.” She turned away from the sputtering caretaker to address them all.

“Not one word of what went on tonight is to pass your lips. I don’t believe in throwing minors to the press, and if they learn the snakes were released rather than destroyed they won’t rest until they’ve goaded all of Britain into a witch hunt. I will not allow such an ordeal to take place at this school. Not over a bunch of reptiles who, as Mister Potter has so emphatically insisted, did absolutely nothing wrong.”

Harry’s heart lifted with gratitude. “You agree they’re innocent?” he asked.

“I do,” she replied. “And I don’t believe all the hullabaloo in the papers about you using snakes to spy on us.” It was the first time she’d made reference to his ability to speak Parseltongue directly, and a wave of relief washed over him when he realized she wasn’t going to make a big fuss over it.

“Of course I won’t,” he agreed. “It’s not like they understand English anyways.”

“I suspected as much.” She looked down at Ms Norris. “Cats are much the same, after all.”

“But what about the spectacle?” Filch protested. “They want to see those snakes bleed!”

“Maybe you should take their place,” Harry muttered, not quite quiet enough to go unheard by Quirrell, who hummed in agreement before realizing that wishing death upon his coworker in front of the deputy headmistress was a very bad idea and hastily covered the sound with a cough.

“You can leave the details of that to me,” Professor McGonagall told Filch. “I’d be a poor master of transfiguration if I couldn’t whip up a few dozen snakes.”

“But—“

“Not one word!” She looked into each of their faces in turn. “Do I make myself clear?”

“O-oh yes,” Quirrell stammered when her gaze landed on him. “Quite c-clear.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief and smiled at his head of house. It looked as though the snakes would be safe after all.

“Thank you Professor,” he said, bowing slightly.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she replied. “You still have detention, and if you pull another stunt like this I assure you that cleaning cages or scrubbing the owlery will be the least of your concerns.”

“I understand.”

Filch wasn’t so eager to give in, but when Ms Norris hopped off the table and pressed a paw to his shin he finally realized he was howling against the wind. “Fine,” he growled. “Have it your way. But if I catch them out of bed again they’ll get what’s coming to them.”

Professor McGonagall dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

“Quirinus, please see Mister Potter and Miss Granger back to their common room,” she said, standing up from the couch. “I’m going back to bed. I’ve had far too much excitement these past few days.”

“O-of course,” Quirrell said, quickly ushering Harry and Hermione out the door and back towards
Quirrell waited until the Fat Lady’s portrait had swung shut behind Harry and Hermione before ducking into the closest empty room and sealing the door with the strongest warding charms he knew. With shaking hands he tugged at the tails of his turban, tearing the entire headdress off when they failed to unwind quickly enough.

His master took a ragged breath, his half-formed lungs heaving with a rage Quirrell could feel searing every nerve in his body.

“Meddling brat!” Voldemort snarled. “How dare he interfere with my plans!”

Quirrell wet his lips and found that they too were shaking. “B-but Master, isn’t it better this way?” he asked, not even needing to fake the stutter. “The snakes are free, just like you wanted, and no one will suspect us of having done it.”

He felt Voldemort’s face twist into a sneer. “I needed those snakes to find the stone. Now we’ll need to waste precious time hunting them down one by one!”

“But we already know the stone’s being kept beneath the third floor—“

“Fool!” Voldemort roared, his rage knocking Quirrell to his knees. “The headmaster has not put in place his own protections. The stone must still be with him!”

Quirrell lowered his head until his brow was pressed against the floor. The cold stone felt good against his skin and he swallowed back the urge to be sick. “W-what is he waiting for?”

“That is what I need to find out. Now, get up and find me one of those snakes!”

If he were a braver man Quirrell might have argued that the snakes could wait until the next day, as it was closing in on dawn and he needed to treat the strange wound on his hand. But he was not, and he knew the price of disobedience. So, instead of protesting, he stumbled upright on trembling limbs and fixed his turban back in place.

“Yes, Master.”

Chapter End Notes

I think it was the cannon Voldemort who brought up Wormtail finding him by speaking to wild rats about places they feared to go, and that got me thinking about the other animagi in the series. Wouldn't they also be able to speak to their animal counterparts? And for Professor McGonagall, that would mean that she could speak to all the pet cats in the castle - which would be fascinating, and would possibly lead to situations such as the one in this chapter! :)

We also had some Quirrell in this chapter - and you'll need to decide for yourselves whether he stuck up for Harry on his own or whether he was ordered to by Voldemort.
I know there's a lot of people curious as to when Voldemort will start to play a larger role in the story, and I can happily say that the next chapter will be the catalyst that throws him and Harry together - though not in the way you might expect (and not the Voldemort you might expect either).

Thank you for sticking with this story despite the long update gaps. It seems like I never have enough time in the day to do everything I want, and it's always a precarious balance between writing, work, and my adoptable shop over on Flight Rising, but I have no intentions of giving up on this story, so you can continue to look forward to many chapters to come!
The morning after Rita Skeeter’s inflammatory article graced the front page of the Prophet began with a literal bang.

“Are you going to open them?” Hermione asked, staring at the pile of letters quickly overtaking Harry’s plate as they sat at the end of the Gryffindor table having breakfast.

Harry prodded the stack with his fork, tentatively lifting one corner up far enough to catch a glimpse of his half-eaten ham and eggs, well aware of Professor McGonagall’s eyes on him. “I don’t know who they’re from,” he protested, trying to fish out a bit of ham that hadn’t plastered itself to the parchment.

He gave up when the latest messenger, a harried tawny owl, dropped a thick envelope that hit the top of the stack with a wet, squelching sound before it slid off, trailing an oily substance that reeked of decomposing fish, and bowled straight into his juice. Hermione caught his goblet before it toppled over and slid it out of harm’s way.

As she wrinkled her nose in disgust at the smell, Harry watched the owl wheel about in midair and race back across the hall, all but throwing itself out the window above the teacher’s table. That… wasn’t a good sign.

“I think we should leave,” he said, grabbing his bag from between his feet and swinging one leg over the bench. Wisps of smoke had started rising from the suspicious envelope and, worse than whatever that was, he could see the corners of at least two crimson howlers tucked in among the rest and had no desire to be anywhere nearby when they went off.

Hermione turned to frown at him in disapproval. “You shouldn’t leave mail unopened,” she scolded. “Some of it could be import—”

Harry grabbed her arm and dove off the bench as one of the howlers split open in a shower of sparks and triggered a chain of explosions that shook the rafters.

His mail erupted in a ball of multicoloured flames that devoured the end of the table while the howlers shrieked in rage. Harry clamped his hands to his ears and shuffled back until he bumped...
against the Ravenclaw bench and, in a maneuver that would have made Basil proud, twisted his body under it and out the other side so rapidly that the startled sixth-year boy he passed beneath yelped and booted the underside of the table in panic.

As the students closest to where Harry had been sitting scrambled away, the staff jumped to their feet and rushed off the dais, tiny Professor Flitwick in the lead. The Charms Professor whipped out his wand and cast a silencing spell over the table, plunging the hall into merciful silence.

Harry watched them extinguish the flames, his ears ringing so badly that when Professor McGonagall came over to check on them she needed to repeat herself twice before he could understand what she’d asked.

“Are either of you hurt?”

He pulled himself out from beneath the table and shook his head before looking around quickly for Hermione. She was half under the bench beside him, a grimace on her face. “Are you okay?” he asked her as McGonagall was called back to the charred end of her house table by Flitwick.

“I’ve been better,” she replied as she crawled out. There were scrapes on the back of her left hand from their hard landing, and she was rubbing her elbow as though it pained her. “Thanks for pulling me down. If you’d been a bit slower I would have been caught in the explosion.”

“I owed you,” he said, remembering he still hadn’t repaid her for protecting him during their Transfiguration class, and again the night before when she’d distracted Filch. “You ended up in the hospital wing because of me, and I know you don’t like detentions, so it was the least I could do.” Hermione was looking at him with an unreadable expression. Was she angry with him? He looked down, his face suddenly hot. “To say thanks, you know?”

Hermione crossed her arms with a small huff. “Harry, you don’t owe me anything,” she scolded. “I helped you because I consider you my friend, and friends help each other because they want to, not to repay a debt.”

“But you’ve done so much for me while all I seem to do is get you in trouble.” He swallowed hard and hugged his bag against his stomach. “Why would you want to be friends with someone like that… like me?”

“Harry!” She sounded exasperated. “You’re impossible sometimes! Is it so hard to believe we’re friends because I like you? You’re kind and brave, and no matter how much trouble you get yourself into your heart’s always in the right place.” Harry opened his mouth to protest that he’d done plenty of horrible things in the past, but she leaned forward, crowding him back against the bench, her eyes gleaming fiercely. “You risked your life to save Neville during our flying lessons. You insisted we help Malfoy with Professor Snape, despite it being none of our business in the first place. You were the one who was willing to risk expulsion to save a group of animals who hadn’t done any harm.” Her face softened. “I was angry with you last night,” she admitted. “I must have called you every type of idiot under the sun. But you know what? The longer I thought on it, the more I realized you were also right.” She tilted her head back, looking up at the enchanted ceiling where the dawn was painting the bellies of the clouds overhead in pinks and golds. A spasm of pain tightened the skin around her eyes and mouth. “I was a coward, hiding behind rules because it was easy and safe.”

“I don’t think you’re a coward,” he replied quietly. A small smile curled his lips. “After all, you were the one who cursed Draco out in front of Snape of all people. He’s terrifying.”

“Professor Snape,” she corrected before looking at Harry guiltily. “I may have had an ulterior
motive for that.”

“Oh?”

She grimaced. “I know it was selfish of me, but I just… I wanted you as my partner.”

Harry burst out laughing. “I thought you just wanted an excuse to yell at Draco!”

“Well, that too. I know the two of you are friends, but he can be a right prat sometimes.”

Harry stood up and brushed the dust from his robes. “He’s not so bad,” he said as he hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. “He just likes to feel important. I’m sure if you stop one-upping him in class he’ll warm up to you.”

“But his answers are never complete!” she protested, following his lead until, when she reached down to retrieve her own bag, she discovered it was nowhere in sight. After a moment of confusion her face dropped in horror and she spun towards the destroyed table. “My bag!” she wailed, spotting a blackened lump of fabric beneath the remains of the bench. “All my books were in there!”

Guilt gnawed at Harry’s belly as he did his best to console her, even promising to give her his own copies of their school books. She refused point-blank, but he didn’t give up.

They were friends, after all, and no matter how vehemently she argued it voided all debts between them, Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that her life would have been much less stressful without him in it. If the fact she stuck by him regardless wasn’t worth repayment, what was?

“It exploded?” Neville asked in alarm two days later as Harry told him about the letter fiasco. His grandmother had dropped him off that morning in time to make it to their Charms lesson with the Ravenclaws, and the school rumour mill hadn’t yet reached him.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Professor McGonagall promised they’ll screen my letters until everything calms down, but you’ll want to be careful too. You and your gran stuck up for me in that article, so they might decide to yell at you too. Sorry.”

Neville’s face was pale, but he nodded resolutely. “Thanks,” he said, then his expression wavered. “I’m sorry about the snakes. My gran told me they… got rid of the other ones yesterday.”

Harry started, looking at his friend with wide eyes, before he remembered that Neville didn’t know he’d freed the snakes. It was only natural he would believe the ones Professor McGonagall destroyed were real. Still, it caused a cold sweat to break out across his back and he had to remind himself that he’d seen Basil last night, at which point the snakes had all been happy and safe.

She’d found him while he’d been on his way back to the Gryffindor tower and had insisted he take her up to the dorm so she could steal his body heat and gripe about the ‘stupid softbellies’ who couldn’t tell a healthy mouse from a sick one. The ball pythons had even gotten it into their heads to try and eat Ms Norris and wouldn’t listen when Basil insisted they were far too small to fit the cat in their jaws let alone swallow her. Harry silently wished them luck in their endeavour. He wouldn’t mourn the scruffy cat — the only person who would was Filch, and by this point Harry didn’t care much for him either.

Apart from their questionable choices in regards to prey, the snakes were apparently living the good life in the twisting maze of the Hogwarts’s pipe network. They’d cleared the vermin out of several excellent dens near the school kitchens, whose massive hearths and ovens ensured the
stones remained warm no matter how cold it got outside.

“Do you like it there?” he’d asked her, his heart sinking with the feeling of being left out. It was ridiculous, there was no way he’d fit in the narrow channels and cubbies within the walls, but hearing about Basil’s adventures made him want to see it all with his own eyes.

She considered his question. “It is nice, but I like this den best, especially when your loud denmates are gone.”

“Why?”

She’d looked at him as though he were a hatchling just coming out of winter chillsleep. “Because this is where you are,” she explained patiently. The heaviness in Harry’s chest had lifted, and they’d spent the rest of the evening speaking about Harry’s classes and the spells, potions and plants he’d learned about during the week.

Harry shook his head, coming back to the present. There was nothing to worry about. Professor McGonagall had kept her promise. The snakes were all safe.

“It was too bad,” he agreed, torn between telling Neville the truth or keeping his promise to not breathe a word about the deception. He decided to err on the side of caution, as Professor Flitwick was making his rounds, checking up on their wand-work for the protection charm he’d broken the curriculum to teach them. It was a difficult spell, one they normally wouldn’t learn for a few years yet, but Professor Flitwick had looked at the near empty seats on the Gryffindor side of the classroom and decided then and there that teaching students to cast spells without also teaching them to properly defend from them was an irresponsible oversight that must be remedied immediately. And so, regular lessons were put on hold — not only for their class, but for all of Flitwick’s classes — until he was satisfied they could cast a basic protego.

Charms was not the only class to undergo modifications to the syllabus. When they arrived at Defence Against the Dark Arts, they found Flitwick had roped Quirrell into his plan for reform during the morning break, because instead of learning the Bat Boogie Hex like expected they were drilled on spell categorization and counter-spells, and spent a headache-inducing hour matching lists of common hexes and jinxes to the spells that would undo them before Quirrell took pity on them and sent them off early.

The professor’s hand looked much better, Harry noted as he followed Hermione to the front of the room after class. The blisters had gone down, and he didn’t seem to be in pain anymore as he wrote out a list of book titles for Hermione, who was so eager to learn more about how spell categories were determined she was bouncing with excitement.

“D-do you also need a b-book recommendation?” Quirrell asked him once he’d handed the list over to Hermione.

“No thank you Professor,” Harry replied. “One extra book is enough for me.”

Quirrell twitched and missed putting his quill back in its stand. “Oh, yes. I s-suppose it would be,” he said, picking the quill up and trying again. He peered at Harry curiously. “And are your s-studies going well?”

“I think so? I know the book’s supposed to be in English, but it’s like reading a completely different language.”

“If it’s t-too hard you can always return it.”
Harry smiled. “I’m not going to give up just yet. I think we’re making a bit of headway, honestly.”

Quirrell nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I hope you find it useful, then.”

Harry and Hermione thanked him again and hurried out. They rejoined Neville, who had been waiting just outside the door, and together the three of them made their way to the library so Hermione could pick up her new books.

The afternoon promised to be dull, as it always was when they were forced to sit through Professor Binn’s dry lectures on the goblin wars, but halfway through the class, just as they were all drifting off to sleep, something unexpected happened.

A light rap at the door caused them to start awake and look back over their shoulders. One of the Gryffindor prefects was standing in the doorway.

“Mister Longbottom,” she said. “You’re needed in the headmaster’s office. Please gather your things and come with me.”

Neville looked bewildered as he started to pack away his supplies. “I wonder what they need me for?” Harry could only shrug.

“Maybe it’s to do with the article in the paper,” Hermione suggested, turning away from her notes. “Both you and your grandmother were interviewed, after all, and from what I’ve heard that Skeeter woman loves bending the truth to make her stories more exciting.” She wrinkled her nose. “I can’t stand people who write nothing but rubbish. I suspect Professor Dumbledore doesn’t either, especially if it’s about his own students. He probably just wants to make sure she didn’t misquote you.”

Neville’s face lightened. “That might be. I’ll let you know when I get back.”

They waved goodbye as Neville followed the prefect from the room, and then Hermione scrambled to catch up with her notes, as Professor Binn’s had rambled on as though he hadn’t noticed the interruption. Harry watched her for a few moments, wondering how she managed to pay attention, before the lifeless drone of Binn’s voice got to him. Yawning, he lowered his head onto his arms and tried to go back to sleep.

The prefect brought Neville back just as class was ending only to turn around and call Hermione away.

“Sorry,” Neville said when they asked him what the headmaster had wanted. “I’m not supposed to tell you until you’ve been up to see him. They’ll probably call you next though, Harry.”

His nerves now thoroughly wracked, Harry contemplated making himself scarce for the rest of the evening. In the end he decided against hiding. Neville looked no worse for wear from the experience, and besides, he’d promised himself not to run away any more. That was how he found himself being escorted along the sixth floor forty minutes later by a prefect who, from the way she stared at a point just over his right shoulder when she directed him to follow her up yet another flight of stairs, wanted nothing to do with the castle’s resident parsleemouth.

She stopped in front of a large stone gargoyle and muttered something that sounded a great deal like “cherry nougat”. It must have been a password, because the gargoyle shuddered to life and, after rolling its great stone shoulders, stepped aside to reveal a narrow spiral staircase.
“Up there,” she said, motioning for him to go through. Harry took a deep breath and put his foot on the first step. The stairs jerked to life beneath him, rising upwards like a muggle escalator, and it was only his quick reflexes that kept him on his feet. Behind him the light from the corridor cut off as the gargoyle moved back into place, sealing the exit.

Trapped.

He tightened his grip on the railing and gulped a great lungful of air, hoping it would calm his racing heart as he was lifted relentlessly upwards. He could do this, he chanted to himself, bolstering his resolve. He would do this!

A short landing bearing a pair of arched wooden doors appeared suddenly around the bend. Caught off guard, he tripped on the top step, bowled straight through the doors, which swung open automatically at his approach, and landed hard on a red and gold patterned rug. His face burned as he picked himself up off the floor, but the office was empty apart from himself and he let out a small sigh of relief before turning his attention to the room itself.

It involved a great deal of looking up. Harry wasn’t sure if the overall effect of the pointed gothic arches reaching towards the high ceiling was meant to be uplifting or intimidating, but they succeeded in drawing his eyes past a sea of slumbering portraits and into the rafters a good three stories above his head. Feeling even smaller than usual and more than a little uneasy, he dragged his eyes back down and stepped forward to study the headmaster’s desk while it remained empty. It wasn’t as large as he’d expected, and was nowhere near as ornamented as the chair that rested behind it. A magnificent ostrich plume was propped up in the quill holder, ready to be used, and there were a number of letters resting on a graceful metal tray that Harry assumed must be the man’s inbox. There was a fire crackling merrily in an open rectangular pit a few meters behind the desk, beyond which he could make out another arched doorway that must have led deeper into the tower.

Having no interest in accidentally wandering into the headmaster’s private quarters, Harry turned slowly and took in the office’s walls, which were lined with shelves of books and glass-doored cabinets holding strange silvery instruments that gave off low clinks and hoots along with brightly coloured puffs of smoke. A miniature armillary sphere was rotating slowly on a small pedestal table watched over by a massive bird Harry assumed was stuffed until it turned its head to study him with intelligent black eyes.

Harry stared back, dumbfounded.

The bird sat upon a polished golden perch that appeared dull next to the brilliant sheen of its crimson and orange feathers. A crest rose proudly above its head and its long tail nearly swept the floor. It was the most striking creature he’d ever seen, and Harry had no idea how he’d missed it until now.

He was so bewildered that he didn’t notice the doorway behind the fire pit open until the headmaster gently cleared his throat.

“I see you have met Fawkes,” Dumbledore said, smiling at the look of wonder on Harry’s face. “And while I wish there were more time for introductions, I’m afraid our colleagues from the Ministry are eager to kip off home for a well deserved lunch, so we should not keep them waiting.”

“The Ministry?” Harry asked, snapping out of his awe as he remembered he’d been called here for a purpose other than admiring the headmaster’s pet.

Dumbledore sighed, his shoulders slumping beneath his canary yellow robes. “Yes. I’m afraid that
while their investigation continues we have a duty to assist them.” He withdrew a piece of paper from one of the drawers in his desk and held it out to Harry. It was a waiver, Harry realized, similar to the one he’d signed for Quidditch. “They contacted your relatives for permission to perform a few tests — nothing painful, I assure you,” he added quickly when Harry looked up at him in alarm. “I believe they are still trying to determine what happened to young Mister Finnigan.”

Harry nodded mutely. He didn’t want to be questioned again, but refusing now would be suspicious. Why couldn’t the Dursleys have ignored the form? They’d been happy enough to do that before he’d ran away to Hogwarts. The answer came to him as the headmaster guided him around his desk and down a handful of stairs to the door set in the back wall.

They wanted him to be guilty.

Of course they did. If he were thrown in wizard prison they’d never need to deal with him again. He’d be gone from their lives as irrevocably as if he’d died. Harry took a long, slow breath. He wouldn’t let them win. Straightening his back, he pretended the sweat running along his spine was from the heat of the fire behind him as Dumbledore ushered him into the back room.

Unlike the office, the room was small and rather cosy, with a pair of overstuffed armchairs set across from a small love-seat. The chairs were taken by a pair of wizards who stood as they entered the room, looking very formal in their tidy, well-cut robes. Dumbledore nudged him towards the open seat before he retreated to his office, closing the door behind him and leaving Harry to face the ministry officials alone.

One was the auror who had questioned him before — Kingsley, he thought the man’s name had been. The other was a wiry old man with a stern face and a clipboard tucked under his arm. He was wearing a muggle business suit under an open robe, a mixture that caught Harry off guard after having spent the past month and a half surrounded by wizarding fashion.

“Good afternoon, Mister Potter,” Kingsley said. “Please take a seat.”

“Good afternoon, sir.” Harry replied, sitting down on the love-seat and trying hard not to fidget. He glanced at the unknown wizard and was alarmed to find him writing notes on his clipboard.

“This is my colleague Doctor Goodridge,” Kingsley said, motioning to the man. Harry’s back went up immediately at the title and he fought to keep his expression mild. “He’s a specialist in the field of magical psychology and is currently acting as a consultant in our investigation. Please answer his questions honestly.”

Harry nodded, not having any other choice.

What followed was the strangest half an hour Harry had ever spent in the presence of a doctor. Goodridge had him hold a metal ball that gave off small electrical shocks and asked him to rate the intensity of the feeling on each of his fingers on a scale of one to ten. He then showed him a series of still photographs of people making various expressions and asked Harry to identify them, as well as tell him what he felt while looking at them. Harry had no problem identifying the majority of the emotions, even going so far as to be able to tell the difference between contempt and anger — it was all in the eyebrows — but he feared he didn’t do as well on the second half of the test. He wasn’t sure if Goodridge expected him to feel the same emotion as the people in the photographs or a different one, and the doctor had a poker face that even Draco would be jealous of.

“Anxious,” Harry said, his hands tightening in his lap when Goodridge held up a photograph of a man yelling fiercely at the camera.
“I see, and what about this one?” he asked, showing Harry one of a woman crying hysterically.

Harry frowned, trying to identify the emotion coiling beneath his sternum. “Curious,” he decided, “but also wary.”

“Can you elaborate?” the doctor asked. “What about her makes you feel curious?”

This was the first time he’d been asked to expand on an answer, and Harry was caught off guard. “I guess I want to know what happened to her,” he said haltingly.

“And if you knew?”

“I’d avoid it,” he replied, wanting nothing to do with whatever had caused the woman to look as though her entire world had come crashing down. He had enough of his own issues to deal with. He didn’t need a careless misstep to give him more.

They finished the half-hour with Harry looking at abstract paintings that appeared to have come from a kindergartens’ finger-painting session and trying to identify images in them. Harry saw animals for the most part, though one of them — he admitted somewhat hesitantly — looked a great deal like Professor Snape swooping over a billowing cauldron complete with great streaky bat wings. When he’d finished his description, Kingsley had been forced to turn away and hide his laughter under the pretence of a coughing fit until he regained his composure.

Then the test was over and the two wizards packed up and departed through the fire in Dumbledore’s office. Harry, who’d expected to be told what they were testing for, if not how he’d done, was left sitting on the love-seat confused and put out at the secrecy of it all.

“There,” Dumbledore said, appearing in the doorway once he’d seen his guests off. “Not too bad, I hope?”

“No sir,” Harry replied before he jumped to his feet, eager to be away. He’d started towards the exit when Dumbledore held out his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“A moment, Harry,” he said. “There are a few things I wish to speak with you about before we are called to dinner. I believe I also promised you an introduction to Fawkes.” He motioned to a deep, squishy armchair in front of his desk that Harry was certain hadn’t been there before. “Please, take a seat.”

Harry hesitated, his eyes flicking over to the door that would lead him out of the tower, before he nodded stiffly and perched on the edge of the chair. The unease he’d felt since entering the office was making itself known again, crawling up beneath his ribs to slowly choke the air from his lungs.

Dumbledore swept into his tall-backed chair and held out a small silver tin of yellow candies. “Sherbet Lemon?” he offered. “I find myself particularly fond of them.”

“No thank you, sir,” Harry replied quietly, keeping his eyes on his hands, which were folded tightly in his lap. As though sensing his discomfort, Fawkes hopped off his perch and glided down to the corner of Dumbledore’s desk. His talons clacked against the wood as he found purchase and folded his broad wings back against his sides. He warbled gently and Harry glanced up in surprise as a wave of warmth rushed from his head all the way down to his toes.

“Fawkes is a phoenix,” Dumbledore explained, stroking the bird’s chest with the back of his hand. Fawkes nibbled gently at his fingers, dislodging them so he could preen the feathers beneath.
It had been over a month since Harry had skimmed his book on magical beasts — at least the parts that hadn’t involved serpents such as runespoors, ashwinders and basilisks — so it took a moment for him to dredge up a handful of facts. “Oh!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening as he looked at the phoenix with new appreciation.

“Yes,” Dumbledore agreed. “Remarkable creatures, phoenixes, and very faithful pets.” He turned to regard Harry. “I hear you have a rather unusual pet yourself.”

In an instant, all the wonder Fawkes had engendered drained away. “I don’t have a pet, sir,” Harry replied, meeting his eyes defiantly.

“I know you brought a snake with you to Hogwarts. It was with you in Transfiguration last week. I also believe it was the reason you followed Professor McGonagall and Mister Filch down the third-floor corridor back in September. Am I wrong, Harry?”

Harry raised his chin. “Yes, sir.”

Dumbledore folded his hands on his desk and leaned forward. His eyes were penetrating, as though he could see straight through him. The pressure of his gaze made Harry’s skin crawl. He hated feeling transparent, but to look away now would be to admit defeat and he would not sell Basil out, no matter how much the headmaster pretended to know.

“It’s unbecoming for a young wizard such as yourself to lie, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a hard edge to his voice.

Harry pressed his lips together, his body rigid. His eyes began to water as the pressure intensified. The curse scar on his brow was burning, the heat spreading down across his face until, with a twinge like an icpick being driven into his skull, the pressure vanished.

A spasm of pain tightened the skin around Dumbledore’s eyes and he turned his head aside, blinking hard. Fawkes raised his head and trilled once before he returned to preening his wings.

“Does your scar hurt often?” Dumbledore asked once he’d regained his composure.

“How did you know my scar was hurting?”

“I know a great many things, Harry,” he said, his voice low with an air of mystery that Harry assumed was meant to impress him. It didn’t.

“My aunt knows a great many things too, and she’s a snoop,” he replied bitingly.

“I have no need to spy,” Dumbledore protested, but Harry had just spent part of the last hour identifying emotions and knew guilt when he saw it.

He sent the man a look of deep disgust. “You even sound like her. You’ve got one set of rules for yourself and one for everyone else.”

Dumbledore’s face was white with fury but he didn’t screech or yell like Petunia would have. Instead, he smoothed down his robes and carefully rearranged his hands so they were folded on his desk, one atop the other. “When you come to be my age, you realize how many of the mysteries and secrets of your youth were always apparent to those who understood the signs, no matter how cleverly you believed you’d hidden them.”

Harry scoffed in disbelief. “People only see what they want to see.” Ten years with the Dursleys had proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt.
“I believe your pet’s name is Basil,” Dumbledore said casually, causing Harry to look up sharply as his blood froze in his veins.

There was no way Dumbledore could have known her name. The only people he’d told were Hermione, Draco, Neville and the Weasley twins, and the thought of any of them ratting him out left him cold and numb. He grit his teeth and didn’t answer, even when the seconds dragged into minutes and the silence between them grew oppressive. No matter how sympathetic or kind Dumbledore acted, Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that admitting Basil’s existence to him would be the same as sentencing her to death.

Dumbledore was the first to give in. “Harry, please understand that I am merely concerned for the wellbeing of my students, which includes Mister Longbottom, who was treated for a snake bite on the first day of classes. I know the snake that bit him belongs to you, there are many witnesses who will attest to it.”

_Say nothing_, Harry reminded himself. _As long as you're quiet, they can’t use your words against you._

Dumbledore stood and reached into the sleeve of his robe, drawing out a long dark wand with several knots spaced evenly along its length. “I hoped this wouldn’t be necessary, but if you won’t speak you leave me no choice but to summon her here.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. “What?”

“It’s a simple enough spell,” Dumbledore explained, raising his wand. “All that’s required is an incantation, a slight wave of the wand and a mental image of the item or creature you wish to summon. Now, _Acc—_”

Harry leapt to his feet and lunged forward, snatching the wand from Dumbledore’s hand before skittering out of range, his heart lodged in his throat as the realization of what he’d just done sunk in.

The portraits above them gave up the pretence of sleep and erupted in an uproar of shock and disbelief. Fawkes cried out in alarm and took flight, circling once before settling high up in the rafters.

“That’s assault, that is!” exclaimed the portrait of a rotund wizard with a bulbous nose. “The nerve of youth these days. In my time they knew better than to go about attacking their elders.”

“And in mine,” agreed a witch with tight grey curls plastered to her head. “Return that wand immediately young man or I shall tan your hide!”

“Have him scrub the astronomy tower!”

“And write a letter of apology!”

“No, expel him!”

“Oh bravo, Mister Potter!” cheered a wizard with a pointed black goatee and immaculately tailored robes in a deep forest green. There was a wicked grin on his thin face. “Steal the tin of candies next. That will really get his goat!”

“Don’t encourage him, Phineas!” the other portraits yelled.

Harry let the sound of their voices wash over him, never once taking his eyes off Dumbledore,
whose expression was no longer genial.

“Harry, return my wand.” His voice was low and dangerous. The portraits immediately fell silent. Harry gripped the wand a little tighter, moving it behind his back.

“No, I won’t.”

Dumbledore took a step towards him but Harry circled right, keeping the desk between them.

“Mister Potter, I won’t ask you again. I understand you have some attachment to this snake, but I cannot allow you to keep a dangerous animal in the school.”

Something snapped inside Harry and all his panic and unease ignited into blazing anger.

“Dangerous?” He almost choked on the word. “You want to tell me that one little snake, who doesn’t even have venom, is dangerous and should be destroyed, when you’re keeping monsters in the school.” His lips pulled back in a snarl. “You’re right, I did go down the third floor corridor, and I saw the hounds. I also saw how much trouble Professor McGonagall had locking them back up — and she’s an adult! If a student opened that door they could be killed, she told me so herself!”

“He has a point,” said Phineas.

Dumbledore’s face was flushed and he was standing very still. He took a deep breath and then forced out a smile that looked anything but genuine.

“I’m afraid the hounds, as you call them, must remain in the school this year,” he explained. “They are guarding a very powerful magical artefact on loan from an old friend of mine that I cannot allow to fall into the wrong hands. It was nearly stolen once already from Gringotts late last summer, and we must take all precautions to ensure that does not happen again.”

“So you’re keeping it here? Even though someone wants it bad enough they broke into a bank?” Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“There is no place more secure in all of Britain.”

That wasn’t the point, but Harry was too angry to spell it out to him.

“That being said, you have made a valid point, and I can understand why you feel my position on your pet is unjust,” Dumbledore admitted reluctantly.

“I don’t have a pet,” Harry growled. “I have friends. One of whom just happens to be a snake.”

“Your friend, then.” Dumbledore tried to edge closer, but Harry slid around the corner before the old man could get within arm’s reach. They stared at each other across the desk, Harry now next to the headmaster’s chair while he stood behind the one Harry had been occupying.

“Will you let her stay?” Harry asked, sensing weakness.

Dumbledore made a placating noise. “Things aren’t that simple, my boy. You must understand that snakes are still held in fear by many, even so long after Voldemort’s defeat, and after the event that took place in your Transfiguration class, some of the students’ parents have concerns about their children being around a snake — even a little one.”

Harry’s heart sank, but he rallied quickly and shook off his disappointment. He couldn’t leave this office without ensuring Basil would be safe, and if Dumbledore didn’t want to commit he’d just
need to force the issue, no matter how terrible it made him feel inside.

“If you don’t swear to leave her alone, I’ll tell the board of governors about the hounds.”

It was a shot in the dark, but from the way Dumbledore’s face hardened Harry knew the board wasn’t in the loop about using the school as a safe-house, and wouldn’t be pleased if they found out.

Some of the portraits gasped, but Phineas started laughing. “A touch of the black, is it? I think I like you, boy.”

“There is no need for threats, Harry,” Dumbledore said, holding his palms up in front of him. “I merely wished to warn you of the danger your… friend faces if she remains in the school. She has nothing to fear from me personally, of that I assure you.”

Harry didn’t believe him. “Swear it!” he hissed. “Swear that you’ll leave her alone!”

“I give you my word,” Dumbledore said gravely. “Now, I believe luncheon is nearly over and I’m sure you’re hungry after speaking to the investigators.” He held out his hand. “Once you have returned my wand you will be free to go.”

Harry hesitated, gripping the wand a little harder. Dumbledore was between him and the exit, and even if the man was now smiling at him in that genial, grandfatherly manner he remembered from the start of term feast, there was always the chance it was a ploy to get him to lower his guard. Quickly glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the door to the back room was still open. Before Dumbledore’s patience ran out he whirled on his heel and threw the wand as hard as he could. It arced over the fire and straight through the door, hit the floor with a clatter and rolled under the love-seat.

Dumbledore gave him a look of deep disappointment, but refrained from commenting as he stepped around the desk to retrieve it. Harry slipped around the other side and made a b-line for the exit. He burst through the door, not bothering to close it behind him, and took the stairs two at a time. He was forced to wait for the gargoyle to step aside when he reached the bottom and spent the entire time bouncing on the balls of his feet, his ears pricked for the sound of robes on the stairs behind him. Luckily, it seemed that Dumbledore was either having a hard time locating his wand or had decided not to pursue him after all, because there was no sign of him when Harry bolted into the castle proper, determined to get as far away as possible.

He ran into Hermione and Neville three floors down.

“There you are Harry!” Hermione said as he skidded to a stop in front of them. “We were worried when you didn’t show up for lunch— what’s the matter? You look ghastly.”

“I blackmailed him.” Harry’s voice was little more than a choked whisper. “I blackmailed the headmaster.”

“What?” Hermione shrieked. Neville was staring at him open-mouthed, at a loss for words.

Harry sank to the floor, his legs shaking too hard to support him. “He knew about Basil. He was going to use a spell to summon her and… he would have killed her.” He looked up at them, his eyes wide as saucers, begging them to understand. “I had to stop him.”

Hermione’s shock melted into pity. “Oh, Harry,” she said, kneeling down next to him and pulling him into a tight hug he was too exhausted and frightened to protest. “I know how much she means to you, but that was incredibly reckless! Blackmail is illegal!”
Harry’s stomach twisted painfully. “I know, but I— I had no other choice. Are you mad?”

She sighed. “Of course not, but you worry me terribly sometimes.”

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I don’t mean to.”

She finally released him and sat back. “I know, but you really do have the most terrible luck.” She looked up at Neville. “You’ve noticed it too, right?”

Neville didn’t seem to hear her. He was gazing out the window, a small thoughtful frown pursing his lips. “You know,” he said slowly. “I think Professor Dumbledore lied to you.”

Harry froze. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

Neville shook his head, looking bewildered. “It’s just… I don’t think summoning charms work on animals. At least, none of my aunts or uncles ever summoned Trevor for me when he ran off, even when I asked if they could get him back using magic. I always had to use the four-point charm and track him down on my own.”

Harry sat up straight. “He tricked me?”

“Maybe,” Neville replied. “He knows a lot more spells than most witches or wizards, though. Maybe one of them would work.”

They all stared at one another, processing Neville’s words.

“Well,” Hermione said as she rose to her feet and brushed the dust from her knees with a brisk sweep of her hands. “I guess there’s only one thing to do now.”

“Go to the library?” Harry guessed, springing to his feet as well.

“I will go to the library,” Hermione said forcefully. “You will go eat lunch so you don’t get in trouble with Professor McGonagall.”

“But!—”

“You can join me after,” she said, her face softening. “I have no idea how you managed to blackmail someone like Professor Dumbledore, but if he took you seriously then it must be something he won’t risk getting out. Now, the two of you should get going. Lunch will be over soon and the sooner you’re done eating, the sooner you can help me research summoning spells.”

As she shooed them away, Harry reflected once again on how lucky he was to have Hermione as a friend.

Dumbledore remained seated at his desk long after dismissing Harry. He steepled his fingers and pressed them against his lips, lost deep in thought.

“It is more active than I’d hoped,” he said to Fawkes. The phoenix chirruped in reply before turning away to preen one of his magnificent crimson wings.

“I had hoped growing up…” He shook his head and sighed. “But there is nothing to be done about that now.”

Rising from his desk, he walked across the room to where a small, faded photograph sat partially hidden behind a brass astrolabe. He picked it up, his fingers brushing over the silver phoenixes
decorating the frame. A group of twenty witches and wizards standing in two loose lines smiled grimly at the camera. James Potter stood in the front row, his right arm wrapped protectively around his wife’s shoulders. His left arm was cradled against his chest in a sling. The skin of his wrist, just visible above the cuff of his robes, was traced with black veins — a parting gift from Voldemort himself.

“You would have never forgiven me,” he said quietly, gazing at their faces. The photograph had been taken shortly before Lily discovered she was with child and bowed out of the Order of the Phoenix, choosing to put the well-being of her son before her role in the resistance. “But perhaps, given time, you would have understood it was the only way to save him.”

He gently placed the photograph back on the shelf and returned to his desk. Running a hand over Fawkes’s crest, he allowed the phoenix’s warmth to chase away the chill of doubt that crept over him when he remembered the fury burning in Harry’s eyes.

No matter what misery it caused, he could not allow the thing imprisoned in the boy to gather enough strength to break loose. If it did, the child known as Harry Potter would cease to exist.

Chapter End Notes

Harry’s conversation with Dumbledore ended up being revised extensively from my original draft, in which there was very little tension and Dumbledore basically rolled over on allowing Basil to stay at the school. The new scene was going well - and then Harry jumped up and stole his wand. I was just as surprised as Dumbledore when it happened, followed quickly by wondering how the hell I was going to get Harry out of this one. Luckily, blackmail had already been introduced with the entire Snape-Draco situation, so it wouldn’t be that far of a stretch for Harry to give it a try. :)

Hopefully I’ll be able to get into the main Samhain stuff starting next chapter (it’s been a long time coming) now that I’ve gotten the first meeting between Harry and Dumbles done so there will be a point of comparison for afterwards - as well as some tasty foreshadowing for what’s to come next.

Thank you to everyone who’s stuck around, as well as to those who have left kudos, subscribed or commented! I’m going to do my best to get another chapter up by the end of the month, which will hopefully be aided by the fact that I’ll be working from home for the foreseeable future!

Stay safe everyone!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!