

Book One: Snake in the Grass

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Book One: Snake in the Grass

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Little Whinging, Surrey is a place where individuality goes to die. Row after row of identical houses line the streets with pristine, white picket fences and perfectly pruned hedges and house perfectly normal families. Those who live on Privet Drive are no exception to this.

But there is one little boy who does not fit into that mould.

Little Hari Potter, who has befriended snakes and knows their ways, hears his neighbors whispering of things he wanted them to notice and says, "Aunt Petunia, did you hear? Mrs. Number Six thinks we're too poor to afford clothes for two children. I heard her talking about asking the neighbors for donations for us. Isn't that nice of her? I know that I'm a huge burden on you all, so I'm glad that someone is stepping up to help out."

And that simply will not do. The Dursleys care more for their reputation than anything else, and so things slowly but surely begin to change as a result.

The Hari Potter who arrives at Hogwarts could never sort anywhere but Slytherin.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Should I really be starting yet another long project in the midst of so many others? Probably not, but I've been hyperfixating on Harry Potter something fierce and could not make myself focus on writing anything else. We're in for the long haul on this one; I have every intention of fully rewriting the entire series, book by book, while expanding upon it a great deal. The series will have seven books in total, one for each original book, and I'm quite excited for everything to come! Just know that I don't do update schedules (which I figure that you may not know since I haven't written for Harry Potter before now). I tend to work on something in a manic haze for a while, put it down for a bit, and then find my way back to it to power through.

Here's the [playlist](#) that I made for this AU and listen to while writing it, just in case you wanted some background music. Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

Oh, and fuck J.K. Rowling. All my homies hate J.K. Rowling. My characters now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sweat drips down Harry's face as he casts a wary glance at the garden hose, wondering if soothing the persistent, scratchy ache in his throat is worth the risk of Aunt Petunia catching him slacking off while trimming her prized rose bushes. His head feels like it's positively swimming from the heat, and the branches in front of him are beginning to blur together in a way that has nothing to do with Harry's poor vision.

He risks another glance toward the hose before spotting movement from the corner of his eye. The unbearably lacy curtain that shields the Dursleys' kitchen from the outside world is ever-so-slightly askew, and Harry knows better than to think it was caused by a draft. Someone is watching him, and whether that person is Aunt Petunia or Dudley, the end result will be the same if they see him doing anything but what he is expected to.

Harry heaves a sigh before getting back to work. The heat only gets worse as the afternoon drags on, and he can only work so quickly when half of the branches in front of him don't exist as anything more than mirages created by his exhausted mind.

While it is an exceptionally warm summer afternoon for Little Whinging, Surrey, there are several reasons why Harry Potter is affected so badly by it. First and foremost, Dudley's cast-offs are several sizes too large for Harry, and while there are a few holes in the ratty fabric that allow some airflow, the excess of material only serves to amplify the heat and weigh him down. Secondly, restricted access to fresh drinking water while the hose is taunting him from just across the yard only makes Harry thirstier and thirstier as he works. And finally, unknown to anyone but Harry himself, he naturally runs quite warm. Working in the middle of freezing snow with shoes that keep more moisture in than out is easier for Harry to handle than even milder summer days.

It is an abnormality. It is another freakish quality that the Dursleys will know about if they ever take Harry to a doctor, and he is incredibly grateful that they never do. He can hardly control his body temperature, after all.

Harry is quite miserable as the sun threatens to set before he's finished. He's already in a world of trouble for starting dinner so late; if he doesn't at least finish the rose bushes first, then he might not see outside of his cupboard for a week. The Dursleys don't have to worry about the school asking questions during the summer, and they are not shy about taking advantage of that.

"I'm doomed," he groans quietly. "There's no way..."

"Why do you smell like prey, little speaker? I cannot sense any predators nearby."

Harry startles so badly that he almost drops the massive pair of shears that dwarf his tiny, trembling hands. He whips his head around this way and that, but he cannot find the source of the voice and is certain that he's going around the bend before he hears, ***"Over here, little speaker."***

A long, dark snake slowly lowers itself from the top of their fence and moves toward Harry with a purpose that doesn't seem natural. Shades of light and dark brown twine around the snake's body in a pattern that grows clearer as it approaches him, and while he's not sure what kind of snake it is, he knows that it's not something native to Britain.

“How did you get here?”

“The dull human’s nest master found me and started screeching like a winged predator before tossing me outside. I’ve been trying to escape the invisible box for years now, so it was no great hardship. Why would I ever want to stay with the dull human when there was a little speaker here?” A quiet hiss follows the snake’s question as it winds around his leg, slowly climbing up his rake-thin form. Harry continues working like nothing is amiss, mind running a mile a minute. He knows that Aunt Petunia, or more realistically, Uncle Vernon once he gets home, will kill him if they see the freakishness happening in their backyard right now. ***“No, you are special, little speaker. I will be staying with you from now on.”***

“I don’t think I’m anything special. I’m just... Harry. You’re the talking snake. That seems pretty special to me.”

“You do not know.” Harry isn’t sure how a snake can sound so surprised, but this one manages it. ***“We are not speaking one of your human languages, little speaker. You are the one speaking snake language.”***

“Oh.” Harry rather thinks that he has enough freaky things happening around him without adding talking to snakes into the mix, but it isn’t like he has much of a choice in the matter. ***“That’s... Really?”***

“Really.” Did a snake just nod at him? Harry is pretty sure that snakes aren’t supposed to do that. ***“Speakers are rare. Snakes must guide them down the right path, protect them, and since clearly no one else has elected to do so, I will. You have much to learn, little speaker. Allow me to teach you.”***

And Harry *wants*. He wants so badly to accept this snake’s offer, to learn something about the strange things that he does, but he can’t. ***“The Dursleys will kill me if they see you! It’s not safe.”***

“Are they why you smell like prey? All the more reason for me to stay until you grow strong. We have not had a worthy speaker in over a century, and I will not allow them to steal you from us.”

“Boy! What is taking so long?!” Aunt Petunia’s shrill voice has his heart pounding in his chest, and all Harry can think about as he sees the back door creak open is that he desperately wants the snake wrapping around his torso to be hidden. Pale blue eyes level a glare on him that always leaves Harry shaking, but the screaming and panic he is expecting never comes. “I won’t tolerate laziness from you! Get in and start dinner!”

“Yes, very special indeed... You are a powerful speaker. I will keep you safe, and you will keep me safe in return.”

And, well, Harry wouldn’t be Harry if he couldn’t roll with the punches. Strange things are always happening around him. At least a snake is easier to hide than turning his teacher’s hair blue in front of the whole class.

He goes inside, washes up, and falls into the familiar routine of preparing dinner while trying not to think about much of anything at all. He’s only marginally successful.

Harry isn’t sure what he did, but none of the Dursleys can see the snake coiled around his baggy shirt. Whatever it is doesn’t save him from his aunt and uncle’s wrath for not finishing his chores, though. He gets locked into his cupboard without any dinner, and they only let him out the next morning to finish trimming the bushes before Uncle Vernon locks him back up with a firm, “You’ll get no food for the next four days, boy. Keep quiet and we might give you a glass of water or two.”

“Like the freak knows how to do that,” Dudley scoffs. “Always ruining everything.”

“Exactly right, Dudders.” Harry only just makes out a self-satisfied smirk growing beneath his uncle’s hideous mustache before his world is plunged into a familiar darkness. He resigns himself to a very long four days with a quiet sigh.

“Well,” he hisses quietly, very mindful of his volume. ***“At least I’m not alone this time. I’m sorry that you’re trapped in here with me. Do you think you could fit through the vent, or is it too small for you?”***

“You’d be amazed at what a snake can fit through,” his friend hisses proudly. ***“Nothing can trap us. Except for cursed invisible boxes and their latches that keep me from pushing the metal off of the top of them. You will not put me in one of those things.”***

“Of course not! I would never want to lock you away. It’s... It’s a horrible thing to do to someone.”

“You would know, wouldn’t you, little speaker?”

Harry averts his eyes, feeling a bit too seen. ***“What kind of snake are you, anyway? I’ve never seen something like you before.”***

“I will have to teach you the art of misdirection another time.” He swears that it sounds like the snake is laughing at him. ***“The dull human said I was a ball python, though the distinction matters little to me. I also lay eggs. Humans talk a lot about snakes that lay eggs and those who don’t, so I figure they must think it important.”***

“Oh, thank you! Do you have a name?”

“Not one that I will ever claim,” she denies firmly. ***“The dull human gave me a few but all were insulting, and I will not answer to them nor speak of them.”***

“Names are important to snakes, then?”

“Very. A snake’s name is indicative of the respect they hold. Any name that is not a reference to greater powers in this world is an insult, and any snake that accepts such a name as their own will lose the right to ever associate with a speaker. Snakes answer to no master but themselves, and to forget that is to forget what it means to be a snake.”

Harry feels rather as if he’s stepped into an alternate dimension, but he cannot deny how fascinating this all sounds. ***“That’s so cool! I didn’t realize that snakes had their own rules like that, but it makes sense... Would you like one? A name, that is. I’d have to look through ones that properly honor you once we get out of here, but I’d be happy to do so!”***

The ball python nudges underneath his chin with a quiet, ***“I would be honored, little speaker.”***

And for the first time in a very, very long while, seven-year-old Harry Potter thinks that everything might turn out alright for him after all.

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It takes weeks for his aunt and uncle to be in a good enough mood for Harry to slip away from Privet Drive, but he does so the second they give him the chance. ***“I’m just glad they eased up on me before the summer ended,”*** he hisses under his breath. Now that Harry knows what to listen for, he can hear the slight difference between snake language and English, and he knows that anyone walking past them will think that it’s just a peculiar-sounding breeze if they happen to overhear it. ***“It would’ve been much harder to come out here during the school year.”***

Harry briefly worries that the librarian will see his friend curling around his neck and screech at him to get out, but her eyes glance right over her just like the Dursleys did. ***“You have nothing to worry about, little speaker. You are very powerful. So long as you do not want them to see me, they will not.”***

“If you say so...”

“I do.” She slowly raises her head and lifts herself up until she’s, albeit unintentionally, doing a rather impressive impression of one of their nosey neighbors peeking over the fence. Harry stifles his giggles as a small smile tugs at his lips. ***“I cannot read your human words, so you will have to do the searching for us, I’m afraid.”***

“That’s fine. It shouldn’t be too hard to find a section on mythology.”

Harry concedes defeat only a short few minutes later when he realizes that he’s not going to find much of anything with these glasses. Instead, he shyly shuffles up to one of the service desks, the one with the youngest, least-intimidating-looking librarian behind it, and murmurs, “Excuse me, ma’am? Could you tell me where the mythology books are?”

“Oh, aren’t you the cutest?” Harry suddenly gets the feeling that she thinks he’s much younger than he actually is. “Of course, I can! I can even show you if you’d like?”

“Yes please!”

“Let’s go get your parents and we’ll all go together, okay? Do you know where they are?”

Harry freezes in place, and it’s only his friend’s gentle prodding that keeps him from bolting as soon as he snaps out of it. ***“You can use this, little speaker. Make yourself appear small, unthreatening, and unappetizing until you are strong enough to survive on your own. It is the best way to avoid predators, and you have too many of those as it is.”***

“Oh, um, I’m here by myself, ma’am. My aunt and uncle are always so busy, and I don’t want to be a bother... They know I’m here, though, honest!”

Concern shines in the librarian’s eyes, but she does not press further. “Alright, sweetheart. Let’s go find your book, okay? I’ll help you. What are you looking for?”

“Thank you! I wanted to look into different goddesses, I guess? The ones associated with knowledge and wisdom.” His friend is far too smart for a name any less important than that, and her pleased hiss leaves Harry confident in his decision on the matter.

“Alright, that shouldn’t be too hard! You’ll probably have to do some digging since most of our books are written about entire pantheons, but basically every religion has a goddess of wisdom.” Harry follows her as they weave between row after row of books, stopping short once they reach their destination. “You let me know if you need any other help. I’ll check up on you in an hour or so, okay? You don’t want to stay too long and worry your aunt and uncle.”

She starts to turn away, but Harry and his new friend have a plan, a plan that will ensure they are safer and healthier than they are right now. The librarian is already worried about him, and this is simply too good of an opportunity to pass it up. “You don’t have to worry about me, I promise. They won’t care when I come home. Or if I come home...” His words are barely a whisper, but they are still deafeningly loud in the silence that surrounds them. The librarian freezes in place, and Harry almost feels guilty about the stricken look on her face when she looks back at him. Almost.

She takes a fortifying breath before saying, “Then I’ll come back with water and some snacks so long as you promise to be very, very careful with them and not read at the same time. Does that sound good?” Harry nods, not having to fake his surprise and awe in the slightest. “Stay as long as you like, sweetheart.”

“O-Okay.”

Harry still feels as if a feather could knock him over once the librarian is out of sight, and only the hissing laughter of his best friend brings him back to the present. ***“Wonderfully done, little speaker. You are more snake than you allowed yourself to believe. Now come on, I was promised a name.”***

By the time he finds it, Harry has a headache from squinting at the small print on countless pages for hours on end, but he has also eaten more in one sitting than he’s been able to since the summer started and has even more snacks tucked away in his pockets. ***“What do you think of Nisaba? She’s the Sumerian goddess of writing and grain, and she’s closely tied to knowledge because of that.”***

“Nisaba...” his friend hisses contemplatively. ***“I like it. I have no need for your written words, but humans hold them in high esteem, just as I should be. And mice and rats love to hide in grain. I accept your name, speaker.”***

The warmth radiating from Harry’s chest nearly brings him to tears. Nisaba glows with power that neither of them can name, but for once, that power feels like a blessing instead of a curse. Harry walks out of the library with a small, pleased smile on his face and several worried pairs of eyes watching him up until the moment he’s outside the door.

“Today was a good day.”

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“That poor boy looks like a strong wind could knock him over.”

“And those clothes, goodness those clothes! They’re practically hanging off of him!”

“He was squinting so hard at those books too... I don’t think his glasses are the right prescription.”

“He’s awfully small, isn’t he? The Dursleys certainly aren’t short of food or money if the husband and son are any indication, so why does he look like he isn’t being fed at all?”

“... You don’t think?”

“No, surely not. They might be a bit much, but the Dursleys are good people, aren’t they?”

“He ate those snacks like I was going to take them away the second he let go of them. I watched him slip them into his pockets when he thought I wasn’t looking! Something is wrong in that house, mark my words.”

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Harry is very satisfied with his trip to the library. The whispers throughout Little Whinging are reaching a fever pitch, and they’re all focused on the Dursleys and how they might be treating Harry. Some of the rumors are outlandish, but many of them strike close enough to the truth to be worth encouraging. He lets his too-large shirt slip off his shoulder and expose purple, finger-shaped bruises as he walks past Mrs. Number Eight, the notorious gossip even amongst a neighborhood of gossips. When Mr. Number Three goes to sit out on his back porch and keeps a steady, contemplative eye on him as he works

for hours without any breaks, Harry makes a point of shucking off the old shirt entirely and revealing the way his ribs are on prominent display beneath the baggy clothing. He doesn't have to utter a word to spur the rumors on further.

When old Mrs. Figg asks him a few probing questions, Harry answers them with wide, innocent eyes, downplaying it all and insisting that his treatment is perfectly understandable since he's such a horrible burden on their family. It sounds rehearsed. It's meant to.

Aunt Petunia goes to Privet Drive's weekly book club meeting for all the stay-at-home mothers and comes back ghost-pale. "What have you done, boy?!" she hisses lowly, and Harry can't help thinking that it's a far uglier sound than snakes make.

"I haven't done anything, Aunt Petunia, honest!" She only smacks him around a bit for his cheek, for daring to talk back to her, and it's nothing that Harry is unused to in the slightest. But he still makes a point of acting extra skittish around those in the book club, and he can see the moment that they realize that Aunt Petunia is just as complicit in his treatment as Uncle Vernon, the obvious culprit for Harry's bruises, is.

Revenge is a beautiful thing.

His aunt and uncle try to do damage control, telling anyone and everyone who will listen that Harry is a troubled boy who lashes out at everyone around him and causes trouble on purpose, but they aren't nearly as clever about it as he is. Everyone in Little Whinging has come to their own conclusions about what is happening behind closed doors at Number 4 Privet Drive, and it is far harder to convince someone that their own opinion is wrong than it is to discredit a single rumor, especially when that rumor is being spread by the focus of an even larger rumor.

"I am proud of you, little speaker. You do serpents a great honor."

"Thank you, Nisaba. I never could have done it without you."

The ball python is smug for weeks, radiating contentment even as Harry returns to school and relishes in his classmates' uncertain rather than outright hostile behavior around him, but Harry refuses to begrudge her rightfully earned pride.

His aunt is nearly apoplectic after two of his teachers call her and express concern for Harry's welfare within the same week. She's angry and more than a little scared because Child Protective Services is supposed to be visiting soon, and how is she going to explain away Harry sleeping in the cupboard? He can see the panic in her eyes. It's the perfect time to put the final nail in the coffin.

"Aunt Petunia, did you hear? Mrs. Number Six thinks we're too poor to afford clothes for two children. I heard her talking about asking the neighbors for donations for us. Isn't that nice of her? I know that I'm a huge burden on you all, so I'm glad that someone is stepping up to help out."

Bony shoulders slump, and eyes that are filled with equal parts hatred and venom that would do any snake proud lock onto his. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing, boy. I don't know how you did it, but I know that you did."

Harry tilts his head to the side with wide, innocent eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about, Aunt Petunia. Are you feeling alright?"

"Stop it! Just... Just stop." His aunt almost sounds like she's going to cry. Harry can't bring himself to feel bad about it when she is the reason he spent so many nights crying, hungry and alone, while curled up in his cupboard. "What do you want from us?! What will it take for this to all stop?"

"Don't lay a hand on me. That goes for all of you. If you, Uncle Vernon, or even Dudley hurts me, then I will make sure everyone finds out about it before the day is up. I need clothes that actually fit me and glasses that are my prescription too. Everyone is going to notice if they don't change. And I want a bedroom, a real one! The whole neighborhood knows how big your house is and how many bedrooms it has. What do you think they'll say if it gets out that I'm sleeping in the cupboard under the stairs?"

"Fine! Fine, we'll do this your way. But you had better make all of this nonsense stop, boy."

"Do not forget about the food, little speaker. You cannot grow strong without it."

"A-And I want food! I'm the one cooking it, so it's only fair that I get to eat some. Every meal."

Harry does not shrink back from his aunt's answering sneer, and that is what shocks Petunia Dursley most of all. He no longer seeks her approval. He does not need it. Nisaba is proud of him, and while Harry might have hidden his abuse out of shame before he met her, she has taught him to use any and every tool at his disposal to improve his circumstances. He feels no shame over this now. It's hardly his fault that the Dursleys are awful people.

“And you’ll make this all go away if I agree?”

“I’ll make sure to tell Child Protective Services what wonderful, kind people you are and insist that I have no clue where the rumors came from. As the bruises fade and I gain weight, the rest will stop believing it on their own. I’m sure they’ll decide that I was playing too roughly with the neighborhood boys or some rubbish.”

“... Deal. But keep any of your freakishness in your room, alright? I don’t want to see any of it! And Vernon is going to be in a foul enough temper as it is once he has to explain to our precious Diddykins that he doesn’t get two bedrooms anymore.”

“Understood, Aunt Petunia. I’ll make the transition period as easy for you as I can.”

An evaluating gaze rests on him for several moments, as if deciding whether or not he is telling the truth before his aunt breaks eye contact with a weary sigh. “Go on then. I’ll start sorting through that bedroom and clear off some space for you. I can hardly trust you to go through sweet Dudders’ things and not destroy them, after all,” she huffs. “I’ll call for you once dinner needs making.”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia.” Harry can’t wipe the smirk off his face as he runs out into the backyard, and the power within him thrums with satisfaction and joy. ***“We did it, Nisaba!”***

“You did it. I simply gave you advice, little speaker.”

“You taught me how to carve out a nest for myself and make it safe. A snake acknowledges their debts, and I owe one to you.”

“Find me a fat rat and we’ll consider it even.”

Harry doesn’t burst into laughter, but it is a close thing. His life has not been easy, and he knows that countless hardships await him in the future. Despite this, Harry has hope again. He will carve out his own path, and while his aunt, uncle, and cousin may still look at him and think that he’ll never amount to anything, that does not matter. They do not matter. How could they in the face of something like this?

He catches Nisaba the biggest rat he’s ever seen, though not without nearly getting bit for his troubles, and he watches as she strikes lightning-fast before curling around it and slowly working the rodent down. It isn’t until the tail has disappeared down her throat that she sluggishly slithers over to him and hisses, ***“You’re so warm. Pick me up, little speaker.”*** He does so, and she clings to him, still invisible to any eyes but his own, as they make their way back inside. Dinner is a quiet affair, and though he is not allowed to eat at the table, Aunt Petunia sends him up to his new room with a plate of food and a sharp point to the stairs. He’s hardly going to complain. His new room may still be filled with junk, but the bed is clear, it is several times bigger than the mattress in his cupboard, and it is *his* now.

“Thank you, Nisaba. For teaching me how to be a proper snake.”

“Little speaker was already a proper snake,” she answers dismissively. ***“But you are a proper speaker now too. Many serpents will seek you out, and you will bond with those who are meant to remain by your side. You can always tell which ones those are, though I’m not sure how I know that. It certainly will not hurt to talk to other snakes and ask around. Maybe one of them will know.”***

“You are mighty and wise, and I shall always heed your counsel, Lady Nisaba.”

Something in the tone of his voice must give him away, both earnest and entirely too teasing, because Nisaba levels him with a look and says, ***“You are a sassy hatchling, but I much prefer it to when you were too quiet and reeked of prey.”***

Harry laughs without any fear of existing too loudly and being punished for it, and it is a wild, free thing that lifts both of their spirits. ***“You know what? I think we’re gonna be alright. I think we’re gonna grow up here, safe and ignored, until we get strong enough to build our own nest and leave this place behind us. Between you, me, and whatever my strange powers are, nothing will get in our way.”***

“Of course we will, little speaker. A snake wouldn’t settle for anything less.”

Chapter End Notes

We’re gonna have at least four chapters (including this one) before we get to the Hogwarts letters, one for each snake companion that Harry is going to meet before beginning school. It may seem like a lot, but each one has their own role to

play in this story and their own personality and character traits, so I hope you enjoy them all nonetheless. I am playing around a lot with magic theory here, and let me just put it this way... By the fourth book, once Harry has all the familiar bonds that he will form throughout the story, he will have seven serpent familiars that he views as true partners, as they should be regarded, just as Voldemort has seven horcruxes. Beyond being a magically powerful number, this is a very intentional parallel.

Also, here's a little snake fact for you! Since we cannot speak to snakes, it's important to never handle any snakes in your life directly after feeding them like Harry does here. This runs the risk of scaring them and making them regurgitate their meal, an incredibly damaging and stressful thing for snakes to go through, in an attempt to escape from you more quickly. Don't do it, folks.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Did I seriously both write and edit another chapter of this within a day? Yes. In my defense, I only had to edit the first chapter this morning, but still... I hope you all enjoy the double update today!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things with the Dursleys are far from perfect, but they are far better than before. Harry's clothes, while secondhand and a bit worn, fit him, and he gets portions half the size of Vernon and Dudley's at each meal now. Harry's stomach revolts at the thought of eating that much in one sitting anyway, regardless of how much Nisaba frets over him being such a small hatchling for his age.

The most notable improvement is a result of his new glasses. They are rectangular, black frames made of plastic, the cheapest frames that Aunt Petunia could find, and Harry loves them. Now he can make out the distinct shape of each leaf in a tree and see more than vague white blobs in the sky as he watches the clouds go by and honestly? Harry wouldn't trade that for anything in the world.

A couple of years go by like this. His annual eye exam simply leads to a new prescription in an identical pair of frames, and Nisaba takes great joy in teaching him all the ways of a snake that he hasn't already figured out. Neither of them is sure what his powers are, exactly, but they know he can make Nisaba invisible to everyone else, produce heat beyond his natural warmth that has his friend practically melting in contentment, and he can make people forget what was happening a few moments before if he focuses very, very hard on wanting them to.

That last one is dead useful for making the Dursleys ignore any freakishness that they may notice happening around him. He tries not to let that occur in the first place, but sometimes things happen. Things like Dudley grabbing him in a grip that is *just* shy of bruising, he knows what he can and can't get away with now, and brushing against scales that Harry absolutely cannot let him remember touching.

It is a delicate balance to maintain, but he manages.

Harry and Nisaba are out enjoying the spring breeze as he weeds the garden, talking idly as he pulls up countless dandelions while skillfully weaving around the flowers Aunt Petunia wanted to grow. ***"This is almost relaxing without the threat of punishment hanging over my head, don't you think? The yard always looks so nice by the time that I'm done that Aunt Petunia can't complain about me taking days to do it either."***

"I love watching her face scrunch up like she's just smelled a rat that's been dead for weeks," Nisaba hisses a satisfied laugh as she tucks her head beneath the collar of his shirt. It's far harder for her to do so with clothes that properly fit him, but that does not stop her in the slightest. ***"It makes my day."***

"I've finally found you! So you're the speaker that's been casting out his magic for serpents to follow, huh? Smaller than I expected, but a speaker is a speaker."

A snake as green as the leaves he's hiding in is only visible to Harry because of how his black markings stand out among the foliage. It's another snake species that Harry doesn't recognize as being from around here, and he wonders how many exotic snakes are going to find their way to him. He already talks to several grass snakes and a few adders here and there, but none of the other snakes he's spoken to have ever made the warmth in his chest buzz with contentment like Nisaba does.

None of them until this one, that is.

"Magic? Is that why I can do the things I do? Magic is real?"

"Of course it is! Almost every parselmouth throughout history has had magic, and even those who did not have relatives who did. You mean to tell me that you do not know? What has this snake been teaching you?"

"Excuse me?!" Nisaba hisses sharply. ***"I have taught him to embrace the snake within. I have taught him how to survive. I have helped him make a hostile nest safe and taught him how to deceive predators into believing he is not worth notice! I may not have known what his power was, but we did know it existed and he used it. No humans have ever been able to see***

me, I am always pleasantly warm without being too hot, and the humans forget what they were mad about any time they go to yell at him again. Do not speak of things you don't understand!"

"Ah, I see now. You've only ever known the muggle world, haven't you?" The snake gives them both a considering look before joining them in the grass. *"Then you have taught him well indeed for him to know as much as he does. But that does not change the fact that he needs another snake to teach him about his magic and what it means for him to have it. That must be why his magic called so strongly to me."*

"So you're a magic snake? Is that why you're so brightly coloured?"

"Yes and no, speaker. I am not a magical species, but my shed is used in many potions. I have lived among wixen for my entire life and overheard many interesting things, though I was quick to take advantage of the potion master's apprentice forgetting to lock my cage regardless. I am so brightly coloured because I am a boomslang, and boomslangs are venomous. Males such as myself, especially, are known for our bright greens to warn off any foolish predators lest they find themselves becoming prey."

Harry's eyes go wide at that. *"You're venomous? How venomous? I know the adders around here are too, but they're not really dangerous to people. Only small prey."*

"Venomous enough to kill a hippogriff with a single bite. Though I suppose you wouldn't know what those are. They are far larger than humans, in any case, and bigger than the horses they resemble too. Even the most novice of potions masters are not foolish enough to take my shed without having a perfected stunning spell."

"Oh." Harry's mouth suddenly feels very dry. *"That is very impressive."*

The boomslang preens under the praise. *"Oh, I know. But you do not have to smell like prey and fear, speaker. Only a mad serpent would dare attack a true speaker such as yourself, and I am not mad. I shall only strike at your enemies."*

"Thank you. Does that mean you feel that fuzzy warmth as well?"

"Obviously. That is a familiar bond, speaker. Familiars support wixen in rituals, complex spells, and day-to-day life in exchange for receiving an infusion of magic from them. This magic makes familiars more resistant to spells cast by those they aren't bonded to and extends their lifespan as well. With snakes, in particular, we tend to grow longer than we would get without the aid of magic as well. You may even bestow me with a name if you wish it."

"Camulus." The name feels as if it is torn from Harry's throat, but he does not shy away from it. *"I've been reading up on various gods and goddesses to have a list of proper names in the back of my mind, and you feel like a Camulus. He's a Celtic god of warfare, and his name sounds kinda like Camelot, doesn't it? With you being the one to tell me that magic is real... It just feels right. We can choose something else if you don't like it, though."*

"Camulus is a very good name indeed, speaker." The boomslang glows with a gentle light that has Harry reaching out for him before he can think better of it. Thankfully, the serpent doesn't protest being draped across his shoulders in the slightest. *"What is my speaker's name? And the other snake's too, I suppose."*

"I'm Harry, and this is Nisaba. It's a pleasure to meet you, Camulus!"

"Harry? How dreadfully muggle. But I suppose that we have bigger concerns than your name right now. We can revisit gifting you another one at a later date. You have much to learn and... How old are you, speaker?"

"I'm nine. Why?"

"You have much to learn and only two years to learn it."

"What happens in two years?" Nisaba asks with a pointed hiss. *"You do not intend to put the little speaker in danger, do you?"*

"Of course not. He'll get his Hogwarts letter in two years, that's the magical school in Britain, requesting his attendance. It's where all young wixen in the country and countries close to it receive their magical education. But you are capable of far more than the average wixen, and you need to be taught both how to harness that power and how to hide it when necessary. Survival above all else."

"Survival above all else," Harry and Nisaba agree in unison. *"Thank you, Camulus. We will not forget the debt we owe you."*

Camulus locks eyes with them both before a satisfied nod solidifies the magic in their words. *"The speaker need only vow that I am not kept in a cage to be used for ingredients again and I will consider the debt repaid. You, on the other hand..."* The boomslang eyes Nisaba with open curiosity. *"I wish to be taught about the muggle world as I teach you both about the magical one. I will not let myself become prey in an unfamiliar place when the knowledge needed to survive it is available to me."*

"I will never lock you up, I promise. Welcome to the family, Camulus!"

"You have yourself a deal, serpent of venom."

And so two becomes three. Harry finds that hiding two snakes from the world around him isn't any more difficult than hiding one.

"First we need to establish what you can already do. Accidental magic is often indicative of what spells will come easiest to you once you have a focus, and it sounds as if you are already using a few intentionally and not accidentally. That requires no small amount of power."

"Um, well, it's not difficult for me to keep you two hidden at all. I only have to think about it for it to happen."

"Yes, that's a classic concealment charm. The magic for that did not feel accidental to me in the slightest; it was heavy with intention."

"Little speaker also keeps me warm even during the coldest winters. I know the dull human used a light for that, but little speaker only needs his magic."

"That's a warming charm, sometimes called a heating charm, and if he does it as often as you say, then that's another instance of wandless rather than accidental magic. Nonverbal too, I'm guessing?"

"You're supposed to use words for spells?"

Camulus levels him with a disbelieving look. *"Yes. That is going to be something you want to hide until you are much stronger. Wandless magic too. We will go over the incantations for those spells later. I don't know the wand movements, nor do you have a wand to practice with in any case, but we'll go over them as soon as you get your things for Hogwarts. What other magic have you done?"*

"Well, I can make people forget about stuff sometimes. If they notice something that I didn't want them to, then I focus really hard on making them forget about it. It's difficult though, and I've had close calls."

"Hmm... That sounds accidental verging on intentional. You'll likely figure out how to do it on purpose before too much longer, but let's hope you don't need the confundus charm that often. Your magic has a definite tendency toward charms from what we've discussed so far, with a possible affinity for mind magics to boot, but are there any other instances of magic that you can think of? Any at all? Even if it only happened once, it can be useful for figuring out the wider scope of what you're capable of."

"Um... I turned my teacher's wig blue once when I was younger. He was berating me in front of the class for not being able to read the board, and I was just so upset..."

"The colour-changing charm. That is a definite trend toward charm work. There isn't a much better branch of magic that you could be attuned to; Charm Masters make excellent duelists as well."

"Little speaker also popped us up to the school roof once. It was very noisy. We only avoided notice because he concealed himself like he does to me as soon as we were up there."

"Oh yeah! I totally forgot about that."

"... Pardon?" Camulus turns to him with a shocked hiss. *"You accidentally apparated? And you're both still in one piece? Just how powerful are you?! Wixen aren't allowed to learn how to apparate until they're seventeen and have fully developed magical cores, and for good reason!"*

"It's not like I knew what I was doing!"

"Merlin and Morgana, what have I gotten myself into with this speaker?"

Camulus hisses despairingly to himself for quite some time after that. Harry and Nisaba can't quite help laughing at his expense.

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"Family is incredibly important among wixen. While many of them wrongly obsess over blood, I can tell you that the magic I've tasted from pure-bloods, half-bloods, and muggle-borns alike are all far too varied in power and abilities to say that one is any better than the other, last names do hold genuine importance. There are many noble families among the magical families of Britain, and those names come with titles, regard, a seat on the Wizengamot, and often more money than any one wixen can hope to spend in a lifetime. You do not want to upset anyone from those families."

Camulus is an excellent storyteller. His voice is captivating and expressive in a way that demands attention, and both Harry and Nisaba give it willingly.

"Though some families are more important to avoid offending than others. The Black, Greengrass, Longbottom, and Malfoy families are those of both notable political power and fortunes, so a social faux pas is less likely to be forgiven. The Abbott, Bulstrode, Crouch, and Nott families have more political power than wealth, though they live quite comfortably regardless. There are also a few families you'll likely want to avoid from reputation alone. The Carrow, Lestrangle, Rosier, Selwyn, and Yaxley families are known for having more mad wixen in them than not, and I would recommend you avoid them. Most others I trust you to use your best judgement for, though I feel I should warn you that the Weasleys are widely regarded as blood traitors. They have an infamously large brood and seem like an alright sort, but that may be important to keep in mind depending on the circles that you're running in."

"It all sounds so complicated." Harry buries his head in his hands with a groan. *"How am I ever supposed to keep up with all of this stuff?"*

"I will teach you. You have learned the ways of a snake well, and I do not doubt that you'll learn the ways of the wixen just as quickly." Camulus slithers into Harry's lap, and the additional weight helps him take a deep breath. *"I never asked you for your last name, did I? I cannot imagine you belong to any overly important wixen family, you never would have wound up here otherwise, but there must be some distant relation. Parselmouths are tied deeply with family magics."*

"Oh, it's Potter!"

Camulus jerks so sharply that Harry almost thinks that prey has wandered too close to them before the snake whips his head around and stares at Harry in shock and horror. *"You're Hari Potter. Oh Merlin, that makes entirely too much sense. Those muggles just anglicized your perfectly respectable name."*

"Hari? Not Harry?" He thinks that he likes it. It certainly sounds better than Harry, and he has always been eager to cast off any attempt that the Dursleys made to make him appear more normal. His name is no exception to this, it seems.

"Decidedly not Harry. The Potters are a family that immigrated from India several centuries ago, and though many took on anglicized names for the sake of convenience, yours was not altered. It is not as if saying Hari is particularly difficult. I suppose that explains why you're a parselmouth. It's not an especially common gift among the family, but it is prominent in India and pops up in the line from time to time."

"Are the Potters important?" Hari asks, feeling rather as if his world has been tilted on its axis once again.

"Are the Potters important, he asks. What on earth were those wixen thinking by sending you here?!" It takes several long moments for Camulus to compose himself. *"The Potters are a noble family, Hari. A prominent noble family that is also considered ancient in India. At least we will not have to worry about affording school supplies, but Merlin... Hari Potter knowing nothing of the wizarding world. They would have eaten you alive."*

"You say that like the little speaker is as important to the wixen as he is to us."

"He is! They say that he defeated the Dark Lord. He's the only known survivor of the killing curse, and while I maintain that one or both of his parents used sacrificial magic to channel the loss of their own lives into saving his rather than a mere hatchling being capable of any great feat of magic, wixen are rarely so sensible. They've hailed him a hero. He's a celebrity in the magical world! I was going to teach him proper etiquette even if he was a muggle-born, but those lessons take priority now. We can focus on magic once I'm certain he's not going to make an absolute fool of himself the second he steps into Diagon Alley."

Hari has never been happier that he can talk to snakes. Walking into that situation unaware sounds like it would be an absolute nightmare.

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"Now, wixen do not shake hands often, but if one extends their hand to you, then it is a severe insult to refuse it. The gesture is often used between families that were feuding in previous generations as an attempt to make amends. Exposing your hand reveals that there is no wand hidden in it, and it is a declaration that they do not wish to be enemies with you. Even if you do not like or trust the family, accept the handshake. Refusing is not worth the political trouble, and you may gain some true allies from this. I do not doubt that the children of several former Death Eaters will be angling to be your friend and restore their family's honor, doubly so because there's no way you're going to any house but Slytherin."

"You don't think I could be a Ravenclaw?"

"You like knowledge, sure, but you like knowledge in the same way that a snake does. Knowledge can mean the difference between life and death, so you hold it close and prepare yourself for when you might need to use it someday. Slytherins are all about survival. I must insist upon you being checked for compulsions and mind-alteration spells if you wind up anywhere else."

Harry snorts at that, but he concedes Camulus's point with a nod. He rolls his eyes at the decidedly smug look he receives in turn. *"Now, what is the standard greeting for a wixen of no notable status the first time that you meet them?"*

"Merry meet."

"An heir or heiress? Suppose that it is Heiress Greengrass in this instance."

"Merry meet, Heiress Greengrass. The words would be accompanied by a kiss to her knuckles if I was beneath her in station, but since I am not, the words alone are fine."

"Very good. And a lord or lady? Suppose that it's Lord Malfoy in this instance."

"Merry meet, Lord Malfoy. The words must be accompanied with a deep bow up until I receive my lordship, at the very least, and even then, it is respectful to acknowledge fellow lords with a shallow bow once you are of the same station."

"And with a lady? Assume it is Lady Malfoy."

"Merry meet, Lady Malfoy. My words must be accompanied by both a brief, though still formal, bow and a quick kiss to her knuckles until I receive my lordship since she is above me in station. Once I am a lord, I can leave the kiss behind, but bows are still expected for ladies."

"And how does one say farewell?"

"Merry part alongside any titles that apply. Even with those above you in station, a shallow bow, barely more than the dip of a head, is acceptable for farewells. When attempting to impress someone, however, you cannot go amiss with a more noticeable bow."

"Very good, Hari! You've learned the rules faster than I expected you to."

"I've always been adaptable," he says with a shrug. *"I wouldn't have survived the Dursleys, much less wrangled them into something almost tolerable, if I wasn't. It's not as hard as I thought it would be."*

"I am proud of you." Camulus hisses out a breathy laugh at the flush painting Hari's cheeks. *"Just remember that you don't have to be so formal with heirs and heiresses after your first introductions. The same level of respect only needs to be maintained for lords and ladies regardless of how well you know them, and even then, they may give you leave to refer to them less formally in private settings with time. Follow their lead in that, and you will not go wrong, Hari."*

"Thank you, Camulus. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"Embarrassed yourself thoroughly, I'm sure."

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"Why do muggles insist on taking such loud methods of transportation? Brooms are far quieter."

"Brooms are far less protective too. How likely is a wixen to die without knowing cushioning charms if they crash into something at a high speed?"

"Very."

"Humans are pretty dull creatures, but they are creative when faced with obstacles. We have to give them that."

Camulus looks contemplative before conceding her point with a nod. His attention returns to Hari shortly after. ***"Is it true that muggles have resorted to healing wounds with a needle and thread since they don't have magic to do it for them?"***

"Does the magical world not have stitches?" Hari pauses, answering his own question with a shake of the head. ***"I guess they wouldn't need to with healing spells and potions available, huh? Anyway, yeah, it's true."***

"Wicked! Maybe muggles aren't so bad after all. I still want to bite your muggles, though."

"If it wouldn't cause more problems than it was worth, I would let you."

"Don't taunt me with what can never be, Hari," Camulus hisses plaintively. ***"You can be so cruel sometimes."***

A wicked little smirk is the boomslang's answer. ***"Well, I learned from the best, didn't I?"***

Both snakes are very pleased with themselves after that.

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"I want you to try a new spell entirely. You already know how to do everything but the colour-changing charm consistently, and that isn't particularly useful to you. Perhaps if you had scales like other serpents and could use the spell to camouflage yourself... But you do not. Regardless, there is a spell that I am especially familiar with that I believe will serve you well. Any guesses as to what it is?"

Hari hums thoughtfully, thinking back and carefully combing through each conversation he and Camulus have had since they met. ***"The stunning charm?"***

"Precisely! I've heard this one so often that I even know the incantation for it, so that should make it easier for you to cast wandlessly. You say stupefy and focus your magic on knocking someone out with it or halting a moving object. Why don't you try tossing something and hitting it midair? That will improve your reaction time too."

"Yes, sir!"

Nisaba helps him rummage through the broken toys that are scattered throughout the room, and it is her that manages to find a dirty tennis ball that is, miraculously, in one piece. Hari tosses it up and down a few times, feeling uncharacteristically nervous. He takes a deep breath before he tosses the ball into the air, and his eyes lock on it as he whispers, "Stupefy."

Nothing happens. Hari catches the ball with his hand and feels decidedly embarrassed.

"You're focusing too much on the word itself. You need to draw on your want as well. Will that ball to stop moving as if you want nothing more in the world. Once you're actually casting the spell, you should see a beam of red light shoot out from your hand."

Hari narrows his eyes in focus, tosses the ball in the air, and this time, he flings his hand out as he firmly says, "Stupefy." He nearly drops the ball by doing so, but he does manage to create a faint, red glow around his hand.

"Impressive. Do it again."

He does. Over and over and over again, Hari tosses the ball into the air, utters stupefy, and progressively creates a brighter red glow around his right hand. He nearly falls off the bed when a beam of light shoots across the room, and this time, he does miss the ball and winces at the dull thuds it makes as it bounces across the floor. ***"Did I just...?"***

"You're getting the spell. Now you just have to learn how to aim it. It's a lot harder to hit a ball than another wixen, but maybe that's a good thing. Never hurts to be more precise in your casting."

Hari nearly collapses on his bed, chest heaving with effort, once he finally freezes the infuriating ball in midair. He only holds it for a few seconds before it falls to the floor, but he cannot be bothered to go pick it up again this time.

"Rest, little speaker. We will protect you."

And he is far, far too tired to object to Nisaba's suggestion. His eyes close of their own volition, and he can feel himself drifting off to sleep to the sound of the hissed conversation being held on his headboard.

"You watch him when the sun is high and I watch him when the moon is?"

"Obviously. You're nocturnal, I'm diurnal, it only makes sense. It's best not to drain his magic by keeping ourselves going regardless of the time right now. He's too exhausted to sustain that sort of pull."

“Was it wise to wear him out so much? What if we cannot protect him in time?”

“My venom will stop anything and anyone that means him harm in their tracks, and you may always call for me if there is a true danger during the night as well. We’re both bonded to Hari, so we’re both bonded to one another as well, even if we do have to intentionally reach out to each other to make use of that distant bond. Call and I will wake.”

“... Thank you, Camulus. Perhaps you aren’t so bad after all.”

“I could same the same about you. For a snake who knew only of muggles before meeting Hari, you have adapted remarkably well.”

Hari truly drifts off into slumber then, and it is only once his breathing steadies that the two serpents turn to one another with meaningful looks.

“We’re agreed then?”

“We’re agreed.”

Snakes have been vilified by humans since the beginning of time, and wixen are no exception to this. However, this sentiment is only growing worse in both the muggle and magical worlds. The rise of Christianity has led to an overwhelming number of muggles viewing them as the devil’s messengers and killing them whenever they see them. The rise of Voldemort has led to the vast majority of British wixen declaring them and anyone who associates with them, namely Slytherins since they embody traits that Salazar Slytherin valued, evil. Serpents have become reviled throughout Britain, and their lives are now in danger because of it. There are so few parselmouths left to advocate for them as magic intended, and the few that are born here either die young after slipping in front of the wrong person or repress their abilities entirely for fear of discovery.

But Hari Potter is different. He holds a great deal of political power in the wizarding world, and he has all the signs of an exceptionally powerful wizard, even at this age. Once he’s better trained, once he hits his majority, there is no doubt that he will be able to cultivate power and respect beyond what he’s been given for the actions of his parents. Hari Potter has the potential to completely change Britain’s view on serpents, both snake and wixen, and it is their duty to cultivate that potential.

Survival above all else.

Chapter End Notes

Hari's name both maintains a similar spelling (though different pronunciation, with it being said ha-ri instead of hare-ee) AND gives him a name that the serpents respect as well. After all, Hari is an alternate name for the Hindu god Vishnu. The name also means lion and represents equal parts strength and compassion, so it's something I can absolutely see James and Lily Potter naming their son.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hari figures out how to consistently cast the stunning charm surprisingly quickly. Camulus immediately starts teaching him a few others, the only non-charm that he throws into the mix refuses to produce any results and is set aside for once Hari has his wand, and by the time he turns ten, Hari has a small arsenal of spells hidden up his sleeve.

He doesn't bother to learn the proper incantations for his concealment and warming charms. The spells are like second nature to him after all these years, and while he'll need to know how other people cast the spell once he starts Hogwarts, Camulus thinks that it's a good idea to keep practicing solely intent-based magic.

"As you saw with stupefy, spells are typically accompanied by a flash of light whenever they are cast. The colour will always be the same for the incantation used. Stupefy will always be partnered with a red light, for example, so learning to distinguish what each spell looks like when cast is an invaluable skill. Many wixen rely on hearing the incantation to know what's coming for them, but if your opponent is a nonverbal caster or the scene of your battle is too loud to make it out, knowing which colours are associated with each spell can be the difference between life and death."

"They're all supposed to do that? But none of my spells have ever had a noticeable light to them before."

"And we will cultivate that skill, trust me. I believe it to be the result of your magic operating solely on intent rather than having an incantation to aid it. Incantations are consistent and draw power from any wixen who speaks them in the same way, and that means that the spells themselves look the same regardless of who casts them. Power levels can vary slightly, but generally, one stupefy will look like all the rest of them."

"Huh... So if I use intent-based magic against someone, they have no way of knowing what's coming?"

"None at all. Even those who can sense magic will not be able to react quickly enough for it to matter."

"It's possible to sense magic?"

"That is a lesson for another day. Now, focus on your confundus charm."

It doesn't take him long to perfect that spell either, though Hari hopes he won't need it any time soon. The pink light that accompanies the incantation might slip under the radar among wixen, but it sticks out like a sore thumb in Little Whinging. It's better than risking the spell failing on him entirely, though, and his control over the intent-based version of the confundus charm is too shaky to risk when he has other options.

Stupefy, confundo, aguamenti, immobilus, and alohomora. He only has a small selection of incantations to fall back on, but each and every one of them has proven useful. On days when Aunt Petunia is spiteful enough to dance on the line of acceptable treatment towards him, aguamenti ensures that he will never have to go without water again. Immobilus is similar to stupefy, but it simply freezes a target rather than knocking out living ones. Hari has used it a couple of times to make an attempted bully stay down on the ground for just a few seconds longer than they would have otherwise. It's not enough to make them think that something is wrong, but he magically pins them down just long enough to scare them and make sure that he can make a clean getaway before any teachers are brought into it. Alohomora is Hari's favorite spell by far. The Dursleys cannot lock him away and pretend to lose the key ever again, no matter how much he upsets them, and that is one of the few punishments that they could still use on him without attracting the neighbors' attention.

Hari takes great joy in unlocking the deadbolts and heavy locks on the other side of his door one by one and popping up where he isn't meant to be on occasion, just for the fun of it. The Dursleys add a new lock to his door every time, but it hardly deters him. The unlocking charm becomes as easy as breathing with so much practice, and it joins his concealment and warming charms in the list of spells that he can cast with intent alone.

Magic is utterly fascinating. Even with such a simple, survival-based skillet, Hari is already discovering combinations that prove useful. A simple aguamenti paired with his warming charm allows him to discover the joy of warm showers, and whenever Nisaba struggles with stubborn patches of shed getting stuck on her body, he can use the same combination to help her get them off without making her uncomfortably cold in the process.

"You said that the water-making spell reacts more strongly to the caster's intent than most standardized magic, right?"

"Exactly so. It's typically a spell taught to wixen near their majority for that very reason, but we needed a fresh supply of water badly enough that I was willing to risk teaching it to you anyway. You've never needed more than a steady stream of

water while casting the spell, but if you wanted to, you could even conjure a wave."

A smile stretches across his face as Camulus confirms his suspicions, and Nisaba gives Hari a thoroughly amused look from where she's draped across his shoulders. *"What has you so excited, little speaker?"*

"The warming charm, or at least my version of it, works the same way! I can make it just a few degrees warmer, make everything feel cozy and warm, or make it so warm that it's verging on uncomfortable, and since I don't need an incantation for my warming charm at all, I can meld the magic I use for it to aguamenti to alter the spell as it's cast instead of afterward. But it goes beyond that, doesn't it?"

Camulus's bond floods their link with an unholy glee as he nods, eyes sharp and evaluating as he urges Hari to continue.

"I was thinking too small! A wixen is going to hear me say aguamenti and expect cool, refreshing water, even if it is hurled at them in a wave, and counter it in a way specifically catered to those circumstances. A bubble-head charm, for example, would keep them from drowning in the wave, so they're more likely to cast that than they are to try to dodge the massive swell of water entirely. So if I amplify my warming charm as much as I can... Theoretically, I could conjure a wave of boiling water, couldn't I?"

"Yes! Yes!!" Camulus hisses triumphantly. "You're beginning to understand. Most wixen make the mistake of believing that magic is immutable, unchangeable, simply because they've grown up surrounded by it and always see things done a certain way. That could not be further from the truth. Magic is equal parts power, intent, and control, and when those three elements are harnessed properly, there is very little it cannot do. Combining spells is difficult, though not impossible, when you must use both of their incantations, but any wixen capable of casting nonverbally could combine a silent spell with a verbal incantation if they tried. Not all spells would work well together, of course, but most do not think to attempt it at all."

"How could they not see the potential? I just don't understand..." Hari trails off, mind whirring with possibilities.

"You are ready."

"What?"

"Sit down, Hari. There is something else I wish to teach you." He does so, blinking in bewilderment as the typically snarky boomslang slithers into his lap and coils up there. *"Do you remember when I mentioned wixen who are capable of sensing magic?"*

"Like I could ever forget! Are we finally going to talk about them?"

"Patience, my speaker." Despite the exasperation in Camulus's voice, there is a thread of fondness there that undermines it. "Regardless of what many think, it is not an inherited skill in wixen. Family magic may make learning to sense magic easier, but one does not have to be born with a natural aptitude for the ability to learn how to do so, though a certain level of power is required. One can hardly cast out their magic in search of another source of it if they don't have magic to spare, after all. That being said... There are no natural magic sensors born among wixen, but it's a completely different story for magical creatures and animals. Cats are the most well-known magic sensors, which is why they're such popular familiars, but serpents are high up on that list too. Our ability to sense magic is nearly unparalleled, even among the ones who know nothing of the magical world at all. That is how Nisaba knew you were a speaker before ever meeting you, and that is how I was able to track you down after escaping my imprisonment despite being several cities away from you. We are particularly attuned to the magic of parselmouths, but we can taste the ambient crackle of magic in the air from something as mundane as a flobberworm. And parselmouths are just as much serpent as they are wixen."

"You think that I could taste magic?"

"I think that you already do. You simply dismissed the buzzing sensation as another oddity not to concern yourself over and pushed it to the back of your mind. I want you to try bringing it back to the forefront for me. Don't think of any spells, incantations, or intent. Let your magic fill the air around us and tell me what you feel."

Hari takes a deep breath before gently loosening his control over his magic. The air is punched out of his lungs by the sight of a rich, purple glow filling the room. It feels like secrets whispered in the dark and hidden alcoves. It feels like power lying in wait that is prepared to strike at a moment's notice. It feels like home. He blinks the tears out of his eyes before closing them, focusing on his other senses so that he may better understand the power surrounding him.

The first thing he notices is the distinct hint of electricity in the air. Magic smells like the wind before rain, a promise of something greater soon to come. That sensation is strongest within his bedroom, dancing around himself, Camulus, and

Nisaba as if they are the eye of the storm, but as he focuses on casting his magic out further, he can sense hints of it beyond Number 4 Privet Drive too.

There is a surprising concentration of magic draped over the house itself, but the heaviness of it tastes of iron and makes his skin crawl. Despite its unsettling intensity, that magic does not draw Hari's attention half as much as the spots of magic dancing throughout Mrs. Figg's yard do. There is a wildness and intelligence there that reminds him of the magic dancing around Camulus, simply without the power of a familiar bond boosting it further.

"Always knew that there was something strange about those cats."

Camulus's hissing laugh nearly startles him out of his meditative state. *"Very good, Hari; they're half-kneazles. They're highly intelligent, even when mixed with a mundane cat, and uncannily skilled with detecting who can or cannot be trusted. What else do you sense?"*

"Warmth. Heat and magic. Some sort of magical fire? No, a floo! And there's an echo of power that once was, or maybe power that could have been. That's... Mrs. Figg is a squib, isn't she?" His magic retreats immediately, snapping back and coalescing within him as it vibrates with anger and fear. The lights start flickering. *"What are the chances of that being a coincidence?"*

"There are no coincidences, little speaker. Only opportunities and those who fail to take them."

"They're watching me. They've been watching me this whole time! Mrs. Figg knew that I was being abused, and despite me being important to them, no wixen ever came to do anything about it. If I hadn't met you two... What do they want from me? Why do they want me to stay here so badly? And what is that awful magic that hangs over this house?"

"It's a blood ward," Camulus answers simply. *"No other magic tastes so heavily of prey and a successful hunt. As for the rest... Well, that is the question, isn't it? You are a wizard of noble heritage, and many of those lines are closely related to one another. You doubtlessly have magical relatives, no matter how distant, that could have taken you in after the deaths of James and Lily Potter. But instead, someone harnessed the power of your mother's blood sacrifice, something that should have protected you and you alone, and twisted it into a ward that shields the whole house. Why? The war was over, and any wixen smart enough to have supported the Dark Lord while avoiding imprisonment for it wouldn't have thrown that all away to kill a baby. Wixen seldom make sense, but this... There are very few powerful enough to get away with pulling strings like this. And only one of them has been reassuring Britain's magical community that you are safe and sound ever since you were spirited away."*

Nisaba's hiss is a wild, furious thing. *"Dumbledore! I do not like this. It reeks of a plot."*

"That it does, sister." He sounds deceptively calm, but the bond between them all reveals that rage dances throughout Camulus's magic as surely as it does theirs. *"That it does."*

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Once Hari starts sensing magic, it is difficult to stop. Mrs. Figg's half-kneazles watch him with a more knowing gaze than before, but he slowly relaxes as time goes by and nothing happens. Mrs. Figg does not treat him any differently while babysitting him whenever his relatives go on vacation, and if sharp, feline eyes linger on Nisaba or Camulus for longer than a few seconds, then he simply guides more magic into their concealment charms and acts as if nothing happened.

He's almost certain that the cats are helping him on purpose.

That niggling suspicion only increases as the week carries on, and while almost all of the half-kneazles catch his attention at some point or another while he's speaking with his familiars under his breath or warming them with his magic, there is one who always warns him if his concealment charm starts to waver in the vision of something as magical as he is. She has a rich chocolate brown coat that Hari knows is rare in ordinary cats, and he suspects that the colour comes from her kneazle heritage. The golden eyes that trail after his every step certainly glow with magic, if nothing else.

"Is she...?"

"Perhaps. Only time will tell."

Hari narrows his eyes at his familiars as they study the half-kneazle contemplatively, but he's not allowed to think over that interaction for long before Mrs. Figg is cooing over him again.

"Oh, it's such a delight to have you, Harry dear. I've never met anyone that my cats like so much! Especially Wellie. She's such a feisty girl, but she trails after you like a lost kitten. I'd let you take her home with you if I could, but..."

"I understand, Mrs. Figg. Thank you anyway." Hari's smile is more than a little strained around the edges, but Mrs. Figg has never been a particularly observant person. She does not see it.

He spends the rest of the day looking through photo albums of her cats with her, and now that he is looking for them, Hari can see a few here and there that look more like the kneazles Camulus described to him than an ordinary cat. He briefly considers asking her why they look so different before firmly putting the thought out of his mind. It's not worth the risk of anyone discovering how prepared he is for the world they intend to blindside him with. He will not give them the chance to alter their plans before he gets into the magical world and firmly cements his place in it.

Hari is drawn out of his head by the persistent press of a furry head against his hand, and a smile tugs at his lips as his hand traces down her back. "I'm sorry that you have such an awful name," he whispers. "Wellie is just... so demeaning, isn't it? I can't imagine that you like it very much."

The air between them is heavy with magic, and eyes that wouldn't look out of place twinkling in the night sky slowly blink shut before the half-kneazle stands up and goes to the door. When Hari doesn't immediately follow her, she turns back to face him and meows quietly. Neither Nisaba nor Camulus protests it, so Hari opens the door and heads out into the night with her, murmuring, "What do you want to show me, girl?"

He follows her toward the shrubs at the edges of Mrs. Figg's property. They always look wild and overgrown in a way that he can't help liking, and whenever one of their neighbors grumbles about it, Mrs. Figg just explains that they attract more wildlife for her cats to watch and hunt before cheerfully asking if they want to see any pictures of them. Considering the increasing volume of panicked hissing that Hari hears as they approach those shrubs, he cannot argue with her logic, no matter how ridiculous it may seem.

"No, no, no... I am so close to the speaker! Go away! I'll bite you, you stupid bird! See if you enjoy eating me when you drop dead from the sky!"

They pick up the pace, and it's unsettling to see a flash of brown and white swoop down when he cannot hear a thing. "Stupefy!" A flash of red shoots across the yard and hits the barn owl inches away from the young snake that almost fell victim to its sharp talons. The cat is only a half-step behind the spell, and Hari averts his eyes as she makes sure that the owl will not get the chance to shake off the spell. He instead focuses his attention on the little adder that nearly became its meal.

"Are you alright?"

"Speaker? Oh, thank you, speaker!" The tiny snake is not even a foot long yet, obviously in her first few months of life, and has pitch-black scales all over that Hari sees in adders from time to time. It's quite common for them to be born melanistic, and since they are nocturnal, the genetic mutation helps them instead of hindering them. ***"That awful bird was sitting there for hours. I didn't move at all, but it's like it just knew I was here no matter how still I was. They don't usually act like that!"***

"You're right. That is unusual..." Hari glances over at what remains of the owl just as the half-kneazle drags it into the bushes. When she emerges from them once more, it is with a slightly bloodied piece of parchment in her mouth. ***"So it was a post owl. Magic makes them more intelligent, so it's not your fault that it tried to kill you. You didn't do anything wrong."***

He flares out his magic to sense for any possible spells woven into the parchment, but there is nothing interesting about it except for its potential contents. The young adder rears back at the sensation before drawing even closer, wrapping around Hari's wrist with an intrigued hiss. ***"You have this magic too. You can protect me from predators like those post owls and the strange cats around this place, and I can teach you how to tell predators from prey and who might be both. Mice can still bite when cornered, and even the fearsome post owl fell to your magic and the strange cat, after all. You have good instincts, but I think they can be made better. Let me stay with you, speaker."***

"Would you like to be gifted a name? Or do you simply wish to remain with me until you are bigger in exchange for your lessons? You would not be the only snake with me." Hari brushes his hand over Nisaba and Camulus, allowing them to become visible to the non-magical snake.

The adder studies them closely before firmly hissing, ***"I would like a name."***

"What do you think of Artemis? She is a goddess of the hunt and nature, and I believe that you will eventually become an even more brilliant hunter than you already are with a mind like yours. You will only become smarter as you grow older, especially when linked to magic, and to evade a post owl for hours as you are... It's impressive."

"I accept this name, speaker. You honor me with it, and I vow to you that I will live up to its importance." A flare of magic links them together just as Hari's new favorite half-kneazle, tired of being ignored, presses the roll of parchment into his hand with a plaintive meow.

"I know, I know, I'm going," he laughs. "I can make sure Mrs. Figg still gets it, so don't worry about—" A sharp yowl cuts him off, and Hari halts midsentence, cogs turning in his head as he whispers, "Unless you wanted me to open it?"

A nod and another firm press to his hand is his answer, and Camulus laughs at his disbelieving expression. ***"I told you that kneazles are smart, and this one has more kneazle in her than the rest of her siblings. You can see it in her eyes. You're not going anywhere until you read that letter."***

Hari glances back at Mrs. Figg's home, and he only starts to relax once he confirms that the windows are still dark and puts his three snake companions under concealment charms that the cat sitting across from him approves of. He carefully sits down, making sure that everyone is in a safe position for him to do so, as he unfurls the parchment with sharp, hungry eyes.

Arabella,

I am glad to hear that young Harry is doing better than he was in previous years. I know that you had your doubts about his placement with the Dursley family, but they are good people, despite their faults, and I trusted that they would raise the boy well. One cannot underestimate the power of familial love, after all, and no matter how upset Petunia may have been that she couldn't go to Hogwarts with Lily, it speaks well of her character that she thought to ask at all. Would someone who truly hates magic as you feared they did do such a thing? I rather think not.

I've started rambling again, forgive me. I did actually write to ask you something of some import. Have you noticed any instances of accidental magic from young Harry recently? I know that it's always been quite common for little things here and there to pop up, it happens with children as magically powerful as he is, but there was a rather large surge of magical energy that my wards alerted me to a couple of weeks ago. None of my other inquiries have turned up any answers, so I thought it best to ask you.

As always, I was delighted by the photos you sent along. Kneazles are such wondrous creatures, aren't they?

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Chief Warlock

Supreme Mugwump

"Well," he croaks faintly. "I definitely won't be intentionally casting my magic out like that again any time soon. And I'll have to be more careful about practicing magic too. I'm lucky that he still thinks it's accidental with all that I've been doing lately. It must only alert him to magic being used, not the specific spells involved, or he would definitely be more suspicious. This is... Not ideal. Aguamenti."

A gentle stream of water flows from his outstretched hand until the parchment is soaked through, and the half-kneazle who gave it to him immediately starts ripping it to shreds. "Thank you. Seriously, thank you. I'm not sure how you knew, but... I will not forget the debt that I owe you."

Golden eyes stare into his own, searching for something that they must find because a flare of magic springs to life between them both. Hari knows that he's gaping as the half-kneazle says, *'So long as you get rid of my atrocious name and gift me with a suitable one, I will be content.'*

"I knew it!! I knew she would be his familiar!"

"I did not doubt you, sister. Merely stated that we could not be sure she would want the bond. Cats are peculiar animals, and they are even more so when they're part creature."

"If it had to be one of the strange cats, then I guess the one that saved me isn't too bad..."

"How...?" Hari's whispered question draws his familiars out of their conversation, and Camulus takes pity on him by explaining.

"True familiar bonds, far too many wixen take in pets and call them familiars, allow for wixen and their familiars to understand one another. When it comes to snakes who find themselves bonded to a parselmouth, this means being able to understand the language their human speaks outside of parseltongue. But with other creatures or animals, you become able to hear their intent through your bond, and any familiars who do not understand it already gain knowledge of your language in turn."

'Both languages. I could talk to other animals to a certain extent before, but I've never understood a snake so clearly until now. I wonder... Could I understand any language if you learned it?'

"Magic is *so* cool." Hari allows himself to bask in his joy for a few moments, magic singing with the realization of two new bonds. "What do you think about Athena, goddess of wisdom and military victory? Because you are trying to help me win, aren't you? Against anyone who wants to use me."

'Indeed I am, little wizard. And I like that name very much.'

They sneak back in under the cover of the night, and when Mrs. Figg finds Athena curled up on the couch with Hari the next morning, she is none-the-wiser about their little adventure or the letter she would never read.

It is more difficult to convince Mrs. Figg that Athena will be safe at the Dursleys than it is to convince the Dursleys to let Hari keep her. After all, what would the neighbors think if he told them about the cat flap on his door when they don't even have a cat?

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"What is that idiot doing? Is he trying to break the Statute of Secrecy?"

"He is like a dumb mouse, squeaking and flailing about in search of grain and attracting the attention of every predator around him in the process."

Hari has to try very hard not to laugh at Camulus and Artemis's scathing commentary on the wizard they bump into while grocery shopping. It's hard not to when they're absolutely right. Everyone in the building is giving the strange man walking around in a formal suit and a violet top hat a wide berth, and even if he couldn't sense the cloying magic around him, Hari would do the same.

Of course, this means that the man practically trips over himself and dips into a deep bow when he notices Hari. Several mothers clutch their children closer, and Petunia turns such an alarming shade of puce that he almost thinks she's going to faint right then and there. Instead, she drags him and Dudley out of the store and abandons their cart in the process. She levels Hari with a fierce glare and hisses, "You don't know him, do you?"

"No, Aunt Petunia," he reassures her. "He's really weird, isn't he? I don't like the way he looked at me. Can we please get our shopping done somewhere else?"

A small crowd is milling around outside the store, some watching in confusion and concern while others have followed them out to shield Hari from the wizard's searching stare, and he can see the moment that his aunt realizes they have an attentive audience as she slides on a mask of her own.

Her smile doesn't look remotely real to anyone who studies it for too long, but the way it wobbles at the edges is easily dismissed as concern rather than irritation. "Of course we can, sweetheart. I'm sorry, Diddykins, we'll have to go back for your ice cream another day."

"But Mom! You promised it today!"

"I know, but these things happen sometimes. Your favorite costs two pounds more at the other store."

"They still have it, don't they?"

His aunt, never able to hold out against Dudley's whining for long, concedes and drives them both to the other store without further argument. She buys the ice cream.

"It's kind of funny," Nisaba muses once they're all safely tucked away in his bedroom for the night. ***"If they had magic instead of hating it, then your relatives would be Slytherins too, don't you think?"***

Hari thinks about Uncle Vernon and how his eyes are always set on the next promotion at work, constantly climbing higher and higher up the ladder even though they live quite comfortably as it is. He thinks about Aunt Petunia and how quickly she understands Hari's games and starts playing them too, working with him instead of against him to salvage her family's reputation. He thinks about Dudley and how he's learned that raising his voice and turning on the waterworks gets his mom and dad to cave in every single time, never hesitating to use it to his own benefit.

"You know what? Yeah, I think they would be."

Chapter End Notes

I realized that my little snippet about Hari's future familiar bonds at the end of chapter one did not explain this very well, so I am here to clarify: he will have seven bonds specifically with serpents, so as to parallel Voldemort's horcruxes, but Hari was always going to have an eighth bond (much like Voldemort planned to have seven total soul pieces and did not intend to make a horcrux out of Hari) that doesn't "count" in the arithmancy involved due to not meeting the same criteria as the rest. And to be fair, two of the seven serpents will not be familiars that can follow Hari around or be with him often anyway. Hari will not be gaining any more familiar bonds outside of Athena and the seven serpents, though he will have a way with dangerous creatures that worries his classmates. A lot.

As for Hari and Athena's bond/mind-link, only Hari can understand what she means. Her words are put in 's and only italicized to show that difference, and the serpents are unable to understand her since Hari cannot exactly speak feline.

And yes, Hari's finite number of familiars does mean that he won't get Hedwig here. There was no universe where that would ever happen with how I planned to introduce Artemis; Hari would not subject her to spending so much time around an owl. That being said, Hedwig does not disappear from the story entirely! She will be showing up as another important character's owl.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A series of sharp knocks against his door and the click of lock after lock disengaging jolts Hari into awareness. “Get up! Breakfast needs to be perfect for my darling Dudley’s special day.”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia. Give me just a few minutes to get dressed.”

“You have three minutes and no longer!”

Knowing that his unruly hair is a lost cause within that timeframe, Hari swiftly gets dressed and holds out his arm for Artemis to coil around instead. She’s gotten bigger since last summer, but she’s still barely over a foot long and has plenty of growing left to do.

Just as he’s about to walk out his door, Dudley’s thundering footsteps race down the hall. “Wake up, cousin! We’re going to the zoo!”

“Does he think we don’t know that?” Camulus hisses derisively. **“He’s only been talking about it all week.”**

“You’re just upset because we can’t go.” Camulus gives Nisaba a truly impressive glare for that comment, but she’s been immune to that look for a long time now. **“Everything will be fine; stop worrying so much. Artemis is going with him, and if he really needs us, then our little speaker can always tug on our bonds.”**

“Don’t worry, if anyone looks at our speaker funny, then I’ll bite them!”

“Please don’t,” Hari pleads lowly, chuckling despite himself. It’s less concerning when he knows that Artemis is only saying that to comfort Camulus. Mostly. She absolutely will bite someone if they try to hurt him, but she won’t go out of her way to do so either. **“Besides, there’s bound to be a bunch of snakes at the zoo. If push comes to shove, I can always ask them for help in exchange for a favor.”**

And that, more than anything else, soothes his grumpy familiar’s worries.

Athena bumps her head against Hari’s leg and pointedly looks at the door with twitching ears. *‘You need to go. The humans are starting to get agitated.’*

“Thank you. You three try not to get into too much trouble while I’m gone, okay?”

“No promises.”

“We won’t get into any trouble that we can’t get out of.”

‘My plan for the day won’t cause any problems. I’ve been meaning to look into this for a while, but it’s hard to get a moment alone in this house...’

Despite his familiars’ far-from-reassuring words, Hari joins the Dursleys in the kitchen and quickly starts preparing breakfast, keeping a close eye on the bacon while he pours Uncle Vernon his morning coffee.

“Hurry up, boy! Bring me my coffee.”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon. Do you want any sugar today?”

“It’s not one of those cheap, watered-down brews that we got as a gift. Black is fine.”

Hari flips the bacon and stirs the eggs around before passing the mug over to his uncle with a pleasant smile. “Here you are. Sorry for the wait.”

“Just don’t let anything burn, boy.”

“Of course! Only the best for Dudley, especially today.” Uncle Vernon watches him with a narrow-eyed glare, but he can find no fault in Hari’s cooking. And Hari is far too skilled a liar for his uncle to hear the hints of sarcasm hidden in his sugary sweet platitudes.

He watches Aunt Petunia cover Dudley's eyes and lead him into the living room from the corner of his eye, pulling down plates for each of them and setting the table between tasks. "Aren't they wonderful, darling?"

Dudley's hesitant silence is the tell-tale sign of a brewing temper tantrum, and Hari nearly snickers outright when he hears, "How many are there?"

"Thirty-six, I counted them myself."

His cousin turns the most betrayed stare on his father that Hari has ever seen from him. "Thirty-six?! But last year I had thirty-seven!"

"Yes, w-well, there are quite a few presents that are bigger than last year's."

"I don't care how big they are! I-!"

Aunt Petunia, ever the peacemaker, rests a gentle hand on Dudley's shoulder and says, "Now, now, here's what we're going to do. While we're at the zoo, we're can buy you two new presents. How does that sound, popkin?"

"Really?" Dudley snuffles. "You mean it?"

"Of course, sweetheart!"

A far happier Dudley joins them at the dining table, satisfied with his bargain. For once, Hari is allowed to sit with them, and it's a clear indication of how much things have improved that Dudley doesn't complain about it at all.

In fact, once Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon slip into the living room to start bringing Dudley his presents, his cousin starts whispering to him in broken snatches, careful not to let his parents overhear anything. "I wish that Piers could come with us, but I guess it's not too bad since you'll be there. It would've been dreadfully boring if it was just me, Mum, and Dad."

"Guess we're lucky that Mrs. Figg tripped over one of her cats, huh?"

"Tripped, sure. And she just happened to do that right after Mum and Dad started talking about taking me to the zoo, did she?" They both snort at the sheer disbelief in Dudley's voice. "I don't know how you do what you do with animals, but it's really cool. Think you can make the ones at the zoo act like that?"

"Think you can keep your parents from seeing me do it?"

"You've got yourself a deal, cousin."

Watching Dudley open a mountain of presents while being showered with the sort of unconditional love that Hari has never known stings just a little bit less this year.

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"I'm warning you now, boy. Any funny business, any at all, and you won't see the outside of our house for the rest of the summer, you understand? We'll tell everyone that you've gone off to summer camp." Uncle Vernon brandishes his car key at Hari in what is probably meant to be a threatening manner, but it's hard to take him seriously when Hari knows that he can knock him out with a single word.

Regardless, Hari refuses to rock the boat right now. His Hogwarts letter should arrive by the end of next month, and he really doesn't want to create any unnecessary tension beforehand. "I understand, Uncle Vernon."

"Then get in."

Dudley's leg bounces with pent-up energy for the entire drive, and he practically sprints out of the car the second they park it. "Come on, hurry up!" Aunt Petunia's nose scrunches up spectacularly when Dudley runs back to drag Hari along with him, but she doesn't say a word when her son is so obviously excited.

They spend hours going from exhibit to exhibit, and several of the more curious animals come right up to the glass and toward Hari in particular. The smile from getting to see so many different animals up close doesn't leave Dudley's face until they arrive at the leopard enclosure and can't find them anywhere. "Aww, are they hiding up in the trees somewhere? This sucks."

Hari, who knows just how much Dudley has been looking forward to seeing his favorite animal in person, can't help wondering if big cats are just as sensitive to magic as domesticated ones. He shouldn't. He knows that he shouldn't do

anything overtly magical when his aunt and uncle are already casting him strange looks for how the animals are acting around him, but... His cousin has actually been decent this year, and he just looks so miserable right now.

"I'm sorry, Diddykins. Do you want to go get some ice cream? We can always come back later; maybe they'll be out then."

"I guess... Can we wait for just a few more minutes?"

Dudley stares listlessly into the trees, and Hari carefully flares out his magic while no one is paying him any attention, keeping a tight rein on the swirl of colour that wants to burst free. Just as Dudley's shoulders slump and he turns around to leave, a blur of yellow and black climbs down from one of the massive trees within the exhibit and starts prowling toward the glass. "Dudley, look!"

His cousin whips his head around so quickly that Hari can hear his neck pop with the motion, and he looks between Hari and the leopard walking right up to them with a smile that stretches from ear to ear. "That's so wicked!! Look at it; it's absolutely massive!!"

"Him," Hari corrects gently, smiling nearly as wide. "But he really is amazing, isn't he?"

"Your aunt smells upset."

Artemis is still learning how to distinguish the complex range of human emotions from one another, so Hari braces himself for several things as he subtly glances back at Aunt Petunia. He expects to see anger for causing something so abnormal to happen the second their backs were turned. He expects to see disgust for letting Dudley stand so close to him that they're brushing shoulders as his cousin studies the leopard that is observing Hari just as intently. He expects to see fear for her son's life when a pane of glass is all that stands between them and the huge cat, especially when she knows that Hari is magical.

He is completely blindsided by the utter devastation he finds on his aunt's face. She looks like she's seconds away from bursting into tears, and he can practically taste the guilt that is choking her. Hari quickly averts his eyes.

"Do you wanna go to the reptile house after we get ice cream? I know that snakes are your favorite."

"It's your birthday, Dudley. We can do whatever you want."

"Exactly," his cousin agrees with a self-satisfied nod. "And I want to know what you want to see next, so you have to tell me."

A bark of laughter escapes Hari before he can even dream of tempering his reaction. "Well, in that case, I'd love to go see the snakes after you get ice cream."

"After we get ice cream." Dudley's tone makes it clear that he won't accept no for an answer, and Hari feels like he's still in shock from Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon's utter lack of protest after they finish their ice cream and head toward the reptile house.

The second they step through the doors, the snakes that are already awake and moving halt their explorations, periscoping to get a better look at the source of magic calling to them. Even the nocturnal snakes slowly start to shift around, and Aunt Petunia looks thoroughly discomfited by this until Dudley takes Hari by the hand and leads them straight to the boa constrictor enclosure.

"Look at that! I didn't know that snakes could get this big."

Hari reads the informational display right next to the exhibit with a content smile and says, "They get bigger too. There are a few species of snake that get even longer than boa constrictors, and the boa they have here is a male. He probably won't ever get any bigger than eight feet long. Female boas constrictors can grow to ten."

"Wicked! That's almost as big as a car..."

The odd expression on Aunt Petunia's face still hasn't gone away, so in the face of her silence, it is Uncle Vernon who asks, "And how did you learn about that, boy?"

"The library."

"Oh, yeah! Harry's always reading books about snakes or mythology when he's not busy doing his schoolwork. The school librarians even tell him in advance whenever they order new books on either of those subjects. He's one of their favorites, the little swot."

Hari just shrugs at his aunt and uncle's disbelieving looks. "I volunteer during recess. They appreciate not having to put back all the returned books and being able to focus on keeping the library organized and helping kids check stuff out instead. I do the same thing at the town library during the summer sometimes."

"Huh..." Aunt Petunia shakes her head slightly, briefly studying Hari with her evaluating gaze before refocusing on her son. "Did you want to keep looking, Dudders?"

"Not yet. Look!"

The previously drowsy boa is completely awake now. He lifts his head and slowly moves toward the glass. ***"A speaker? Have you come to free me of this place?"***

Uncle Vernon flinches at the drawn-out hiss that comes from the snake, but Dudley only looks all the more enamored with him. Aunt Petunia, on the other hand, looks at Hari with a sort of resignation that makes him wonder how much, exactly, she knows about the magical world.

"That depends. Do you want to be free?"

"Boy, I said no—!"

"Vernon, don't." His uncle halts his tirade before it can really even start, looking at Aunt Petunia like she's suddenly grown a second head. "You'll cause a scene. No one can hear him, and even if they do, they'll just think it's one of the snakes."

"But he's..."

"I think it's wicked!" Dudley cuts his father off with a grin. "Can you teach me how to do that? Do you actually understand them?"

"I'm sorry, but it's not something that can be taught. I can understand them, though."

The boa constrictor nods his head in answer to Hari's previous question, and even Uncle Vernon looks more bewildered than angry now. ***"I do. I have grown tired of being stared at day in and day out, constantly being woken up by humans beating on the glass. I am never allowed to explore anywhere beyond the four walls around me. It is a pretty cage, but a cage is a cage."***

"I understand exactly what you mean." Hari looks over at his aunt with a pleading expression, undeterred by the pinched look on her face. He can use that guilt she's feeling against her; he knows that he can. "He doesn't like it here. He feels trapped and harassed, like he can't ever escape people who want him to perform for them. He wants to be free, Aunt Petunia."

Hari loves being right. His aunt's face flits through several complicated expressions before she asks, "And where is he going to go? It's too cold here for him to survive outside."

"You just believe him, Pet? Don't let him confuse you with his nonsense." His uncle's voice is little more than a whisper, but he still manages to make it sound harsh. Beneath all the bluster, Hari can tell that he's just afraid.

"It's not nonsense, Vernon. Not this. This is... Lily mentioned it once. It ran in her husband's family."

"Where do you want to go? Brazil is a whole ocean away, and the winters are really harsh here. I can try to help!"

"I wish to stay with you, speaker. I can intimidate your enemies and defend you from them should they dare strike anyway. I am not large enough to eat them for you yet, but perhaps one day... If you gift me with a name, then I shall live by your side for as long as you want me there."

"He wants to come home with us." Hari's whisper cuts through his aunt and uncle's quiet argument, and Uncle Vernon turns to him with a look of wide-eyed horror.

"Absolutely not. There's no way—"

"It can be my present." Uncle Vernon falls silent at his son's sudden interjection. "The ones you promised me from the zoo? This is cool enough to count for two, I think."

"W-We can't exactly buy him, Dudley," Aunt Petunia stammers nervously. "Zoos don't sell their animals."

"I can make it look like an escape." His aunt goes deathly pale at Hari's suggestion. "One worthy of a lawsuit, even. You could get tens of thousands of pounds out of it."

“... Could you really?”

“Vernon!” Aunt Petunia hisses under her breath.

“What? You know they gave my promotion to that new hire this year. Said he’d quit if they didn’t or some such nonsense. If the boy can make us easy money, then I say let him. Even if it does mean that...” His uncle shudders. “Tens of thousands of pounds... It’s for tens of thousands of pounds.”

“I think that’s as close to a yes as I’m ever going to get from them,” Hari hisses wryly. ***“If you deem it acceptable, I would like to offer the name Kratos to you. He is a divine personification of strength, and I can think of no better moniker for you and your powerful coils.”***

“I accept this name, speaker.” A faint glow emanates from them both, and Hari thanks his lucky stars that it’s not something muggles are capable of seeing. ***“How do you plan to free me?”***

“I can loosen the screws on both grates of your exhibit’s air vent, inside and out. That way you can push them off yourself and appear to have escaped due to the zookeepers’ negligence.”

“That sounds like an acceptable plan to me, speaker. You do serpents a great honor with your cunning.”

Hari cannot keep the smile off his face as he focuses on loosening the metal screws that keep the air vent secure. Dudley gasps softly when one of the screws bounces off a rock inside the exhibit, and within seconds, the rest of them join it in the foliage. Hari goes more slowly with the one connecting to the central room since he doesn’t want to draw any attention to it, but before long, the grate is barely clinging on and is ready for Kratos to shove his way through.

“You’re good to go, Kratos. Would you mind giving us a bit of a show as you escape? Make the humans think you really considered eating me for a moment.”

A hissing laugh and a nod are his answer, and Hari quickly steers his relatives to another exhibit. “It’s best that we’re not too close to there once he gets out,” he whispers. “Or we would have been able to see him escaping, and they’ll ask why we didn’t alert anyone. This is far more believable.”

The clattering sound of metal against stone plunges the reptile house into silence, and that is when the screams start. Kratos heads straight for Hari, wrapping around his entire body and nearly knocking him to the ground with his sheer weight.

“Thanks, speaker. I will find you.”

Hari coaxes his magic to warm the snake wrapped around him and quietly hisses, ***“This should keep you from getting too cold for a few days, but try not to take too long if you can avoid it.”***

“My nephew!! That snake is trying to eat my nephew!!” Aunt Petunia screams and wails, swinging her bag around and giving Kratos the perfect opportunity to flinch back and drop to the floor. He quickly slithers out the door with a sharp hiss at anyone who gets too close. He’s gone long before anyone can stop him, and distant brown scales fade into nothingness as Hari urges his concealment charm to take hold. He’s surprised that it does from this distance.

Several panicked zookeepers and a harried-looking man wearing a suit and tie burst into the reptile house seconds later, and Hari, acting suitably traumatized, bursts into great, heaving sobs.

“How does something like this happen?!” Uncle Vernon shouts at the top of his lungs. “We were clear across the room from that blasted snake, and suddenly the gigantic thing is coiled around my nephew! Look at how small he is! He could have been seriously hurt!”

“I’m *so* sorry, sir. I promise that we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“Hey boss, over here! Looks like the grates on the air vent fell off. Must have gone right through them.”

“How was that not noticed on our rounds? I want you to call every single person responsible for checking the reptile house this week. I’ll fire the whole lot of them if I have to.”

“That’s not enough.” Aunt Petunia’s voice sounds far more intimidating when it’s all cool anger instead of shrill rage. “Our nephew could have *died*. We’re lucky that it wasn’t something venomous. You will be hearing from our lawyers about this.”

“Now, I’m sure that’s not necessary...” the curator mutters nervously. “He’s alright, isn’t he? Just a bit shaken up.”

“Not necessary?! You think that you can get away with the reckless endangerment of my nephew’s life without any consequences?! No! No, we’ll sue this damn zoo and take this incident to every paper out there. See if anyone trusts you with

the safety of their children *or* these animals ever again!”

They leave the zoo with a settlement for fifty thousand pounds. Hari is more than a little smug about it.

Uncle Vernon is oddly contemplative during the drive home. He’s quiet for a long time, interrupting Dudley’s friendly interrogation by muttering, “I guess you’re not half bad after all, boy. I can put up with your weird cat and you talking to snakes if it means making this kind of money in a day.”

“It’s not like I can do this frequently, though,” Hari feels the need to point out. “It’d be suspicious.”

Uncle Vernon scoffs. “Obviously. But this is almost half of my yearly salary, boy. Even if it’s only once a year, that kind of money isn’t something to scoff at. It would be bad business to ignore an opportunity like that. I can... Overlook your bouts of freakishness in return.”

Hari is hardly one to reject an olive branch like this, though that doesn’t mean he’ll leave it untested. “Really? Is now a good time to mention that I already had three snakes before today, then?”

“Boy, I know you’re not stupid, so stop pretending to be. You just earned us fifty thousand pounds easy as breathing. You could tell me that you have a dragon hidden in your bedroom and I wouldn’t care.”

“Please don’t give him any ideas, dear,” Petunia groans.

“Wait a minute, you’re saying that dragons really exist?! Mum, Dad, can we *please* get a dragon?”

Hari honestly cannot believe the conversation happening around him right now. It feels like he tripped into an alternate dimension by some accident of fate in the midst of all his prepping for the future, and it’s throwing him decidedly off-kilter.

But it is real. No matter how peculiar it feels, it is real.

“We have made their nest our own. We must watch for any signs of them striking while our guard is down, but... Perhaps they will become worthy nestmates someday.”

“I think that they just might, Artemis.”

He doesn’t believe that his aunt and uncle are capable of loving him, but acceptance, no matter how conditional, is the next best thing.

It’s enough.

“Harry James Potter, I heard that hissing! Is there a snake in this car?!”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia,” he answers with a laugh. He lets his concealment charm slip from Artemis’s form with a little smirk. “I don’t go anywhere without at least one of them, honestly. I just make sure they stay hidden.”

“Harry, that is an adder.”

“It’s Hari, and I’m aware.”

“Wha— It is? It was spelled Harry on the letter you were left with.”

Hari hums softly at that. “I wondered if you knew, but I guess not. It was news to me too.”

“How did you find out about that? I’m certain that your records with us have Harry on them.”

“Camulus, that’s one of my snakes, told me. He lived in the magical world for several years, so he overheard my name quite often. I’m something of a celebrity, apparently.” Hari rolls his eyes and mutters, “I guess Dumbledore didn’t get to start spreading that nickname around before my real name was in the papers.”

“You don’t sound like you like him any more than we do. Why? He’s one of your sort, isn’t he?”

“Did you ever wonder why I was sent to live with you, Aunt Petunia?”

“I... Assumed that we were the only option. But you’re about to tell me that’s not true, aren’t you?”

“If he really wanted to make sure I was taken care of, then he would have at least talked to you first; he wouldn’t have left me on your doorstep and given you no choice in the matter. But he did. Because for whatever reason, he didn’t want me to know

about magic.”

Hari’s smile is a small, bitter thing. “Imagine this scenario: a young, magical boy with a lot of political power and no clue what to do with it finds himself in a world that has already decided exactly who he is. This boy is lost and confused in this new world surrounding him, but it’s wonderful and new and he wants nothing more than to be a part of it. Dumbledore is the headmaster of the school that the boy must attend to stay in this world, and he is in control of how that boy is introduced to it. So he sends someone to tell that boy just the right things. They tell him about his parents and how they were heroes. They tell him who he can trust and who he can’t. They encourage him to be what everyone expects him to be. And it is so easy to convince the boy that they only want the best for him. Suddenly, the boy that everyone is eagerly waiting to see again is a walking, talking mouthpiece for a man with three significant, unique positions of power. Maybe I’d believe that it was all just a horrible coincidence if Dumbledore didn’t constantly reassure everyone in that world that I’m happy and safe, that I simply chose to grow up outside of the magical world for the sake of my privacy, but...”

This is the most that he has ever spoken to the Dursleys. It’s heartening to see that even Uncle Vernon is paying close attention, glancing back at him with the rearview mirror from time to time and becoming increasingly pale.

“I think that he knew you would mistreat me. I think that he wanted you to. And even if he didn’t know before, even if it wasn’t his intention, he definitely knew that it was happening. Mrs. Figg is one of his spies, you know? She moved here specifically to keep an eye on me, and Dumbledore writes her letters regularly to check in on what’s going on. Athena intercepted one of those letters for me once; that’s how I know for sure. He knew that I was being abused, and he did *nothing* about it. Why? I can only assume that it was because he wanted me to be. He wanted me to be easily manipulated, and he didn’t care how hurt I was in the process so long as I didn’t die before he could make use of me.”

Aunt Petunia flinches as if she’s been struck, and Uncle Vernon clenches the steering wheel so tightly that the faux leather cracks beneath his grip. “Harry... No, Hari, I’m so sorry. I—“

“Don’t.” A single word silences his aunt completely, and he heaves out a sigh at the stricken look on her face. “I don’t care. You don’t hurt me anymore, I survived, just forget about it. It doesn’t matter.”

“How do you not *hate* us?” Dudley whispers. “We were so awful to you for no reason.”

“A serpent who strikes at shadows remains oblivious to the predator stalking toward them. A serpent who wastes their venom on a once-predator finds themselves helpless in the face of a true threat. Both are just fancy ways of saying that snakes don’t hold grudges to anyone or anything that isn’t actively dangerous to them. And, well, they did raise me.” Hari shrugs. “I’ve got bigger threats to worry about.”

The heavy silence is broken by the shakiest question he’s ever heard coming from Uncle Vernon. “Well, that settles it, doesn’t it?”

“Of course,” his aunt sniffs disdainfully. “We’re hardly going to keep playing into that lot’s hand. They think that they can play us for fools? If they want our nephew downtrodden and defenseless so badly, then that’s the exact opposite of what they’re going to get. So long as the neighbors don’t see anything and he’s careful about it, I don’t see why he can’t learn his magic. He hasn’t had any uncontrollable outbursts since he was small.”

“I still can’t believe that you can do magic. Real, actual magic. It’s wicked, cousin! How’d you do that thing with the leopard, anyway?”

Hari flushes at being caught out for that, muttering, “Well, uh, cats are known for being magically sensitive, so I thought it was worth seeing if big cats are too. I just flared my magic out a bit to get his attention, that’s all.”

“Wicked,” Dudley repeats, eyes wide and awed. “It’s like you’re some sort of animal tamer. Can I meet the rest of your snakes when we get home? Pretty please?”

“I think we all should,” his aunt admits begrudgingly. “Best not to bump into any surprises later. Just promise me that you won’t start messing with anything dangerous without your cousin there, Diddykins. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t, I promise!! Thank you, Mum!”

Hari can’t even be upset about Aunt Petunia making that decision for all of them. Everything that has happened today has been such an abrupt shift from their previous norm that he feels rather like he was hit by a confundus charm, and beneath all of that, he’s too pleased that downplaying his abilities and playing nice with the Dursleys for years has finally paid off to care about his aunt being a bit bossy.

He still half-expects the whole car drive home to be some kind of strange hallucination once they step across the threshold of painfully ordinary Number 4 Privet Drive. Then he notices Athena sitting only a few steps away from the door with a picture frame held gently between her teeth.

A young girl with fiery red hair waves at the four of them from beyond the frame with a grin that crinkles her whole face with joy, and a lanky girl who can only be Aunt Petunia warily peers around her. They only get a sharp nod from her. The only other person in the photo is a boy with long, black hair who watches the red-haired girl with a small, fond smile as she starts twirling around and around, flowers blossoming in her footsteps.

“Oh,” his aunt breathes with a watery chuckle. “I... Where did you find that, kitty? I forgot that picture even existed.”

‘It was in the attic. I knew that I sensed something magical in this house; I just had to dig around for it.’ Athena stalks forward, rubbing against Hari’s leg as she presses the picture into his hand.

“It was buried in the attic somewhere,” he murmurs, eyes widening as he gets a closer look at the red-haired girl in the photo and sees eyes as green as his own wink at him. “This is... Mum?” Hari feels the tears welling up in his eyes, but he can’t force himself to stop looking at the picture for long enough to wipe them away.

“... You’ve never actually seen a picture of her, have you?” Aunt Petunia murmurs softly. “Yes, that’s Lils. Why don’t you go put that up in your room? You can keep it. It’s not like we can leave a moving picture on our mantelpiece anyway.”

“Thank you, Aunt Petunia.”

“And don’t forget to bring your snakes down!” she shouts after him as he races up the stairs. “I need to thank them for making sure you turned out half-decent!”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia!” he calls back with a laugh. Nisaba and Camulus are climbing up his legs the second he steps into his room, hissing contentedly as his magic vibrates with joy.

“What changed, little speaker? Your magic has never tasted so zingy before.”

“You bonded with another familiar, didn’t you? I can feel another link approaching us.” Camulus gives Hari a side eye at his sheepish nod. ***“It’s enough to give a snake a complex, you know? How many familiars do you need?”***

“I’m not gonna just tell them no when they ask! Not if they mean it.”

“Our speaker is too kind for his own good sometimes,” Camulus sighs. ***“But Nisaba is right. Your magic does taste happier and more energetic than it usually does, and a familiar bond alone won’t do that. What happened?”***

“His nestmates want to share their den with us! All of us! And they do not smell of deceit, brother.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Artemis.”

But even Camulus cannot find anything to complain about when they rejoin the Dursleys downstairs, watching Athena purr up a storm as Dudley scratches underneath her chin just the way she likes. Aunt Petunia looks a bit faint when she realizes exactly what kind of snake Camulus is, but Hari gleefully informs her that he’s been living with them for almost two years now and that he would have already bitten someone if he intended to.

She does not have to know just how often he offered to do so for Hari. Some things are best left unsaid.

The tenuous peace between a wizard child and his muggle relatives has finally started to feel like something real. His aunt and uncle are still afraid, still nervous every time they see a snake moving across a piece of their furniture, but Dudley thinks that magic is the coolest thing ever. He chatters Hari’s ear off about the magical world and all the creatures in it, and Artemis warms up to him almost as quickly as Athena did. Nisaba and Camulus still keep an eye on Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon just in case they suddenly change their minds, but a couple of days go by and they still continue to smell entirely like nestmates and not at all like predators, the two admit. The silent tension between the separate parts of Hari’s life slowly starts to melt away.

Kratos rejoins them a few days after their visit to the zoo. There is no shrieking or yelling about freakishness or a sudden change of heart as the massive serpent settles into their home, and when Hari comes downstairs to make dinner one evening and sees Kratos draped over the back of the couch while Uncle Vernon watches the television, he allows himself to truly relax.

His letter from Hogwarts will be here before much longer, and Hari knows that everything will be chaos once he rejoins the magical world. He’ll enjoy this small bit of peace while he still can.

Chapter End Notes

And so the plot truly begins >:)

For those of you who may be confused by the Dursleys' shift in behavior, I thought that I would offer some more detailed, overt explanation here. Dudley has always been one of those characters that is really a product of his upbringing, and in a universe where Hari blackmails the Dursleys into treating him like a human being, he begins to see that he really isn't all that different from them far earlier. He tested the boundaries of what he could and couldn't get away with at first, of course, but that's just what kids do. Once he started spending time with Hari, he realized that he wasn't all that bad. And then he started to actually like him. After a far less traumatic zoo visit, Dudley thinks that magic is the literal coolest thing ever. He and Hari are going to remain good friends throughout the series.

Petunia and Vernon are far more complicated.

Petunia resents magic for the fact that it stole her sister away from her, but there is still that part of her, deep down, that was excited when their family learned that Lily was a witch. Hari's constant accidental magic in canon rubbed that wound raw, even more so because he was (understandably) angry with them and his magic often lashed out against them or acted up around them. If things had gone down in the zoo the same way that they did in canon, then Petunia could never learn to accept magic. Dudley may not have been in any real danger, but they had no way of knowing that canon Hari didn't try to kill their son. But that doesn't happen here. Instead, Hari makes sure that Dudley gets to see his favorite animal on his birthday, and she is suddenly, painfully reminded of her sister growing petunias for her as she dances around their family garden. It makes it hard to hate him, especially when, beyond verbal threats to keep them in line that have nothing to do with his magic at all, Hari is perfectly well behaved.

Vernon fears magic because he does not understand it, and he is prone to lashing out at things that he doesn't understand. This is only antagonized further by canon Hari's outbursts of accidental magic. But again, Hari has a firm handle on that here, so while he still warns him to mind himself, he cannot honestly remember the last time he saw any "freakishness" before the zoo. And Vernon is an opportunistic man, if nothing else, so Hari proving that his magic can be immensely helpful to them makes him stop and think. He weighs risks vs rewards, and in the end, he decides that he's willing to tolerate magic for the sake of his son and what Hari can offer to their family.

That and, now that they're aware that some sort of plot is brewing in the background of the magical world, both Petunia and Vernon refuse to just roll over and let them do whatever they want. They're not good people, though they will slowly, very slowly, become better. They're "accepting" Hari mostly out of spite and because he has proven so useful, but even then they might not have if it wasn't for how clearly enamored with his magic that Dudley is. They'll do anything for their son, even this, and it isn't until much later that they genuinely begin to care for Hari.

Hari is too utilitarian to care why they're treating him better, only that they are. He couldn't care less about their reasoning when the outcome is the same.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

You know, I was originally going to do the whole Diagon Alley trip in one chapter. Then I wrote 3k words leading up to said trip and got to over 7.5k by the end of their Gringotts visit, and I knew that there was no way it would be easy to read through a chapter that could easily become double that in length. So yeah, I split it in half. I hope you enjoy the chapter regardless, and we will be shopping and then preparing for Hogwarts pre-term for the entirety of the next chapter. Then it's Hogwarts Express time ;3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Speaker, your letter is here! Open it so we can get rid of that accursed owl lurking outside.”

Hari shoots Artemis a concerned look as he walks to the front door, gathering the letters that were shoved through the mail slot and hissing under his breath. ***“Will you be alright at Hogwarts? You know that there’ll be a bunch of owls in the castle, right?”***

“I will always be with you or Athena, so it will be fine. I refuse to share my nest with one of those things, though! I don’t care how useful they are; I’ll ask Kratos to eat it if you get one.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” Hari shuffles through the envelopes until he finds one with a red wax seal buried within the pile, lifting the hefty envelope with equal parts anticipation and dread. “Aunt Petunia, my letter is here!”

“Oh? I didn’t hear a knock at our door... Though I suppose your lot doesn’t have to bother with such a thing. Shall I put tea on for our guest?” His aunt’s voice carries over from the kitchen, and she sounds surprisingly well put together for how nervous Hari knows she is.

“No guest, just a letter,” Hari corrects, idly passing the rest of the mail over to Uncle Vernon as he joins him at the kitchen table.

Aunt Petunia pokes her head out of the kitchen with furrowed brows and a deeply troubled expression after hearing that. “No guest? I remember some witch helping Lily with her shopping, telling her all about what she’d need and how to get to school for the start of term. Surely they don’t expect us to figure it out on our own. I couldn’t even see the entrance to your shopping district without wearing some strange necklace!”

“Sounds just like their lot,” Uncle Vernon snorts. “Keepin’ their heads up in the clouds for so long that they forget all common sense.”

“I think they’ve forgotten that I’m, for all intents and purposes, basically a muggle-born. I know far more than they expect me to, but if I hadn’t met Camulus... The real question is if this is the result of incompetence or deliberate sabotage.”

The sound of a door slamming against the wall interrupts their conversation, and Dudley races down the stairs with wide, excited eyes and both Nisaba and Camulus coiled around his arms. Athena trails behind him with a satisfied look, joining Kratos in curling up by the crackling fireplace that is burning more often than not these days.

“It’s really here then?! Come on, cousin, open it!”

“Alright, alright!” Hari laughs as Dudley peers over his shoulder. “I’m opening it, give me a second.” A trickle of magic pops the seal open, and Hari carefully unfurls the parchment contained within.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class; Grand Sorcerer; Chief Warlock; Supreme Mugwump, International Confederation of Wizards)

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 September 1st. We await your owl by no later than July 31st.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

“That’s it? That barely tells you anything at all. Besides, we don’t have an owl! How are we supposed to write them back?”

“There’s one waiting outside,” Hari reassures his cousin, mind whirring a mile a minute. “But this is definitely the sort of letter that someone born and raised in the magical world would receive. What is the game here? Does Dumbledore suspect that I know more than I should and is trying to get me to slip up? Or are they trying to keep me as oblivious as possible even now that I’m rejoining their world? I don’t like the sound of either.”

“Nothing for it but to write them back, I suppose.” Aunt Petunia lays breakfast on the table with an offended sniff. “We’ll just have to request an escort ourselves.”

“Mum, can we go with him? I don’t want Hari to go by himself!”

Hari watches his aunt and uncle have a conversation with their eyes alone before Uncle Vernon says, “Grunnings is going through a critical transition period, so I can’t take off work right now if I want any chance of getting a promotion next year. However...”

“You and I can go, popkin. I don’t trust those people to have Hari’s best interests in mind, and I’m not going to let them pull one over on us.”

A slight smile tugs at his lips as he pulls out the shopping list attached to his letter, disappointed but not surprised to see that it only has the barest of bare essentials written down on it.

First-year students require:

Uniform:

- Three sets of plain work robes (black)
- One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
- One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
- One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all of a student’s clothes should carry name tags at all times.

Books:

- *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1* by Miranda Goshawk
- *A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot
- *Magical Theory* by Adalbert Waffling
- *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch
- *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore
- *Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger
- *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander
- *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* by Quentin Trimble

Other Equipment:

- 1 Wand
- 1 Cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)
- 1 set of glass or crystal phials
- 1 telescope

- 1 set of brass scales
- Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

Parents are reminded that first years are not allowed their own broomsticks

“I bet you’re excited to read all those books, aren’t you?” Dudley teases. Hari isn’t even sure when his cousin started looking over his shoulder again. “Gonna buy even more of them, I’d bet.”

“Knowledge is power, Dudley.”

“Course it is. Doesn’t make you any less of a swot.” Hari rolls his eyes at that, but he knows that Dudley is just messing with him. “What’re you gonna do about the snakes, though? It says here you can only bring an owl, cat, or toad.”

“It doesn’t specifically say that we can’t bring other animals, just that we can only have one of the three. I plan on keeping everyone but Athena hidden for as long as possible since British wixen are weird about parselmouths, but even once we’re found out, bonded familiars are protected in the Hogwarts charter. They legally can’t force us apart.”

“That’s a good lad.” Hearing even a hint of approval in Uncle Vernon’s voice has to be the single most surreal thing that Hari has ever experienced. “Always take advantage of the loopholes.”

Aunt Petunia finally joins them at the table, paper and pen in hand, and slides them over to Hari with a wan smile. “Why don’t you start working on that return letter? We can… Look over it together before we send it out. Make sure we’re covering all our bases.”

“Thanks, Aunt Petunia. I appreciate it.”

Breakfast is filled with eager plotting and snickering, and Hari wouldn’t have it any other way.

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Dear Deputy Headmistress McGonagall,

I thank you for your letter and eagerly accept a place in your school.

If it’s not too much trouble, could we receive an escort to Diagon Alley at your earliest convenience? Aunt Petunia is the only one of us who’s ever been, and, as a muggle, she can’t find it on her own.

I’m really quite excited to get my school things! Magic is wonderful, isn’t it?

Yours Sincerely,

Hari Potter

-

Dear Mr. Potter,

Of course you may receive an escort to Diagon Alley. It was an error on our part to send you a standard acceptance letter in the first place, and I apologize for not checking more thoroughly before I signed off on it.

Self-writing quills pen all the student letters, you see, but that’s no excuse for the failure on my part.

Rubeus Hagrid, our school’s groundskeeper, will be free to escort you on July 31st, and you should expect him shortly after noon. We will send him along with three enchanted pendants for your relatives to wear should they wish to accompany you.

We look forward to seeing you on September 1st, and though it’s early, I wish you a happy birthday.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

“Wanna bet that they’re taking us on my birthday, a day that will have most British wixen thinking about how I’m attending Hogwarts this year, on purpose?”

“That’s a sucker’s bet, cousin.”

-

“Are you ready for this?”

Hari gives his aunt a shaky smile that feels far more like a grimace. “I have to be, don’t I?”

“... You could always change your mind,” she whispers. “I know that we’re only now starting to become something like a family, but we would keep you. You don’t have to go.”

For just a few moments, he considers it. He could go to Smeltings with Dudley, earn the highest marks he possibly could, and study to become an exotic vet that specializes in snakes. He could become an animal educator and teach people that snakes are grossly misunderstood animals, helping children and adults alike overcome their fears. He could forget about plotting headmasters and a world that wants something from him that he’s afraid of discovering too late to save himself from it.

But such a future simply isn’t meant to be.

“I can’t. If I was any other wixen, then maybe, but they won’t let their savior hide away from them. They’d find me, one way or another, and they would take me with them. They could just... Make you forget I ever existed. I’m not sure if they’d go that far, but I’m not willing to risk it.” Hari shakes his head, steeling himself as Kratos twines around his body in an approximation of a hug. He casts the featherlight charm on him without even thinking about it, easing the strain of the snake’s sheer bulk on his body. “No, I’ll go. I’ll go, and I’ll carve out my own path, one that I can be proud of, no matter what it takes. I will not be anyone’s pawn. A serpent answers to no master but itself.”

“They’re never going to see you coming,” Aunt Petunia murmurs. “You’re going to take their world by storm, I just know it. Give them hell.” She clears her throat, blinking away the mistiness in her eyes as she calls out, “Dudley, bring the snakes down here, please! Hari needs to hide them before our escort gets here!”

“Coming!!”

His aunt sighs fondly at the sound of a slamming door, holding her arms with a cocked eyebrow as he makes Kratos invisible to anyone but him and his other familiars. “Pass him over to me. You’ll have to get measured for robes today, so you probably won’t get away with keeping more than the little adder on you.”

“You don’t mind?”

“It’s not like anyone will see, will they? I can’t even see him, and with that new charm you’ve been working on, I can barely feel that he’s there either. It’s just practical.”

“Thanks, Aunt Petunia. Let me know if he starts getting heavy again and I can refresh the spell.”

Dudley barrels into the room only seconds after Kratos settles over his aunt’s shoulder, wrapping his lower body around her torso a couple of times to keep his tail from dragging across the floor. “I’m not too late, am I?!”

“We’ve still got at least a few minutes,” Hari reassures him, reaching over to conceal Nisaba, Camulus, and Artemis from view as well. *“Artemis, you’re small enough to come along with me without raising any suspicions. Nisaba, Camulus, are you two alright with riding along on Dudley? They’ll notice two big snakes on me while measuring me for robes, and with how people are likely to swarm me today if they realize who I am...”*

“Do not worry, little speaker. I have grown fond of your nestmate.”

“I guess he’s alright... At least we get to come along this time. It’s bad enough that I missed a familiar bond; I would riot if I couldn’t watch you get your wand.”

“Wicked,” Dudley whispers as the snakes vanish from his sight. “I can still feel them, but it’s like they’re not there at all!” Artemis wraps herself around Hari’s wrist when he offers it to her, and Dudley watches what little he can see of the exchange with wide, awed eyes. “Magic is so cool.”

“Now remember popkin, we can’t talk about the snakes at all once Mr. Hagrid gets here.”

“I know, Mum.” Dudley rolls his eyes. “I don’t wanna get Hari in trouble.”

“I’d appreciate it if neither of you mentioned me using magic either. Most wixen don’t learn how to cast wandlessly until they’re adults, assuming they can do it at all, so I’d rather them not know that I can. I know that Dumbledore was asking Mrs.

Figg about any big displays of magic, so if Hagrid starts asking questions, play everything off as accidental.”

“They won’t hear a word of it from us.”

“Yeah! Besides, most of the things I remember you doing really were accidents. You got all sneaky once you figured it out.”

Athena leaps up onto his shoulder, hooking her claws in the fabric of his shirt as she steadies herself, just before a banging knock sounds at their front door.

Aunt Petunia answers it, and the largest man he has ever seen ducks through their door frame. He’s taller than Kratos is long and wider to boot. Hari is so utterly bewildered that he misses Dudley whipping his head back and forth between the two of them until he asks, sounding quite distraught, “Hari, are you going to get that big?”

Hagrid bursts into deep, booming laughter. “Wouldn’t tha’ be a sight?! No need ta worry; I get it from my mother. James an’ Lily were tall, but not nearly tha’ tall.” He looks over at Hari with a fond smile. “Ya look so much like ‘em, especially yer father. But yer eyes... Those are Lily’s, through and through.”

“You knew my parents?”

“Sure did! I’ve been working at Hogwarts for a long time now. I knew ‘em when they were still lil firsties. It’s real nostalgic to be taking ya to Diagon now.” Hagrid’s eyes are distinctly misty as he says, “I haven’t seen ya since ya were a wee lil babe. I’m glad ta see yer doing well. And look at tha’ cat! I’d recognize those ears and tha’ tail anywhere; she’s half kneazle, ain’t she?”

“Yes, sir! Athena is my familiar.”

“A true familiar bond at yer age? That’s fantastic, Harry!

“He prefers Hari.” Dudley looks nervous as he says it, staring up at the man with a distinct quiver, but he still stands his ground. “Lots of kids used to mock him with that nickname, so... Please don’t call him that, sir.”

“I’m sorry ‘bout that.” Hagrid dips his head sheepishly, and the motion is only made more absurd by the fact that he still towers over them all. “But it’s a real good thing, Hari! Some witches and wizards go their whole lives with no familiar at all.”

Sensing that the conversation could easily head into dangerous territory, his aunt redirects it. “Pardon me, Mr. Hagrid, but could I interest you in any tea? You’ve gone so out of your way for us today.”

“It’s no trouble at all!” he insists. “An’ just Hagrid is fine; no need ta be all formal. But I wouldn’t say no ta a quick cuppa. In fact, I brought somethin’ myself!”

Hagrid pulls out a cake that is just a bit squished and clearly homemade. It has pink frosting and neon green lettering, and every single word, including his name, is misspelled.

Hari falls in love with it immediately.

“Happy birthday, Hari.” Hagrid rubs at the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’m real sorry ‘bout yer name. I wouldn’t have done tha’ if I knew, but...”

Hari can feel his eyes watering. He shakes his head rapidly as he blinks away the tears. “*Thank you*, Hagrid. I love it.” He sounds like he’s about to cry. He thinks that he just might. Hari is looking at a birthday cake that was made just for him; it’s hard to believe.

Hagrid doesn’t look any less guilty despite his reassurances, though, and to Hari’s great surprise, Aunt Petunia says, “I could let you fix it if you want. I like to bake, so I always keep some frosting on hand. I think we’ve got candles somewhere too...”

“Really? You’d do tha’?”

A sharp nod is his answer. “The words won’t be the same color, but I don’t mind at all.”

“That’s mighty kind of ya. I’ll have to tell Minerva that she was dead wrong ‘bout y’all; I ain’t never met better muggles.”

Aunt Petunia practically wilts with guilt, and she quickly busies herself with brewing their tea. She and Hagrid make an odd sight: a slight woman dancing around a literal giant of a man as he stoops over the kitchen table and pipes frosting onto Hari’s cake with a shaky hand. He and Dudley exchange a bright smile before sitting down at the table and watching Hagrid work.

The cake has ‘Hapee Birthdae Hari’ written across the entire thing in white frosting. It’s absolutely perfect.

“Aha! I found them.” His aunt holds up an open pack of candles left over from Dudley’s birthday. “I don’t think we have quite enough for eleven, but...”

“That’s fine, Aunt Petunia! Thank you.”

Hari definitely cries once he’s sitting in front of his first-ever birthday cake, candles flickering with flames and warmth that he was forced to imagine for years as he blew away cakes made of dust in the solitude of his cupboard.

Dudley looks just as bittersweet about this as Hari does when he whispers, “Make a wish, cousin.”

And he knows that he’s not supposed to say it out loud, but he can’t help himself.

“I wish for every birthday from now to be as wonderful as this one.”

-

“An’ here we are! The Leaky Cauldron.”

The Leaky Cauldron is a small, cozy place with dim lighting and so many people in it that Hari is briefly overwhelmed by the sheer amount and variety of magic around him. Its structure clearly speaks of a building that has withstood the test of time, and he can’t help wondering how many generations of wixen have passed through this very building.

He nearly asks, but before he gets the chance to, the barkeep calls out, “Ah, Hagrid! Your usual, I presume?”

“Not today, Tom. I’m here on official Hogwarts business. Just helpin’ young Hari here buy his supplies.” Hagrid’s booming voice carries across the room, and it feels like every single conversation being held within the pub halts at once.

“Bless my soul. It’s Hari Potter.”

“Welcome back, Mr. Potter! Welcome back!”

“Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter. I can’t believe I’m meeting you at last.”

“Man, you really weren’t kidding about being famous, were you?” Dudley mutters under his breath. “This is mental.”

“Back up! Give my nephew some space!”

Several wixen shy away at his aunt’s fierce scowl, but one wizard in a purple turban is undeterred. Hari’s heart nearly leaps out of his chest when he watches every single one of his familiars lock eyes with the man. Athena’s fur bristles as a low growl rumbles in her chest. *‘He’s not to be trusted, Hari. He reeks of death and danger.’*

“Hari P-Potter. I can’t tell you how p-pleased I am to meet you.”

“Oh! Hello, professor. I didn’t see ya there. Hari, this is Professor Quirrel. He’ll be yer Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts.”

Hari is screaming internally at that announcement, but he lets none of it show on his face. “Oh, it’s nice to meet you, professor.”

“F-fearfully fascinating subject, defense is. N-n-not that you need it, ay, P-Potter?” Quirrel’s stutter is too forced to be anything but faked, never mind the fact that he’s only repeating the first syllable of his words instead of them slurring together. It does not make Hari feel any better about his chances that Quirrel only feels so dangerous to his familiars because of his field of study.

“Yes, well, we best be going now. Lots to buy.” Hagrid ushers Hari and his family toward the back door, and the wixen idling around them part like the ocean. It’s thoroughly disconcerting and not at all the introduction to the magical world that Hari would have chosen for himself, but he’s certain that this is still salvageable.

Just before they step out the door, Hari turns back to the wixen who are poorly hiding the fact that they’re watching him go, and, with a quick dip of his head, says, “Merry part.” The whispers start anew as the massive door swings shut behind them, and Hari instead focuses on studying the wall that is infused with magic standing only a few feet in front of them.

“It’s a dead end.” Dudley tilts his head as Hagrid continues walking toward it, pulling out a bright pink umbrella that he taps in a peculiar pattern against the bricks. “How’re we supposed to get through?”

No sooner than the question leaves Dudley's mouth, Hagrid taps his umbrella against the wall one last time and the wall starts shifting to form a pathway before their very eyes. "Magic," he answers simply, a smile tugging at his lips at the look of shocked awe on both Hari and his cousin's faces. "Welcome to Diagon Alley."

"It hasn't changed a bit in all these years," Aunt Petunia murmurs. "Even the shops look the same."

The streets are filled to bursting with wixen going about their days, making purchases for everyday needs and preparing to send this year's group of students off to Hogwarts. The magic seeping through every inch of this place and racing to greet him makes his head spin, and it is only once Athena rubs against his cheek, purring as she draws some of that magic into herself, that Hari feels like he can breathe again. It gets even easier once the snakes follow her lead and do the same.

'We are here for you, Hari. If it all ever gets to be too much, then you only need to ask us for help. Siphoning excess magic makes us more powerful, more intelligent, and better able to support you regardless; it truly benefits us all.'

"Thank you, Athena," he whispers.

Hagrid leads them down the busy street, pointing at various shops along the way. "Here's where you get your quills and ink, and over there are all your bits and bobs for doing your wizardry." They walk past a hairdresser, a robes shop, and a shop selling ingredients for potions before they reach a store specializing in owls, having several on perches outside of the shop to draw in customers, which makes Artemis hiss sharply before ducking her head beneath Hari's shirt. Thankfully, it's far too busy and loud here for anyone to have noticed the sound.

"Wow, look at it! The new Nimbus 2000."

"It's the fastest model yet."

"You have real flying brooms?!" Dudley exclaims. "That's so cool! Hari, you have to get one."

"First years aren't allowed broomsticks, remember, popkin? We'll have to wait until next year for that one."

"Aww..."

Hari can't help laughing at the exchange, looking back at the Quidditch supply shop that has Camulus hissing under his breath.

"Foolish wixen and their eagerness to court their demise. Why must they insist on making faster versions of those death traps almost every year? It takes years for them to create new potions or spells that serve an actual purpose, but of course, they must prioritize their ridiculous sport."

"I think they sound interesting," Kratos disagrees. ***"It's like climbing a tree but you never reach the top. Speaker, will you take me flying once we can have a broom?"***

"Not all of us have a constrictor's grip, you know?" Camulus grumbles under his breath, exasperation flooding their bond as Hari subtly nods in Kratos's direction. ***"I want nothing to do with those things. I have no plans of plummeting to my death any time soon, thanks."***

"I assume that we're headed for Gringotts first?" his aunt enquires. "I brought some money for his shopping, though I'm not sure how much the conversion rate has changed over the years... We can always make a return trip if needed."

"That we are! And there'll be no need for all of tha'. Hari's parents left 'im with plenty."

Gringotts is the exact opposite of the Leaky Cauldron in every way. High, vaulted ceilings lend to a sophisticated air that is only furthered by the marble counters and intricately patterned tile beneath their feet. Hari finds himself very glad that Camulus has already taught him what little he knows about goblins so that he didn't find himself gaping like a fool at the sight of creatures even smaller than he is running the bank. Dudley is not quite so fortunate, but Hari elbows him sharply before he can say anything about them.

Goblins are fierce-looking creatures, and Hari can't help but feel that Camulus's previous descriptions of them did them a disservice, though he had admitted to never meeting any himself. Their management over the magical world's money seems to be the only thing any wixen regards them for, but Hari can sense something more. He sees it in the clicking of sharp claws against marble and grins that would not look out of place in a shark's mouth. He sees it in the weapons hanging on the walls that many wixen surely dismiss as ornamental despite being sharp and ready for use at a moment's notice. He sees it in the way that they move, so light on their feet that their footsteps do not make a sound.

They are a warrior culture, of that Hari is certain, and it certainly makes the respectful way of greeting a goblin make far more sense.

He can feel the weight of several eyes lock onto their group, and when he sees how their eyes linger over Aunt Petunia and Dudley just as much as they do Hari, he gets the sinking feeling that they can see right past his concealment charms.

Hagrid leads them right up to one of the tellers and clears his throat, but before he can say a word, Hari cuts in with, "Merry meet, Sir Goblin. May your enemies tremble at the mere mention of your name."

He receives a sharp, evaluating look at that, and several of the goblins around them subtly glance over from their dealings with other wixen as well. "Merry meet, young one. May your vaults prosper for generations to come. What business have you with our bank today?"

Hagrid clears his throat once more, and Hari shoots the goblin an apologetic look. "Mr. Hari Potter wishes to make a withdrawal."

That look of sharp interest intensifies tenfold. "And does Mr. Hari Potter have his key?"

"Ah, wait a moment. I've got it here somewhere." Hagrid starts rummaging around in his massive pockets, pulling out one thing after another that is not Hari's key and making him feel like he might keel over with embarrassment. This is really something they should have done before going up to the goblin and wasting his time, and the pinched look on Aunt Petunia's face tells him that she thinks the same. "There's the little devil!" Hagrid holds up a gleaming golden key that has the goblin nodding in approval. "Oh, and there's something else as well," he whispers, holding up a letter before he passes it over the counter. "Professor Dumbledore gave me this. It's about you-know-what in vault you-know-which."

This is the most painfully unsubtle thing that Hari has ever borne witness to in his life. Hagrid is only making himself seem more suspicious by dancing around the subject like he is, and there is no sense in doing so when he can just ask to be taken to whichever vault he needs. Hari highly doubts that anyone that could potentially overhear them will have any clue of the vault's contents just from hearing the number assigned to it.

"Very well. Griphook, take our guest down to the vaults. If you'll excuse us, we need to have a word in private with Mr. Hari Potter."

"Oh, I'm really not supposed ta separate from 'im, ya see."

"We take our clients' privacy very seriously, Mr. Hagrid. This is not a matter you can be involved with."

"Would it be alright if we came with him?" Aunt Petunia gestures to Dudley and herself. "I'm his guardian, and this is my son."

"Kin is allowed, assuming Mr. Hari Potter permits it."

"Of course," Hari confirms with a nod, shooting his aunt a desperate look before glancing back at where his vault key remains clutched in Hagrid's hand. "I don't mind them being there at all."

"See? It's all quite alright, Hagrid. You go run your errand while we deal with business here, and we'll wait for you once we're done or vice versa."

"Well, if yer sure..."

"Quite certain. Would you mind passing me Hari's key? We'll need it to make a withdrawal once we're done, and there's no sense in making you go down to the vaults twice."

"Oh! O' course, here ya are." Hagrid passes the key over without hesitation, and Hari can feel the tension that was previously vibrating in his magic relax at the sight. Whatever reason that Hagrid is the one Dumbledore sent to escort Hari, whatever plot he is using him for, Hari rather doubts that the man is even vaguely aware of it. He's the incredibly earnest type, the kind who can't lie to save his life, and Hari will bet anything in the world that Hagrid was either a Hufflepuff or a Gryffindor while attending Hogwarts. "Suppose I best be going, then. I'll meet ya by the entrance."

Hagrid allows himself to be guided away by Griphook, and the goblin on the other side of the counter smirks all the wider for it. "Merry meet indeed, Heir Potter. My name is Bloodclaw. The goblin nation has been wanting to speak with you for a very long time."

They're led into a private office far away from any prying eyes, and Bloodclaw studies them closely as he gestures for them to take a seat on the notably human-sized couch. "I presume there is a good reason that you're hiding your familiars from the world? Goblins don't take too kindly to attempts at deceit."

"My deepest apologies, Sir Bloodclaw." Hari bows his head, and Athena jumps down into his lap as a result of the movement. "British wixen are... Touchy about parselmouths, and I did not wish to advertise the ability before I firmly establish my place in this world. No one will think twice of a kneazle familiar, but four snakes... Even if I do not openly speak to them, rumors will fly."

Bloodclaw concedes his point with a nod. "I will make a note of that in your file, then. We will guard your secrets as we guard your gold." Hari jolts at the magic imbued in those words, and Bloodclaw smirks as if receiving confirmation of something he suspected. "You are a very interesting wizard indeed, Heir Potter. Tell me, is there any reason why you ignored our correspondence until today?"

"Correspondence?" Hari murmurs. "The only letter I've ever received is from Hogwarts. Which... Now that you mention it, that's incredibly odd. With my status in this world, there are surely at least a few wixen who sent me letters over the years."

"It is as we suspected, then. A mail ward was likely placed on your person to prevent any cursed letters or artifacts from reaching you in the aftermath of the war. I'm sure that it was an... Oversight to include Gringotts in that," Bloodclaw says in a way that makes it obvious that he doesn't believe that in the slightest. "Regardless, you are here now. Your greeting tells me that you know something of the ways of our world, but are you aware of your station in it?"

"Yes, sir. Camulus, he's um..." Hari waves his hand and the boomslang that is draped over Dudley's shoulders flickers into view before he conceals him once more just as easily. The gleam in Bloodclaw's eyes becomes even sharper. "He escaped from a potion shop that kept him for his shed skin after being stuck there for several years. He overheard many things, including proper greetings and day-to-day conversations of wixen, and he's taught me everything that he can. I know that the Potters are a noble family in Britain, and I know that they're considered ancient and noble in India. I know how to navigate conversations with other heirs, heiresses, lords, and ladies without committing any social faux pas, and obviously, I learned how to regard goblins with the respect they are deserved. But I know that there is still much for me to learn, and I am eager to fill any holes in my education."

"Good. Far too many wixen believe they know everything when they truly know nothing at all. It heartens me to see that you are not one of them."

And Hari, seeing an opportunity to turn calculating interest into something of a true alliance, if only between himself and Bloodclaw, says, "Like their belief that they are the winners of the Goblin Rebellions while you maintain total control over their finances? You allow them to think themselves victors for stripping you of the right to bear wands, but you truly do not *need* them to perform magic, do you?" Bloodclaw's smile is a sharp, vicious thing. "You have weapons that are kept deadly sharp hanging on the walls, and every single one of them is encrusted with jewels that wixen dismiss as ornamental when they can act as a focus for anyone who needs to channel their magic in that way. You mutter angrily about wands as if they are important to you so that wixen grow complacent. So that they forget just how much you're capable of without using a focus at all. And when they grow overconfident and attempt to strip you of your rights again, you will be ready for another war and strike them down."

Somehow, a goblin's laughter is even more terrifying than their smile. "Oh, you've got the air of a serpent about you, Heir Potter." Bloodclaw's response is an answer in and of itself. "Typically these tests would run you a ten galleon fee, but... You, Heir Potter, are going places. If you'll indulge my curiosity, I would like you to submit to a blood test that I will waive the charge for, just this once. Most of the noble families are intertwined to some degree, so inheritances can be a messy affair. Even those who are directly descended from the main line may be passed over by the family magic, deemed an unworthy heir compared to a far more distant relation. It is always worth confirming what you stand to inherit."

"I thank you for your counsel, Sir Bloodclaw. I would greatly appreciate receiving a blood test."

Dudley's eyes are as wide as saucers when Bloodclaw unsheathes an ornate dagger that has an emerald-encrusted hilt. Aunt Petunia merely averts her eyes, looking more than a little squeamish when Bloodclaw says, "You just need three drops of blood on the parchment. The magic will take care of the rest."

Hari presses the tip of his thumb against the blade. Three steady beads of blood swell up and fall onto the parchment below, and he marvels at his thumb healing before the fourth could even begin to form. Dudley gasps as a wall of text flickers into view, ink glistening with a slight red undertone where the light hit it just right.

Heritage Test Results: Hari James Potter

Closest Relations:

- Lily Potter née Evans (mother, deceased)
- James Potter (father, deceased)
- Sirius Black (godfather, adoptive father by magic, incarcerated)
- Petunia Dursley née Evans (maternal aunt, current guardian)

Heirships:

- Heir Potter by right of blood and magic, Lord Presumptive
- Heir Peverell by right of blood and magic, Lord Presumptive
- Heir Slytherin by right of magic and conquest, Lord Presumptive
- Heir Black by right of magic and blood (distant), heir of Lord Presumptive: Sirius Black

Vaults:

- **Vault 687: Potter Trust Vault:** Contents: 30,403 galleons, 4 sickles, and 21 knuts
- **Vault 704: Potter Family Vault:** Contents: 400,324 galleons, 16 sickles, and 13 knuts; Potter family grimoire; assorted heirlooms
- **Vault 765: Black Trust Vault:** Contents: 57,836 galleons, 12 sickles, and 8 knuts
- **Vault 812: Slytherin Family Vault:** Contents: 678,536 galleons, 4 sickles, and 17 knuts; Slytherin family grimoire; assorted heirlooms
- **Vault 848: Peverell Family Vault:** Contents: 724,819 galleons, 5 sickles, and a knut; Peverell family grimoire; assorted heirlooms

Hari feels a bit faint. “Sir Bloodclaw? What’s the conversion rate for galleons?”

“It’s 29 knuts to a sickle, 17 sickles to a galleon.” Bloodclaw’s smile is as sharp as the dagger he tucks away. “Of course, if you’re referring to pounds sterling, then it’s about five pounds for every galleon.”

“Blimey, Hari, you’re a millionaire!”

“Of course, Heir Potter-Black-Peverell-Slytherin only has access to his trust vaults until he reaches his majority, but they hold more than enough to get him through his schooling several times over.”

“You may just call me Hari if you wish, Sir Bloodclaw. Or Heir Potter if that is too informal. My full title is a bit of a mouthful.”

“Heir Potter, then.” Bloodclaw dips his head in a nod. “If I might make a couple of suggestions?”

“You may. I appreciate your counsel.”

“The first thing I would invest in is a set of mailboxes. The upfront cost is 70 galleons with a monthly fee of five galleons for services rendered. This will neatly circumvent whatever mail ward was placed upon your person as post owls will know to deliver any letters directly to Gringotts. We remain in possession of one of these linked boxes, screen any incoming letters for curses, compulsions, or other such spells, and place all that pass inspection into our box. The mailbox you take home with you will glow whenever you have a letter or package waiting on your acceptance. To accommodate any larger packages, these mailboxes have undetectable expansion charms on them as well, fitting about as much as our average 300-level vault.”

Hari’s eyebrows lift higher and higher at Bloodclaw’s explanation. “That does sound useful. Is there a way to return letters through the mailboxes as well? Artemis hates owls.”

“It would make the monthly fee seven galleons instead of five, but we can accept return letters from you and mail them out through local post owls.”

“Let’s do that, then. You can pull the funds from the Black trust vault. What else do you suggest?”

“Gringotts also sells mokeskin pouches, magically expanded pouches that only the owner may pull items out of, directly linked to the vaults in their name. One need only think of the number of galleons they need and which vault they wish to take it from to do so, no visit to the physical vault necessary. It is a pricier artifact due to mokeskin’s rarity, running you 180 galleons, but in the event that it is difficult for you to escape your escort or outside parties only want you withdrawing a certain amount of money...”

“I see,” Hari hums. “I presume that it is only linked to my trust vaults until I reach my majority?” A curt nod is his answer. “Is it possible to store items in this pouch as well?”

“Indeed. It functions as an ordinary mokeskin pouch would, just with the charms necessary to allow remote withdrawals.”

"If, for instance, I needed to deposit something in my vault remotely, would it be possible for me to send items through using the same method as withdrawals? Or would that require an additional charm?"

"It's part of the first charm, though seldom used."

Hari hears the silent question in Bloodclaw's voice, smirks, and asks, "Including living things?"

"Ah, I see. If one needed to hastily make a familiar disappear, then it would be both possible and safe to send them on a quick trip to your vault, yes."

"Excellent thinking, speaker," Camulus croons proudly. "Kratos is quite difficult to hide, and so long as you are not in danger, I give you permission to send me through should you ever need to. I will be incredibly cross with you if you use it to keep me from fighting by your side, however."

"I hear you loud and clear. What do the rest of you think?"

"I trust you, little speaker. This sounds like a good failsafe to have."

"So long as there aren't owls there, it's fine by me."

"I've been worrying about being the reason you are discovered too early. It will comfort me a great deal to no longer have to fret over that."

'I doubt you'll ever have a need to send me away, but I grant you permission for it in any case.'

"We'll take it."

"Would you like for those funds to be pulled from the Black trust vault as well?"

"Yes. Sir Bloodclaw?"

The goblin glances over from where he's grabbing the pouch, cocking an eyebrow in question. "Yes, Heir Potter?"

"Your help today has gone beyond that of simple counsel. The advice you have given me and the blood test you provided may well be the difference between life and death someday. I acknowledge the debt that I owe you and vow to one day repay it. On my magic, I swear. So mote it be."

A thread of purple light swirls to life, connecting Hari and Bloodclaw as his magic weighs the truth of his words, accepts them, and vows to hold him to them.

Bloodclaw trips over thin air, nearly falling before he grips the corner of his desk and steadies himself. He whips his head around with wide, disbelieving eyes. "Heir Potter, do you understand the severity of the oath you just took?"

"I do. A serpent acknowledges their debts, and I owe one to you. I *will* see it repaid."

The goblin straightens up then, resting a closed fist just above his heart as he looks Hari in the eye. "Heir Potter-Black-Peverell-Slytherin, as the current king of the Goblin Nation, I do acknowledge that you have treated us with nothing but the utmost respect since your arrival here despite being unaware of my status. Not once have you hesitated to acknowledge goblins as your equals, and now you have sworn a magical vow to repay a favor given freely with no such expectation of you. Magical oaths of that magnitude demand repayment in kind. I declare you a friend of the Goblin Nation. Your best interests are now our best interests, and you will always find an ally in the goblins. Advice to you will always be offered freely and without hesitation from this day forward. On my magic, I swear. So mote it be."

Bloodclaw's magic is red and fierce, singing of blood and battle and loss. It dances around Hari as the vow between them settles, and he feels a bit more confident once it does, almost as if an army is at his back.

Once the magic settles and Hari regains his other senses, Athena leaps up to his shoulder just as he scrambles to get on one knee and says, "King Bloodclaw, I apologize for treating you so informally before now. I can only hope you'll forgive my forwardness."

"You are already forgiven, young serpent." Bloodclaw waves his hand dismissively. "You had no reason to believe that I was anything but an ordinary goblin, and even still, you showed me more respect than any wixen has in over a century. Thank you, Ragnok." The king halts their conversation to acknowledge the delivery of Hari's new mailboxes, gesturing for him to get to his feet. He passes both the pouch and Hari's linked mailbox over to him with a sharp grin. "Now come along, we don't want to make your escort anxious, do we?"

Bloodclaw's rumbling chuckle reverberates throughout the hallways as he leads them back to the main atrium. "You are nothing like they expect you to be, Heir Potter, and thank Ragnuk for that."

"... What just happened?" Aunt Petunia blinks several times as she trails after them, hoping that the vision in front of her will make more sense the next time she reopens her eyes. It doesn't take long for her to give it up and hide her face behind her hands with a despairing groan.

"I think that Hari just formed an alliance with the goblin king, Mum. By being nice."

"Lils, I bet you're laughing at me from the grave, aren't you? Why is your child *insane*?"

Chapter End Notes

To those of you wondering why the goblin king would be working as if he is an ordinary teller, I ask you to keep in mind that Hagrid is going to retrieve the Philosopher's Stone. It's an artifact of notable import that I imagine only a select few goblins would know was in one of their vaults at all (after all, they certainly weren't aware of the horcrux in Bellatrix's vault, so they don't know everything that goes in them). I always thought that it would be very strange indeed for Hagrid to walk up to some random goblin and them immediately know about what he's talking about, so the goblin who helped them had to be someone important. Besides, goblins aren't the type of creature to sit back and let others do the work for them. I cannot imagine their king would be any less involved in running the bank itself, hands-on, than any of the other goblins.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone that celebrates it has a Merry Christmas!! I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get this up in time, but I will never doubt the power of manic energy and sheer excitement ever again X'D

I am very glad that I split the initial Diagon Alley chapter in half here. Somehow, this chapter wound up being a bit longer than even the last one. Hope you all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aunt Petunia quickly stops to chat with another goblin and converts some pounds into galleons before they rejoin Hagrid, who is looking decidedly green, by the door.

“Are you alright, Hagrid?”

“Ah, Hari, there ya are! Sorry, those carts always leave me feelin’ all out of sorts.” Hagrid looks over at Aunt Petunia with a pleading expression. “Would ya mind if I kipped to the Leaky for a quick drink? Just to get my bearings, mind. I’ll rejoin ya before long.”

“Take all the time you need. We should be able to navigate the shops just fine; it was mainly getting here that was the problem.” His aunt’s voice is sugary sweet with derision, it’s a tone he knows well from her gossiping about the neighbors, but Hagrid doesn’t seem to notice that.

“I appreciate ya. Yer probably gonna want ta take Hari by Madam Malkin’s first. Takes a few hours after a fitting fer the robes ta be ready.” Hagrid waves farewell before he staggers off, and Hari finds himself very grateful that he didn’t have to ride the carts if they’re even half as awful as Hagrid makes them seem.

“I can’t believe they sent someone so irresponsible to escort you,” his aunt scoffs. “Going to a pub before we even enter a single shop, honestly.”

“I like him,” Hari insists firmly. “He made me a birthday cake. He seems like a really nice person; he’s just not someone that you ask to show new students around. It’s not his fault that Dumbledore sent him.”

“Yeah, that whole thing with the vault he was visiting seemed really suspicious. Do you think they wanted you to pry?”

“Maybe. I think that everyone expects me to be a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors are brave, rash, and constantly seeking adventure. But I want nothing to do with whatever is happening there.”

“Good. I don’t want to see you abandon all common sense for these people.”

“Of course not, Aunt Petunia.” Hari chuckles as they rejoin the hustle of Diagon Alley, peering around before asking, “Do you mind if we stop by that hairdresser first? Camulus has told me all about hair-lengthening potions, and I’ve always wondered if growing this mess out would tame it a little.” When his aunt looks like she might argue, he gives her a mischievous grin that halts her in her tracks. “Besides, I’m pretty sure that everyone expects me to be a miniature clone of my dad. We might get more peace if my hair doesn’t look like the trademark Potter mop, and it should cover the scar better too.”

“Well... I suppose if Vernon can get over a boa constrictor, then he’ll be able to get over long hair too. Let’s go then. We’ll go get you fitted for robes right after.”

They weave through the crowd until they finally reach Eytelia’s Parlor for Witches and Wizards. A bell chimes softly above their head once they open the door, and a cheery voice calls out from another room. “Give me just one moment, dears! I’ll be right with you!”

A pair of enchanted scissors twirl about with a flourish as the witch steps out to greet them. “Eytelia Boot, at your service! What can I do you for today?”

Hari lets a nervous smile tug at his lips when he recognizes that name. The Boot family is best known for their role in founding Ilvermony School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the United States, but a branch of the family had moved back to

Britain a few generations back and they have a seat on the Wizengamot. He's not sure of her exact position within the family, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

He steps forward with a bow, pressing a ghost of a kiss to the back of her hand. "Merry meet, Lady Boot. I was hoping to get my hair grown out today. I have hope yet that I'll be able to tame it somehow." Unfortunately for him, he reveals the very scar that he wants to hide with the motion.

"My stars, you're Hari Potter." Eytelia shakes her head slightly before recollecting herself and giving him a sheepish grin.

"Pardon me, that was incredibly rude. Merry meet, Heir Potter. I can certainly do that for you. I imagine that you've had quite enough of being gawked at, hm?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it," he sighs. "I was absolutely swarmed in the Leaky Cauldron. I just want to do my shopping in peace."

"I imagine. I'll get you taken care of right away! Come on, take a seat. And who is this with you?"

Hari sits down in the bizarrely comfortable chair that is imbued with magic before saying, "Forgive me for not introducing them sooner. This is my maternal aunt, Petunia Dursley, and this is my cousin, Dudley Dursley. I grew up with their family." He pointedly does not say that they raised him because they didn't, but she'll make her own assumptions and he will not correct her. He knows how to play this game, giving just enough information to satisfy someone while leaving the rest up to their imagination.

"I always wondered if the rumors were true. Seems you really were raised in the muggle world. Was it very different from here? I imagine this must all seem quite strange to you."

"Less strange than you might think. People are people, in the end." Hari has a plan for shopping in Diagon Alley. He needs to present himself as the most helpful, earnest version of himself possible while still allowing hints of his Slytherin nature to shine through and talking about his belief that he will go there. The last thing he needs is the magical world as a whole denouncing him the second he gets sorted out of shock and fear, and considering the muttering he's heard around him from several wixen casting wary glances at those wearing silver and green, that's a distinct possibility. "The celebrity thing is weird, but there's nothing for it but to adapt and overcome."

"Hence why you stopped here before getting any of your things. You're a sensible one, for sure. I wonder if we'll see you sorted into my old house... I was a Ravenclaw, you know? Most Boots are. I've actually got a son, Terry, who will be in your year! Now he's a Ravenclaw if I ever saw one; I swear that the only time he doesn't have a book in his hand is while showering. He'll even fall asleep holding them sometimes!" Hari listens to her chatter away as she rinses his hair, tilting his head back as she starts working the hair-lengthening potion through it. "Do you have any idea which house you might be in?"

"Slytherin, most likely, though I guess Ravenclaw wouldn't be a bad fit either..."

"Hey, nothing wrong with being a Slytherin. Don't listen to any weak-willed wixen that say otherwise, okay? Slytherins and Ravenclaws have always gotten along, and some of my best and most loyal friends have been snakes. Besides, ambition is a fine thing to have. You think I ever would have opened this place if I didn't have a bit of it myself?"

"Thank you, Lady Boot," he murmurs. "I admit to having some worries about the fallout of my sorting, but I also don't want to make myself miserable fighting to go somewhere I don't belong."

"Don't you worry about a thing. You just let the hat put you where it will and everyone else can sort themselves out, you'll see. You've done quite enough for us as it is, Heir Potter, so don't let anyone make you feel like you owe them a thing. Can you lean forward for me?" He does so, feeling the peculiar sensation of hair against the back of his neck as she pulls it over the back of his chair. "And you can lean back, thank you."

"What was that about a hat?"

"Aw, blast, you got me to slip. And you picked up on that right away, huh? You really are a little snake, aren't you?" Hari bats his eyes at her innocently and flashes a wicked little grin that sends her into peals of laughter. "How you're sorted is one of the best-kept secrets at Hogwarts, but I suppose there's nothing for it now... There's an enchanted hat that can see into your mind and will sort you based on what traits you best embody. Sometimes it takes longer for it to decide, but most hat-stalls are hat-stalls because they're arguing with the hat's decision rather than because they suit two houses equally well, though either is possible. Just don't let anyone know I told you, hm?"

"Your secret is safe with me, Lady Boot."

"Much appreciated. What do you think, Heir Potter? I can cut it shorter if you'd like; I wasn't sure what length you were aiming for."

Hari's eyes widen at the sight of himself in the mirror. His former bird's nest is still undeniably messy, but it looks almost artfully so when it falls in loose curls down his back. He twists around to see that it ends just beneath his shoulder blades, and a genuine smile begins forming then. His scar is nowhere in sight.

"I love it, Lady Boot! How much do I owe you?"

She waves him off dismissively. "Nonsense, I couldn't possibly charge you for this. Consider it a birthday present from me."

Hari hums consideringly at that. "If you insist... Say, are there any products you'd recommend to help with maintenance? Shampoos, brushes, potions, that sort of thing? I've never used any magical ones before."

"You're not leaving without making a purchase, are you?" Eytelia teases with a wide grin on her face. "Alright, you little charmer. I've got just the thing for you. Accio 'the unruly hair set'." Hari's eyes widen as a small selection of items whiz into the room from all over the shop. "You usually have to say the incantation for the summoning spell, that's accio, by the way, for each separate item you want to summon, but I found that if you assign a group of items a shared name, then you can summon them all at once. Consider that a friendly tip from me."

"I'm sure it'll come in handy someday," Hari chuckles. "What do all of these do?"

"There are three of these that I would recommend for you. Davies' Docile Locks, that's the shampoo, is specially formulated to prevent frizzing and tame cowlicks, and it works especially well for wavy to slightly curly hair like yours. This potion is actually a credit to your own family; your grandfather, Fleamont Potter, created Sneekeazy's Hair Potion in an attempt to tame the infamous Potter mane. It's wildly successful for the average wixen's hair, but I'd recommend saving it for special occasions since it'll only work for a few hours or so for you." Hari nods eagerly, soaking in the information like a sponge. It's amazing how much he can learn from just a single person, and he's eager to see what it's like to be surrounded by people who grew up with magic all of the time.

"Now the brush is actually my own creation! Ravenclaw's head of house, Professor Flitwick, is a Charms Master, so one tends to pick up a few things," she explains with a wink. "It's enchanted to both detect tangles and help you gently untangle them. It'll probably take a while to get used to the brushing required for this length, so I thought it might help you."

"It sounds brilliant! I'll take all three."

"Then it'll cost you 12 galleons." Hari passes over the money with a smile, and Eytelia beams in return. "Merry part, Heir Potter. I hope you enjoy your time at Hogwarts."

"Merry part, Lady Boot! Thank you for all your help!"

He practically skips out the door, doing a little twirl before turning to face his aunt and cousin. "What do you think?"

"It suits you, oddly enough," Dudley murmurs. "I thought it would look weird, but it doesn't."

"Is that how you did it?" Hari hums at Aunt Petunia's question, tilting his head slightly. "Turn everyone in the neighborhood against us, I mean. You were acting so meek and uncertain; it's not like you."

"Noticed that, did you?"

"I'm not blind," she says with a snort. "Do you not want to talk about it?"

Hari blinks in mild surprise. "I don't mind. Thank you for asking, though." They start steadily making their way toward Madam Malkin's, Athena trailing behind them and tripping a few wixen who aren't paying close enough attention, and he explains as they go. "One of the first lessons that Nisaba ever taught me is that the best way to avoid attracting the attention of a predator is making myself appear small, unthreatening and unappetizing in equal measure, and I've found that holds true for people as well. Play up the innocence and insecurity and play down the wit and cunning. All Slytherins have masks of some sort. Most choose to hide behind shields of ice, making it appear as if they don't have any emotions at all, but I just don't have that in me. Instead, I manipulate the emotions that are already there and just change how I allow myself to react depending on who I'm with and what they want to see. It feels more real that way, even when I'm pretending. And if I can convince myself that I'm not acting, then I can certainly convince everyone else."

"That's... Dreadfully clever," his aunt admits begrudgingly.

"Growing up with you and Uncle Vernon helped on that front. I had to learn how to read your moods to avoid getting frying pans or belts swung in my direction, and I had to learn which days that it was best to ignore the pangs of hunger and which ones you might show me pity and offer some food if I asked nicely enough. I learned how to read people, even if that wasn't your intention, and I thank you for that, if nothing else."

"You shouldn't have had to," Dudley grumbles. "It's not right."

Hari simply shrugs, giving his cousin a wan smile. "We can't change what's in the past. It was a useful thing to learn, so I'm choosing to see the utility of it rather than focusing on past hurts. There's really no point in dwelling on it now that it's over."

"... You're a better person than I am, nephew."

Their conversation tapers off as they arrive at Madam Malkin's, not wanting to risk anyone overhearing them now that they're in a less crowded area. "Hogwarts, dear? I've got the lot here; there's another young man being fitted up right now, in fact. You don't mind sharing, do you?"

"Not at all. Say, how does this work, exactly? I've never had a fitting before."

"This is your first one?" Madam Malkin looks over their group more closely then, eyes softening when she notices the pendants that both Aunt Petunia and Dudley are wearing. "Ah, muggle-born, then? It's nothing scary at all, dearie. I just need you to sit still for a bit while my enchanted tape measures do their thing, and since you're not wearing robes, you won't have to dress down any either."

"Thank you, Madam Malkin. That makes me feel much better." Hari receives a warm smile as Madam Malkin leads them into to the backroom. As they step through the threshold, Hari watches a fabric tape measure flutter around a pale, blond boy with silver eyes and the distinct air of someone raised in the lap of luxury, taking his measurements down to the width of his arms. There is no mistaking his identity; the Malfoy family is quite distinctive. "Merry meet, Heir Malfoy."

Hari's lack of a bow does not go unnoticed, and he can see Malfoy's evaluating gaze as he tries and fails to place his family. Thankfully, wixen culture is more forgiving with heirs and heiresses than it is with lords and ladies. "Merry meet, Heir... Pardon me, but I don't believe I recognize you."

"You are forgiven. I am Heir Potter, of the noble house of Potter." He winces at the sound of a bucket of pins clattering on the floor, electing to ignore Madam Malkin's gasp of surprise. "It's your first year as well, correct?"

"Heir Potter?" Hari watches silver eyes glint with excitement before Malfoy schools his expression. "It is, yes. Do you have any idea what house you'll be in? I'm sure to be a Slytherin; there hasn't been a Malfoy outside of Slytherin in centuries, you know?" He doesn't even get a chance to open his mouth before Malfoy starts his next line of questioning. "Where have you been all these years anyway? I knew those rumors of you living with muggles were absolute rubbish; one only has to listen to you to know that you were raised by a proper family. I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same. How could they be when they've never been brought up to know our ways? Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, can you imagine? I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families."

"That's you done, Heir Malfoy."

Malfoy steps off the platform at Madam Malkin's prompting, turning back to face Hari before saying, "Merry part, Heir Potter. I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose."

"Merry part, Heir Malfoy."

His cousin barely waits for the young wizard to be out of earshot before muttering, "He really likes to hear himself talk, doesn't he?"

'He was like a little kitten.' Athena's bond sings with amusement. *'All energy and curiosity with absolutely no clue where to direct it.'*

Hari allows himself a small smile as Artemis shifts her position to avoid the tape measure when it wraps around his arm, and if he's not imagining things, the thread of white is moving much quicker than it was before.

"Merry meet, Heir Potter." Madam Malkin bows lowly, far more lowly than necessary, before pulling out her pins and getting to work. "Please forgive my ignorance."

"Merry meet. And it's quite alright, I would have corrected your assumption if I took offense to it."

"Even still... What were you wanting to get made today, Heir Potter?"

"I'll need the standard Hogwarts set, but I was thinking of adding a few robes for casual wear as well. Maybe a few different colours of dress shirts too."

"I can do that for you, no problem! Did you have any colours in mind?"

"I know the standard dress shirt is white, so maybe a couple in black and gray as well? As for the robes, I was thinking of getting three sets. Maybe one in green, one in dark purple, and one in black? Silver accents, if possible."

"You have excellent taste, Heir Potter. That should all look quite fetching on you!" Madam Malkin gives him a satisfied nod as her tape measure flies back to her side. "I'll put these on rush order for you. Do you still have shopping to do?"

"Yes, this was one of our first stops," his aunt answers.

"Then drop back by in a couple of hours if you don't mind; they'll be ready by then at the very latest. It was a pleasure doing business with you! Merry part, Heir Potter."

"Merry part!"

"You're going to have every shopkeep wrapped around your little finger by the time we leave today, aren't you?" His aunt sounds equal parts exasperated and amused, hands resting on her hips as they step back out into the busy alley.

"That is the plan."

"Well, I still don't see any sign of Hagrid, so where were you wanting to go next?"

"I think I saw a trunk shop just a few stores down. We should stop there before we start shopping for supplies in earnest. This will be much easier if we're not forced to carry everything we buy, and though I could technically use my pouch for that, I'd rather not draw attention to the fact that I have it."

"Sounds sensible enough to me. Let's go, then."

Tuttle's Trunks is incredibly busy, though most of the chaos is contained to one side of the store. "Hogwarts standard trunks are the first section on your left! Only 30 galleons!" Hari bends down so he can pick up Athena, not trusting that she won't get stepped on in the rush. He looks at the massive crowd of wixen before veering off to the right instead. His housemates will probably crucify him if he has a basic trunk, and it's not as if he doesn't have the money to purchase a more personalized one in any case.

"Ah, you're a more discerning customer, aren't you?" A young witch gives him a sharp smile as he peruses the far more expensive trunks. "Anything in particular that you're looking for?"

"I'm an avid reader, so a large library compartment is a must. Potion ingredient storage as well. Beyond that, I'll need compartments for clothes, general supplies, and a temperature-controlled compartment that can be used for housing a familiar."

The witch's dark eyebrows rise higher and higher as his list grows, whistling lowly. "You realize that's gonna cost you, like, 300 galleons, right?"

"I'm going to be using this trunk for the next seven years at the very least, hopefully longer. May as well invest in a good one from the start."

"Too true, that. I like you, kid! The name's Tuttle, Lana Tuttle." She floats a quill and parchment over to herself, and an inkpot follows closely behind them. "Any specifications on appearance?"

"Plain black will do, though silver and green accents wouldn't go amiss."

Lana chuckles, studying Hari more closely as she asks, "Think you're destined for my old house, huh? Well, luckily for you, we already have a trunk with the charms you want, and the colour-changing charm is simple enough magic. The only question is if you think a 300-book library compartment is enough, or do you need a larger one? It would be an upcharge."

"The current charm will work just fine, thank you."

"Then it'll only be a few moments!" She steps into the back for what feels like literal seconds before returning with a trunk in hand, eyes gleaming with satisfaction at the promise of a big sale. "Were you wanting the shrinking and featherlight charms put on it as well? The featherlight charm will keep it from getting heavy no matter how much you put in it, and the shrinking charm will allow you to shrink it down and tuck it into your pocket with a simple tap of your wand. It's safe for use with even the most delicate of potion ingredients, and it's safe for your kneazle if it's in there too. I wouldn't recommend trying it with animals that don't have at least a bit of magic in them, though."

"How much will it cost me?" His answer is yes regardless, but Hari knows better than to agree to something immediately. That's a fine way of getting himself swindled.

“The charms will bring your total up to 318 galleons.”

“Then I’d like to add them, thank you.”

“Not a problem at all! The last thing I’ll need to do is charm your initials onto the front. Is silver alright?” Hari nods in answer. “Then what are your initials?”

He leans forward with a wink, holding his finger in front of his lips in a shushing motion as he whispers, “H. J. P.”

Lana’s eyes widen minutely at that as she dips her head in a quick bow. “Merry meet, Heir Potter,” she murmurs quietly. “I hope your new trunk serves you well.”

“Merry meet and merry part. And I’m certain that it will.”

Once they step outside of the shop, Hari can finally spot Hagrid’s wild hair that towers several heads above the rest of the wixen in the alley. He’s holding an ice cream cone in each hand, and Hari’s appreciation for the man only grows stronger. “Come on, I don’t think he recognizes me like this.”

His suspicion is confirmed when they’re able to approach Hagrid without him shouting their names from halfway across the street. In fact, it isn’t until they’re almost with him that he notices Aunt Petunia, having previously overlooked Hari and Dudley as other kids getting their school shopping done, and does a double take.

“Blimey, Hari. Is tha’ you?”

He nods rapidly, laughing when his hair flies in his face as a result. Aunt Petunia straightens it with an undeniably fond smile that makes his heart stutter in its chest, but Hari refuses to think about that and instead gives Hagrid a shy smile. “What do you think?”

“I’ve never seen a Potter’s hair look so neat before! Or, well, as neat as it gets, I suppose. It suits ya.” He hands both Hari and Dudley an ice cream cone, letting them enjoy it while they sit at a shaded table outside of Fortescue’s for a few moments to catch their breaths. Once they’re done, he asks, “Where all have ya been so far?”

“We took care of his hair, visited the robe shop for his fitting, and got him a trunk. We were just about to start shopping for his supplies in earnest.”

“Seems like I came at jus’ the right time, then! Wanna go ta Ollivanders and get yer wand before picking up the rest, Hari? It’s best not ta leave that too late. Yer wand’ll pick you, not the other way ‘round, so it might take a while.”

He can feel every single one of his familiar bonds light up with interest at that, especially Camulus’s. “That sounds like a great idea, Hagrid!”

Hari isn’t sure what he expected Ollivanders to look like, but he finds himself surprised regardless. His shop is positively tiny, the last thing he would expect from the only wand shop in Diagon Alley, though Hari supposes that wands are typically a one-time purchase. He’s a bit surprised that Hagrid can fit inside at all, though that may be helped by the fact that, with the exception of a single, spindly chair that looks like it might snap if you so much as breathe on it, Ollivanders is almost completely devoid of furniture. Bookshelves that rest flush against the ceiling are filled to the brim with wands, and the only possible way of accessing them seems to be with the assistance of a sliding ladder if the tracks following the shelving are any indication.

He doesn’t see the wizard just yet, but he still intends to make a proper first impression. “Merry meet, Lord Ollivander. Could I bother you for a wand?” Hari nearly startles when Ollivander slides into view, looking down at him from nearly the top of the ladder.

“I wondered when I’d be seeing you, Heir Potter. Merry meet.” The last part is mumbled, barely audible at all, but Camulus has told him plenty about how Ollivander is infamous for being more than a bit eccentric. “Seems like only yesterday your mother and father were in here buying their first wands. Hers was willow with a phoenix feather core, ten and a quarter inches long, and swishy. Excellent for charms, that one was. And your father chose a mahogany wand with a dragon heartstring core, eleven inches long, that was rather pliable. It did wonders for him in transfiguration. Well, I say he chose it, but in truth, the wand chooses the wixen. Now, what is your wand arm?”

“I’m right-handed, if that’s what you mean.”

“Very well, let’s see here... Ah!” Ollivander shimmies out a wand box before taking it over to Hari, opening it up to expose the wand within. “Here we are. Maple wood with a phoenix feather core, seven inches long, and rather whippy. Go on now, take it. Give it a wave!”

Hari does so, shuddering as soon as he touches the wand. It feels like stepping into a lake in the middle of winter, freezing and miserable and like it's trying to suck the life out of him. He waves it anyway, and several boxes of wands go flying across the shop, crashing into the wall. He abandons the horrid thing the second he can get away with doing so.

"Apparently not. Perhaps..." Ollivander selects another box, and Hari can tell just by the feeling of unpleasant heat skittering beneath his skin that this one isn't it either. "This? Ebony wood with a unicorn hair core, eight and a half inches, and springy."

The second that Hari touches the wand, not even lifting it into his hand, a vase of flowers explodes.

"No, no, definitely not! No matter. Hm... I wonder. Why don't you give this a try? Holly with a phoenix feather core, eleven inches, nice and supple." Hari hesitates to even touch this one, the feeling of wrongness is so strong. But Ollivander is watching him with a peculiar gleam in his eyes and an expectant gaze, so hesitantly, he picks up the wand.

It promptly bursts into flames. Hari blinks in shock at the small pile of ashes now resting in his hand, looking at Ollivander with wide eyes. "I am so sorry, Lord Ollivander! I'll pay for this one in addition to whichever wand chooses me."

"No, no, no need for all of that. You're a bit of a tricky customer, but these things happen. I was so certain... Tell me, Heir Potter, can you feel anything calling to you? I've noticed that you had an adverse reaction to each of these wands before so much as touching them, subtle as you may be. Trust your magic; it won't lead you astray." Ollivander steps to the side and gestures for him to walk through the rows of wands.

All of the wands that he passes by feel utterly wrong for one reason or another. Even the woods that feel like home and potential are not paired with cores that will work with him, and for a brief moment, Hari is worried that he won't find a wand at all.

That's when he feels it. There is a faint vibration of power in the air, whispers of shadows and crevices that hiss in his ears, eager to tell him their secrets. Hari looks up, completely unaware of the fact that his eyes are glowing killing curse green. "Up there. Seventh shelf, third one to the right."

"How curious..." Ollivander brings the wand down and passes it over to Hari with a sharp, evaluating gaze. The two of them head back out to the entrance of the shop before he starts explaining what he meant by that. "This wand is one of the few in my shop that is not of my own creation. On occasion, a wixen that comes to my shop is simply not compatible with any of the three cores I've deemed best for consistently powerful wands. To help prevent these wixen from going home empty-handed, us wandmakers trade a few of our wands to one another for the sake of greater diversity. This is a Sayre wand from the United States, crafted by a descendant of Isolt Sayre. Aspen wood with a horned serpent horn core, twelve inches long, quite whippy. Go on, give it a try."

Hari's magic positively sings. Swirls of purple light dance around him, and they ruffle his hair affectionately as euphoria swells within him. He cannot help laughing in his sheer joy, eyes shining with wonder and adoration as his magic settles beneath his skin once more.

"Curious, how incredibly curious... I haven't seen a resonance like this in quite some time, Heir Potter. It's no wonder no other wand would accept you. Aspen is known for finding its home with strong-minded, determined wixen that are attracted to quests and achieving new order. It is a revolutionary's wand. And horned serpent horns... They are a particularly powerful core with a sensitivity to parseltongue. So sensitive to it, in fact, that they vibrate whenever it is being spoken nearby. They have also been known to warn their owners of imminent danger by emitting a low, musical tone, much like the serpent itself does."

His wand is carved with two snakes coiled around it and each other, bearing their fangs in a silent hiss near the wand's handle. It's perfect, and no matter how suspicious it might look, Hari refuses to give it up. This wand is *his*.

"I think that we can expect great things from you, Heir Potter. Great things, indeed..."

Hari's smile is just a bit too sharp around the edges. He likes the sound of that, no matter how nervous Ollivander sounds about it. "How much is it?"

"Nine galleons. Wands typically run you seven, but with the cost of imports..."

"Perfectly understandable, Lord Ollivander. It's no trouble at all. Do you happen to sell wand holsters as well? Something that makes it possible to have your wand in hand in an instant and prevent anyone from stealing it from you?"

Ollivander gives him a long, searching look before saying, "Wand holsters are five galleons and come in a variety of colours. They're ten with both charms on them."

“Then I’ll also take one with both charms. Do you have any in emerald green?” Hari tilts his head to the side and frowns when Ollivander only seems more unnerved by the motion. “Are you alright, Lord Ollivander? I haven’t done anything to offend you, have I?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort.” The wizard shakes his head as he helps Hari fit the holster to his right arm before sheathing the wand inside. “You’ll just need to flick your hand and you’ll find your wand in it,” he explains before returning to their previous conversation. “But you have not upset me, Heir Potter. You are simply... Eerily similar to a student that I sold one of my wands to in the past. Your wand only makes you seem more so. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things, after all. Terrible, yes, but great.”

It feels like Hari’s heart stops beating in his chest.

Camulus rears back with a furious hiss. ***“He dares?! You are a marvel in this world, one of the few wixen worthy of our trust, and he dares to insinuate-?!”***

“To compare our little speaker to that pretender is, it’s sacrilegious! An insult to all serpents!!”

“Let me at him! Let me at him!! I won’t kill him, just make him really uncomfortable! Come on, speaker, please?”

“You are nothing like the man who left you without a nest for so many years. Such a man would not have freed me, especially not at great risk to himself, no matter how well it turned out in the end. This human knows not of what he speaks, Hari.”

He’s still trembling when Athena leaps up onto his shoulder, eyes glowing gold with magic as she yowls at Ollivander. She nuzzles against his cheek, projecting nothing but love and trust through their bond as she says, *‘You are good, little wizard. You are a survivor and you are cunning, but that does not make you evil. Do you think we would stay with you if you were?’*

Hari doesn’t manage to choke out an answer before Hagrid, face red with fury, shouts, “Now, that’s a load of hogwash! Hari is nothin’ like You-Know-Who, an’ I won’t stand fer ya slanderin’ him like tha’! He’s a good kid who ‘as been nothin’ but sweet an’ respectful ta ya! I cannae believe you, ya absolute-!” He practically tackles Hagrid in a hug, silencing his rant with the sound of his sniffing. Those giant arms instinctively wrap around him, and though he expected to feel suffocated, Hari only feels safe.

“Can we just... Go? Please?”

“O’ course we can, Hari. Come on.” Hari darts forward to leave his money on the counter, and Hagrid ushers the three of them out of the shop, giving Ollivander a furious glare on the way out. “Sorry fer makin’ a scene. I cannae stand injustice like tha’.”

“No, thank you,” Aunt Petunia whispers. “I have half a mind to march back in there and give him a piece of my mind, myself. Who says something like that? Hari is *eleven*.”

“Is... Is everyone going to treat you like that when you go to Slytherin?” Dudley whispers. “Hari, are you sure about this? Maybe you should try for Ravenclaw instead...”

“Not everyone. Lady Boot, Madam Malkin, and Tuttle were all perfectly nice to me, remember? But some of them? Yeah, most definitely. Everyone expects me to be this image of a hero that they created in their head, but I can’t be that. I’m just... Hari. And I don’t want to pretend to be anyone but myself.”

“Ya think yer gonna be in Slytherin, Hari?”

“I...” It’s more than a little bit manipulative, but Hari’s eyes are already wide and watery. Besides, he really doesn’t want Hagrid to hate him because of stupid house biases. “You’re not gonna hate me too, are you?”

“No! No, Hari, not at all! Yer still a good kid, and if ya go ta Slytherin, then ya go ta Slytherin. Who knows? Maybe ya can help some of ‘em be better. House has a lot o’ bad eggs, but Dumbledore wouldn’t let ‘em keep attendin’ if they were all bad.”

“Thank you,” he whispers, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

“O’ course. Let’s go get the rest of yer shopping done, hm?”

Hari is far less enthusiastic when grabbing some quills, parchment, and ink, and returning to Madam Malkin’s to get his new clothes is a quick, quiet affair. And though picking out potion ingredients does capture his full attention, it’s not enough to completely pull him out of his dejected slump. A wixen’s wand, assuming it’s one that chose them and not something they

inherited, is a peek into their very soul. It's why only family and close friends are ever told what they are made of in polite society. To have Ollivander peek into his soul and deem it lacking is a devastating blow, but it is one that makes him all the more determined to prove him wrong. Greatness does not have to come at great sacrifice to others. Hari will be the kindest Slytherin that there ever was, and then Ollivander will feel quite silly about this whole affair.

The sight of Flourish and Blotts is the thing that eventually pulls Hari out of his own head.

Hari's eyes come alive at the sight of so many books, so much knowledge about the world that has been kept from him for this long, and he's practically vibrating out of his skin before they even step foot into the store.

"Yer sure he won't be a Ravenclaw?"

"If my cousin isn't a Slytherin, then I will eat his silly, pointy hat."

"Hari." He faces his aunt with an eager gleam in his eyes that he cannot quite stifle. "Don't forget to get your school books first, okay?"

"I won't, Aunt Petunia."

She nods, and just before he can take off, she says, "Dudley, will you grab a basket and help him with his books? Hari? I'll buy anything you two can carry."

"R-Really?" he stammers, eyes blowing wide with shock.

"Really. I... Happy birthday, Hari."

This time, Hari is the one to grab Dudley and pull him along through the shop, shoving a basket in his hands and immediately heading toward the section for Hogwarts first years. His cousin shows the same interest in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* as Hari does, and he gets a distinct feeling that Dudley is going to want to borrow that one before term starts. The required readings barely fill up half of Hari's basket, leaving them with plenty of space for other books.

"Lead the way, swot," Dudley teases. "I'm just here to be the muscle. Let me know if you get too tired carrying yours; I can hold both."

Hari immediately gravitates toward supplemental readings for muggle-borns, knowing that they will be immensely useful to him. *Prepping Potions Ingredients for Novice Brewers*, *Quilligraphy*, *Wixen Customs and Traditions*, *Hogwarts: A History*, *Modern Magical History*, and *Notable Magical Names of Our Time* join Hari's textbooks in his basket, filling it to bursting. He's thankful for the featherlight charm placed on it, knowing that his arms would be incredibly sore otherwise.

He and Dudley swap baskets regardless, and Hari wanders over to the section for elective courses. "I thought you said that you couldn't take these classes until your third year?"

"I can't, but it doesn't hurt to read ahead. Besides, I'd rather already have an idea of which subjects I want to take so that I'm not forced to choose at random and hope for the best once it is time for me to choose."

"... I really don't understand you sometimes, Hari."

Remembering what Camulus said about the blood wards over Number 4 Privet Drive, Hari picks up *Ancient Runes Made Easy* and *Ancient Rune Translation*. He wants to see if he can find where the ward runes are inscribed, and even if he can't, it's a good idea to know more about them in any case. *New Theory of Numerology* and *Numerology and Grammatica* join them from the Arithmancy section, and Hari picks up *Unfogging the Future* from the Divination section as well. It doesn't seem like a subject that he will be particularly interested in, but he figures that it's worth reading either way, if only so he can be sure.

It's the Care of Magical Creatures section that he's most excited for, piling book after book into his basket with a smile. *National Compendium of Beasts*, *Dragons Across the Globe*, *Serpents and Sorcerers Throughout History*, *Familiar Bonds: What to Expect*, and *Magical Beings in Wixen Society* all join his selection before he scuttles off to a more broad assortment of magical texts. After considering his options for several minutes, Hari finishes filling their second basket with *Practical Charms for Wixen at Home*, *Magical Theory*, and *Latin to Incantation: The Transformation*.

Aunt Petunia is waiting for them near the register, and while she flinches at the 50 galleon price tag, she still pays it without complaint.

"Aspiring Ravenclaw, eh? Enjoy your time at Hogwarts, kid."

“They’re all going to be so surprised,” Dudley snickers as they exit the shop, sneakily running his hand along Nisaba’s scales. “So, so surprised.”

“Where’s Hagrid?”

“Oh, he said that he needed to run one last errand really quick,” Aunt Petunia answers with a shrug. “He should be back before much longer, and then we can head home.”

Hagrid rejoins them only a few minutes later, carrying a large bag with mesh screens on the front and sides with a smile. “There ya are! I always get nervous in Flourish an’ Blotts, too easy fer me ta knock down bookshelves and make a right mess in there, but I went an’ stopped by the Magical Menagerie fer ya. I noticed ya don’t have a carrier fer Athena yet, and in busy places like Diagon... It’s really safer fer her in there. The shoulder strap should magically adjust ta ya too, so it won’t be difficult fer ya ta carry. Happy Birthday, Hari.”

“Thank you, Hagrid. For everything today.” His new cat carrier is a dark, forest green with silver handles and a ring of silver lining the mesh, and the overt display of support makes Hari’s eyes water once again. “Seriously, this was the best birthday ever.”

“O’ course! It was a right delight takin’ ya. Don’t be a stranger at Hogwarts now, ya hear? Come say hey sometime, and feel free to bring yer friends over fer a cup of tea. Even if they are a bunch of Slytherins.”

“I will!”

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“Rubeus, I’m glad you could join us.”

“O’ course! I wouldn’t miss it fer the world. I’ve got the you-know-what, so now we’ve just gotta set up protections fer it, right?”

“Exactly!” Albus claps his hands together with a smile. “That’s why we’re having this meeting today. We need to coordinate our protections so that none of them are too similar, after all. But before we get into all of that, how was young Harry?”

Severus scoffs at the mere mention of the boy’s name, but they all know to ignore that by now. “Hari is doing well, but he doesn’t like that nickname. Seems ta be a real polite boy, and he’s clever as a whip too. You’ll probably be seein’ him in yer house, Severus.”

That startles a cough out of their Potions Master. “Pardon? I must have misheard you.”

“Nope! He seems quite certain he’ll be a Slytherin, an’ his aunt an’ cousin agree. Only other possibility is Ravenclaw, I reckon.”

“Truly? There’s no chance of Gryffindor at all?”

“Not that I can see, Minnie. He ain’t much like James or Lily at all beyond looks.”

“That’s... Troubling. Did you notice anything peculiar, Rubeus?” Albus’s tone almost reminds him of Ollivander’s, but that can’t be right. Rubeus knows that he has to be imagining things because Albus Dumbledore is a great wizard who gave him a chance when no one else would, and he would never think such things about Hari. He must just be a touch sensitive still after that mess at Ollivanders.

“Not really, no. He’s got a half-kneazle familiar with a true bond ta him far as I can tell. He certainly seems ta understand her in any case, an’ she’s right protective of him. An’ his wand was interestin’, but that’s about it.”

“Interesting in what way? Do you remember what it was made of?”

“O’ course! It was such an odd combination; I could hardly forget it,” Rubeus chuckles. “It was made of aspen wood an’ has a horned serpent horn core. Carved real pretty-like with a pair of snakes curling ‘round it too.”

Albus swiftly redirects the conversation to what they came here to discuss after that, and though Rubeus doesn’t notice it, Quirinus Quirrel does not stutter once during their meeting, eyes sharp and calculating to adjust for this change of circumstances.

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“I still can’t believe that mermaids are so ugly!”

“It’s just selkies that look like that, Dudley. Sirens are still plenty beautiful.”

“I know, but still. It’s weird!”

In a scene that neither Hari nor Dudley would have believed possible only a couple of years ago, both of them are sprawled out on Dudley’s bed and reading through their magical book of choice. Hari has already torn through his supplemental texts, and his practice with a quill has made him confident that his writing will be, at the very least, legible. He’ll work on improving beyond that point throughout his schooling.

Dudley is currently rereading *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* for what has to be the fifth time this summer, and Hari is reading *Hogwarts: A History*, much to Camulus’s displeasure. ***“Speaker, you are only going to make your nerves worse if you keep focusing on that school. Please choose some lighter reading.”***

“I would rather be stressed now than unprepared later. I cannot afford to be ignorant.”

“A battle fought exhausted is a battle lost before it ever begins.” Camulus shoves himself between Hari and his book with a hiss. ***“Practice some spells. Focus on your magic and getting used to your wand before term starts. You won’t be able to practice during the summers after this one, not once the trace is active, so it’s best to get as far ahead now as you can. That’ll make it easier to get ahead during the school year as well.”***

“He’s really telling you, huh?” Dudley snorts. “What’s he so upset about?”

“He says I’m stressing myself out for no good reason, and he’s right,” Hari sighs. “Do you want to watch me practice the colour change charm? I really think that I might get it to stick this time.”

“Yes!! Do you think you can make my bedding green and silver? Then we’ll match, and it’ll almost be like you didn’t leave at all even when you’re all the way over in Scotland.”

“... Yeah, I can do that. And if I can’t get it to stick yet, then I’ll figure it out before I leave, I promise.”

Hari only has a few days to fulfill that promise, but he’s managed more impossible odds than that.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve noticed that Harry Potter has quite a few unnamed background characters that are, quite literally, just noted as the parent of a kid at Hogwarts, so that gives me some room to play around with them. Gotta love the worldbuilding opportunity!

We didn’t get to see Hagrid’s explosion of temper against Vernon here, but I still feel like it was an important part of his character to display. He’s a very loyal man, and he’s exceedingly protective toward those who have earned his respect and care. What better opportunity to showcase that than while Hari is getting his wand? Ollivander will hardly be the first person to compare Hari and a young Tom Riddle (even in canon they were considered similar, after all, and Hari is only even more so here; the main difference is that he is genuinely kind and just exaggerating things slightly rather than being entirely fictitious), and Hagrid, as one of the first people whose life was destroyed by Tom Riddle, does not take too kindly to those comparisons. Not at all.

I had a great deal of fun coming up with titles for Hari’s extra books as well. I’m sure some of you will notice that there are a few titles in there that are referenced in canon as well, but the majority are something that I had to name on my own. I cannot promise to go in-depth with the contents of each of those books, but I do intend to write little snippets of them for Hari to read on-screen for both lore purposes and just for fun.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Can you guys believe that I sat down and wrote a chapter with just over 11k words in a single day? Literally the only reason that y'all didn't get this on the 26th was because I had to go to work before I got to edit it. Now that I'm off... Well, here you go! I will promptly be going to bed now X'D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Now, the platform should be around here somewhere..." Aunt Petunia and Dudley are walking alongside Hari at King's Cross Station, and the former is murmuring worriedly under her breath while his cousin remains oddly silent and morose. "Between platforms nine and ten. It gave me a right fright when I watched Lily run through a brick wall to get to her train; I doubt I could ever forget it."

Kratos is currently tucked safely away in Hari's trunk, shrunk and hidden in his pocket to avoid drawing suspicion. There is an occasional second glance at Athena, but since she's currently purring away within her carrier, it's not too odd a sight. Needless to say, Nisaba, Camulus, and Artemis are all safely hidden beneath concealment charms while remaining on high alert, flicking their tongues out and searching for a hint of magic in the air.

"That's where we need to go, little speaker," Nisaba hisses quietly, swaying toward Aunt Petunia just as her eyes glaze over and look past a brick wall standing only a few feet away from platform ten. ***"It tastes of magic and undiscovered crannies."***

"You will want to say farewell to your nestmates here. Muggles cannot go through this entrance. It goes beyond the muggle-repelling charm. The magic here tastes of judgement and curiosity, and I am certain that any muggle attempting to run through this portal would only give themselves a broken nose in the process."

"Where is it?" his aunt murmurs, cutting off his and Camulus's conversation. "It should be right here." She nearly flinches out of her skin when Hari gently reaches for the edge of her coat and gives her a tremulous smile.

"I can see it, Aunt Petunia. You don't have to worry; I'll be able to handle things from here. Thank you again for driving me."

"Of course, it's no trouble at all. Dudley and I plan to make a day of it while we're already in London."

Dudley doesn't look particularly enthused by that, but Hari knows that he would be if it wasn't for him leaving today. It still shocks him just how much his cousin has come to openly enjoy his company over these past few months. "Hey... You'll write, won't you?"

"Of course I will, Dud. I'm not sure if there's an easy way for you to send letters back, but the owls that Gringotts send out should be willing to wait a bit so long as you're there to receive them."

"There's an address on the muggle side of things that will get letters to post owls too," Aunt Petunia assures them. "My parents wrote Lils constantly, I swear. I remember that address."

"See? It'll almost be like I never left at all."

Dudley gives him a wan smile. "No, it won't. But I hope you have fun. Be careful, okay?" Before Hari can say a word, his cousin's arms are wrapped around him in a hug. "I don't care what kind of fancy spells they know; if anyone gives you trouble, then just tell me about it. I'll kick their ass."

"Dudley!"

They both laugh at Aunt Petunia's appalled tone, and once Dudley steps back, his cousin's smile is just a bit closer to real. "I'll be careful, Dud. And I'll keep a list for you, promise." His wink makes them both devolve into laughter once more. "I expect to hear just as much from you, got it? I don't care how boring you think Smeltings might seem in comparison; I want to talk about how things are going for you too. Besides, I don't want to fall behind on my education here either..."

"I'll pass along the lessons, you swot," Dudley promises with a roll of his eyes. "Sucks that you won't be able to help me do them anymore, but I guess you'll at least be able to show me where I went wrong afterward."

“We do not want to linger much longer.” Artemis’s hiss is low and wary. ***“We are too exposed, and we’ll begin to attract attention if the non-magical humans notice your relatives leaving someone your age here alone.”***

“Bye Dud, Aunt Petunia. Safe travels!”

“Safe travels.”

“Merry part, cousin.”

Hari strides away from the only family he has ever known, no matter how strained things were between them until recently, and it is the hardest thing that he has ever had to do. As he steps through the barrier between his old world and the magical one, he knows that it is only the first difficult decision in a long line of them to come.

The Hogwarts Express is beautiful.

It’s a brilliant, eye-catching red that reminds Hari of the fire trucks he’s seen race down the streets every now again, but beyond that, the train is absolutely seeped in magic. Its magic sings of new adventures and lifelong bonds that have been formed on this train, and Hari can sense its eagerness to welcome another year’s worth of young wixen positively thrumming around it.

There are wixen families everywhere, all wishing their children farewell with pride thrumming through their magic. Animals are everywhere too, some familiars some not. Owls hoot crossly to one another from the cages they are trapped in, and Artemis is equal parts petrified by their presence and mirthful at their current predicament. It’s better than the sheer terror she usually feels around them, in any case. Cats weave between the feet of countless families shuffling their children on board, and after Hari watches no fewer than three nearly get stepped on, he reminds himself to thank Hagrid once again for his gift.

“Gran, I’ve lost my toad again. What if we can’t find him?”

“Oh, Neville,” he hears an older woman sigh. “We’ve still got time before the train departs, so if we hurry...”

“Did she say Neville? As in Heir Longbottom?” Camulus perks up, tongue tasting the air as he hisses in quiet contemplation. ***“I can sense a toad that tastes vaguely of his magic not far from here.”***

Hari follows magic that smells of freshly overturned soil and new growth after rain, finding that the toad is drawn to the magic of the train itself and is attempting to board it on his own. “Come on now, none of that,” Hari murmurs as he snatches him from the air mid-leap. “You’ve got Heir Longbottom worried sick, and you’ll be on the train soon enough.”

It is far easier to track down Neville again than it was to find the toad. His magic is vibrating beneath the surface, teeming with life and potential, and it is a beacon in comparison to the faint wisps of magic that he followed to find his pet. “Merry meet Dowager Longbottom, Heir Longbottom.” Hari bows as he lifts the dowager’s hand and lightly kisses her knuckle, giggling quietly at Neville’s gobsmacked expression. “I believe you were looking for him?”

Neville lights up when Hari holds his toad out to him, a relieved smile overtaking his face. “Trevor!! You found him, thank you!” It is only when his grandmother gives him a disapproving look that Neville straightens up and returns the greeting, face flushed and nearly as red as the train. “Merry meet, Heir... Um...”

“Potter.”

Both Neville and his grandmother startle at that, though the latter is far subtler about it. “Merry meet, Heir Potter. I thank you for assisting my grandson.”

“It was my pleasure, Dowager Longbottom. It seems that Trevor here is quite drawn to the train. Must be something about the magic of it... Would you care to join me in finding a compartment, Heir Longbottom? It would be awful if he hopped off on you again.”

Neville gives Dowager Longbottom a pleading look, and she heaves a sigh that painfully reminds Hari of Aunt Petunia. “Go on, Neville. Stick close with Heir Potter, and make our family proud.”

“I will, Gran.”

The two of them board the train just as a gaggle of redheads begins pouring through the barrier, boisterous and loud and with magic that reminds Hari of fireworks. They settle down in a compartment roughly halfway down the train, and Hari hopes that its equal distance from both the front and back entrances will keep too many people from bothering them.

“So, what classes are you most excited for, Heir Longbottom?”

“Just Neville is fine...” he murmurs. “You did find Trevor, after all.”

“You may call me Hari then.” The smile tugging at his lips is warm and genuine, and Neville shakily mirrors the expression. Hari’s a bit surprised by how shy he is. “What classes are you looking forward to, Neville?”

“Herbology, mostly. I love helping out with the gardens at home. There’s just something soothing about it. Gran expects me to focus on bigger magic than that, though... Things like Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Well, Dowager Longbottom is hardly going to be hovering over your shoulder while at Hogwarts,” he teases with a wink. “Take advantage of that. Herbology is a perfectly respectable field of study, and if she truly took issue with your interest in the subject, then I doubt she’d allow you to work in the gardens or have a toad for a pet. Toads are most commonly pets or familiars for wixen with a natural aptitude in Herbology, you know? It’s the most appealing magic for them.” That’s a snippet of information that Hari has learned from *Familiars Bonds: What to Expect* which is a surprisingly fascinating read despite his personal experience with the subject.

“R-Really? You think so?”

“I know so. That doesn’t mean that you should neglect other fields of magic, of course, but one should always seek to further their strengths.”

“Huh... What classes are you excited for, Hari?”

“Charms, most definitely. It’s such a diverse branch of magic, and I look forward to learning about properly enchanting objects after our OWLs. I’m excited for Care of Magical Creatures, too! I wish we could take it sooner than third year.”

The train lurches into motion, and Hari glances out the window just as the train rounds the corner, houses coming and going from his field of vision so quickly that it hurts his eyes to even attempt focusing on them. He turns back to Neville. Just as he’s about to ask him another question, a knock sounds at their compartment door before it slides open slightly, a head of red hair peeking through.

“Anyone else sitting here?” he asks, pointing at the seat directly across from Hari and Neville. “Everywhere else so far has either been full or locked.”

“No one,” Hari reassures him with a shake of his head. “Please, take a seat. And merry meet.”

The door slides shut behind the boy as he goes to take a seat, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “Merry meet, uh... Do I need to bow? Normally it’s only those real proper types that greet you like that.”

“No, no, it’s fine!” Neville insists with a nervous chuckle. “You can just call me Neville. Gran is the only one who really cares about that stuff.”

“I won’t take offense if you choose not to.” Hari shrugs. “Though others might. I’d be wary of not doing so in a more public space.” He pointedly does not share his name quite yet, cocking an eyebrow at the boy across from them. “Are you going to introduce yourself, or...?”

“Oh! I’m Ron, Ron Weasley. What about you?”

“Hari Potter.”

“No way!” he gasps. “Are you really? Does that mean that you have the, y’know...?” Hari tilts his head slightly, and his hair shifts to reveal the prominent scar on his forehead. “Wicked. So that’s where You-Know-Who...”

“Not that I remember it, mind.”

“You don’t remember anything at all?”

He does. He remembers a flash of green light and an explosion of power that has haunted his nightmares for years. Nisaba has helped him work through how shaky and tense they leave him feeling as he struggles through the aftermath countless times. Hari is hardly going to share that sort of information with a stranger, though. “No, nothing.”

“Shame, that.” Ron sighs, shaking his head. “But I guess I wouldn’t want to remember it either.”

The door to their compartment slides open once again, and identical redheads that have to be related to Ron step inside briefly.

“Hey, Ron.”

“Listen, we’re only going to be a few compartments away. Lee Jordan brought a giant tarantula this year, and there’s no way that we’re going to miss out on that.”

“Right,” Ron mumbles, looking decidedly pale.

“So if Mum asks, we totally looked after you the whole time. Besides, it looks like you’re doing just fine on your own! Who are your ickle firstie friends?”

An unholy glee lights Ron’s eyes, and before Hari can begin to contemplate why, he says, “Oh! This is Neville and Hari. You know, Hari Potter.”

The twins burst into laughter. “Oh, that’s a good one, Ron! But you still have much to learn in the art of pranks.”

“Perhaps you’ll prove worthy of our tutelage, though, in time... Have fun, Ron!”

Ron is snickering under his breath. “Oh, Fred and George are gonna be so shocked at the sorting. Bet they’ll feel like right berks. Man, I haven’t gotten one over on them in years.”

“Do they pull pranks very often?” Hari asks, humming softly.

“All the time. They say that they’re known for it at Hogwarts, and I believe it. They’re gonna drive Mum spare one of these days. They’re brilliant too,” Ron mutters lowly. “Super smart. Doubt anyone would ever know it was them if they didn’t want them to.”

“Noted,” Neville squeaks, trembling slightly.

“Do you have any other siblings?” Hari knows that he does, but Ron has caught his interest now. If the rest of the Weasleys are anywhere near as interesting as Ron, Fred, and George seem to be, then they’re worth making note of, even the ones that he won’t speak to often.

“Oh, loads. I’m the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts,” Ron grumbles lowly. “You could say that I’ve got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left. Bill was Head Boy, and Charlie was Quidditch Captain and star seeker on Gryffindor’s team. Now Percy is a Prefect, and like I said earlier, Fred and George are brilliant. They mess around a lot, but they still get good marks and everyone thinks they’re funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but even if I do, then it’s no big deal because they did it first. And I’m not even the youngest! Ginny is an angel in Mum’s eyes, and since she’s the only girl, she gets all new stuff. But you never get new things as the youngest of six brothers. I’ve got Bill’s old robes, Charlie’s old wand, and Percy’s old rat...”

Ron reaches inside his jacket pocket before slumping with dejection, pulling out his empty hand with a sigh. “Or I did. I’d bet anything that Scabbers ran back to Percy the second he got the chance. Sneaky little bugger. Percy won’t want him now that he’s got a proper owl, but I guess he hasn’t figured that out yet. Scabbers might be useless and sleep all the time, but I kinda feel bad for him. Percy can be a right terror sometimes.”

“I can help you look for him if you like?” It will be harder since he clearly isn’t Ron’s familiar and is more closely bonded with someone else, but the Weasley family magic is similar enough that Hari should be able to track him down.

“Hari found Trevor for me before we got on the train,” Neville explains at Ron’s skeptical look. “I didn’t even ask! He really will help you look.”

“... Nah, Scabbers will come back. He likes to wander off sometimes, but he always comes home before long. Doubt it’ll be different at Hogwarts. Thanks for offering, though.”

They fall silent for a while, and Hari lets Athena out to curl up on his lap with a contented purr as their train leaves London proper. Rolling pastures of grains and cows replace the previous blur of gray visible outside their window. It isn’t until about half past twelve that the door to their compartment opens again, followed by a loud, clattering noise as a dimpled witch with a wide grin asks, “Anything off the cart, dears?”

Aunt Petunia’s packed lunch is tucked away in his trunk, but Hari can just barely make out what looks to be wrappers for magical candies from where he’s sitting. He’s curious about how they taste and what makes them any different from muggle candy, and he knows that Dudley will love getting some in the mail as well. He stands up just as Ron flushes red and mutters about having brought sandwiches under his breath. Neville stays seated as well, giving Ron a reassuring grin as he says, “My Gran would have my hide if she knew I was spoiling my lunch with sweets.”

The variety sitting before Hari is astounding. Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Ice Mice, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, Acid Pops, Fizzing Whizzbees, Pepper Imps, Sugar

Quills... The list goes on and on. Knowing that it won't hurt his wallet any, Hari buys several of everything, vowing to test them later and see which candies are safe for Dudley and which ones have magical side-effects that cannot be easily explained away.

Hari pays for the candies before ducking back into their compartment, and Ron's eyebrows nearly climb to the top of his head at the sight of all the wrapped goodies held in his arms. "Hungry, are you?"

"Not really," he answers with a shake of his head. "But I've never had magical candy before, and I know that my cousin will love them. I've just gotta figure out which ones to send..."

"Oh, right... I heard that you grew up with muggles. Is that true?" Neville asks. "Only... you act like you've been here your whole life."

"No, it's true. Being raised by muggles doesn't mean that I couldn't get tutors, though." It's true enough, in a sense. His friends don't need to know that a snake tutored him, not yet.

"Really? What are they like? My Dad is interested in everything muggle, but I guess that comes with working in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office."

"Not too different from people here, honestly. We have things they don't have, they have things we don't have... It's mostly a difference of culture. And again, I had a tutor for that. My aunt wouldn't want me to make a fool of myself." He chuckles as he pulls out his lunch, and both Ron and Neville follow suit. Ron groans despairingly as soon as he unwraps one of his sandwiches.

"Mum always forgets that I don't like corned beef."

"Want to trade for mine?" Hari offers. "It's roast beef and swiss. I don't mind corned beef."

"You really don't want this," Ron protests weakly. "It's all dry. Mum does her best, but she doesn't have a lot of time with the five of us, especially not right before Hogwarts."

"I promise you that I've eaten worse. I really don't mind."

"... Thanks, Hari."

Swap made, the boys eat their lunches in companionable silence, and afterward, Hari shares some of his candy with his new friends, eyes boggling when Neville sticks out his tongue after taking an acid pop only to reveal a small hole burned through it. "It heals quickly," Neville explains with a laugh at Hari's panicked expression. "Magic sees to that. Everyone always thinks I'm mental for liking these." Hari isn't sure that he disagrees, but he gives Neville every one of his Acid Pops regardless.

He and Ron each eat a Pumpkin Pasty instead, and Hari makes a mental note that this one is perfectly safe for his cousin. Afterward, he holds up one of the Chocolate Frogs and asks, "What are these? They're not really frogs, are they?"

"No, but see what the card is. I'm missing Agrippa."

"They're just chocolate, but they're enchanted to give a good jump once you open them," Neville explains. "And they've got collectible cards in them."

"Oh, right, I forgot you wouldn't know. Chocolate Frogs have cards with famous witches and wizards on them. I've got about 500, but I'm still missing Agrippa and Ptolemy."

Harry unwraps his Chocolate Frog, snatching it with deadly accuracy before it can jump away. He bites its head off particularly viciously when he sees the card that came with it. He immediately turns it over so that he won't have to look at the headmaster's face, instead reading the information on the back of the card.

Albus Dumbledore (Currently Headmaster of Hogwarts)

Considered by many to be the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark Lord Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work in alchemy with his mentor, Nicholas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

"Ugh, I've got Morgana again, and I've already got six of her. Do you want it? You could start collecting." Ron looks wistfully at the pile of Chocolate Frogs, and Hari accepts the offered card with a small smile.

"Help yourself. Just make sure to save one for my cousin, okay? I'll ask him to send the card back if it's Agrippa or Ptolemy."

“You’re the best, Hari!”

Cards for Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, Merlin, and the druidess Cliodna soon join Hari’s new card collection, and Ron seems plenty happy with just eating the chocolate frogs. Hari pulls out a box of Bertie Bott’s, and Neville gives him a nervous look the second he does.

“I’d be careful with those, Hari. They really are *every* flavor. Most of them are good, but sometimes you’ll get ones flavored like flobberworms, earwax, dog food... They can be quite dreadful, and smelling them doesn’t really help you tell whether they’ll be good or bad.”

He swiftly decides to try those at a later date. Best not to test his stomach’s endurance when he’s already so nervous. Once farmland gives way to twisting woods and winding rivers, another knock sounds at their door. A girl with bushy hair and her entire Hogwarts uniform on –robe included, unlike Hari who has opted to simply wear the uniform’s dress shirt, tie, and slacks until they get closer to the school– lights up when she sees a head of red hair. The reason for this becomes obvious as she holds out an old, gray rat that looks particularly twitchy, even half-asleep as he is.

‘Hari. That rat does not feel like a normal rat. He smells of rat-wizard in the same way that you smell of serpent-wizard.’

He makes a mental note of that, not that there’s much he can do about it now. For all he knows, Ron’s rat is just a Maledictus and it would be cruel to drive a wedge between them when Scabbers remains nothing more than a rat either way, physically and mentally. Hari will keep a close eye on him for any signs of danger, but his wand is currently silent and Scabbers has already been in the Weasley family for at least a few years by now. It’s not a pressing concern.

“Are you Ron Weasley? Your brother, Percy, asked me to bring Scabbers back to you. And also to tell you to keep a closer eye on him.”

“I’m not the one who ditched him for a shiny new owl. Percy can stuff it,” Ron mutters under his breath. “But thank you.” Ron takes the rat from her, and an awkward silence falls over them all as she stands in place, shuffling nervously before she quickly takes a seat.

“I hope that you don’t mind! It’s just... I’ve been walking around the train so long that I didn’t get a chance to pick a compartment.”

“It’s no problem,” Hari reassures her. “We’ve not got anyone else sitting here.”

“I’m Hermione Granger, by the way. Nobody in my family is magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when my letter came, but I’m quite pleased, of course. Hogwarts is the very best school for witchcraft and wizardry, I’ve heard, and I’ve already learned all of our course books by heart. I just hope it will be enough. I feel ever so behind...”

She talks quite quickly, and Hari cannot tell if that is a result of nerves, excitement, or just how she talks. He’s pretty sure it’s a blend of all three.

“Sounds like you’re ahead to me,” Neville laughs nervously. “I haven’t even started reading all of my course books yet, much less learned everything from them.”

“Same here. Besides, there are plenty of muggle-borns each year, and they always do just fine. Even if you were behind, it wouldn’t take you long to catch up.”

“If you say so... I just–”

“I’m Neville Longbottom.” Hari is more than a little surprised at his friend cutting off another nervous rant, even if it is with something as simple as an introduction. “Sorry for not introducing myself sooner.”

“Ron Weasley.”

“Hari Potter.”

Hermione’s eyes gleam when she hears her name, turning to Hari with eagerness shining in her eyes. “Are you really? I’ve read all about you, of course. You’re in *Modern Magical History* and *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*.”

“Don’t believe everything those books say,” he warns her. “Remember that a lot of it is conjecture. I’m the only one that survived that night, and I was too young to remember anything that happened there. The best they could do is guess what happened.”

She looks like she wants to argue with him for a moment, but then she remembers who she's talking to and sighs. "I suppose you're right, but still... Do any of you know which house you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope that I'm in Gryffindor. It sounds by far the best. I hear that Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose that Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad..."

"Gran wants me to be in Gryffindor, but I'll probably wind up in Hufflepuff." Neville looks quite dejected by this, and Hari does not like the fact that these house biases are being instilled in wixen long before they step foot into Hogwarts. Even Hermione, a muggle-born, sees the clear favoritism toward Gryffindor and wants to be part of it for that reason.

"My whole family has been in Gryffindor. Mom, Dad, all my brothers... I don't know what they'd say if I wasn't. I guess Ravenclaw would be alright, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

"I'm going to be in Slytherin." The entire compartment falls silent at Hari's declaration, and Hari's heart twists in his chest at the looks of shock and disbelief directed toward him.

"Wha-?! But that's the house You-Know-Who was in!"

"It's also the house that Merlin was in." Hari levels Ron with a hard stare. "I will not judge a house for the actions of one person in it."

"You sound... Really sure," Neville murmurs. "Like there's nowhere else you could go."

"I would be sincerely surprised to wind up in any other house. Surprised to the point of suspicion."

"B-but you're nice! You swapped sandwiches with me and shared your candy with us, and you're saying that you're a snake?!"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Slytherins are ambitious, resourceful, determined, and clever. I am all of those things, and not a single one of them prevents me from being kind."

Hermione bites her lip, looking nervous as she says, "But aren't Slytherins known for being prejudiced? Blood purists? It's said that almost all of You-Know-Who's followers came from there."

"I do not doubt that there are prejudiced people in Slytherin, but there are prejudiced people in every house. As for the Dark Lord's followers, of course most of them were Slytherin. It was his house, if you'll recall, so which students would he spend the most time with?"

"... Slytherins. Which makes it easier to convert them to his cause."

"Precisely so, Neville."

"You called him the Dark Lord," Ron mutters lowly. "I thought that only his supporters... You really shouldn't call him that, Hari."

"Well, I'm not going to call him You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. That's just ridiculous. I understand not calling him by his name, it's not worth the risk of triggering the taboo on it, but he was a Dark Lord. There's nothing wrong with calling him that. Magic has lords, dark, light, and gray, and those titles are not given out of respect. They're simply fact."

"Everyone will call you evil. Don't you care about that at all? I'm sure you can go to another house if you fight for it," Hermione pleads with him.

"No, I don't care." Hari's voice is firm but not unkind. "I want to be in the house that will help me become the best wizard I can be. I want to improve my strengths while I learn to cover my weaknesses. I know that everyone expects me to be some carbon copy of my parents, but I think they forget that I wasn't raised by them. They died when I was so young that I can't even remember them. I'm not just some combination of James and Lily Potter. I'm Hari Potter, and Hari Potter is a Slytherin, through and through."

There is another brief, heavy silence broken only by the sound of Ron's laughter. "Blimey, you really went and chose the most difficult path for yourself, didn't you?"

Hari smiles at that, feeling nostalgic as he references one of Nisaba's earlier lessons. "There comes a time in everyone's life when you are faced with a decision between what is right and what is easy. There is no shame in choosing the easy path, sometimes it is the path best suited for you and your survival, but no one can remain on that path forever. To do so is to sacrifice everything that you are, everything that you could be, and embrace a hollow existence in its place. I refuse to lose myself for the sake of being the person that everyone imagined I'd be. I am myself and no one else."

He half expects anger and refusal. He half expects his friends to declare that they want nothing to do with him anymore. Hari is relieved to see nothing but contemplative expressions surrounding him. "I still want to be your friend," he promises them. "No matter what houses we end up in."

"Me too, Hari," Neville promises immediately, getting startled when Athena slinks over into his lap instead and starts purring even louder.

'I like this human. His magic is the creation of life itself, growing and weaving energy and channeling it through the earth. He is steadfast and true.'

"Yeah, mate. I won't forget this, even when you're in Slytherin and I'm in Gryffindor."

'That one is... Uncertain. Not of your friendship, but of himself. Your words have put him in a state of inner turmoil, and depending on which side he falls on... He could wind up either a wonderful friend or one that you will not tolerate for long. Only time will tell.'

"Well, I may not know you well, but I suppose that Professor Dumbledore wouldn't let Slytherins attend at all if the house was as evil as they make it out to be. I'll have to do some more reading, search for alternate sources with less bias."

'Her magic is so very nervous, flitting about and taking in everything it possibly can before returning to her. She may shy away from you at first, but it will be because she is unsure of her place in this world, not because she is afraid of you. Treat her kindly and you will have a true friend in her.'

Hearing Athena's approval, mostly anyway, has Hari relaxing into his seat with a sigh. "Thank you. The House of Potter will not forget the kindness you showed them today." His words thrum with magic that makes Hermione gasp, Neville stiffen in shock, and Ron nearly falls out of his seat. His rat squeaks in terror.

"That was..." Hermione's voice trails off as she looks out the window, and she shakes her head, eyes glinting with determination. "Looks like we're getting close. You three should probably go ahead and get changed; I'll go wait outside." She doesn't give them a chance to protest before stepping out of the compartment, though they had no intention of doing so anyway. Hari opens the door for her once they're all dressed in their Hogwarts uniforms, and it's odd to see their ties and crests both a dull gray and black, as they will remain until they're sorted.

Only a few moments later, there is yet another knock at their door. Hari is thoroughly disgruntled by the number of visitors at this point, fearing that his serpent familiars, who are remaining deathly quiet to avoid giving themselves away in the enclosed space, will be discovered if wixen keep cramming themselves into their compartment.

The door slides open to reveal Malfoy, flanked by two bulky boys with Dudley's build. Their position makes them look like bodyguards, and knowing Malfoy's status, Hari wonders if there is some truth to that. "Here you are, Heir Potter. I've been looking all up and down the train for you, you know?" Steely gray eyes search over Hari's companions, and Malfoy's nose scrunches up slightly at the sight of the company he's keeping. "Heir Longbottom. Weasley. And... I don't think I recognize you. What's your surname?"

"Granger."

"Hmm... Any relation to the Dagworth-Grangers?" When he only receives a confused look from Hermione, Malfoy sneers. "I thought not. They tend to be much... Paler." Hari bristles at the comment, and Malfoy pales at whatever expression is on his face, immediately realizing his error. "Heir Potter, I'd like to introduce you to Heir Crabbe and Heir Goyle."

"Merry meet, Heir Crabbe, Heir Goyle."

"... Merry meet, Heir Potter."

"Merry meet."

They respond as if removing a splinter while they do so, reluctant and pained despite knowing they must. Hari is less than impressed, and it shows on his face. And Malfoy, desperate to salvage the situation, only says something that makes it even worse. "You'll soon find out that some wixen families are better than others, Heir Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

Malfoy's careless words insult the Longbottom family, dismiss the Weasley family as nothing more than blood traitors, make his stance on muggle-borns even clearer than they were in Madam Malkin's—which was already toeing the line of acceptability in the first place—and has insulted Hari and his capability all in the same breath. Even so, when he holds out his hand for Hari to shake, he does so.

Malfoy looks horribly smug as Hari says, "I thank you for extending an offer of neutrality on the behalf of your family, Heir Malfoy. The House of Potter accepts it and ends any feud that may have existed between our families during times of war." That expression is wiped right off his face, just like the hurt and betrayal are then wiped off of his friends' faces, when Hari continues with, "That being said, the House of Potter chooses its own allies and will not stand for another house attempting to dictate them. It is an insult to both my family and my honor for you to insinuate that I need that assistance, and should you continue to do so, it will be grounds for establishing a new blood feud between you and myself. Now, I do not wish to do such a thing, Heir Malfoy, but honor demands it when you imply that I, and by extension my family, am incapable of managing my own affairs."

"I..." Malfoy's cheeks flush pink with embarrassment. "I'd be careful if I were you, Heir Potter. Unless you choose your allies more wisely, you'll go the same way as your parents did: betrayed by someone they believed they could trust."

"Out!" Hari barks sharply, standing to his feet and flicking his hand so that his wand flies into it. He points it directly at Malfoy with a cold glare, and Athena yowls, fur bristling as she stalks to his side. "You have dishonored yourself and your family enough, Heir Malfoy. Leave before Lord Malfoy's first inquiry to you this term is why the House of Potter has enforced a blood feud before your first day of school."

"Y-You can't do that," Malfoy stammers uncertainly. "Heirs don't have that sort of power."

"Lord Presumptives do when they are the last of their line." It isn't Hari who says this but rather Neville. "There was... A lot of arguing about whether I should be considered Lord Presumptive too, given my parents' condition. But they decided against it on a technicality, with the promise of releasing the lordship to me upon my majority if nothing improves." Neville shakes his head slightly, leveling the increasingly pale Malfoy with a hard look. "There is no one else left of the Potter line. Hari is their future, the only one left to make decisions for them, and he can declare blood feuds if that is what he wishes."

Malfoy's face hardens into a shield of ice before he whirls around, coldly furious. "You'll regret this, Heir Potter."

"I don't think I will, Heir Malfoy."

Crabbe and Goyle dutifully follow Malfoy into the corridor, and the door slams shut behind them and locks the second that they're through it. Ron whistles. "Blimey, mate, that was impressive. You really told them off! And closing the door like that..."

"Even Gran would've been impressed by that." Neville chuckles nervously at the thought. "I've never seen any wixen get verbally torn down like that without breaching social conduct in the slightest. Heir Malfoy would've come out the loser even if this argument happened in a room full of lords and ladies."

"I'm sorry for thinking less of you for a moment there," Hermione apologizes fretfully. "I thought that you were siding with him, but... You really meant what you said, didn't you? About being yourself no matter what, regardless of the consequences."

Hari nods, and he and his friends settle down only to grow excited once more as a voice echoes throughout the train. "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train; it will be taken to the school separately."

He cringes slightly at that, reluctantly pulling his trunk out of his pocket and enlarging it. Athena heads back into her carrier without him saying a word, curling up as he zips it closed, much to the astonishment of his friends.

"I've never seen a cat so well-behaved before..." Hermione murmurs.

"She's half-kneazle, isn't she? I saw some in the Magical Menagerie when we went to get Percy's owl."

"Even still, they're usually pretty headstrong unless... Is she your familiar, Hari?"

"She is! Good eye, Neville. Athena is one of my best friends, and we've been bonded for over a year now."

"I read that it's really rare for wixen to bond with familiars so young, though!" Hermione cries out. "I wasn't even going to start searching for one until my third year because of it. But I guess it makes sense that *you* would..."

Thankfully, the train rolls to a stop before she can expand on that train of thought, forcing them to abandon the conversation as they join the other students gathered in the corridor. The students are herded out into the cold, dark night, illuminated only by the moon, the faintly twinkling stars, and the swinging light of a lantern held high above their heads.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here! Alright there, Hari?" Hagrid beams over the sea of heads, and Hari beams right back. "C'mon, follow me! Any more firs' years? Mind yer step now! Firs' years, follow me!"

They stumble down the steep, narrow path with only the lantern and Hagrid's voice to guide them. The pitch black surrounding them is so dark that Hari can only assume they're traveling through the forest, and he wonders who thought this was a good idea. He likes Hagrid, but another professor, especially one who can cast *lumos maxima*, seems like a wiser decision.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec! Jus' round this bend here."

There are several loud exclamations of awe as they step into a clearing with a great, black lake dividing them and a large mountain. A castle sits atop that mountain, windows glittering with a golden glow of light all the way up spiralling towers, and white orbs of light float throughout the courtyards as well.

Hari registers absolutely none of that.

The magic of this castle is *alive*. It sings a symphony of love and loss, greatness and obscurity, joy and sorrow, and Hari finds himself rooted in place by the sound of it. The castle's magic stretches even beyond the castle itself, dancing along the surface of the lake and swirling beneath it with a dim, green glow that can be dismissed as a trick of the light by any wixen not as skilled in sensing magic as Hari is.

'Welcome home! Welcome home, my heir.'

Hari is near tears, overwhelmed by the sheer sense of safety and belonging that he feels, when Ron gently brushes against his shoulder. "Alright, Hari?"

"I'm *wonderful*."

"It's really beautiful, isn't it? It feels like *Hogwarts: A History* was selling it short."

"I can't believe that I'm actually here," Neville whispers quietly.

"No more'n four to a boat!" It is only then that Hari notices a small fleet of boats sitting by the lake's shore, and he and his friends immediately make their way over to an empty one. "Everyone in?" Hagrid calls from a boat that he has to himself, though no one can deny that he needs the whole thing. "Right then, forward!!"

They sail across the lake in no time at all, and Hari watches, equal parts disconcerted and fascinated, as they leave absolutely no trail behind them. The lake remains as smooth as glass as they journey across it, left completely undisturbed."

"Freaky, innit? Feels a little too perfect."

"You can say that again, Ron." Hermione looks equally as disturbed as Hari does, but she brightens up quickly enough. "Still! We're nearly there now. It won't be much longer."

"Heads down!" Hagrid shouts as the front of their group of boats approaches an alcove at the shore, sailing through a dense curtain of ivy attached to thick branches hanging above them. Hagrid is the only one tall enough to need to worry about getting hit by any of those branches, though Hari bets that Ron will too in a couple of years.

Once they're all back on their feet again, Hagrid leads them up another passageway that takes them up to the top of the cliff, finally smoothing out into flat, even grass at the front of the castle. They all climb a flight of stone steps, blissfully even compared to their previous paths, as Hagrid strides to the top in only a few large steps. Once everyone has caught up with him, he does a quick headcount before nodding in approval. His giant fist beats against the door once, twice, thrice before it swings open.

A tall, stern-looking witch stands on the other side of it, looking down at the gathered first years with intense scrutiny.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall."

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here." She steps to the side to reveal an entrance hall so large that it could fit two of the houses on Privet Drive in it and still have room to spare. The stone walls are lit by the soft glow of torches, and the lighting is dimmer than it is in Gringotts due to the light reflecting off of dark stone here instead of gleaming, white marble. They follow McGonagall through the hall, boots clicking softly with their footsteps as the sound faintly echoes off the walls.

Hari can hear the distinct murmur of hundreds of people on the other side of the doorway to his right, but that is not where McGonagall leads them. Instead, she takes the first years to a small, empty chamber that is an offshoot of the main hall, crowding them inside until everyone is in the room.

“Welcome to Hogwarts. The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you can take your seats in the Great Hall, you must be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house becomes your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house’s dormitory, and spend free time in your house’s common room, forming lifelong friendships there.”

When Hari hears that, It’s not difficult to understand how the British magical community became so divided and splintered from within. It almost sounds as if Hogwarts is encouraging their students to only spend time with those in their house, fostering the belief that everyone in that house and their way of thinking is correct while all the others are wrong. It is a very dangerous mindset to encourage, exactly the kind of mindset that leads to us-vs-them thinking which leads to wars.

“The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced astounding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, but keep in mind that these points may be lost from your failures and misconduct as well. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honor. I hope that each of you will become a credit to whichever house becomes yours.” McGonagall glances over them all, and Hari swears that her eyes linger on him for just a touch longer than the rest. “The Sorting Ceremony will take place in only a few minutes. This is something that happens in front of the entire school, this way your new housemates may immediately welcome you into the fold. I suggest that you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting. I shall return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly.”

McGonagall sweeps out of the room, and it takes several long moments before whispers start up. “Do you have any idea how we’re sorted?” Neville stammers.

“Some sort of test, I think. Fred said we have to wrestle a troll, but I’m pretty sure he was joking.”

“The Sorting Ceremony is one of the best-kept secrets in Hogwarts! No one ever knows exactly how they do it going into the school.”

“You just have to wear an enchanted hat,” Hari reassures the increasingly nervous-looking Neville. “It’ll know where you belong.”

“That sounds almost as ridiculous as wrestling a troll,” Hermione sniffs. “Besides, I *just* said that no one knows; it says so in *Hogwarts: A History*, and—”

Her rant is cut off sharply by several screams. A small procession of ghosts floats into the room, bickering among themselves.

“Forgive and forget, I say. We ought to give him a second chance—”

“My dear Friar, haven’t we given Peeves more than enough chances? He gives us all a bad name, you know? He’s not even really a ghost, and he’s constantly terrorizing— I say, what are you all doing here?”

No one answers.

“New students!” the Friar calls out joyously. “About to be sorted, I suppose?” Hari is one of the few people who answer at all, nodding quietly. “I hope to see you in Hufflepuff! That was my old house, you know?”

“Move along now,” McGonagall’s sharp voice scolds the spirits. “The Sorting Ceremony is about to start.” One by one, their sudden visitors float through the wall and into some other room in the castle without a word of protest. Hari supposes that even ghosts can be a bit nervous when faced with McGonagall’s stern demeanor. “Now, form a line and follow me.”

Hari steps between Neville and Ron, sending the nervous boy in front of him a reassuring smile as they are led through a pair of massive double doors and into the Great Hall. Thousands of candles hover above the long tables stretching throughout the hall, twinkling like miniature stars as their flames crackle and flicker. The plates and goblets all seem to be made of gold, and Hari wonders if they have featherlight charms on them or if he’s about to struggle to drink anything at all. He supposes that he can simply cast the charm himself if it isn’t already on the goblet. There is another long table at the end of the hall, stretching horizontally instead of vertically, where the teachers are sitting. McGonagall leads them up to this table, turning them around to face the crowd of students with the teachers at their backs.

He can hear the low, ringing note of danger coming from his wand, audible only to him as the one whose magic is attuned to it. Hari cannot help glancing back at Quirrel, and the sound grows louder the second they lock eyes. He quickly averts them. Instead, he looks to the ceiling to see a pitch-black sky with stars twinkling throughout it, making it appear as if there isn’t a ceiling at all.

“It’s bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in—”

“*Hogwarts: A History*,” Hari finishes for her, smiling sheepishly at her embarrassed flush. “Sorry, I enjoy reading too. I may not have read all of my books cover to cover yet, but I picked up a lot of supplemental texts too.”

“It’s fine. We’ll have to compare notes sometime!”

McGonagall silently places a step stool in front of the hall, and the chattering of the students at the surrounding tables quiets at once. Hermione turns to Hari with a dismayed, betrayed look when the professor puts a pointed witch hat on the stool, and he only chuckles softly, wiggling his fingers as he says, “I have my sources, Granger.”

“None of that,” she huffs. “Just call me Hermione.”

Hari nods, whispering, “Hari, then.”

The hat twitches. A tear near the brim opens, revealing that it is not a tear at all but rather a mouth, and the hat begins to sing.

“Oh you may not think I’m pretty,

But don’t judge on what you see,

I’ll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats slick and tall,

For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There’s nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can’t see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuffs are true

And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

If you’ve a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

"Even the hat sounds biased against Slytherins," Hari mutters under his breath. "What of our cleverness? Our determination? Our resourcefulness and ability to survive whatever comes our way? Why do all the other houses get a bunch of positive traits while Slytherins are only branded as untrustworthy?"

He is not quiet enough if the way that Ron steadily grips his shoulder is any indication, but Hari is too relieved by both the motion and the fact that Ron doesn't brush against any of his snakes with it to care.

McGonagall steps forward with a long roll of parchment clutched in her hand, unrolling it and clearing her throat. "When I call your name, you will step forward, put on the hat, and sit on the stool to be sorted." After everyone nods in understanding, she calls out, "Abbott, Hannah!"

A flushed girl with blonde pigtails stumbles out of the line and puts on the hat. She's only been sitting for a few short seconds before the hat cries out, "HUFFLEPUFF!" Both her uniform's tie and crest shift to yellow and black, with the latter sporting a badger, as she makes her way over to the enthusiastically cheering table just to their left.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat cries out again, and Bones quickly sits down next to Abbott.

"Boot, Terry!"

Hari perks up at that name, watching the boy put on the hat and not being surprised at all when it calls out, "RAVENCLAW!" only a few seconds later. His uniform's tie bleeds blue and bronze, and his crest depicts a soaring eagle instead of a badger.

"Brocklehurst, Mandy!" also becomes a Ravenclaw, but "Brown, Lavender!" is their year's first Gryffindor, making her way over to the table of red and gold on the far left. "Bulstrode, Millicent!" is their first Slytherin, and only the table of silver and green and a select few first years, including himself, are clapping as she walks to the far right table. Thankfully, once they see him doing it, Neville, Ron, and Hermione join in on the round of applause as well. Bulstrode looks slightly less nervous because of it.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Finnegan, Seamus!"

It takes the hat a full minute to shout, "GRYFFINDOR!" Hari wonders whether Finnegan suits two houses equally well or if, like Hermione, he simply heard that Gryffindor is the best house to be in and argued for it until the hat gave in.

That is when McGonagall calls out, "Granger, Hermione!"

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Hermione is more than a bit nervous as she makes her way up to the stool. When she got on the train this morning, she swore that she was going to attend Hogwarts wearing red and gold, becoming one of the brilliant and brave wixen that the books she has read praised. She wants to be the heroine. She wants to be someone important, someone that bullies won't mess with anymore, and Gryffindor seems like the perfect house for that.

But then she remembers her mother telling her to never let the bullies get to her, to never change any part of who she is for people who are jealous of her brilliance. She remembers Hari Potter, looking sad and more than a bit afraid of losing them while he says that he refuses to bend to the expectations of others and refuses to be anyone but himself.

Hermione doesn't need to change who she is to be amazing. She doesn't need to become someone else to be important. She's important as she is, or Hari would have never rejected someone like Malfoy for the sake of her, Ron, and Neville.

The Sorting Hat is on her head for a scant few seconds, murmuring, *"You already know exactly where you belong. Better be... RAVENCLAW!"*

And when she turns back to her new friends and sees all three of them clapping with bright smiles, Hermione knows that everything is going to be just fine.

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"Longbottom, Neville!"

Neville jolts when Professor McGonagall calls his name, nearly falling flat on his face as he rushes over to the stool. He's been thinking long and hard about his future at Hogwarts ever since he stepped on the Hogwarts Express with Hari Potter at his side, friendly and kind and still undoubtedly destined for Slytherin. There is an effortless grace to him that Neville will never emulate, no matter how many etiquette lessons his gran puts him through, and beyond that, Hari is clever and so very determined.

He's certain that he's destined for Hufflepuff. Neville has always had a strong sense of justice, and he has patience in spades. Gardening is grueling, difficult work that he adores, and given how protective he already feels of his new friends, Neville knows that he's plenty loyal too.

But Hufflepuff isn't where he wants to go.

"Are you sure? You would do well there."

Neville knows that too. Hufflepuff will be comfortable. He will flourish there like the plants that their Head of House is known for taking care of, content to sit on the sidelines, study to become an Herbologist someday, and allow the rest of the world to pass him by. But it isn't where he wants to be. It isn't where he needs to be.

If he hadn't met Hari Potter, Neville would have argued for Gryffindor for the sake of appeasing his gran, too afraid of disappointing her to allow anything else. But he has met Hari Potter. He has met Hari Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger, and he can tell that they're all destined for great things. They're his friends, and Neville doesn't want to be left behind. He needs to push himself to be something more than he is.

He thinks about Hari saying that there always comes a day when someone has to choose between doing what is right or easy, knowing that the wrong decision could destroy everything that they are. He thinks about how Hari seems so determined to change the prejudice that the magical world has against the Slytherin house, and Neville knows that it will be next to impossible for Hari to find any allies in Gryffindor on his own.

"That loyalty only further proves my point that you'd make an excellent Hufflepuff, you know?"

"No. I want to be in Gryffindor. I need to be in Gryffindor. And does it not take a lot of bravery and nerve to argue against the decision of a hat made for sorting students?"

"... That it does, young Longbottom." The Sorting Hat spends several minutes trying to wheedle him into accepting Hufflepuff, but Neville holds his ground. Finally, though not without exasperation, it shouts, "GRYFFINDOR!"

The table of red and gold erupts into cheers, but Neville can't care less about that. He sets the hat back down on the school and glances back at Hari as he makes his way to his new table. His friend is still clapping for him, and Neville nods with determination and a promise gleaming in his eyes.

They will remain friends. Neville will muster up every ounce of courage he has, withstand his house's future derision, and remain very publicly friends with a Hari Potter who wears silver and green. He will do the right thing, not what is easy, no matter how difficult that may be.

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Hari is immensely relieved when the first thing Neville does after being sorted is look back at him with fire in his eyes. Knowing that his friend has taken their promise seriously does a wonder for Hari's nerves as he distantly registers "MacDougal, Morag!" being sorted into Ravenclaw.

Malfoy swaggers forward as soon as his name is called, and the Sorting Hat barely touches his head before shouting, "SLYTHERIN!" Hari groans, and Ron gives him a commiserating pat on the shoulder.

There aren't very many of them left now. "Moon, Lily!" goes to Ravenclaw, "Nott, Theodore!" goes to Slytherin, "Parkinson, Pansy!" goes to Slytherin, then a pair of twins are sorted with "Patil, Padma!" sorting Ravenclaw and "Patil, Parvati!" sorting Gryffindor. "Perks, Sally-Anne!" goes to Gryffindor as well, and then—

"Potter, Hari!"

Hari steps forward, and whispers break out across the hall, spoken so lowly that they almost sound like the hissing of snakes.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Hari Potter?"

The last thing that he sees before firmly placing the hat on his head is nearly every person in the hall craning their necks to get a good look at him. He puts them out of his mind.

"Hm... Not a bad mind on you, but we both know where you're meant to be, Heir Slytherin. This will not be easy for you. I would not blame you if you asked for another house, but you will not, will you?"

"No. I'm a Slytherin, and I am not ashamed of that."

"As it should be, Heir Slytherin, as it should be. The castle will always aid her heirs, so if you have any need of her, simply call. She will hear you. Better be... SLYTHERIN!"

The Great Hall is dead silent as Hari takes the hat off his head, delicately setting it down on the stool as silver and green overtake his tie and a beautiful serpent swirls to life on his crest. It remains quiet as he makes his way to his new house, not even the Slytherins clapping from sheer shock, until Neville, all the way over at the Gryffindor table, proves why he is one of them and begins clapping. Hermione and Ron join him soon after, and slowly, confusedly, the Slytherins do as well. None of the other houses do.

He doesn't care. Hari is exactly where he needs to be, and no matter what may come, he has his friends by his side. He has his familiars by his side. He has the very castle herself by his side. It is enough.

And if it is not? He will make it so.

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Ron feels decidedly queasy as "Thomas, Dean!" sorts Gryffindor and "Turpin, Lisa!" goes to Ravenclaw. He doesn't know why he feels so nervous. He knew before they got off the train that Hari Potter was going to be a Slytherin; Hari isn't the type to lie about that sort of thing, and even if he was, there's just something about him that screams there is more to him than is immediately apparent. Hari Potter is someone special, and it has nothing to do with him being the Boy Who Lived.

"Weasley, Ron!"

Ron wants to be special too. He wants to stand out, to be different from the rest of his family, to be someone great. And Ron is a tactician; he always has been. Ever since he received an old wizarding chess set that Percy didn't play with anymore for his birthday, Ron has been thinking about how each action prompts another one from the people around him, about how even a single unexpected move can completely change the game.

He sees Hari Potter sitting alone at the Slytherin table. He sees all of his housemates—with the exception of Nott and Greengrass, who are simply electing to ignore him—glaring at him suspiciously as they try to figure out what sort of game he's playing at.

In another universe, one where Hari Potter is a Gryffindor, Ron will argue when the Sorting Hat tells him that he is fiercely determined, resourceful, and plenty cunning to avoid his brothers' pranks as he does. He will argue that he only wants to live up to his family's expectations when the hat tells him of his ambition, lying to both the hat and himself when he says that he's being brave because he doesn't want to be any of those things—he will argue that he doesn't care about being Prefect or Head Boy or anything like that at all, but his mum will be so disappointed if he isn't, see—because he's terrified of becoming the very thing that he's been told to hate his entire life. It isn't until he sees his reflection in the Mirror of Erised that he realizes the depth of his self-deception. Ron Weasley, upon realizing that his greatest desires are accolades and recognition even beyond his wildly successful brothers, becomes a bitter, resentful person who believes that he's missed his chance, doomed to forever live in Hari Potter's shadow. It makes him a very poor friend indeed.

But in this universe, Hari Potter is a Slytherin. This changes everything, not just for Hari but also for everyone around him.

“My, my... Such ambition with this one. You will become great, even if you have to carve that greatness out of stone with your bare hands. Your loyalty almost makes me consider Hufflepuff, but... No, you would eat them alive. Better be... SLYTHERIN!”

The hall is nearly as silent as it was when Hari got sorted. But Neville, Hari, and Hermione are clapping, and once they get over their shock –Ron can’t wait to tell Fred and George how ridiculous they looked with their mouths hanging open like that– the twins start cheering and screaming for him too. No one except for Hari at the Slytherin table does. Ron doesn’t care about any of that. He sits down right next to Hari, and he smiles as a look of gratitude and awe lights his friend’s face.

“Zabini, Blaise!” is the last student to be sorted, almost immediately going to Slytherin, and saunters over to sit on the other side of Hari.

“Merry meet, Heir Potter, Weasley. I hope you don’t mind me hanging around. Something tells me that you two are going to shake things up around here.”

Honestly, he and Hari need as many allies as they can possibly get, regardless of their reasoning. The other team’s side of the board is stacked compared to theirs, and every additional piece makes their victory all the more possible. And Ron knows that Hari is thinking the same thing as him when he says, “Merry meet, Heir Zabini. It would be our pleasure.”

“Merry meet, Heir Zabini,” Ron echoes with a bow that he faintly remembers Percy mentioning once. Zabini looks pleasantly surprised by this.

“I was right,” Zabini decides in that moment. “You two are going to be interesting.”

Ron can only hope that it’ll be enough for them to survive this.

Chapter End Notes

I know that maledictus can only be women in canon, but given that it feels really gross for that to be the case, especially with Nagini as our only example of one, I felt it prudent to make it a bloodline curse that can be put on any wixen. Even more so, I decided to add a fun little twist to it! Basically, the animal that the cursed wixen and their descendants are cursed to become is hereditary in and of itself. Let’s say, for example, that Pettigrew really was a maledictus (He isn’t. He’s just an animagus, as in canon, but Hari really has no reason to believe that some random wixen would elect to live as a family pet for whatever reason). The Pettigrew family would have pissed off a wixen in the past, likely by betraying them since that’s the common association people have with rats (and intention is more important in magic than fact), and the particular Pettigrew to spark that ire would be cursed to become a rat and slowly lose himself to that form. The actions of his descendants are what determine whether or not that bloodline curse strikes them too. So in this scenario, Peter betraying the Potters would have activated the theoretical bloodline curse and made him into a maledictus.

Am I ever really going to get into this in the AU? Maybe vaguely so with Nagini, but not really beyond that. Did I still think it was neat and wanted to share it? Absolutely.

Draco... Draco, Draco, Draco... Don’t worry, he and Hari will be friends in time, but there is just no universe in which he unlearns his biases THAT quickly. Things will be quite tense between him and Hari during their first year for a variety of reasons, but it’ll simmer down as they get older and shift into a true friendship.

But man, oh man. How about that sorting, huh? I’ve been SO excited to reveal my plans for this little group, and Blaise is a certified shit-stirrer who lives for the drama and absolutely insists upon being in on it. It’s little wonder that he stuck himself to Hari and Ron immediately; it’s obvious that they’re up to something.

I stand by the fact that if it didn’t directly oppose Rowling’s anti-Slytherin agenda, Ron was 100% meant for Slytherin. I mean, seriously.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I hope you're all doing well and have a Happy New Year!

This chapter is a bit more of a transitional one, something to set us up for classes starting next chapter, but there are some important things established and some fun character interaction here regardless. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

McGonagall takes up the Sorting Hat shortly after Zabini sits next to him, rolling up the list of names and tucking it away. She rejoins the other professors at the head table, and Hari takes the opportunity to study them more closely.

Most of them he'll reserve his judgement for until he's attending classes, but Hari is excited to see that one of their professors appears to have some goblin blood in him, judging by his height and the precise point of his ears. Elves, even only partial ones, have a sharper look to them than he does. The only other professor of note –not including Quirrel, who he is pointedly ignoring– is a pale wizard with lanky black hair that looks vaguely familiar. He looks rather like someone just stabbed his crup in front of him.

Dumbledore stands up from his seat in the dead center of the table, arms outstretched with a beaming smile. “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!”

Nearly the entire Great Hall erupts into clapping and cheering, and Hari is glad to be sitting at the only table that seems to have any sense. “Is he quite mad?”

Zabini snorts at that. “That’s an understatement. Though I am surprised to hear you saying it, Heir Potter. Not Dumbledore’s biggest fan?”

“Hardly.”

Their conversation is clearly catching the interest of the Slytherins around them, there is a reason Hari isn’t being quieter about it, but it comes to a halt when the widest array of food that Hari has ever seen appears before them.

“Blimey, this is...”

“More than you’re used to, Weasley?” Malfoy sneers.

“I rather think that it’s more food than any of us are used to, Heir Malfoy,” Hari cuts in smoothly, arching an eyebrow that dares him to protest. He does not. Once he’s turned back to his own plate, sulking, Hari stops Ron from loading up his plate and whispers, “Follow my lead. There’s an etiquette to these things, and you’ll be eaten alive if you don’t follow them. Even finger foods are not finger foods during banquets, not here.”

Ron groans quietly. “I just had to follow you here, didn’t I? Bet this wouldn’t be a problem in Gryffindor.”

Several of the students sitting closest to them tense up at that. Hari snickers, shaking his head as he says, “You say that like the hat even considered it for you. I know it didn’t.”

“You caught me. It considered Hufflepuff for about two seconds, but it said that I’d eat them alive so...”

“It was never anywhere but Slytherin for me.”

“I can’t say that I’m surprised, mate. You’re about as Slytherin as they come.” Ron’s amused grin tells Hari that he knows exactly what he’s doing here, but he clearly agrees with the plan if he’s going along with it anyway. It’s working. The students around them are slowly relaxing as Hari helps his friend fill his plate and tells him which utensils to use for which foods. He has a feeling that they’ll have to go over this several times before Ron starts to truly get the hang of it, but he’s willing to listen and doing surprisingly well so far.

Ron startles so badly that he nearly drops his fork when a ghost covered in blood approaches their table, but he is not the only first year to do so. “We have a larger group than usual this year,” the ghost says. “Slytherin has won the House Cup for the

past six years in a row. Let's endeavor to keep that pattern going." His voice is laced with a subtle threat that Hari knows he cannot fulfill as a ghost. Even still, his act is impressive.

"The Bloody Baron always gets a kick out of terrorizing the firsties," one of the upper years murmurs lowly. "He's our house ghost, so try not to worry too much about him. He won't do anything to you."

Even with those words, Malfoy looks less than pleased when the ghost takes a seat next to him, hovering over their year with evaluating eyes. His blank stare lingers on Hari longer than the others, and he's not the only one to take notice of that.

"Bad luck, Heir Potter," Zabini chuckles. "Seems like you've caught his attention."

"I'd hardly call that bad luck. Maybe I'll be able to have a conversation with him sometime. Imagine all the stories a ghost could tell you..."

They engage in idle chatter until their meal is nearly over, and that is when the topic of conversation turns to their families.

"Mamma considered sending me to Beauxbatons since it's closer to home, but my father always spoke fondly of Hogwarts. She figured that I would do better here than somewhere so pretentious and stuffy anyway."

"The Zabinis are an Italian family, right?" Hari asks quietly. He thinks that he remembers the name coming up somewhere, but he's not completely certain.

"Si! Mamma kept her last name since she ranks higher than my father did, and she insisted that I was born and raised in Italy. Not that he was around for long enough to protest, mind. He got terribly sick; she always has the worst luck with that. Mamma is on husband number... Six, I believe? I've lost track. She's always left a widow." Zabini gives them a smile that is more than a little amused despite the topic of conversation, and Hari knows that there must be something more going on with that situation. It's not any of his business. "How many of you are there again, Weasley? I honestly cannot remember."

"There's seven kids, plus Mum and Dad, of course. My mum stays at home to look after us all, but Dad works at the ministry. Bill is a contractor for Gringotts, Charlie works on a dragon preserve in Romania, and Percy is determined to get his foot in the door at the ministry as well. There are already whispers of someone taking him on after graduation. Then there's Fred and George, of course. You'll hear about them before long if you haven't already."

Zabini's eyebrows climb higher and higher as Ron speaks, whistling lowly as he says, "Those are quite some connections. International too... The things you could do with that. What about you, Heir Potter? Rumors have been circulating about where you've been for years now."

"Oh, I was living with my aunt and uncle."

"... I didn't think that James Potter had any siblings," one of the upper years mutters.

"He didn't. My mum did, though." The table plunges into silence and Ron snickers at the appalled looks surrounding them. Zabini looks thoroughly entertained as well, eyes dancing with mirth as a smile tugs at his lips. Hari turns to the wide-eyed upper year, tilts his head innocently, and asks, "Problem?"

"Lily Potter was a muggle-born."

"Yes, she was. Your point?"

A shocked silence falls over them once more, and Hari returns to his meal with a smirk tugging at his lips. That silence is broken by a sudden shout from a student whose family he immediately recognizes.

"You grew up with muggles?! They're no better than animals!"

"Your shocking lack of decorum leads me to believe that you were the one raised by animals, Heir Flint. Merry meet, by the way."

Hari's scathing rebuke leaves Flint red-faced and humiliated, forcing him to mutter a "Merry meet" in return. There is still a fair amount of disdain being directed at Hari, but he can see the beginnings of curiosity mixed in among those hateful stares too. It's time to dial it back a few notches; he's stoked the fire enough for now.

Zabini is choking back laughter as their food vanished before their eyes, and none of them pay any attention to the desserts that fill the table shortly after. "You're going to be a riot, aren't you? No one is going to know what to do with you, Heir Potter." Mirth shines in his eyes as he says, "I didn't expect to feel at home here so quickly, but... You may call me Blaise if you wish. I have a feeling that we'll be wonderful friends."

“Hari, then.”

“And uh... You can call me Ron.” He sounds uncertain, but Ron relaxes when Blaise’s face lights up.

“I’d be delighted to! It’s going to send the others into fits,” he snickers. “Oh, I already have so much to tell Mamma in my first letter. She going to be so pleased.”

Their little trio is largely ignored by the other Slytherins, and they talk amongst themselves while listening in on other conversations in equal measure. It is only once the desserts vanish from their plates and Dumbledore stands once more that the Great Hall quiets.

“Ahem, just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First-years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.” Dumbledore’s gaze flashes over to the Weasley twins, and Ron chuckles.

“Like that’ll stop them. He’s only encouraging them, really.”

“I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, our caretaker, to remind all students that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.” Hari suspects that rule is broken quite often as well. “Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of term. Anyone interested in trying out for their house should contact Madam Hooch.”

The jovial expression on Dumbledore’s face hardens into something far more serious. “And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is off-limits to everyone who does not want to die a very painful death.”

“... Why would he keep something that could kill students inside of a school?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like the sound of it. You’d think he’d at least tell us what the danger was. Who knows if it’s something that can break out of there or something magically powerful enough to enchant someone into coming to it regardless of the warning.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Ron mutters. “Half the school has snuck into the Forbidden Forest at some point. If he really wanted to keep people out, then wouldn’t he tell them why? I’m pretty sure that half of Gryffindor just took that rule as a challenge.”

“... Unless he actually wants someone to go after it.” Ron and Blaise both turn to Hari with wide eyes. “Let’s just say that there were some... Peculiar things I noticed during my escort to Diagon Alley. No matter. Whatever his intentions, I want absolutely nothing to do with some corridor of death.”

“You can’t just say that and dismiss it, Hari!” Ron hisses quietly.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Blaise is not asking, and all things considered, Hari can’t blame him for that. He may not have much information to give them, but either of them could know more about what’s going on than he does simply by being raised in the magical world. He’s willing to talk for the sake of avoiding future headaches. “When we won’t be overheard.”

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!” Dumbledore looks like he’s the only professor that’s happy about that. The others have rather pinched expressions on their faces, even the ones who were happily engaging in conversation only moments prior. Hari understands why very quickly.

Everyone sings the golden words hovering above Dumbeldore’s head –that looks like a useful spell; Hari is going to have to look into it– in wildly different styles. It’s chaos incarnate. No one finishes singing the song at the same time, and it is only once Fred and George have finished singing their funeral march rendition that they are allowed to leave the Great Hall.

“Merry meet, firsties! I hope you’ll forgive the lack of proper formalities in a group setting; we’ll be stuck here all night otherwise.” Even Malfoy snickers at that, and the witch with a shining ‘P’ badge looks very pleased with herself. “My name’s Gemma Farley, and I’m one of your fifth-year Prefects. If the badges don’t make it obvious enough, then Heir Burke here is your other Prefect. We’re the ones over the younger years, so you’ll be coming to us with any problems you have, okay?” Farley waits for them all to nod in agreement before continuing, “We’ll be leading you down to the Slytherin common room, so stick close. Oh, and congratulations! We’re delighted to welcome you to Slytherin. This is the largest group of firsties that we’ve had in a long time, isn’t it, Heir Burke?”

“It is. I can’t recall the last time one of our groups couldn’t fit into one dorm room.” Seeing the look of mild confusion and curiosity on their faces as they trail after the Prefects, Burke explains, “Our dorms are split into boys and girls. As an aside, if you believe your things may be taken to the wrong dorm, then let us know, and if you’re not sure which one is best for you because both or neither fit, then we will speak with our Head of House to ensure that everyone is as comfortable as they can be. This doesn’t have to be now. If things change later on, then you may let us, or whoever your current Prefects may be,

know.” Hari relaxes the longer that Burke talks, suddenly quite reassured that Slytherin as a whole isn’t half as bad as it’s made out to be. Repairing their reputation will be easier when his own house isn’t fighting him on it. “Back to the point, our dorms hold a maximum of six students per room. Since we have seven boys this year, you’ll be split into a group of three and a group of four, both with their own bathrooms. Don’t ask us to move you. Hogwarts decides who goes with who when splitting students, and there is no overriding that decision, regardless of status or favors offered.”

Hari relaxes at that declaration, overwhelmed by the feeling of safety and reassurance coming from the castle. The stones surrounding him emanate magic as surely as everything else here does, and while Hogwarts is not communicating quite so clearly as she did while welcoming him home, he can still understand her.

He is safe here. He will still need to be cautious with his secrets, far too much is riding on his ability to keep them, but Hogwarts will protect him the best that she is able.

The dungeons are decidedly colder than they’re used to, and Hari instinctively reapplies his warming charms on Nisaba, Camulus, and Artemis to adjust for the difference in temperature. He pays close attention to the path they’re taking and the snakes carved into various nooks and crannies along the path to the common room, slowing to a halt once Farley and Burke pause in front of an unusually empty stretch of stone wall.

“This is the Slytherin common room. No one outside of our house is allowed in it; we have far too many enemies within the castle for that.” Burke levels them all with a steely glare. “Do not share our passwords with anyone or you’ll be scrubbing cauldrons with Professor Snape for the rest of the year.”

“Aww, lighten up a bit, Heir Burke! If any of you want to spend time with those outside of our house, then it’s fine, but we do have to hold fast to the no outsiders rule, I’m afraid. We can help you find a place to meet up with them, though! Just ask.”

“We are safe down here because every other common room has something marking their entrance. No one thinks to look for the absence of portraits or objects. There are far too many students, especially Gryffindors, who would set up ambushes for us if they knew where our common room is, so be careful not to lead them back here even if they can’t get in without the password. If you fear that you’re being followed, then find an older Slytherin before coming back here, and if you can’t find an older Slytherin, then go to an older Ravenclaw or even a Hufflepuff if you have to. Better safe than sorry. And do not travel alone; Slytherins stick together.” Once Burke is sure that they understand him, he turns to face the empty wall and says, “Asphodel.”

Stone slides away to reveal an entrance far more subtly than the wall like it in Diagon Alley, and the first thing that Hari thinks when he sees their common room is that it’s like a darker, cozier version of Gringotts. Black, marble columns line the edges of the room and lead to a grand archway made of the same material. That archway borders a window that appears to be tinted a bluish-green at first glance, but a small school of fish swimming past it reveals that it is actually a view into the lake they traveled across to get here. Even the furniture itself screams wealth, all made of dark wood with plush upholstery.

The entrance closes behind them once Goyle shuffles into the room, and several candles lining the wall flicker to life with white flames. The room feels much warmer afterward.

“Now, before we usher all of you firsties off to bed, our esteemed Head of House has a few words for you.”

The vaguely familiar-looking wizard in all black steps out of the shadows, leveling them all with a stern look that makes McGonagall’s glare seem like a kitten’s in comparison. “I am Professor Snape, Potions Master and Slytherin’s Head of House. We are a house of ambition, so I expect your grades to reflect that. Should you struggle with any subject in particular, we have an in-house tutoring system that will aid you and grant your upperclassmen extra credit. Take advantage of it.” Malfoy looks decidedly relieved by that, glancing back at Crabbe and Goyle before refocusing on their professor’s speech. “Slytherin must present a united front. Any disagreements you have with one another will remain behind these walls. Many within Hogwarts search for any sign of weakness in us, waiting for the best moment to strike. Do not give them the chance. Any punishments I assign to you will be done behind closed doors for the same reason. Do not believe for a second that you will get away with breaking the rules if you are caught.”

Hari is delighted by the implied permission to do so as long as they’re careful about it. The calculating gleam in Ron’s eyes tells him that his friend understands that message just as clearly as the rest of the first years do.

“You will receive your timetables for classes at breakfast. Breakfast runs from 6:30 to 8:30, and I recommend getting there no later than 7:30 tomorrow so that you may eat properly and return for any books and supplies you will need. Classes begin at nine-o’-clock sharp.” Snape turns to their Prefects with a cocked eyebrow. “Burke, Farley, I trust that you have this group handled?”

“Of course, Professor!”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Then I shall be on my way. Madam Pomfrey will need these potions sooner rather than later with how quick these dunderheads are to hurt themselves.” Snape practically glides out of the room, and Farley waves farewell to them with a friendly smile before leading the four girls in their year to their dorm rooms.

“Alright, boys. With me.”

Despite knowing that Hogwarts is looking out for him, Hari still breathes a silent sigh of relief when he sees the nameplates outside of their dorms. “Heir Malfoy, Heir Crabbe, Heir Goyle, you’re in the first room. Heir Nott, Heir Zabini, Heir Potter, Weasley, you’re in the second. If you need anything urgently, then bother Farley. This is our OWL year, and I’m as likely to hex you as help you if you catch me at the wrong time.”

Burke leaves them with that bit of parting advice. Hari is the first to head to their dorm, and the others are quick to follow. Athena is waiting for him at the foot of the bed nearest the window, laying on the comforter and watching the fish go by with her tail slowly swaying back and forth. A snowy white owl sits on an ornate perch next to the bed nearest to the door, and Artemis quietly hisses in displeasure.

“She tastes of magic. Not quite of a familiar bond but of something that will become one someday. I will be stuck dealing with this foul creature for seven years, speaker. Seven years! I expect repayment in the form of many, many mice for this.”

Hari subtly runs his fingers through his hair to soothe Artemis until her disgruntled hissing falls into complete silence. It’s only then that he The beat-up trunk next to his bed is joined by Ron throwing himself down on it with a sigh, and Blaise starts arranging his stuff by the bed nearest to the window on the other side of the room. Hari does the same, setting up the photo of his mother, Aunt Petunia, and their childhood friend on his bedside table and quickly helping a concealed Kratos out of the trunk. The massive boa only has to take one look at the others in the room before he nods and slithers under Hari’s bed, coiling up beneath it and waiting until Hari can pull the curtains around the bed shut before he moves from his hiding spot.

They unpack in relative silence, and surprisingly, Nott is the one who winds up breaking it. “Your cat is half-kneazle, aren’t they? I could send Hedwig up to the owlery, but...”

“She is!” Hari’s tempted to ask Nott to do so anyway, if only to put Artemis at ease, but it’ll do the snake some good to get used to owls sooner rather than later, even if Hari himself will never own one. “Athena won’t do anything, I promise. She knows better.”

The tension in Nott’s shoulders relaxes ever-so-slightly. “That is a relief. Merry meet, Heir Potter, Heir Zabini, Weasley.”

“Merry meet, Heir Nott.”

Nott studies Hari intently for several moments after all of them exchange greetings, and it isn’t until Ron starts to bristle that he says, “You didn’t seem surprised by your sorting.”

“Oh, not at all. I would have been suspicious of tampering if I went anywhere else, quite frankly.”

“You two friends with the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor? I noticed that they started clapping for you right away, Heir Potter. Seemed to be the only ones other than Weasley and yourself who weren’t stunned into inaction.”

“Yes,” Hari says firmly, arching his eyebrow and leveling Nott with a hard look. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Not for me. You’re going to want to be careful, though.”

“We know,” Ron groans despairingly. “Merlin, we know.”

Blaise laughs at that, looking entirely too pleased with himself as he snaps his trunk closed. “I can’t believe that we stole not one but two wizards that everyone was so certain would be in Gryffindor. I bet the lions are going to be snarling about it for weeks.”

“We stick together?” Hari asks casually, avoiding eye contact as he puts away the last of his clothes. “They’ll be going after the first years, in particular, I’m sure. Apologies for that.”

“Hardly your fault,” Blaise dismisses with a wave of his hand. “But yes, I like the sound of that. Better to move in a larger group until we know what we’re up against.”

“Mate, I followed you into the snakepit. Of course I’m sticking with you.”

“... An alliance of sorts does seem like it would be useful.”

“Excellent! That will make this far easier.” Hari pulls out a set of his pajamas out of his closet with a yawn. “I’m knackered, so I’m going to start heading to bed now. We’ve got a long day tomorrow.”

It is only once everyone is tucked into bed that Kratos slithers up into Hari’s with him, acting as a massive weighted blanket while he basks in Hari’s warmth. ***“How was the trunk?”*** Hari hisses quietly, voice barely more than a whisper on the wind. ***“I know that you don’t like confined spaces, but...”***

“It was comfortable enough. I will not begrudge you for doing what you must to ensure we stay together, Hari, so you can stop your worrying.”

“This isn’t going to work long-term,” Camulus hisses. ***“It will be difficult for us to even navigate this room without being stepped on, and we have to be quiet or risk exposing your secret far sooner than is safe.”***

“We should move up the Muffliato Charm on our list of priorities. It’ll make others suspicious when they notice it, but I doubt this will be anywhere on the list of what they expect me to be hiding.”

“It is a start. But even then, it will only work for so long. The rest of the school is easy enough to hide from, but your new nestmates? You will slip eventually.”

“I know, I know. I’m working on it. I’ve got an idea; I just need to find out whether Professor Flitwick is more loyal to the school, namely Dumbledore, or to the Goblin Nation first. If it’s the latter... Then I can protect myself both from loose lips and prying minds with an Unbreakable Vow. The others are likely to appreciate it as well since it will protect their secrets as surely as it protects my own. So long as it happens in this dorm room...”

Nisaba climbs up his headboard and coils around one of the posts with a satisfied hiss, keeping guard despite the curtains and spells shielding them from the outside world. ***“That sounds like an excellent plan, little speaker. The other hatchlings will surely see the wisdom of it.”***

He knows they will; it’s merely a matter of if they can convince a professor to be the bonder for it. If all else fails, then Hari will learn how to cast an Unbreakable Vow himself. Their secrets are far too important to risk. Survival above all else.

Chapter End Notes

And now you know who Hedwig winds up with in this. I wanted to give you all an explanation for why I made this decision before I even started writing this AU, so here we are:

Hedwig’s name comes from the patron saint of orphaned children. She plays the role of confidant and protector in canon and has a truly beautiful relationship with canon Harry because of it, and I think her character is incredibly interesting. Having said that, I knew that she would be sidelined as little more than a pet if she remained with Hari. He wouldn’t want to risk her getting hurt by the many, many enemies he has both inside and outside of Hogwarts (which is only made worse by the fact that he sorted Slytherin), and he also wouldn’t want to risk sending letters through such an easily trackable method of communication. Hedwig is a very distinct owl, after all; it’s why she gets hurt in canon Harry’s fifth year. So if she stayed with Hari, then she wouldn’t be able to deliver letters for him, and he already has a protector and guide in the snakes and Nisaba in particular. He was taught to protect himself very young, and Hedwig would not truly be able to fulfill the role that her character was written for if she stayed with him in this AU.

Now, I’m sure that some of you are wondering: Why Theodore Nott? We may not know a lot about his canon character, but what we do know is an important part of that decision. Theo’s father is noted as an elderly wizard and a Death Eater, and he is quite possibly someone who attended school with Voldemort due to that distinction. Theo’s mother died when he was young. She is not noted to be elderly like his father nor is it said that she died in childbirth or anything like that; she is simply gone and we don’t get a reason why. Most wixen don’t exactly die out of the blue for no reason. Pair this lack of information with the fact that Theo was one of three students who could see the Thestrals during that Care of Magical Creatures class in fifth year, and it starts painting a pretty damning picture. It is heavily implied that Theo witnessed his mother’s death, and it should also be noted that he is one of very few Slytherins in canon Harry’s year who does not become a Death Eater. He is the ONLY one who does not become a Death Eater who has family that was one. It’s not mentioned directly whether he got involved with the Battle of Hogwarts at all, but considering that (as much as I discard events that come after the main series in general) he was not arrested afterward and was only arrested later on for creating illegal Time-Turners, one can assume that he did not take the Dark Mark. It is also noted that when his father

gets arrested after the Department of Mysteries, he does not seem to have any sort of particularly negative reaction toward Harry, or much of a reaction at all.

Sure, one could say that his mother died of some curse or illness, but that seems rather unlikely given the scope of healing in the magical world. It also feels like something that would have been mentioned. So that leaves us with the most likely option: for one reason or another, Nott Sr. killed Theo's mother. And Theo saw it happen, quite likely without his father being aware of that fact. Hence why Hedwig still has her name. Hedwig is a protector of orphans, and what else can you call yourself when you're being raised by the man who murdered your mother? She represents that same hope for freedom and safety one day to Theo as she does to Harry in canon, and I am very excited to depict their relationship and have her continue to be involved in the story throughout the series. He is already loathe to be separated from her, as is made clear this chapter.

Oh, also! I was asked to include a little list here with Hari's current familiars to make it easier to keep track, so:

Nisaba: female ball python
Camulus: male boomslang
Artemis: female adder (melanistic)
Athena: female half-kneazle
Kratos: male boa constrictor

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

You know, I've noticed that for a series that centers around the existence of magical schools, we really don't get to see a lot of classes at Hogwarts. I'm correcting that here :3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hari wakes up long before his dormmates do. It's hard to break habits born of survival instincts, and even if the Dursleys have been far more tolerable as of late, Hari has not stopped waking up before sunrise every morning. A soft orb of light flickers to life next to his head with barely a thought, and he digs through his school bag to pull out his quill, ink, and parchment and set them up on his bedside table. It's a bit of an awkward lean to write on it while he's sitting in bed, but since he doesn't have a chair and has no desire to hover over it while standing, he makes it work.

Dudley,

I hope things go well for you on your first day at Smeltings. Don't forget that you promised to send along copies of your coursework! I'm determined to keep up in both worlds, no matter how busy that's going to leave me. I'm sure that I can catch up over the summers if needed; I'll have to do any testing on breaks or after the school year anyway.

I'm writing you this before I begin any classes or even receive my timetable, so I'm afraid that I don't have much to tell you yet. I did sort Slytherin, as we all expected, and I've made a couple of friends there! Ron Weasley is one of them, and I met him on the train. His whole family has been in Gryffindor, so I was pleasantly surprised to see him join me in Slytherin. I'm glad since I was worried that we wouldn't be able to be friends anymore. Blaise Zabini is another new friend. He's part of an old family in Italy, so the fact that he allied with me and Ron over the more prestigious Slytherin families so openly is a bold move on his part. I have to respect him for it.

I also made a couple of friends outside of my house while on the train! The first is Neville Longbottom, and even though he sorted into Gryffindor, he gave me a look that promised he was not giving up our friendship without fighting through hell for it. He's also from an old family, one that the Potters are known for being close with, so I'm happy to see that trend continuing in this generation. Hermione Granger is the last of my new friends, and she's the only witch in the group so far. She's a muggle-born like my mum, and from what few conversations we've had already, she's scary smart.

I'm determined to get all four of them into some sort of study group with me. Maybe I'll be able to pull in some other students as well? I need some Hufflepuffs. I don't want them to think that I'm leaving them out of it. Hufflepuffs are supposed to be super friendly, so hopefully, I'll be able to befriend a couple in my classes. I'll save the plotting for a future letter, though.

Make sure to take care of yourself! I'm sending along some candy that I bought here too. Don't worry, all of it is completely safe for you; I made sure. You'll be getting some Chocolate Frogs, Sugar Quills, Pumpkin Pasties, and Cauldron Cakes. Chocolate Frogs will jump once when you open them, so make sure not to do that anywhere but at home, okay? The other three may as well be completely muggle, so you can take them wherever. I'm also saving some Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans for you. But when they say that they're every flavor, I do mean that they are **every** flavor. You could get some really rancid jelly beans, so I figured I'd ask if you'd want to try them before sending them along. Just let me know!

Sincerely,

Hari

He puts both the letter and the candy he's sending to Dudley in his mailbox, and it briefly flashes purple, indicating that Gringotts has received them and is handling them accordingly. Hari loves magic.

"I am coming with you from now on, speaker. I refuse to be left in the nest with the owl." Hari chuckles softly as he picks Artemis up, smiling as she hides herself underneath his hair. They both know that no one can see her right now, but with classes on the horizon and the possibility of a stray spell canceling Hari's, neither of them wants to take unnecessary risks.

"Of course, Artemis. I would never dream of asking you to stay behind. What are the rest of you planning to do?"

“Camulus and I are going to explore the castle,” Nisaba hisses. “There are nooks and crannies to explore, and he can sense many magical rooms throughout this castle. If we are to make this place our new nest, even if this room is a nest within the nest, then we must know every inch of it.”

“Precisely. No one will be able to catch you off guard here, speaker. We will ensure that you know of every hidden passage and secret room that I can sense through the air, all softly buzzing magic and forgotten things.”

“I intend to explore outside of the castle,” Kratos answers while nudging against Hari’s hand. “I miss climbing trees, and I can taste a faint hint of forest and wildness through all this magic.”

“That must be the Forbidden Forest. Be careful while exploring, there's no telling what lives in there, but your concealment charm should hold up regardless. Signal for us if you need help.”

“Will do, speaker.”

‘I intend to explore the castle as well. There are many cats and kneazles here, and I intend to learn about them and their routines. It should prove useful later.’

Hari loves his familiars. ***“Thank you, all of you. I hope you have fun today! Let me know about anything interesting.”***

“Of course, little speaker. We will keep our senses wide open.”

Hari sneaks down into the still-empty common room and lets his familiars out of the entrance. Athena lingers just long enough, acting as if she’s having a conversation with Hari through their eyes alone, for the snakes to slip through before she runs off as well. He goes back to his dorm, gets dressed, showers, takes care of his hair, and packs all of his textbooks away into his featherlight-charmed bag. He isn’t sure which ones he’ll wind up needing today, so he figures that it’s best to be prepared for any class that he can. Hari refuses to lug around a telescope just in case he needs it, though, so he’ll just have to come back at some point if he has Astronomy today.

It’s only after he is completely finished getting ready and hunkers down on his bed, curtains open and book in hand, that the first of his dormmates begins to stir. “Morning, Blaise.” Hari does not stop reading *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* as the boy stirs into awareness, attempting to familiarize himself with several plants he doesn’t recognize and taking special care to read through the notes on the special requirements that need to be met in order for them to grow properly.

Hazy, brown eyes squint at Hari in disbelief. “... Are you already dressed?”

“Yes.”

“It can’t be much later than six. I tend to wake up pretty early.”

“It isn’t. The sun is only just starting to peek over the horizon. I just wake up even earlier, and there’s no point in laying around and doing nothing when I know I won’t go back to sleep.”

“How do you already know the Wand-Lighting charm? And how do you get it to float like that? I’ve never seen it not be attached to a wand!” Blaise wakes up in earnest when he catches sight of the floating ball of light that allows Hari to read in the dark, eyes sparkling with intrigue.

“You’ll come to learn that I know many things, Blaise,” Hari teases, still not looking up from his book. “And magic is only as limited as you allow yourself to think it is. Try to keep that in mind while we’re attending classes, hm? If something isn’t working, try approaching it from a different angle. Listen to your magic.”

Blaise’s gaze is considering, heavy with the weight of a realization that he knows better than to voice aloud. “... You make it sound so simple.”

“It is. You just need the right teacher.”

“And will you? Teach me?”

“Only once you’ve earned my trust beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“That’s fair,” Blaise concedes with a nod. “That kind of power in the wrong hands...” He shakes his head, changing the topic before they delve too deeply into it to dance around. “We still need to have that conversation, you know? About your first trip to Diagon Alley.”

“And we will. But I’m not telling the story twice, so it’ll be with Ron there. Maybe Heir Nott too, assuming that I can pull off my plan within the next few days.”

“Already plotting, are you?” Blaise asks with a snicker.

“What kind of Slytherin would I be if I wasn’t?”

This sends Blaise into full-blown laughter, causing Nott to stir slightly with a groan. Ron snores through it without so much as a twitch. “A very poor one, I suppose,” Blaise finally answers once he regains control of his lungs. “I ought to get ready before the other two are up, but do try to not start any fires without me, Hari.”

“I make no promises.”

Blaise is laughing again as he goes to take a shower, and Nott gives up on sleeping, leveling Hari with a fierce glare. “Can you not be any quieter?”

“Apologies, Heir Nott. I intend to study the Muffliato Charm and master it as quickly as possible, so hopefully, you will not have to deal with the noise for long. Though, in my defense, that was mostly Blaise.”

“... I suppose it was. Apologies, Heir Potter. I’m not a morning person.”

“I gathered,” Hari says wryly. “Anything that I can do to make up for the rude awakening? I would rather like for our alliance to hold, you know? Living with someone who wants nothing more than to hex me sounds like a nightmare.”

“No, I’ll get over it.” Nott shakes his head as he slowly gets to his feet. “It’s for the best. If I don’t start getting ready now, then we’ll probably end up running behind.” Nott gathers his things into a bag much like Hari’s, silently pulling out a book of his own that he only puts down once Blaise is back and he is able to go take a shower himself. Ron is still snoring away.

“We should probably wake him, shouldn’t we?”

“It is nearly seven. Any ideas? He’s slept straight through us talking.”

Hari hums, eyes narrowing contemplatively as he unsheathes his wand. “Think that Aguamenti would do the trick? Only, I don’t want to ruin his things.”

“... We don’t learn Aguamenti until sixth year, Hari.” He does not appreciate Blaise’s blatantly skeptical tone. “But he did put all of his things into his wardrobe or underneath his bed, so they should be out of the line of fire. Assuming that you truly can manage the spell.”

“Aguamenti.”

The water pouring from Hari’s wand is somewhere in between a thin stream and a wave, steadily soaking through the fabric of the curtains until he hears Ron yelp and jolt into awareness. “Bloody hell, Hari! That’s not funny!”

“We’re going to be late for our first day if you don’t get moving.”

“Oh. Oh, shit! Thanks, Hari!” Ron’s curtain flies open as he races out of the bed, sprinting past a dumbfounded Nott and into their bathroom.

“That was... You can cast the Water-Making Spell? That’s advanced conjuration.”

“All things are possible with magic if you believe them so.”

“That’s blatantly untrue. You can’t conjure food.”

“You can conjure animals, though. Living, breathing animals with beating hearts and souls. That is something far more complex than food, and they can be made into it with no ill effects, can they not?”

“... I suppose,” Nott concedes hesitantly. “Where are you going with this, Heir Potter?”

“And food can be multiplied or enlarged if it is already there. Multiplied food is not less nutritious than the original, and both multiplied and enlarged food can feed more people without issue. You can argue that this still isn’t creating food from nothing, but is it not? Truly taking from the original would mean that the food loses something in order to create more of itself. Calories, flavor, texture... But it doesn’t. I rather suspect that conjuring food from nothing without any sort of reference for your magic is simply too taxing for most to attempt since there are so many different elements to it, and when several wixen were unable to do so no matter how much they tried, they simply wrote it off as impossible. Now almost no one even

attempts it because they all believe that it's impossible, and your magic will pick up on that disbelief. It alters your intent, weakens it to the point that the spell isn't remotely viable even if you could manage it." Nott blinks rapidly, opening and closing his mouth several times without a sound. "Are you alright, Heir Nott?"

"Theo. You can all call me Theo."

"Glad to see you side with us in earnest, Theo." Blaise's grin stretches from ear to ear with satisfaction. "You've chosen wisely."

"How could I not? After hearing that, after seeing what you can already do... You are going to change things, Hari Potter. I want to be part of it."

"Well, we're happy to have you, Theo. Anything we need to keep in mind while interacting outside of the dorms? I suspect we'll need to be a fair bit more discrete in your case."

"You suspect correctly. I can be civil with you, of course, but much more than that would be suspicious. It's best that I stick to last names and titles unless we can be assured of our privacy. I've always been fairly... Withdrawn, but I'm amiable with just about anyone too. The other Slytherins know me, and they'll suspect this is more of the same so long as we don't act overly familiar."

"Oh, we're plotting this early in the morning? What did I miss?" Ron asks teasingly as he rejoins them, plopping down next to Hari.

"Theo wants in. We just have to be a bit more careful about things, considering..."

"Ah, I see. Good to have you then, mate!"

Theo's only response is a wobbly smile, and Hari steps in before that silence can become something awkward. "Let's get you caught up to speed. We've got enough time to hash out a few rules before heading down, and we should take advantage of that before we start our classes. Drastic changes after anyone sees us talking to each other will be suspicious without an equally dramatic show, and I'd rather not draw that kind of attention to myself so early on."

"Because it will hamper your plan of collecting friends all across the school? For totally non-nefarious reasons, of course," Blaise asks teasingly.

Hari levels him with a playful glare for all of a few seconds before he starts snickering. He shrugs and says, "Well, you're not entirely wrong."

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The Great Hall is quite busy by the time they arrive, but they still manage to get there before Snape starts handing out their timetables. Theo remains a quiet presence as they chat and eat their breakfast. Dark blue magic curls around Theo protectively, wary and tense despite the careful mask of ease that he wears.

Hari tries not to focus on his friends' magic too much, but it's hard not to, even with his familiars helping him manage it. Magic is flaring all around with the excitement of being used once more now that the school year is starting, and it makes that energy more difficult to ignore.

Ron's magic is a burnt orange that dances around curiously and crackles with energy whenever he laughs. Blaise's magic is crimson and positively buzzes with energy and excitement. Hari can even point out his other friends from across the Great Hall by their magic alone. Neville's magic is a rich, forest green that speaks of a desire to create life and nurture. Hermione's magic is a far brighter blue than Theo's, less restrained and equally as curious as Ron's. Hers just has a calmer edge to it, something stabilizing that the more energetic members of his friend group don't have.

It's amazing how much he can learn about someone simply from studying their magic. Hari suddenly understands why wixen aren't eager to teach one another how to do this.

Snape starts with the first years when passing out their timetables, and a smirk tugs at Hari's lips once he starts reading it. "I'm glad that classes are shared so evenly. I worried that we wouldn't get to see much of Neville or Hermione." His words are a subtle claim to the Slytherins listening in on their conversation that those two are his and that any actions against them will result in retaliation. He expects that everyone in the house will know before the week is up.

"Hey, look at that! We share Herbology with Hufflepuff first thing. You can start your recruitment early."

“Very funny, Blaise,” Hari snorts. “I’d advise you do the same. You never know when it might be useful to have friends in other houses.”

“I think that I’ll let you do the vetting for me. I trust that you won’t bring anyone unsuitable.”

To the others, Blaise’s statement is a clear declaration of alliance, something that goes beyond sitting next to Hari and being friendly with him. For the two of them, it is a subtle acknowledgement that Blaise understands what Hari was hinting at this morning. He knows that Hari will search their magic and figure out which ones will mesh well with their group before approaching them.

“Looks like we get two classes with Gryffindor today. Not looking forward to that tension, but at least we’ll see Neville.” Ron hums as he looks over at their table, eyes narrowed in thought. “Gryffindor has a really small class this year, don’t they?”

“Only seven,” Hari confirms. “Our year is smaller than average, but Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff all got eleven students. Neville and Finnegan were both hat stalls too, and that usually means arguing with the hat to go somewhere else. They could have had as few as five this year.”

“Where else do you think they would have gone?” Blaise asks idly. “I must admit that I’m curious.”

“I don’t know Finnegan, so I couldn’t say one way or another with him. Neville, though? He would have done well in Hufflepuff. I’m fairly certain that he only fought so hard for Gryffindor because he wants to push himself to grow as a person. Well, that and he knew exactly how difficult it would be for me to get a foothold there after my sorting,” Hari smirks, chuckling at the mildly disbelieving looks on the faces surrounding them. “I have such wonderful friends.”

“Planning a coup already, are we, Hari?” Blaise’s teasing smile does not distract from the seriousness underlying his purposefully light tone. “Maybe wait until we have a week of classes under our belts before reforming magical society to your will, hm?” They both snicker at that, and Ron barely refrains from bursting into laughter. Even Theo coughs quietly to disguise a chuckle.

“What classes are you most excited for?” Ron asks once they’ve regained their composure. “I’m looking forward to Defense. The curriculum can be spotty since the professor changes every year, but that means that we might learn things that those in our place didn’t the year before.”

“We can always self-study to fill in the gaps,” Blaise concedes with a nod. “And it does sound like an interesting subject. I’m most excited for Potions, though. I’ve been brewing with Mamma since I was little, and I’ve always enjoyed it. How about you, Hari?”

“Charms! I’ve always loved Charms, and most of my accidental magic fell into that category of spells. I’ve heard that Professor Flitwick is a brilliant teacher as well. Anything in particular that you’re looking forward to, Heir Nott?”

“... Transfiguration.” His short answer is suitably curt to the others in their year, toeing the line of respectful and dismissive, but Hari can see his magic loosen up slightly, pleased to be included.

“We should start a study group,” Hari suggests with a hum. “Sounds like our interests are pretty varied, so we can help one another out and improve all of our marks across the board.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Heir Potter. Would you happen to have room for one more? History of Magic has always been a favorite of mine, and I’ve heard that Binns is positively dreadful at teaching the subject.”

“That would be wonderful, Heiress Greengrass. Merry meet!”

“Merry meet,” she returns with a slight smile. “Do we have anyone for Herbology? I admit that I am... Less than familiar with the subject.”

“I’m not bad with plants myself, though I don’t know the magical ones all that well. Neville is the true prodigy there. I intend to ask him to join us sometime before or after our shared Potions class. I hope that him being a Gryffindor isn’t a problem for you.”

“It sounds to me that Heir Longbottom is so loyal a Hufflepuff that he went to Gryffindor for your sake, Heir Potter. That’s useful in a wizard. And if he is truly as good as you say, then I can overlook the red and gold for the sake of my marks.”

Hari smiles brightly, disarmingly, after hearing that. It seems like he has another ally within his house. “I’m glad to hear it! I’ll ask Hermione about joining us in Charms since she’s a strong student all around. I’ll scope out the Hufflepuffs as well, but we’ll probably need to share a few classes together before any of them will trust an invitation from a Slytherin regardless. They’re so very protective of each other.”

"I wonder why?" Greengrass asks dryly, an amused smirk tugging at her lips. "It's not as if you're plotting anything."

"Precisely!" he agrees with a slight tilt of his head, eyes wide and innocent. "It's ever so confusing."

Blaise does not even attempt to muffle his laughter, no matter how many odd looks students from the other houses send their table because of it.

"Oh, you're the dangerous sort of Slytherin, aren't you? The sort that genuinely convinces everyone around you that you didn't do a thing."

Greengrass sounds equal parts amused and intrigued, and Hari is delighted for the opportunity to really get the rumor mill going. He knows that everyone will be talking about him regardless; he'd rather they talk about what he wants them to. "I haven't a clue what you mean by that, Heiress Greengrass. Offering a listening ear to those in need is hardly seeking out trouble, and if they tell me more than intended, well... It's not my fault I'm so easy to talk to, is it?" He keeps a pleasant smile on his face, laughing internally at the way the magic of the upper years around them keeps flaring with shock.

"Is that how you knew about the Sorting Hat?" Ron asks. "Because parents won't even tell their children about it! It's tradition."

"Perhaps," Hari allows, wiggling his fingers with a chuckle. "A Slytherin has to protect their sources, you know? I won't elaborate further."

"Fair enough, mate. I won't ask you to."

Their conversation trails off after that, and they finish eating breakfast before their group, including Greengrass and Tracey Davis, head out to the greenhouses for Herbology. Each table set up within the humid building where their class takes place in has enough room to seat two people, and Hari lights up when he sees that they aren't the first people to arrive.

Theo takes a seat by himself, Ron and Blaise stick together, and Greengrass and Davis do the same. Hari, on the other hand, approaches a witch with a steady flow of shimmering, golden magic surrounding her. She's speaking to a blonde witch with pigtails who is sitting at the table in front of her, and the yellow magic floating around that girl is bubbly and light in a way that is uplifting to be around.

"Merry meet, Heiress Bones, Heiress Abbott. Would you mind if I sat with one of you? Since our classes are all uneven this year, I figured I would spare everyone the headache of figuring out our seating at the last minute."

"Merry meet, Heir Potter," Bones returns with a slight nod.

"Merry meet, Heir Potter! You can sit with me if you want!"

"Thank you, Heiress Abbott." He accepts her offer with a smile, and he's pleasantly surprised when she immediately pulls him into their conversation.

"Oh, no need for all of that proper stuff! Just call me Hannah."

"In that case, you may call me Hari."

Hannah's answering smile is nearly as blindingly bright as her magic. "So, Hari, was your sorting much of a surprise to you? I'm sure you can imagine that it's the talk of the school."

"Not at all. I knew that I would be in Slytherin long before I got my Hogwarts letter, and I'm quite enjoying it so far. How's Hufflepuff treating you?"

"It's great! Everyone seems so nice, and I can tell that our Prefects are super reliable! I'm not sure how I feel about Heir Smith—he demanded everyone keep calling him that, you know—but maybe he's just feeling out of sorts in a new place. I'm sure he'll warm up in time."

"I'm glad to hear it. Let me know if any of your housemates give you trouble for sitting with me. I don't want to cause any trouble, and Professor Sprout will probably let us have two groups of three if we ask."

"Psh, don't worry about it, Hari." Hannah waves her hand dismissively. "I don't care that you're a Slytherin. You seem nice, and if the others give you any trouble, then I'll just have to talk some sense into them!"

"And I will remind them that my aunt was Slytherin herself. We've never seen a better Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and it's horribly unfair to judge someone solely on their house. Judge someone by their own merits or not

at all, as she always says.”

“Madam Bones sounds like a wise woman indeed. That is precisely why I’m not limiting my friends to my own house. Just because the Sorting Hat thinks I have more in common with those wearing green and silver doesn’t mean that I can’t get along with those in other houses.”

“Even Gryffindor?” Bones asks with a raised eyebrow. “Forgive my asking, but the rivalry between your houses is legendary.”

“Even Gryffindor. Neville was the first friend I made in the magical world, and I’m hardly going to stop being friends with him just because he’s a Gryffindor.”

The other students start trickling in as he watches the beginnings of respect form in Bones’ eyes. Ernest MacMillan sits down next to Bones, and Justin Finch-Fletchley goes to do the same with Hannah, startling when he notices Hari sitting there.

“Sorry, Justin!” Hannah apologizes with a sheepish grin. “Our classes are uneven, so Hari offered to work with one of us.”

“But he’s a Slytherin!”

“And? He’s nice.”

Finch-Fletchley looks between the two of them with a disbelieving expression before moving a table over and sitting next to Kevin Entwhistle instead. “Thanks, Hannah.”

“Of course!”

Malfoy sneers when he walks into the room and sees Hari among the sea of black and yellow, immediately sauntering over to Theo’s table and abandoning Crabbe and Goyle to fend for themselves. Theo briefly shoots him a despairing look, resigned to his fate.

The entire class straightens up when Sprout joins them. The Hufflepuffs are eager to make their Head of House Proud, and the Slytherins are equally determined to make a good impression in their first-ever class at Hogwarts.

“Hello, students! I’m Professor Sprout, and I’ll be your Herbology professor through at least your fifth year, though I hope to teach many of you throughout your entire time here. Herbology is a very hands-on class. We’ll be working with harmless plants for now, those like dittany and asphodel, but we’ll discuss some of the more dangerous ones that you’ll be working with in later years as well! Now, I take it that everyone is sitting with who they want to be their partner for any group projects this year?”

She receives several nods in answer, and Hari notices that she seems especially happy with how comfortable Hari and Hannah are with one another. He can guess that past classes have given her more trouble. “Excellent! Now, Herbology is considered a subtler magic and is often dismissed as work for those simply unable to do more complicated spells, but that could not be further from the truth. Without Herbology Masters, we would not have the quality of ingredients that we do for making potions, and without quality ingredients, you cannot make quality potions. Imagine if we were forced to create healing tonics with half-withered leaves gathered in the wild... It would be utterly disastrous! For example, the powdered root of asphodel and an infusion of wormwood make a powerful sleeping potion, the Draught of Living Death, but if the roots came from a dying plant, then the wixen who took the potion would never wake up again. Quality matters, and even for those of you who do not intend to cultivate your own gardens, it’s important for you to be able to recognize the difference.”

Hari likes this class already. The fact that he’s spending it making connections within Hufflepuff only makes it all the better.

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They meet up with Neville along their way to Potions. Neither Greengrass nor Davis says anything about him falling in step with Hari and Ron, and the former only chuckles when she watches Hari firmly plant himself next to Neville in the classroom.

“Is this going to be a pattern with you, Heir Potter? One might think that you don’t like your own house.”

“Well, I only have so much time to forge connections with other houses, after all. With the number of students in each house being uneven in our year, I figure that I may as well be the one designated to work with someone from whichever house we’re working with that period. Saves everyone the headache of trying to figure it out each class.”

“I’m really bad at Potions, though,” Neville whispers nervously. “I don’t want to drag you down.”

“Consider this damage control, then. I’d rather us get through the class without any explosions, and you can always help me pick the best ingredients and prepare them if you don’t feel comfortable with the actual brewing process. I’ve never made a potion before, but I’ve cooked for a long time! And I’ve been reading a fair bit of my textbook for this class over the summer. We’ll be fine.”

“If you say so...”

Hari is happy to see that Blaise is, once again, working with the decidedly nervous-looking Ron, and he has the feeling that they’re both going to be walking their prospective partners through the process to avoid any incidents. They’ll get the hang of it eventually. Probably. It’ll be better for their confidence to work with someone who has some idea of what they’re doing, and they’ll learn those skills through sheer repetition, if nothing else.

The room falls into a dead silence once Snape sweeps into the room. It’s a different sort of quiet than the one that greeted Sprout, something tenser with a hint of fear hiding underneath. It’s especially noticeable in the small group of Gryffindors; Snape’s reputation truly precedes him.

His Head of House starts class with roll call, and he can feel the dread within him rising at the way he pauses on Hari’s name. “Ah, yes. Hari Potter, our new... Celebrity.” Snape continues to take attendance as Malfoy and his goons snicker behind their hands, and he almost thinks that nothing more will come of that comment once their professor moves on to his introduction to the class.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, 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... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death. Assuming that you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.”

Hari briefly wonders why Snape teaches here when he seems to hate it so much. His magic is as dark as his clothing, constantly vibrating beneath his skin as if it’s a tiger pacing back and forth in a cage barely large enough to contain it. It feels confined, trapped, and oddly enough, there seems to be some sort of link between his magic and Hari’s.

“Potter!” Hari startles at his professor suddenly addressing him. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

“A powerful sleeping potion called the Draught of Living Death, sir.”

“Hm.” Black eyes narrow in contemplation. “Well, that one was a given when you just came from Herbology. Pomona always discusses that topic on her first day. Let’s try a harder one, Potter. Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

“Assuming that we’re in the field with no supplies, I would look in the stomach of a goat, sir. But any self-respecting brewer keeps a few in their stores for emergencies, so I would look there first in any other situation.”

“I didn’t ask for your cheek, Potter.” Hari knows better than to say he was simply answering the question, but he wants to. Oh, how he wants to. “What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

Now, those names sound vaguely familiar, but he can hardly memorize every entry in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* before his first class. “I...” Out of the corner of his eye, Hari sees Neville shake his head slightly. The answer hits him then. “Aren’t they the same plant, sir?”

Snape arches his eyebrow, looking between Hari and Neville with a thoroughly displeased expression. “Indeed. It also goes by the name of aconite. Bezoars can save you from nearly any poison, and the Draught of Living Death is so powerful that, if brewed incorrectly, it will be impossible to wake whoever drinks it. Well? Why aren’t you writing this down?”

The class doesn’t get much better once they start brewing a potion for curing boils. Snape hovers worse than Aunt Petunia ever did, even in her foulest moods, criticizing every potion except for the one that Theo and Malfoy are working on together. Neville starts shaking in his boots every time Snape looms over them, and Hari knows that their potion would have been beyond salvaging if he had any part in actually putting the ingredients in or stirring it. As it is, he nearly drops their prepared ingredients more than once.

“Just take a deep breath, Neville,” he whispers under his breath. “He’s upset with me, not you. Reckon he doesn’t like me working with a Gryffindor. Take as long as you need. This potion isn’t one that’s overly affected by being boiled a touch too long so long as the ingredients are added in the correct order, and it’s better to turn in a slightly weaker, complete potion without incident than it is to rush and utterly ruin it because of nerves.”

“Right, right... Thanks, Hari.”

The brewing itself goes smoothly for them, but the same cannot be said of Thomas and Finnegan only a few tables away. They somehow manage to melt their cauldron entirely. The liquid from their half-brewed potion is eating through their wooden table, and Thomas, who is covered in it, groans in agony as boils pop up all over his body.

“Idiot boy! I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire? The instructions are there for a reason!” Snape turns to Finnegan and says, “You, take him to the hospital wing.” His magic is positively roiling with tension and fury now, so Hari isn’t surprised when he rounds on Brown and the Gryffindor Patil with a snarl. “Why didn’t you tell him not to add the quills? Thought it’d make your abysmal potion look better if someone else failed, did you? You’ve lost three points from Gryffindor.”

“What?! But that’s not fair!” Brown cries out, only to fall silent when Snape takes even more points for arguing. She looks near tears when he walks away, sniffing over her potion as Patil tries to salvage it.

“Can you keep an eye out for those two?” he whispers to Neville. “I doubt they’ll appreciate my interference, and we can’t really stop Snape, but...”

“I’ll make sure that they’re okay. They were already worried about Seamus and Dean; it’s pretty cruel to punish them for no reason on top of that. Professor Snape is just as bad as they say, huh?” Judging by the disgruntled look on Blaise’s face when he and Ron hand in a nearly perfect potion only to be overshadowed by Malfoy’s, which is three shades lighter than it should be, even his potion enthusiast friend cannot disagree with that statement.

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Neville rejoins them after lunch, and they all walk to Defense Against the Dark Arts together, much to Malfoy’s disdain.

“Hey, Neville? Did you want to join a study group with me and a few friends? We could use your expertise in Herbology.”

“Are you sure that it won’t cause you any trouble? I don’t want your housemates to give you a hard time because of me.”

“Those who would are already going to give me trouble for being raised by muggles. It’s alright, Neville, really. I don’t care what people like that think of me.” He hopes to change the minds of as many of them as possible, of course, but he knows that it won’t be possible to convince everyone. Hari isn’t going to lose sleep over that.

“Then yeah! That sounds nice. Who else is going to be there?”

“There’s myself, Blaise, Ron, Heir Nott, Heiress Greengrass, and you so far. I plan on asking Hermione to join us during Charms, and I’ll probably invite Hannah and Heiress Bones later on too. There might be more eventually, but that’s all I’ve got so far.”

“You’re joining them, Theo?” Malfoy asks with a disbelieving tone. “You know that you can always study with me!”

“I think you’ll have your hands full with Crabbe and Goyle, Draco,” Theo declines politely. “Besides, I don’t want to be fighting my dormmates constantly; that sounds exhausting. Studying is a neutral ground that benefits everyone and smoothes the tension over.”

“You always were soft,” Malfoy scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Whatever. I can’t fault your logic, I suppose. But you realize that you’ll probably be studying with a—”

“Don’t.” Theo’s voice is quiet, but it is lined with steel.

“Ah, right. I always forget that your mother was a half-blood. You don’t have to worry; you’re not like them. The Malfoys have a few half-bloods in our tree here and there too, doesn’t make us any less pure.”

Theo looks thoroughly done with that conversation, and Malfoy, wisely seeing that, redirects his attention to Neville instead. “Is it true that you’re only a Gryffindor for Heir Potter’s sake?”

Neville does not answer Malfoy directly. “You noticed that, did you?” He bumps shoulders with Hari as a small grin tugs at his lips.

“Of course I did. You were hardly subtle about it, and you had to fight the hat for ages.”

“Well, not all of us can be Slytherins.” They all laugh at that –well, all of them except for Malfoy who looks a healthy combination of wary and contemplative– and file into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom that positively reeks of garlic. Even still, Hari relishes the scant few minutes he will have before his wand and magic alike begin warning him of the danger that Quirrell poses, immediately sitting next to Neville once more and pulling out his things with a small sigh.

“Why did you do it, Heir Longbottom?” Malfoy’s question is little more than a whisper, and Hari wonders if he’s starting to realize exactly what kind of game Hari is playing here.

None of the other Gryffindors have arrived yet, so Neville answers without hesitation. “Hari needed an in with the lions. Besides, me being here instead of in Hufflepuff means that if they start planning to do something to you guys, I can tell you before they pull it off.”

“... Well played.” Malfoy sounds as if he’s speaking to both Neville and Hari there, and he knows for certain then: the pompous blond can tell that he’s no longer the only big fish in a small pond. He’s being forced to recognize that Hari is a serious threat to his position as Slytherin Prince for their year. There is a hint of anxiety dancing in his eyes, but Hari isn’t able to contemplate what that might lead him to do for long.

His wand starts ringing lowly, audible only to him and his familiars since they are linked to his magic, shortly after the Gryffindors file into the classroom, getting louder and louder the closer Quirrell comes to joining them.

It feels as if someone stepped over his grave when Quirrell steps into the room, sending a shiver down Hari’s spine as his head throbs. It is only the magic of Hogwarts, the promise of safety, that keeps him from creating some excuse to visit the hospital wing and never come back.

“H-Hello c-c-class. Today w-we’re going t-to be t-t-talking about the most d-dreadful of creatures: v-vampires.”

Hari’s wand has not stopped ringing in his ear. In fact, it grows louder every time Quirrell looks at him, only quieting slightly when Hari averts his eyes. His head is killing him.

This is going to be a very long class.

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He practically sprints out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, only pausing to wave farewell to Neville before making his way toward the Charms classroom. Even the absolute misery of his previous class cannot hamper his excitement to begin learning charms in an official capacity, and the fact that Charms is their last class of the day is extremely convenient when he needs to have that conversation with Flitwick.

“I know you’re excited for Charms, mate, but still... You ran from Defense awfully quick.” Ron’s eyes are narrowed in thought, and his expression grows more concerned by the second. “It’s not like you, even if his class was a joke. What’s wrong?”

Malfoy and his group –Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode– catch up with them, and the former has intrigue written all over his face. Hari supposes that it’s not a bad idea to start planting the seeds of doubt now.

“There is something off about Professor Quirrell. I thought it when I bumped into him at Diagon Alley, and I’m only more sure of it now. That stutter is awfully pronounced, isn’t it? To an unnatural degree. And more than that, he just... *Feels* wrong.”

Blaise jolts to attention then, his typical carefree smile nowhere to be seen. “You’re sure?” The graveness in his tone, one usually filled with flippancy and levity, causes the rest of their housemates to stiffen slightly, drawing in closer to one another as they continue their trek across the castle.

“I’m sure. Do not get stuck alone with him.”

“And how are you so certain, Heir Potter?” Parkinson’s derisive sneer is dulled by the flash of fear he can see in her eyes. Even if she doesn’t trust him, she trusts her instincts. They can all tell that they wouldn’t be talking like this if something wasn’t seriously wrong.

Hari silently weighs the pros and cons for a few moments before saying, “My wand has a horned serpent horn core, you know?” Typically, wixen jealously guard the secret of their wand’s core. The wood is something that those versed in wandlore can often figure out for themselves, especially in Hari’s case with a wand so pale that it could be made of little else but aspen, but no one can tell the core of a wand without being able to see the magic flowing within it. “And wands made with them alert their wielder to danger with a musical tone. Only I can hear it, of course. What sort of alert system would it be if it put me in further danger?”

“Blimey, that’s... He’s dangerous? Really dangerous? My brothers always said he seemed so meek. The stutter is new, though... And it’s awfully suspect to come back with one caused by trauma when he otherwise appears fine, innit? You’d expect injuries and some scars if he really pissed off vampires in Romania.”

Even the most skeptical among them pale at that. “Merlin, you’re right,” Greengrass breathes. “There’s something seriously wrong here.”

“Are you certain that the stutter is new, Weasley?” Malfoy sounds desperate and more than a little afraid. It speaks volumes of how much so when Ron doesn’t hesitate to answer him despite their blood feud.

“Percy takes Muggle Studies, you know? Quirrell was on his sabbatical last year, but Percy still had him in his third year before Professor Burbage took over. He wasn’t stuttering then.”

“Right,” Malfoy squeaks nervously. “Don’t get caught alone with Professor Quirrell. Got it.”

“We travel in groups, as we always do. If he ever asks any of us to stay behind after class, no fewer than two others should wait on the other side of the door. It doesn’t matter how much you dislike them or what family they’re from; if he is posing a threat to one of us, then you do not abandon them to their fate. Slytherins defend their own. Am I understood?”

Hari expects protest. He expects someone to grumble about never standing at his or Ron’s back. He does not hear it. Instead, all he receives are grave nods with equally grim expressions.

“I may not like you two, but I hardly want your blood on my hands,” Malfoy sniffs. His mask seems a bit shakier than usual, just a bit cracked around the edges, but Hari can appreciate his attempt at normalcy. “I’d go get help, if nothing else.”

“We’re agreed then.”

Malfoy nods. “We’re agreed.”

The Slytherins are so shaken that none of them say a word or even make a face when Hari sits next to Hermione in Charms at the very front of the class, sparking whispers among the Ravenclaws. She is so enthralled with her book that she neither notices them nor Hari sitting beside her at first.

“Hello, Hermione. How have classes been so far?”

“Hari! Oh, it’s all been so wonderful. Everything is so fascinating, and there is so very much to learn. Have you had Professor McGonagall yet? I think Transfiguration might just be my favorite subject, but it’s so hard to choose. We were working on turning matchsticks into needles, and I was so close to getting it right. I turned mine silver and pointy, you see, but it was still made of wood.”

“We don’t have Transfiguration until first thing tomorrow, but I’ll certainly be looking forward to it now,” Hari answers with a smile. “Say, have you had Defense yet?”

“Oh, yes! We had it with Hufflepuff just before lunch. It’s an interesting subject, but I have a feeling that I’ll be self-studying a lot in that class. That stutter makes it awfully difficult to cover everything we’re supposed to in a class period.”

Hari wants to warn her away from Quirrell, but that is something that will have to wait until they’re in private. He trusts the Slytherins to keep that information to themselves; he cannot say the same of the Ravenclaws. He can ask her about the other thing, though. “Speaking of studying, me and some friends were thinking of starting a study group. It’s mostly Slytherins so far, but Neville will be there and I plan on inviting a couple of Hufflepuffs as well. Would you be interested in joining? Maybe invite some people along yourself?”

“That’s a wonderful idea! One can never start studying too early, and our exams won’t creep up on us if we start preparing for them now. I definitely want to come! I’ll have to ask around, but I bet that Padma and Terry will join us, if no one else. Is it just for students in our year?”

“At least for now. I doubt that we’ll be of much help to the upper years, and we’re trying to keep this a fairly equal exchange for everyone.”

“That makes sense,” Hermione agrees with a nod. “We’ll have to revisit that in future years. Maybe we could invite students younger than us? Tutoring others is good for your understanding as well, and it never hurts to keep brushing up on the basics. Ah, but that’s something to figure out later.”

His whirlwind of a friend already has the thought spinning around in his head, and Hari decides that he rather likes the idea of helping younger years as they get older. Better to stop the divisiveness and bigotry before it ever leaves the school than to wait until they’re adults and set in their ways before challenging them. He shelves the thought when Flitwick enters the room, eyes catching on the way his nails point ever-so-slightly and how his smile, no matter how friendly, seems just a bit too sharp.

Either Flitwick knows this and acts overly friendly to compensate, or his personality is just oddly cheery for a goblin, even if he's only half. Hari is willing to bet on it being a bit of both. Their professor pauses briefly on Hari's name during roll call, but he recovers so quickly that no one else takes notice of it.

"Charms are one of the most diverse branches of magic. You will be using charms in several of your classes, everything from Defense Against the Dark Arts to Herbology, so establishing a strong base in this class is crucial. Now, does anyone know what classifies a spell as a charm instead of, for example, a transfiguration?"

Hari and Hermione's hands shoot up at the same time, and Flitwick chuckles as he says, "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Charms add certain properties to the object or creature that they're cast on. They can alter physical appearance, behavior, actions, the list goes on. They also tend to last much longer than other active spells, such as jinxes, but they will revert back to normal in time if you don't reapply the spell or consistently feed magic into it. Transfiguration, on the other hand, transforms an object or creature into something else entirely. Conjuraton, an advanced form of transfiguration, transfigures the air into whatever you are conjuring, making it appear as if you have created it from nothing. These spells have to be reversed for their effects to end since it changes them on a molecular level. That's why you can eat duplicated food without suddenly feeling starving a few hours later."

"Excellently explained, Mr. Potter! Take five points for Slytherin. Charms are, at their core, spells that use magic to alter something without changing it entirely. This is most obvious with charms such as the Confundus Charm and the Unlocking Charm, but magic is complex and rarely so easily divided. Can anyone name a spell that classifies as both a charm and another branch of magic?" Hermione's hand shoots into the air again. "Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"The Wand-Lighting Charm! This spell, incantation: *lumos*, creates light at the tip of your wand by bending existing rays of light and amplifying them. Many academics have argued over whether it should be considered a charm or transfiguration, but they ultimately concluded that it is both. It is a charm because you alter light that already exists, amplifying it to light the area, and it's a transfiguration because that light is permanently altered until you cancel the spell. It is not an active drain on your magic, so they cannot say that the spell is more one than the other. The same debate has been had with the Aguamenti Charm, with it ultimately being classified as both a charm and a conjuration."

"Well done! That's five points for Ravenclaw, Ms. Granger. Speaking of the Wand-Lighting Charm, that is what we will be attempting in our next class. Now, as for the theory we're discussing today..."

Hari loves Charms, and Flitwick is the best teacher that he's ever had. Even those who are less interested in the theory of magic are utterly captivated, and he cannot wait until they start casting spells. Charms are so flexible that he can get away with a lot more experimentation here than in any other class without drawing attention to himself, and there are so many things that he wants to try. He is honestly disappointed when class is over, even as he's thrumming with anticipation for what he's going to do next.

"Hari? Are you coming?"

He waves Hermione off with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I needed to talk to Professor Flitwick about something. We'll catch up tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure thing! See you in History of Magic!"

"We'll wait for you outside. Figure we can all head back to our dorm together to set down our things, maybe explore the castle after?"

"Sounds like a plan, Blaise! See you in a bit." He waits for everyone else to file out of the room, eager to relax after a long first day, before saying, "Professor Flitwick? Could I talk to you about something?"

"Of course! It seems we have much to discuss, Heir Potter-Black-Peverell-Slytherin."

Chapter End Notes

Oh, I had so much fun with the magical theory in this. There will be much more where that came from, I assure you.

I also created Slytherin's class schedule for the sake of consistency (and to save my own sanity; I will be doing this with each year, albeit only Hari's exact schedule from third year onward), so here it is for you all!

Monday:

Morning Class (after breakfast): Herbology with Hufflepuff

Midmorning Class (after 1st class): Potions with Gryffindor

Afternoon Class (after lunch): Defense Against the Dark Arts with Gryffindor

Late Afternoon Class (after 3rd class): Charms with Ravenclaw

Tuesday:

Morning Class: Transfiguration with Hufflepuff

Midmorning Class: History of Magic with Ravenclaw

Afternoon Class: Herbology with Hufflepuff

Late Afternoon Class: Defense Against the Dark Arts with Gryffindor

Wednesday:

Morning Class: Charms with Ravenclaw

Midmorning Class: History of Magic with Ravenclaw

Afternoon Class: Potions with Gryffindor

Midnight Class: Astronomy with entire year

Thursday:

Morning Class: Herbology with Hufflepuff

Midmorning Class: Defense Against the Dark Arts with Gryffindor

Afternoon Class: Transfiguration with Hufflepuff

Late Afternoon Class: Charms with Ravenclaw

Friday:

Morning Class: Potions with Gryffindor

Midmorning Class: Transfiguration with Hufflepuff

Afternoon Class: History of Magic with Ravenclaw

Late Afternoon Class: Flying with entire year

As you can see, classes are shared with one house throughout the entire year for the sake of not overly complicating group projects and exams. I decided to make every class a "double" in the sense that it has two houses and refuse to incorporate double periods (where a class takes up two blocks on its own) right now; it's just too complicated to work around. In later years with more complex potions, the class will be held in the late afternoon and extend into the early evening, longer than the typical afternoon class, instead of trying to arrange them in such a way that it's possible to have one class take up two periods. As for sharing each class with another house, that just makes sense, even if I didn't want to give Hari a chance to make friends with people in other houses. I mean, think about it, even with the four houses split into two groups, that's still fourteen classes total to manage throughout all seven years. With one professor per subject, that is utterly insane. It's hardly any wonder that they're so useless throughout the series; when do they have the time to do anything but teach class and create lesson plans?

Also as a note, first and second years have their core classes three times a week (with the exception of astronomy), and third years and up have their classes twice a week (including electives) with a few more free periods to account for increased homework and accommodate taking up to three elective classes (without the use of a time turner).

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I didn't mean to go so long between updates, but these things just happen sometimes. I swear, I'll blink and weeks have gone past like they're nothing at all. Today's chapter is a bit on the shorter end (though not an unusual length for chapters of this story; it just seems like it after the behemoth that was last chapter), but it has several fun things that I'm very happy to share with you guys. This is also one of the few chapters left before the first year plot really starts kicking in, so things will be getting more intense before too long ;3

“So you know, then? I had wondered.”

Professor Flitwick nods, and there is a glint of steel in his eyes that Hari recognizes from King Bloodclaw. His magic is just as wild as the goblins that Hari saw in Gringotts that day too. It sounds like the drag of metal against metal, fierce and unpredictable with a sharp edge that speaks of decades of combat. It's exactly the sort of magic he'd expect from a world-renowned duelist. “Every goblin in Great Britain knew that you had become a friend of our nation before night fell that day. The rest learned of it within the week, from the branches in Australia to the United States to Antarctica. Our king's word travels fast and far. And we needed to know who you are, what you stand to inherit, to look out for your best interests. None of us will ever breathe a word of it where we can be overheard.”

“You don't have to convince me, professor. I'm glad that you know; it makes this far easier.”

“Ah, yes! What did you need my help with? I can't imagine that you have many questions about my class on the first day,” he teases with a sharp grin.

“Before I ask, I have a different, equally important question to ask you.” Hari's grave tone has Flitwick standing straighter, eyes alert and curious in equal measure. “At the end of the day, are you more loyal to the Goblin Nation or to Hogwarts? If there was ever a situation that forced you to choose between the two, which would you choose?”

“I may love Hogwarts, but at the end of the day, it is not my home. I care for my students, but at the end of the day, they are not my people. My father may have been human, but at the end of the day, I was born and raised underground. I received the same warrior training that every other young goblin did. I was not treated any differently there, but here... There are whispers. And if anyone ever knew exactly what I was, I rather expect that I would find myself out of a job. I would mourn what I have to leave behind, but it would not be a difficult decision to make. The Goblin Nation comes first, always. As do the people we consider our own.”

“Good.” Hari breathes out a sigh. “Good... Hypothetically speaking, if a student asked you to be the bonder for an Unbreakable Vow, it is not strictly against your contract to do so, is it?”

“No, it isn't. The board members don't expect children to make such serious vows, so they are not even mentioned. Why do you need an Unbreakable Vow?”

“I have secrets, dangerous secrets, that I know I cannot keep forever. But I am not in a position where it is safe for all of magical Britain to know them. I trust Ron, Blaise, and Theo more than I expected to when we barely know each other, but this is not the sort of thing that I can take risks with. They'll notice something eventually; it's inevitable when we live together. And besides, an Unbreakable Vow won't just protect us from loose lips; it'll protect us from prying minds as well. It can't be anything less serious. We need that protection against Legilimens as well.” Hari does not have to say that they need that protection against Dumbledore for Flitwick to understand what he means. It's mentioned in *Notable Magical Names of Our Time* that the headmaster is a natural Legilimens, and the thought of the man digging around in Hari's head makes him feel violently ill. He will never make eye contact with him.

“I understand,” Flitwick murmurs. “So long as your dormmates agree, I will cast it for you. I will even go a step further and be included in that vow as well. It's best not to leave any loose ends.”

As if on cue, Ron, Blaise, and Theo are all ushered into the room by Athena, and his familiar leaps up onto his shoulder with a contented purr, carefully avoiding stepping on Artemis with practiced grace. *‘The other three are waiting for us in your dorm. I figured it would be easiest to get all the introductions out of the way in one go.’*

“Thank you, Athena.”

His friends exchange a peculiar look with one another before Ron asks, "So, what's going on, mate?"

"It's best that we have this conversation somewhere more private." There aren't any magical signatures especially close to the classroom, but they are still too close for comfort. It won't seem strange for a Slytherin dorm room to have protective warding on it to keep anyone from listening in. It will seem strange if a classroom does.

Hari walks over to one of the stone walls, brushing his hand against it and smiling as a passageway appears. It isn't one that existed before, but Hogwarts is more than willing to help her heir in this way. "This will lead directly to our room. Follow me."

"How did you know that was there?" Theo whispers quietly, falling in step without hesitation.

"I expect that's one of the things he's going to talk about." Blaise's knowing grin has Theo narrowing his eyes, but he doesn't say anything further.

"My question is why there are passageways leading to our rooms in the first place. That seems like a security risk."

"It won't exist unless one of us asks for it, Ron," he assures his friend. "But Hogwarts is happy to help." They all duck into the secret passageway, and stone slides shut behind them once Flitwick joins them. Floating balls of light flicker to life all around them. Hari smiles at the feeling of comfort and home, of Hogwarts' magic, that each orb emanates and follows them without hesitation.

He's so focused on his goal that he doesn't notice the glowing balls of magic from earlier in the passageway rejoining them. They dance around the group of wixen playfully, and once their energy is spent, they float over to create a halo of light around Hari, hovering around his head, shoulders, and anywhere else that they can get close to him before his magic instinctively accepts their offering and absorbs them. Each step he takes seems lighter than the last.

Hari is greeted by wide eyes all around once they step into the familiar dorm room, and he cocks his eyebrow when he notices that Flitwick is no different, though he at least has the presence of mind to immediately cast privacy wards on their room. "What is it?"

"What is it, he asks," Theo groans despairingly. "As if that wasn't the most..."

Blaise pats his shoulder consolingly before giving Hari a wicked little smirk. "What are you up to now, hm? Dragging professors into your plots like this... Tsk, tsk, Hari."

"I want us to make an Unbreakable Vow." He sees no point in beating around the bush with this, and his words certainly catch his friends' attention. "Something that keeps all of our secrets exactly that: secrets. I was thinking something along the lines of us being unable to speak about anything that we overhear, observe, or make clear is a secret in this dorm room. I'd just make everything that we do in here secret if that wouldn't be suspicious, but I don't exactly want anyone to know that we've made an Unbreakable Vow either."

"Why not just make us vow on our magic, mate? Then we wouldn't have needed to involve a professor in this." Ron's eyes are narrow and calculating, and only a few seconds later, he answers his own question. "It's because the Unbreakable Vow protects against mind magics, innit? You think someone's gonna read our minds."

"Dumbledore is a Legilimens."

"Shit!" Ron's eyes are tinged with fear, and though Blaise and Theo maintain more composure, they look just as afraid. "Of course he is. Yeah, yeah I'll make the vow."

"You only needed to ask, Hari," Blaise says with a wink. "I don't want what I already know getting out either. Include that in the vow, would you?"

"This is the safest move," Theo agrees with a nod. "If my father knew I was friends with you lot... Yes, I'll do it."

"Professor Flitwick?" Hari receives a sharp nod in answer, and the two of them work out the exact wording of the vow with occasional input from the others. Any potential loopholes are ruthlessly eviscerated by the time they're finished with it.

"Mother Magic, I am here to bind four young wizards and myself to an Unbreakable Vow of their choosing. I ask for your blessing in this." The buzzing of magic surges around them, some of it from Hogwarts and some of it not, and even his friends can feel it if the way they shudder is any indication. "Thank you. We request that anything overheard, observed, or plainly stated to be a secret within this room or my office remains a secret among those present. We request that magic hold our tongues and shield our minds from anyone who would attempt to pry the truth from us. In addition to this, knowledge

gained prior to this vow may be made secret as well so long as both parties agree that it should be such. Is there any offering I may make for such a boon?"

Magic, thick and heavy and searching, settles around Flitwick and Hari both. He can feel the slight drain on his magic despite not casting the spell himself, and he knows that their professor must be feeling the effects even more strongly. But it works. Hari can feel a bit of that magic settling within him, and he breathes a sigh of relief once the foreign magic retreats from them all, satisfied with its offering.

"That was not a traditional Unbreakable Vow." Theo's sharp gaze rests on Flitwick, mind obviously whirring with the possibilities. "What...?"

"Oh, but it is where I'm from." Flitwick's smile is all teeth. "Goblins have more respect for Mother Magic than most wixen, and vows made with her approval are far more powerful. It's also why we don't need wands to cast spells, as useful as I've found mine over the years. All of this is a secret, of course."

The magic of the vow feels the slightest bit heavier for a few seconds before settling once more, tangling that knowledge into a web of secrets that is sure to grow obscenely complex over the years.

"Of course, professor!" Blaise agrees with a laugh. "Hari can sense magic. That's something we're keeping a secret as well, assuming that you agree?"

"Most definitely. That's not the sort of information I want to be known outside of my trusted few."

"Oh? So you trust us now? Enough to teach me, perhaps?"

Hari snickers at that. It seems that Blaise is hellbent on learning how to sense magic too, but given how well he reads people already, Hari can understand why. It'll be an incredibly useful skill for him. "An Unbreakable Vow is no laughing matter. That you all agreed to make one... Yes, I trust you. Enough so to introduce you to who taught me, even."

Athena leaps to the floor as the rest of his familiars climb up his body. Kratos rests his head where she was perched only a few moments prior, and Hari thanks Merlin and every brilliant wixen that came after him that feather-light charms exist. He's quite certain that Kratos weighs more than him without it.

"You've secured our nest, speaker." Camulus sounds exceedingly pleased by this. **"Well done."**

"Your prey will not see you before they are firmly caught within your jaws," Artemis hisses in agreement. **"And potential predators will see your venom and be afraid."**

"Did you guys hear that?" Ron's eyes flicker around the room nervously. "I could have sworn I heard..."

"Stop scaring the poor hatchlings," Nisaba scolds them both. **"Little speaker, you may remove the charm. We are excited to no longer need to hide within our home. I confess that I got used to openly exploring in our old nest."**

"I am sorry that you ever had to hide. I am sorry that you still must outside of this room." Ron startles violently at the hissing coming from Hari, and Blaise looks utterly fascinated.

Theo sounds almost reverent when he says, "You're a parselmouth."

It's not a question. Even still, Hari winks, finger held up to his lips, and says, "That's a secret. And so are they and any information I share about them." All four snakes that are draping themselves over Hari become visible once more as the charms shielding them from the rest of the world melt away. "I would like to introduce you to the rest of my familiars. This is Nisaba, Camulus, Artemis, and Kratos! Nisaba is the ball python here." Hari lifts the arm that she is wrapped around with a smile. "And she's been with me since I was seven."

"Seven? I've never heard of a familiar bond formed so young. And to have so many... I'm beginning to understand why King Bloodclaw declared you a friend to our nation the first time he met you. I never doubted his judgement, but it is exceedingly rare for someone to earn his favor so quickly."

"You're a friend of the Goblin Nation, Hari?!" Blaise's eyes light up with unholy glee. "That's why you asked Professor Flitwick to do this."

"I am," Hari confirms with a nod, flushing slightly at the thought of how that happened. "Though I rather stumbled into that. I'm lucky that I was taught the proper etiquette beforehand. Camulus, he's the boomslang, joined me when I was nine. He was born and raised in the magical world, and he's the one who taught me everything I know about magic before coming here. Yes, including how to sense it."

Blaise's eyes blow wide at the confirmation. "I wish I could understand him. Lucky that I have you to act as a translator, though, isn't it?"

"You are, and don't you forget it," Hari teases. "I'm used to acting as a translator for my family, though, so it's really no trouble."

"Blimey, a parselmouth... How did that happen?"

Theo answers before Hari gets the chance to. "The Potters immigrated from India, and parselmouths are far more common there. It's been several generations since we've seen one from their line, but they do have a history of it." He gives Hari a considering look before asking, "None of them are going to have a problem with Hedwig, are they? Again, I can just send her to the owlery if we need to."

"Artemis doesn't like owls," Hari admits while pointing at the little adder tucked into his hair. "But that's mostly because Athena and I saved her from being eaten by one. She's willing to tolerate Hedwig in exchange for many, many mice."

"We can play that by ear. If either of them seems too stressed, then we'll separate them." Both he and Theo nod at Blaise's suggestion, and Hari swears that Hedwig hooted in agreement. Her golden eyes seem just as intelligent as Athena's.

"And the big one?" Ron eyes Kratos nervously, though he's slowly relaxing the longer they talk. "When did you meet him?"

"Only a few months ago. My family and I went to the zoo, and while most of the snakes there seemed content, he wasn't. I orchestrated his escape." Hari runs his hand down Kratos's spine, chuckling at the contented hiss caused by his warm hands. "I thought it'd be a hard sell with my relatives, honestly, but they were surprisingly on board. Helps that he's been keeping the rabbit populations down, I think. They were becoming a real pest in Surrey." He's quick to add, "Where I live is also a secret." Dumbledore might already know that bit of information, but he is hardly the only Legilimens out there. Hari isn't taking any chances.

"Only you, Hari," Ron snorts. "Only you. Any other life-shattering revelations you want to drop on us? Now's the time for it."

His friend is clearly joking, but Hari quirks an eyebrow, gives him a little grin, and conjures a ball of light in his hand without a word. His wand is still in its holster. "Wands are useless to snakes, but that certainly didn't stop Camulus from teaching me a few things. This is the Wand-Lighting Charm combined with some form of levitation, though I don't think it's the spell we use for objects. My magic is very... intent-based. I can usually alter and combine spells without much thought, though I have started working backward to try to figure out how to replicate it for others."

"It's such a shame you weren't in my house," Flitwick sighs. "I'm going to have to create extra work for you to keep you from getting bored. Teach you a few advanced charms or challenge you to alter the spell once you get it down in class, perhaps."

"Really?" Hari perks up a bit. "That sounds great! I've always been good with charms, and I'll definitely enjoy pushing my limits."

"What is the most complex charm that you can consistently cast? Knowing that will help me know how to best challenge you."

"He woke me up with the Aguamenti Charm this morning," Ron answers with a wry chuckle. "And it was very controlled."

"That's... And you felt no ill effects from it? No dizziness or severe drain on your magic?"

"None. I'm pants at Transfiguration, though." Hari sighs, shaking his head slightly. "I haven't tried much so far, but... What I've managed so far has always been some sort of half-transfiguration, and they're far more draining than any other type of spell for me. I'm hoping that Professor McGonagall will be able to help me there. Maybe I'm doing something wrong."

"We all have our strengths and weaknesses, mate. You can't be good at everything."

"Exactly! Besides, you have me and Theo for Transfiguration. He enjoys it, and while I like brewing more, my wand is especially fond of those spells. Ebony is like that. We'll figure out a way to get you through those exams if we need to."

"And I believe this is when I should take my leave," Flitwick chuckles, giving them all a sharp grin. "Before I overhear plots best left unheard." Hogwarts opens up a path to return him to his classroom, and he takes a few steps toward it.

"How were you not in Slytherin, professor?" Theo asks, and Flitwick laughs outright before turning around to face him.

“Oh trust me, the hat considered it. But my hunger for knowledge outweighed my desire to use it for anything in particular, he said, and so to Ravenclaw I went. That’s a secret too.” Flitwick winks, takes down the privacy ward, and leaves them to simmer on that for a good, long while.

“You know what?” Blaise asks while they’re getting ready for supper, having spent the past couple of hours exchanging secrets in hushed tones and working on their homework together. “I think Professor Flitwick is my favorite teacher.”

They’re all in agreement on that front.

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Transfiguration turns out to be more than a bit of a disaster on Hari’s part. Turning a matchstick into a needle sounds like it should be simple enough, but he’s yet to manage any result at all. He breathes out a heavy sigh that Bones, who elected to sit next to him in this class, quirks an eyebrow at.

“Having trouble there? From what I’ve heard, that’s unusual for you.”

“Are rumors spreading that quickly?” Hari deflects.

“You know they are; don’t change the subject. What are you struggling with?” Bones might not have a perfectly transfigured needle, but her metal matchstick is a far sight better than his nonexistent progress.

Hari has a hard enough time transfiguring things back in Little Whinging. Here, at Hogwarts, everything has some degree of ambient magic due to the ley lines they rest on. Everything down to the smallest matchstick. And that magic suits it. There is a hint of sparks, of fire, intertwined with the scent of a forest, and the magic is as flexible as any tree, capable of bending without breaking. That is about the furthest thing possible from the magic inherent in most metals, cold and rigid and utterly unbending, that Harry can imagine. The matchstick doesn’t want to be a needle. It feels utterly wrong to try to force it to change into the opposite of what it is.

“I could turn it into a wooden needle, but the metal part... I can’t do that.” Hari demonstrates, and surely enough, the matchstick does not mind a transfiguration that allows it to retain its unique magic. “Maybe if I approach this from a different angle...” It’s not strictly what they were assigned to do, but it should be impressive enough due to the difference in size, he hopes.

One wand motion and incantation later, Harry lifts a sizable, unlit torch from their shared table. “How...? Heir Potter, it should not be possible for that spell to do that.”

“You can just call me Hari, you know?” he chuckles at Bones’ disbelieving expression. “And magic does as it wants sometimes. My matchstick rather likes being made of wood and creating fires, I’d reckon.”

“Mr. Potter.” Hari jolts at McGonagall’s voice, giving her a sheepish grin when he sees her unamused glare. “Focus on the assignment.”

Hari tries the spell again, winds up turning his matchstick into a wooden crochet hook, and sighs despairingly. McGonagall narrows her eyes in curiosity, and he flushes at the feeling of eyes on him from all over the room. “Try it again. Use a sharper flick.”

Doing so only results in a wooden dagger. “I don’t think it wants to be a needle, professor.”

“Don’t be absurd, Mr. Potter. It’s a matchstick; it cannot want anything. Transfiguration is a difficult subject in the beginning, but your magic will get a feel for it in time.” McGonagall leaves them to go help another student, and Bones turns to him with an odd expression on her face.

“You may call me Susan as well if you’d like. Maybe we can help each other out? I’ll help you figure out how to make your matchstick metal if you help me figure out how to change its shape.”

“That sounds like a wonderful deal to me, Susan.”

Susan’s transfiguration is the closest thing they have to a needle by the end of the class period. Hari’s is nowhere near that level, but he does turn the wood silver and makes it shaped like a needle once more. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever get much further than that.

It’s hard to make a spell work when neither he nor his magic want to do it, after all.

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Hari isn't sure how Binns can make a subject as interesting as the history of magic itself boring, but he manages it. The fact that he doesn't even register that they're there and immediately starts droning on about the wixen's horribly biased and inaccurate version of events regarding the wars with the goblins does not help.

Even among the studious Ravenclaws, only Hermione is taking diligent notes on his lecture. Most of the other students are tuning Binns out and self-studying instead, taking notes as they go along. There are a few less disciplined students, like Crabbe and Goyle, who have decided that this class is a free nap period, though.

"You might be the only hope for our year's marks in this class, Heiress Greengrass," he says with a despairing sigh as soon as they're out of the classroom. "I love magical history, and I was still bored to tears. It's hard to even self-study with Binns' droning." He wonders if the ghost will even notice if they skip his class. Harry's willing to be that he'd teach an empty classroom without thinking anything is amiss.

"You flatter me, Heir Potter. I'm certain that Granger would help you in any case."

"She would, but she doesn't have the years of growing up immersed in our culture and history that you do. It's important to have different perspectives on these things. Someone with an eye for the details and what remains unsaid in the subtext and someone with a fresh perspective... They tend to balance one another out quite well."

Their group shrinks slightly once they make it to lunch, and Harry waves farewell to Hermione as she rejoins her housemates. He's surprised to see Hannah and Susan approaching them shortly after.

"Hope you don't mind us eating lunch with you guys!" Hannah's cheery voice stuns the majority of the Slytherin table into silence as they all sit down together. "I figured that since we both go to Herbology after this anyway..."

"Is this even allowed?" an upper-year mutters.

Susan quirks an eyebrow at them, and a smirk tugs at her lips when she says, "It's not against any rules. The charter only requires that students sit with their own houses for feasts, such as those at the beginning and end of the year, and does not specify otherwise. Most simply assume. Aunt Amelia taught me the importance of reading the fine print of these things."

Harry bites back a laugh as the majority of their house is forcefully reminded of the fact that, Hufflepuff or not, Susan was raised by a Slytherin. He sees their opinion of her shift in real time, becoming more guarded and curious than outright dismissive, even outside of their year.

Malfoy looks vaguely ill.

"Are you excited to start working with plants today? I know it's just the boring stuff for now, but it won't be long before we're working with puffapods and bouncing bulbs!"

"I've always enjoyed gardening. There's a sort of peace in it, don't you think? I'm always going to enjoy the class, even when we're working with the less interesting ones."

"I'm so glad you're my partner." Hannah's smile lights up the hall, and he can see several of his housemates squinting and turning their heads away from it. "Most Hufflepuffs don't mind Herbology, of course, but it's rare to find other people with a passion for it."

"I have got to introduce you to Neville, then. He's the real Herbology prodigy among us; he even kept me from embarrassing myself in potions. Say, would you be interested in joining a study group with us?" He gives Susan a quick smile before saying, "You're invited too, of course. We still have to find a place for us to all meet up, but we've got students from every other house so far."

"Ooh! That sounds like an amazing idea!" Hannah cheers. "My charms could really use some work. I don't wanna fall behind everyone."

"... I should be able to squeeze it into my schedule. I'm good at memorizing things, so History of Magic is no trouble at all for me. Given Binns' teaching style, I can't imagine that being true for most of our year."

"I'll appreciate all the help you can give me, Heiress Bones." Greengrass inclines her head with a twinge of a smile. "I imagine that we'll have to beat it into their heads ourselves with those dreadful classes."

Susan laughs, and Harry can't keep the smile off of his face no matter how hard he tries. This is nice. Watching his friends relax around one another like this is comforting, and it makes him believe that his goals truly are achievable. He won't settle for anything else.

One day, students from each house will eat together, smiling and laughing just like this, without any fear of repercussions.
One day, they will forget this unnatural divide and remember that they are all connected by magic.

Hogwarts positively sings with joy at the thought of it.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I did not mean to leave this sitting for half as long as I did, but life is busy, what can I say? The good news is that this fic has been completely outlined now, chapter-by-chapter, hence the final chapter count being added! It will be easy for me to hop back into this project now, even when I have to work on other things. And I am very, very eager to get back to working on this fic. I hope you all enjoy!

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Have any of you ever really focused on what it feels like to cast a spell?” Three pairs of eager eyes gleam with anticipation as Hari thinks on how to best explain what Camulus taught him. Despite the early hour, even Ron is fully alert and paying attention to what Hari is saying. “The way you have to draw from a well of power and channel it in a specific way to get the results you want... Sensing magic is allowing yourself to do the first step while discarding the second. It’s kind of like meditation, honestly. You’re not trying to make your magic do anything; you’re just trying to let it flow freely until you can sense it outside of you as surely as you can feel it inside of you. It can be very magically draining, though, so be careful. Don’t wear yourselves out so much that you’re struggling in class today.”

Not that Hari has ever had any problems with sensing magic for extended periods of time, but Camulus has made it abundantly clear that he is an exception to that rule. His magic is such an endless, fathomless thing that his friends, powerful as they are, can never hope to match it. They’ll never be able to use it constantly like Hari does. Even still, learning how to sense magic will be useful any time they suspect something is amiss.

Hari watches as Theo quickly falls into a meditative trance, followed shortly by Blaise. Ron manages to fall into the same trance several minutes later, just as Theo’s magic flares with awe and wonder that has his friend’s eyes snapping wide open. Dark blue brightens into something a few shades lighter than before, twirling around Theo in clear excitement as he turns to face Hari. The smile that was tugging at his friend’s lips immediately melts away as shocked horror overtakes his expression. “Hari, your magic is...”

The rich, purple shade of his magic has grown far darker over the years, tinging black around the edges and clinging to him like the shadows themselves. Even Camulus isn’t entirely sure what it means. Their best guess is that Hari’s magic has a preference for darker spells and has begun showing that earlier than most wixen do, but even that is only a guess.

Blaise’s magic starts vibrating even more sharply than usual, showcasing an excitement that is directed in a specific direction rather than its typical joy for life in general. His eyes slowly crack open as he says, “What’s all this about Hari’s magic? It can’t be that—” Brown eyes widen as they take in the swell of magic hovering around Hari, heavy with power and nearly encompassing the entire room. “Merda...”

Burnt orange withers slightly as Ron mutters, “You’re all making me nervous, mate. Do I even want to open my eyes?” Self-satisfaction still thrums lowly in his magic, proof enough that he’s got the basic concept down, and despite his hesitation, Ron slowly cracks his eyes open. He slams them shut again as soon as he gets a glimpse of Hari’s magic. “Nope. Nuh-uh. I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that. Merlin, how powerful are you?”

“Merlin sounds about right,” Theo croaks faintly.

Hari rolls his eyes. Honestly, his friends are all so dramatic. “This is all a secret,” he feels the need to clarify, just in case.

“Yeah, no shit!” Blaise sounds a touch hysterical. “They’d crucify you if they knew about this, Hari. Your magic is... It’s *dark*. Absolutely, undeniably dark. I don’t think that’s a parselmouth thing.”

“It isn’t,” Theo confirms. “There’s a record of light, gray, and dark wixen who have been parselmouths throughout the years. Though I wouldn’t say his magic is dark, per se... More like a very dark shade of gray.”

“It’s still enough for Dumbledore to bloody crucify him for it,” Ron mutters under his breath. “Thank Merlin for Unbreakable Vows.”

His friends all watch with a faint hint of resignation as Hari reigns his magic back in, allowing Camulus to drape himself over his shoulders with a raspy, laughter-tinged hiss. ***“Your nestmates are beginning to understand that they share their nest with a predator. Good. It will do them well not to forget it.”***

His friends’ magic maintains an anxious energy throughout all of their classes, and, eager for things to get back to normal, Hari suggests they visit Hagrid after third period since they won’t have another class until Astronomy tonight anyway.

“I have some reading to do, Heir Potter, but pass along my regards.” Theo’s magic is the most settled of his friends, more curious and wary now than outright afraid, so Hari doesn’t feel too bad about him refusing. He needs to keep up appearances anyway.

Ron, on the other hand, immediately perks up. “Really? Charlie always talked about him a lot; it’d be pretty wicked to talk with him. You sure he won’t mind?”

“Yup! Hagrid said I could visit whenever and bring friends along with me, so it should be fine. I don’t think he gets a lot of company... And he’s been really nice to me. I like Hagrid.”

Ron’s magic swirls to life with contentment, finally at ease again as he nods eagerly. Blaise remains a touch more wary as he heaves out a sigh, saying, “It’s really not an act, is it? Not much of one, anyway. “ The Unbreakable Vow won’t let him say anything more than that, but Hari understands him just fine regardless.

“Nope. You’re still my friend, Blaise. Minions aren’t really my style.” That startles a laugh out of Blaise, and the tension completely melts away after that. Conversation flows easily as they make their way to Hagrid’s home, a small, wooden house that sits on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and a genuine smile is tugging at Hari’s lips as he knocks on its door.

The sound of several deep barks and frantic scrabbling has Hari’s magic bracing in anticipation as Hagrid says, “Back, Fang! Back!!” Hagrid laughs nervously as his face peers through the crack of the door, lighting up when he sees Hari standing there. “Hang on jus’ a second, Hari. I said *back*, Fang!” He opens the door wider, struggling to keep hold of the giant, black boarhound’s collar as they step inside.

Cozy. There’s no better word to describe Hagrid’s home. Several hams and pheasants hang from the ceiling, a kettle is boiling over the open fire, and there is a massive bed with a patchwork, handmade quilt draped over it in the corner of the room. Despite everything being condensed into a single room, it doesn’t feel very cramped at all.

Once Blaise has closed the door behind them, Hagrid releases Fang, and he immediately bounds up to them with a rapidly wagging tail as he gives Hari a big, slobbery kiss. “Feel free ter make yerselves at home,” Hagrid says with a smile. “Ain’t often I get Slytherins out ‘ere, but since yer with Hari, I reckon yer alrigh’.”

Hagrid takes the now whistling kettle off the fire and pours it into a large teapot, letting the tea steep as he sets a bunch of rock cakes out on a tray. “This is Ron and Blaise,” Hari introduces. “I’ve made other friends too, but I didn’t want to spring too many visitors on you at once...”

“Nonsense! Yer friends are always welcome ‘ere. Tha more tha merrier and all o’ that.” Hagrid smiles as he turns to face Ron. “Another Weasley, eh? Gave tha school a right shock with yer sorting, yer did. Then again... I spent half me life chasing yer brothers away from this forest, especially them twins. Now those’re a pair of Slytherins if I’ve ever seen ‘em, tha sneaky buggers... Don’t ya be going an’ gettin’ into trouble too, now.”

Hagrid’s booming laughter fills the room as Ron salutes him with a wry grin and says, “I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”

“And yer...?” Hagrid turns to Blaise inquisitively, allowing him to fill in the blanks.

“Heir Zabini. Merry meet, Hagrid. Hari speaks fondly of you.”

Hagrid seems a bit off-put by the proper introduction for a few moments, shaking it off before saying, “Merry meet. Yer family’s from Italy, righ’?”

“Yes, sir. My father was born and raised in England, though, so Mamma agreed to send me to school here.” Hagrid nods in clear approval before setting the rock cakes down and pouring them all a cup of tea, and they all grab one despite the cakes being, as one would expect, rock-hard. Hari’s teeth hurt just watching Hagrid bite straight through one, but he finds that they’re perfectly edible if he lets them soak in the tea for a while. Ron and Blaise are quick to mirror him.

“Is there anyone we should watch out for in the castle, Hagrid?” Hari’s question has two purposes: One, he wants to see if Hagrid is aware of the threat that Quirrel poses or if the adults are likely oblivious to it, and two, he wants to know if there is anyone else he should be watching his step around. Forewarned is forearmed.

“Filch, tha’ mean old git,” Hagrid answers with absolutely no hesitation, making Blaise snort in startled laughter. Ron is hardly so restrained, and he laughs so hard that tears well up in his eyes. “Torments tha students every chance ‘e gets. Steer right clear of him, ya hear? An’ don’t even get me started on tha’ cat o’ his, Mrs. Norris. D’yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere! Can’t get rid o’ her. Filch puts her up ta it.”

Hari makes a mental note of that, and he can see both Ron and Blaise doing the same. Still, it doesn’t really answer the main reason he’s asking the question, so Hari fishes a bit more with more obvious bait. “What about Professor Snape? He seems to really hate me, and I don’t understand why. He’s supposed to be my Head of House, but he kept trying to trip me up with questions during class Monday. It’s like he wanted to humiliate me. And today! Today he was glaring at me the whole class. Do you think it’s because I’m partnering with Neville?”

“Yer workin’ with a Gryffindor?” Hagrid asks as his eyebrows climb to his hairline. “Tha’s a surprise, though I guess yer would... ‘E probably don’t like that much, no. Always been a bit caught up in tha house rivalry, that one. Hated yer father, he did. But ‘e was always good friends with Lily, so why...?” Hagrid’s eyes narrow in thought, and a realization suddenly hits Hari.

The boy in the picture. That lanky, dark hair and equally dark eyes... His mum was friends with Professor Snape. That’s useful information to have. “I reckon he’ll get over it in time,” Hagrid reassures him, even if he can’t quite look Hari in the eye as he says it. Hagrid turns to Ron and, in a clear change of subject, asks, “How’s yer brother, Charlie? I always liked ‘im a lot; ‘e was always great with animals.”

Ron doesn’t hesitate to tell Hagrid all about Charlie and the dragon preserve in Romania, and while he does so, Blaise picks up a newspaper clipping that has his magic sharpening in clear interest. Hari leans over his shoulder to read the article with him.

Gringotts Break-In Latest

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of an unknown dark wixen. The goblins of Gringotts insist that nothing was stolen in the break-in; the vault that was searched had, in fact, been emptied earlier that same day.

“But we’re not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out of it if you know what’s good for you,” said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

Hari is not a fan of the fact that the reporter hadn’t even bothered to ask the goblin for their name. In fact, he’s so angry about it that he doesn’t realize the significance of the date that the break-in happened until Blaise says, “Huh... Didn’t you go to Diagon Alley on your birthday, Hari?”

“Yeah... Guess it’s pretty lucky that I didn’t get caught up in that mess, huh?” Lucky, yes, but also suspicious. Is it really a coincidence that someone tried to break into Gringotts the day that he came back to the magical world? And Hagrid... He’s not sure what his escort took out of a vault that day, but if Dumbledore sent him to do it, then it’s probably something that other people would try to steal.

The fact that Hagrid looks so nervous about what Blaise said really only cements his suspicion. There is something big happening here, something that probably involves the third-floor corridor, and Hari vows to stay far, far away from it. He wants no part of this madness.

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Friday is here before he knows it, and the entire first year is buzzing with anticipation. Some of them are nervous, but most of them are excited. Today is their first flying class, after all.

Malfoy is being absolutely insufferable about it. He keeps going on and on, telling stories about narrow escapes from muggle helicopters that Hari knows are a load of bollocks, he would’ve been penalized for breaking the Statute of Secrecy if they were true, and whining about how unfair it is that first years can’t play Quidditch

Ron’s stories, at least, are far more interesting. Growing up with as many siblings as he did, he’s basically had his own Quidditch team to practice with since he was a kid. Considering that Percy is the only one of his siblings, among those who have already been to Hogwarts, who never joined the Quidditch team, Hari imagines that Ron will have an easy time of it during lessons today.

Hari, on the other hand, is quite nervous. He never even learned how to ride a bike, so the thought of flying a broom is very intimidating. It doesn’t help that Kratos is sulking in their dorm room, upset that he can’t come along when he’s the only one of his familiars truly interested in flying, and the only reason that Nisaba is curled around his neck today is because they insist

on a familiar being with him at all times. Artemis can't hold onto him nearly as well as Nisaba can, so she's currently roaming the halls with Athena to avoid spending more time than strictly necessary with Hedwig.

He vaguely notices that Neville, who looks as nervous as Hari feels, receives a package at breakfast that morning, but they sit too far apart for him to make out what it is. Whatever it might be, it has Neville's magic swirling around in confused worry.

Neville's nerves aren't helped in the slightest by the fact that they have Potions first thing in the morning, and he's practically trembling as they walk together to class. "Are you alright, Neville? You seem worried about whatever you received earlier. Is everything okay at home?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it's fine. Thanks, Hari. I just... I was already nervous about flying lessons this afternoon, and then Gran sent me a Remembrall." He fishes a small orb out of his pocket, and once he fully closes his hand around it, it begins to glow red. "It tells you if you've forgotten something, but... The trouble is, I can't remember what I've forgotten, so now I'm even more nervous than before!"

Potions today does not go any better than the previous two classes had, and considering that he has Transfiguration next... Hari is not having a good day. At least he has a chance to read a few chapters of *Numerology and Grammatica* in History of Magic. Hermione can glare at him for it all she likes; he is not going to be able to focus on reading about history with such a biased version of it constantly ringing in his ears.

Besides, given the way she was nervously reciting things she'd read in *Quidditch Through the Ages* during lunch, Hermione is just as terrified about their next class as he is. He can forgive her for being a bit moody today.

As their entire year steps out into the courtyard, Hari is grateful for the fact that the weather is nice today, if nothing else. It's warm and pleasantly breezy, and the grass ripples around them whenever it isn't being flattened by their feet. Forty broomsticks are laid out in a long row, and a single teacher stands across from them.

Madam Hooch has sharp, golden eyes that remind him of Athena's but without any of the warmth, and he already has the feeling that this is a disaster waiting to happen. "Well, what are you waiting for?" she barks out with clenched fists that rest on her hips. "Everyone, stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up!"

Needless to say, his confidence in this class going well is already dead and buried.

Hari shuffles up to a broom with as few twigs sticking out at odd angles, but every single broom in the lineup seems to be in some state of disrepair. His broom is better off than some others, and at least the magic in it isn't stuttering like it is in a few of the particularly rough-looking ones.

"Stick out your dominant hand over your broom," Madam Hooch calls out from the front of the class. "And then say up!"

"UP!!" the entire class choruses together, to varying degrees of success.

Ron, Parvati, Bulstrode, and Malfoy's brooms snap up into their hands at once. Blaise, Theo, Susan, Greengrass, and Davis's rise slowly but steadily into their hands. As for him, Hermione, Hannah, and Neville... Their brooms remain stubbornly on the ground. He wonders if the magic in them can sense their hesitation and is resisting the command because of it. When Madam Hooch isn't looking, Hari sighs and lifts it up with his foot, tossing it into his hand before anyone but Blaise, who is standing to his right, and Hannah, who is standing to his left and stealthily does the same thing, can see it.

He levels a subtle glare at Blaise for his snickering, but he's relieved that his friend feels comfortable enough to tease him again.

Madam Hooch walks down the line and shows everyone how to mount their brooms. He has to stifle a laugh when she tells Malfoy that he's been doing it wrong for years, but it's difficult to hold onto that amusement when he's so nervous about flying himself.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground. Hard. Keep your broom steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle! Three, two—"

But Neville, nervous and jittery and terrified of being left on the ground on his own, kicks off too soon and too hard. He rockets up in the air, easily going ten feet, twenty feet as Madam Hooch shouts for him to, "Come back down here, boy!" Hari's heart is in his throat. Neither the freezing nor stunning charm will do anything but make Neville hit the ground even harder, so he's forced to watch, utterly helpless, as his first friend falls off the side of his broom and crashes to the ground with a sickening snap.

Neville is so, so lucky to have landed on his wrist. If his head had hit the ground first... Hari's magic vibrates with tension and fury as he glares at Hooch, who had stood there and done absolutely nothing despite being a professor who should be

more than prepared for students to fall during their first flying lesson, as she tuts and acts like the whole thing is somehow Neville's fault.

"A broken wrist," she mutters. "Come on, boy. It's alright, up you get." She turns a sharp look on them all, looking rather startled by the rage in Hari's eyes when she meets them. "None of you move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Now come on, dear." Hooch wraps her arm around Neville as tears streak down his face, and he lets himself be escorted off the field as he cradles his broken wrist and hobbles along.

"Fat lot of good her supervision does anyway," Hari mutters darkly. "If she's just going to stand there and let one of her students fall."

Nisaba is forcing herself to remain quiet, but his familiar doesn't have to say a word for Hari to know that she agrees with him. Her magic is just as upset as Hari's is.

Hannah's eyes widen at his words, and anger furrows her brows shortly after. "Hey, wait a minute... You're right! What was she doing?! Everyone could tell that he was gonna fall!"

Her indignant outcry sparks a few whispers from the students closest to them, but mere moments afterward, Malfoy decides to make a nuisance of himself. "Did you see his face, the great lump?"

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Parvati snaps with a glare, and Lavender is standing by her side in an instant.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" Parkinson teases with a mean sneer. "Never thought you'd like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

Hari is pissed. Malfoy is making a public spectacle of this knowing that Hari can't do a thing about it without breaking the number one rule in Slytherin: Any internal disputes have to be settled internally. And by doing so, Malfoy is technically breaking the rule himself since Hari has made it more than clear that Neville is his friend, and is under his protection, but Snape would never see it that way. There's no way for him to win here.

"Look! It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him!" Malfoy picks up the Remembrall and lifts it up, studying how it glints underneath the sunlight with a smirk. "I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find. Maybe up in a tree? If he can even remember he was given the thing."

The dropped titles are only adding insult to injury here, and even if Neville isn't here to hear it, Hari is barely keeping his magic from lashing out as he clenches his teeth so hard he swears one of them cracks. But when he runs his tongue over it to check, it remains whole and undamaged, so maybe he's just imagining things.

Malfoy is the only one daring enough to get on a broom and fly off after Hooch explicitly told them not to. The Gryffindors are all bristling with rage, but they're thoroughly outnumbered and know it, not realizing that over half of the Slytherins want nothing to do with this. But when Malfoy leaves the Remembrall way up in an oak tree, tucked away in a hollow that makes it difficult to see from the ground below, Hari gets an idea.

He waits until Malfoy saunters back to the line with a smug grin, fixing his hair and setting his broom down as if nothing happened at all. By acting now, he's not technically acting against Malfoy, and if he's going to abuse the technicalities, then Hari will too. He unsheathes his wand, not missing the way that the Gryffindors flinch when he points it at the tree and says, "Accio Neville's Remembrall."

Malfoy watches, dumbfounded and gaping, as the red sphere flies through the air and smacks into Hari's awaiting hand. He tucks it into his pocket and sheathes his wand just before Hooch gets back, and she squints her eyes at the tense silence hovering over the entire class. After a few moments of deliberation, she merely continues on with the class as normal, and despite Hari's general disinterest in flying on a broom, he can't keep the satisfied smile off his face for the rest of class.

Watching Malfoy silently fume is far too amusing.

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Once their flying lesson is over, Hari immediately heads for the hospital wing to give Neville his Remembrall back. Ron and Blaise stick by his side, Slytherins never travel alone, and Hermione, Hannah, Susan, Parvati, and Brown all come with them.

"Merry meet Heiress Brown, Heiress Patil. I wish it were under better conditions, but..."

Brown shakes her head with a grateful smile. "Merry meet, Heir Potter. Thank you for standing up to Malfoy. I know you and Neville are friends, but I don't think any of us expected you to do that."

"I would have been more public about it if I could get away with it," he promises her. "I wanted to hex Heir Malfoy into next week. But I have to choose my battles, and breaking the most important rule in Slytherin..."

His words do exactly what he wants them to: catch the attention of every non-Slytherin student walking alongside them. Thankfully, Susan answers their silent question so that he doesn't have to. He's already dancing on the line of what he can get away with doing. "Slytherins have to stand together, always. Aunt Amelia told me about that. She wanted to warn me just in case I wound up there."

Hari dips his head in a nod, watching as several pairs of eyes light up in understanding. "I can only do so much, but know that most of Slytherin does not agree with what he's doing."

Brown searches his eyes for a lie that does not exist before nodding firmly. "You can call me Lavender, then. All of you."

"And you can just call me Parvati. My sister is the heiress anyway."

Madam Pomfrey is not happy when so many students show up at her door to see one of her patients, but when Neville brightens up before her very eyes, wiping away the tears as he forces himself to sit upright and murmurs, "Hari's here?" she has to concede and let them in.

"But I want all of you out for dinner, understand? Longbottom needs his rest!"

"Yes, ma'am," Hari promises her. "We won't get in your way." She harrumphs before walking off to tend to other patients, and Hari sets Neville's Remembrall on his bed with a warm smile. "Couldn't let you lose this. Are you feeling alright?"

"I've been better. It's like when Uncle Algie threw me out that window... But I at least bounced then." Neville shudders. "I never want to get on a broom again."

"Me either," Hari agrees, mentally filing away that bit of concerning information for later. "I'm not signing up to take flying lessons for the rest of the year, not after that disaster"

Hermione shuffles back and forth nervously before saying, "Me either. I would if it was for a grade, but... I'd rather spend my afternoons studying than flying."

Hannah puffs out her cheeks with an indignant huff. "Well, I'm not going back for sure! How am I supposed to trust a teacher who can't catch her students? I know there are spells for that!"

"Precisely," Susan agrees. "In fact, I think I'll write my aunt about it. That kind of incompetence in one of our professors is concerning."

"Have you seen half of our professors?" Blaise asks with a snort. "It's like it's a requirement or something. I think the only decent ones are Professor Flitwick, Sprout, and McGonagall."

"Ugh. I hate that a study group is actually a good idea," Ron groans. "We're going to have to do most of the work ourselves if we want to pass."

Parvati perks up at the mention of that. "A study group? Could we join you guys?"

"Of course!" Hari assures her. "As long as you don't mind people from every house being in it. It'll be a bit Slytherin heavy, but that's mostly because it's easier for me to make friends there than anywhere else."

"That's fine by me. You guys seem alright, for a bunch of snakes," Lavender teases them with an airy laugh. "You should've seen Hari earlier, Neville! Malfoy was being a right berk and left your Remembrall in a tree, and then—" her voice broke off in a fit of laughter. "Hari just! He summoned it back, easy as can be, as soon as Malfoy was on the ground again. He was fuming the whole class!"

Neville's eyes shine with clear gratitude as a smile tugs at his lips. "I wish I could've seen it."

Unfortunately, dinner creeps up on them before they know it, and they're forced to say farewell to Neville. That is when Hari has a truly brilliant idea. "Hey, do you guys want to sit with us for dinner? All of you?"

Parvati's eyes light up with an unholy glee. "We'd be honored."

Even Hermione agrees, a small smile tugging at her lips as she says, "I'll go get Terry and Padma. Can't let Malfoy think he's the only one who can bend the rules to his advantage, can we?" She darts off to do just that, and Blaise's shoulders are already shaking with stifled laughter as they make their way to their seats.

The absolute shock of two students in red and gold sitting down at the Slytherin table affects even the seventh years. That shock turns to outright horror and disbelief as Hermione marches up to the table and plops herself down between Hari and Ron, casually introducing her friends to them. “Everyone, this is Terry and Padma. They both want to join our study group, so I figured I’d bring them along. We still need to plan when we’re going to meet up, after all. The weekends, maybe? We’ll need the time after our classes for homework.”

“Merry meet Heir Boot, Heiress Patil. We’re pleased to have you.”

“Speak for yourself, Heir Potter,” Malfoy mutters under his breath, but he’s well and truly stuck in this situation. To make Hari’s friends leave when he’s clearly invited them and it isn’t against any rules for him to do so is also against the most important rule in Slytherin. And there are a lot more witnesses in the Great Hall than there were out on the field. Witnesses that are far more likely to make Malfoy’s life difficult for doing so than a bunch of first years.

Checkmate.

“Just Padma is fine.”

“Terry. I’ve never cared much for all that formal tosh anyway.”

“Hari, then,” he concedes with a dip of his head and a self-satisfied smile.

Greengrass’s eyes are positively dancing with mirth as she says, “Well, I suppose now is as good a time as ever to figure out the specifics for our study group. We can catch Heir Longbottom up later. None of you mind if Tracey comes along, do you?”

“Not at all!”

Malfoy looks as if he’s just bitten into something terribly sour, and it takes everything Hari has to keep a straight face. He’ll think twice before trying to pull that kind of stunt again, that’s for sure.

Chapter End Notes

Since it’s been a while, I figured I’d include this little reminder:

Nisaba: female ball python
Camulus: male boomslang
Artemis: female adder (melanistic)
Athena: female half-kneazle
Kratos: male boa constrictor

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

This is a bit more of a transition chapter, but I still had a lot of fun writing it and it leads into some very important things so! I hope you all enjoy! I'm really on a roll with this story right now.

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

'Italics' = Athena's Speech

"Italics" = Singing

Saturday dawns with the faint glow of Hari's mailbox stirring him into wakefulness. He stretches with a yawn, rubbing at the corner of his eye as he mindlessly conjures a glowing ball of light that reveals Kratos sleeping at the foot of his bed and Camulus sleeping right by his side.

"Good morning, little speaker."

"Good morning, Nisaba. Good morning, Artemis."

"Morning."

The only light within the room comes from Hari's mailbox and his magic. The sun has not yet risen over the horizon, and so, his view of the Great Lake is obscured by darkness and the shadows twisting beneath the water's surface. Faintly glowing, golden eyes glance back at him before Athena arches her back and pads over to his bed, leaping up into his lap with a purr. *'Good morning, Hari. I believe your cousin has written to you.'*

It's rather difficult for him to reach his bedside table without jostling Athena out of his lap, but somehow, he manages. The glow of his mailbox fades into darkness once more as he opens the letter with a faint smile on his lips.

Hari,

I'm sorry for taking so long to write you back. Adjusting to Smeltings is harder than I thought it'd be, but I'm doing alright so far, I think. It feels strange to go home and not see you or any of your familiars there. Even Mom and Dad keep expecting to see them and getting all weird and quiet when they don't. I think I'm going to beg them for a pet until I wear them down. They're sure to give in eventually, if only to keep things from being so strangely quiet around here. I'll make sure that it's not something that will mess with your familiars, though, don't worry!

Anyway, I've been making a few new friends of my own, and honestly... I like them a lot better than Piers. Am I an awful friend for saying that? I don't miss him nearly as much as I thought I would. Oh! I don't think I mentioned; he didn't make it into Smeltings. I know he was going for it, but something happened, I guess? I'm not really sure. I'm glad for it, honestly. I was getting sick of him making fun of you.

I think that I'm going to try joining the wrestling team. I've got a lot of free time that I don't know what to do with anymore, and I'm getting restless sitting around and playing video games all day. Speaking of teams, have you found out more about Quidditch yet? How are your classes? I'm dying of suspense here, Hari!

Dudley.

PS: I attached a copy of every assignment I've been given this week, swot. Copies of my notes too. I hope you appreciate that I'm actually trying to keep up with those for you.

PPS: Of course I want to try the magical jelly beans! Who do you take me for?!

Hari snickers as he pulls out a roll of parchment and quill, penning out a return letter with an amused smile.

Dudley,

Take all the time you need to return my letters. I'm glad to hear that school is going well for you, and I appreciate you passing along your work. I'll finish the worksheets as soon as I can and send them with a letter, and I do very much appreciate that

you're giving me a copy of your notes. It'll make sitting my exams during the summer far easier if I can actually study beforehand. But I won't bore you with all of that.

Classes are... Certainly interesting. Charms is my favorite, by far, but we both knew it would be. There are just so many useful things to learn, and Professor Flitwick is amazing! He's an accomplished duelist, you know? And he's already promised me extra lessons if I get too far ahead of the class! I won't have to sit around, bored out of my mind because charms come easily to me. Transfiguration, on the other hand... I am so bad at it, Dudley. It's honestly embarrassing. I just can't get my magic to turn one thing into something else if it's too different from what it already is, and I'm not really sure why. My magic just revolts at the thought of it. Herbology is a lot of fun, not too different from normal gardening, really, and I enjoy. Astronomy too, though I wish the class was earlier. Is there really a point in having us stay up until midnight to study the stars? We can see them far sooner than that, and we still have classes the next morning! It's absurd! Potions is another interesting class, but the professor hates my guts for some reason? Hagrid said he knew my dad and didn't get along with him, but get this, he was friends with my mum! He's the guy in that picture with her and Aunt Petunia. It's more than a bit strange to have a picture of my professor as a kid sitting on my nightstand. Defense Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic are both complete jokes, though. We're going to have to self-study a lot if we want any hope of passing the exams, and considering the size of our study group now... Everyone else knows it too. I did, in fact, manage to befriend a couple of Hufflepuffs as well. Two more Ravensclaws joined alongside Hermione, and we even have two more Gryffindors joining us now! Considering the rivalry between our houses, things are going far better than I could've hoped for. We'll all be meeting up in one of the many, many unused classrooms tomorrow. I do wonder why there are so many classrooms and so few classes, though... What kinds of magic have been lost to history or just aren't taught anymore? It makes me sad to think about it.

As for Quidditch, I actually had my first flying lesson yesterday and... I'm sorry to disappoint, but I want nothing to do with that madness. Hooch just stood there and did absolutely nothing when Neville fell off his broom, and my entire friend group is refusing to sign up to take the class for the rest of the year now, even the ones who like flying. Watching someone plummet to the ground from so high up will do that to you. It was honestly really scary; he could have died.

Anyway, I promise to keep you updated on how things are going here. I hope wrestling tryouts go well for you!

Hari

PS: If you could not tell Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon about what we say in our letters, I'd appreciate it. I don't want to push too hard too soon, and I know they're still leery around magic. I'm surprised Aunt Petunia did as well as she did in Diagon Alley.

PPS: Attached is a box of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, as promised. Good luck.

Hari deposits his letter and the promised candy into his mailbox before he gets to work, tearing through his worksheets with a single-minded focus that has him finishing a week's worth of homework and assignments just as Blaise begins to stir.

"... There is something wrong with you, Hari. It's a Saturday! Go back to bed!" Hari snorts at Blaise's disgruntled tone as he stumbles off for the loo, tucking his voluntary homework into his trunk and pulling out *Serpents and Sorcerers Throughout History*. Breakfast is still hours away, being served far later over the weekends than it is during the week, so Hari may as well make himself comfortable in the meantime. He curls up with his book, idly running one hand down Athena's back as he reads.

When speaking of serpents, many wixen make the mistake of assuming that serpent and snake are interchangeable terms. They are not. Serpents are a wider classification that includes snakes alongside many magical creatures, ranging from occamies to dragons, and the wixen that form close bonds with them are often among the most powerful wixen in history.

Only a parselmouth can form familiar bonds with serpents. This is a truth that is oft forgotten, and many wixen attempt to claim otherwise for the prestige that comes with having a serpent for a familiar. Unless they speak the tongue of serpents, know that they are a liar and do not bother with them further.

Parseltongue is often mistaken as the language of snakes, but as I mentioned previously, it is the language of all serpents. This is why parselmouths are oft sought after as dragon tamers, as they are among the few wixen who truly have nothing to fear from the brilliant, powerful creatures. Serpents will not turn against a parselmouth, with only one exception.

Should two parselmouths find themselves at war with one another, any sane serpent will side with the one who best embraces what it means to be a serpent. Parselmouths are meant to be an advocate for serpents, the wixen that Mother Magic herself bestowed this gift upon to protect creatures that most consider dangerous and frightening, and should a wixen turn their back on this duty, the serpents, too, shall forsake them.

Blaise sighs when he walks back into their room and sees that Hari is very much still awake, shuffling over to his bed and sitting down next to him. "What're you reading?"

“*Serpents and Sorcerers Throughout History*. Look at this passage for a second. The Dark Lord had a snake as a familiar, didn’t he? I think I remember that being mentioned in a history book somewhere. Maybe *Modern Magical History*? But that’s not important right now! If it’s true, then I could totally turn his familiar against him, don’t you think?”

“That’s... It sounds like it’d be possible. But the Dark Lord is dead, Hari. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Maybe, but... I’m not so sure I buy that. It’s better to be safe than sorry, don’t you think?” His friend’s eyebrows furrow with concern, and Hari snorts at the expression. “I’d like to introduce you to a muggle law of nature called Murphy’s Law. There are a few different variations of it, but the core meaning is: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and at the worst possible time. And with the break-in at Gringotts, whatever weird thing is going on with Quirrel’s magic, and the third-floor corridor ban... Something big is happening. I don’t like it, Blaise.”

“Well, when you put it like that... It is pretty worrying, huh? Budge over. Looks like we’re both going to be reading this thing.”

Theo quirks an eyebrow at them when he stirs awake almost an hour later, muttering, “I’m not even going to ask.” Nisaba and Artemis begin to drift off into sleep as the sun rises, and Kratos and Camulus wake up in their place. Blaise is remarkably composed when the boomslang drapes himself over his shoulder, not even faltering as he flips the page. Kratos wraps himself around Hari with a content hiss, basking in his radiant heat and resting his head on top of Hari’s. Only an instinctive featherweight charm keeps Hari’s neck from getting a crick in it as a result.

Ron groans at them all when he wakes up hours later, once the sun is well into the sky, and sees all three of them reading. “It’s the weekend! We are not staying cooped up in our dorm all day with books!” Hari snorts at that, and once they’re all dressed and ready for the day, they head down for breakfast. It seems like the other Slytherin first years all had the same idea, as their section of the table is just as busy now as it is before their classes.

“Good morning,” Greengrass greets them as they sit down. “Do you four have any plans today?”

“We’re gonna explore the castle.” Ron’s tone leaves no room for argument as he levels a look at the three of them. “So that these three don’t ruin their eyesight by staring at books all day.”

“Bit late for me, don’t you think?” Hari quips, and if they were sitting at any other table, he has a feeling that Ron would have chucked a fistful of eggs at him. His eyebrow just violently twitches instead.

“That sounds like fun!” Davis grins as she drums her fingers against the table. “Mind if we join you guys? I wanna see if there are any shortcuts between our classes.”

“Sure, why not?” Blaise agrees with a shrug. “We may as well do it together. We’ll probably notice more that way too.”

Unfortunately, Malfoy takes that as an invitation to tag along as well, bringing the rest of his friends with him, and they’re all subjected to his neverending chatter about flying that has only been stoked further by their first flying lesson. Parkinson hangs off of every word he says, Crabbe and Goyle grunt at all the right moments, and Bulstrode... Her reaction is more interesting. It’s impossible for him to miss the way she drifts closer to Greengrass and Davis as they explore Hogwarts’ halls, finding several secret passageways along the way, and he wonders if there’s a chance of befriending her as well. She certainly doesn’t seem as comfortable with Malfoy as the rest of them.

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Hari sneezes at the heavy weight of dust in the air. It’s obvious that the disused classrooms are not included in Filch’s rounds to clean the school, and honestly, why should they be? It doesn’t look like anyone has used this room in decades. “Scourgify.”

He takes a deep breath as the charm works its magic, cleaning years’ worth of dust and grime in an instant. Hermione’s eyes glitter with intrigue. “Where’d you learn that? They don’t teach the scouring charm until fourth year.”

“I read it in *Practical Charms for Wixen at Home*. It’s got all sorts of cleaning, cooking, and general housework spells in there. Do you want to borrow it later?”

“Yes, please! I can let you borrow *Transfiguration: Reforming Matter and Reforming Magic* in exchange. I’ve read it cover to cover twice already, and I’ve heard you’re struggling in Transfiguration.”

“Thanks, Hermione. I appreciate it!”

Terry squints at him before heaving out a sigh. “We were robbed. We were totally robbed. Hari would’ve done great in our house.”

“Undeniably, but you haven’t seen how devious he can be yet,” Greengrass says with a wicked little smirk. “Thank you all for coming. Before we get started, I would like to propose that we dispense with the formalities. I see no need for us to be dancing around titles and etiquette when we’re all here to learn. I’d rather we focus our attention on the task at hand. That permission extends beyond our study sessions, of course.”

“Thank Merlin,” Ron groans. “I hate keeping up with all of that bollocks.”

They all laugh a bit at that, even Daphne, before she recollects herself and says, “Does anyone have any homework they still need to finish? We should get that out of the way first.”

Hannah sheepishly admits that she hasn’t even started her Charms essay, and both Lavender and Parvati are debating whether it’s worth even trying on their History of Magic essay. It’s not likely that Binns reads them when he doesn’t even take attendance. Most students only show up to his class at all for fear that another professor will catch them skipping it.

Hari helps Hannah with her essay, and Tracey and Terry, who both share the class with him and already know exactly how good he is at Charms, quickly join them and ask him to help them revise their own. Daphne and Susan help Lavender and Parvati with their History of Magic essays, saying that even if it feels pointless, the only way they’ll be able to pass the class is if they remember the material for their exam. Writing essays is a good way to commit that information to memory. Neville starts quietly reviewing his Herbology notes with Padma and Theo, and they both pay rapt attention as he stutters his way through additional tips and tricks he’s learned over the years of taking care of magical plants. Hermione, Ron, and Blaise review Defense Against the Dark Arts, and between Hermione’s book knowledge and the disturbing amount of practical knowledge that Blaise knows, Ron is learning all the jinxes and counter-jinxes he could ever dream of.

Once everyone is caught up with homework, their groups start shuffling around to review the subjects they’re struggling with. Neville helps Daphne with Herbology, and she helps him with Potions in turn. Blaise and Susan come over to help Hari with Transfiguration, both just as befuddled as he is that he can consistently get his magic to do *something*, just not what the spell is supposed to do. Lavender reviews her Astronomy notes with Ron, who is always so exhausted in that class that he can’t take cohesive notes no matter how hard he tries, and Ron helps her with Defense Against the Dark Arts with an eager, slightly wild around-the-edges, grin. Hermione takes over helping Hannah, Tracey, and Terry with Charms since there isn’t anything she feels like she’s struggling with at the moment. Padma is in a similar boat and starts reviewing History of Magic alongside her sister and Theo.

The hours pass by in a blink of an eye. Their group is being loud enough that Hari is grateful that Daphne and Hermione both immediately vetoed studying in the library, and the setting sun has only just given way to darkness and the twinkle of stars shining in the sky above. It isn’t until Hermione mutters a quiet, “Tempus” that they all realize exactly how late it has gotten.

The glowing, white numbers taunt them: 8:55.

“Merda!” Blaise swears as they all scramble to put away their things. “The curfew!”

First years have to be back in their common rooms by nine, and Hari knows before they even step foot out of the room that there’s no way they’re making it in time. Maybe the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws can manage it, the towers are closer to the classrooms than the dungeons, but the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs?

“We’re gonna get in so much trouble,” Hannah whimpers as they sprint through the halls, ducking through secret passageways in a desperate attempt to get back to the dungeons. A shiver crawls up his spine when he hears the distant footfalls of Filch chasing after them, shouting “Think you can ignore curfew, do you?!” as if they didn’t have at least a couple of minutes left.

“Man, Hagrid wasn’t kidding!” Ron pants as they turn another sharp corner. “Filch really is a mean old git!”

They find themselves forced to a halt at the end of a long corridor with a single, locked door at the end of it, and despite Hogwarts’ assistance up to this point, no secret pathways open up here. Filch is getting closer, so Hari whips out his wand and whispers, “Alohomora.” The eight of them slip inside the door before Hari relocks it with “Colloportus.” and heaves out a relieved sigh. That relief is very short-lived.

A rumbling growl rumbles in front of them, and they all slowly crane their head upwards to meet the gaze of a massive, angry cerberus. “Well,” Theo croaks faintly. “Guess we wound up in the third-floor corridor.”

“Hari!! Unlock the door, unlock the door! I’ll take Filch!!” Hannah sobs as she pulls on the handle to no avail, but as he stares into eyes as large as his entire head, Hari remembers something he read in *National Compendium of Beasts*.

Slowly, quietly, he begins to hum a lullaby, and the growls slow to a stop. He doesn’t know very many songs, but... He remembers lying awake in his cupboard at night, listening to Aunt Petunia sing Dudley lullabies and wishing she would do so

for him for years, up until Dudley was old enough that he insisted she stop doing it. He can sing her favorite one from memory, and so, he does.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word,

Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.

And if that mockingbird won’t sing,

Mama’s gonna buy a diamond ring.

If that diamond ring turns to brass,

Mama’s gonna buy you a looking glass.”

The cerberus’s heads start to slump as their eyes droop shut, and Hari smiles, gently running his hand over one of their heads as he continues singing.

“If that looking glass gets broke,

Mama’s gonna buy you a billy goat.

If that billy goat won’t pull,

Mama’s gonna buy you a cart and pull.

If that cart and bull turn over,

Mama’s gonna buy you a dog named Rover.”

Hari is so focused on the cerberus in front of him that he does not see his classmates openly gaping at him, even the dignified Daphne. His hands run underneath the giant dog’s ears, and a giggle shakes his voice slightly at the sleepy thumb of their leg when he hits a good spot.

“If that dog named Rover won’t bark

Mama’s gonna buy you a horse and cart.

If that horse and cart fell down,

You’ll still be the sweetest little boy in town.

So hush little baby, don’t you cry,

Daddy loves you and so do I.”

He allows his voice to fade into silence as the cerberus snores away, sleeping contentedly beneath his hand. “See?” he whispers. “They’re not so scary. You’ve just gotta know how to work with them.”

Artemis wriggles in his robe pocket with a hissy laugh at the absolutely stunned silence that answers him. ***“I think you’ve scared them stupid.”***

“Hari,” Susan starts with a strained voice that forces her to clear her throat. “It would be a *crime* if you don’t become a magizoologist. Please tell me you intend to look into the subject. There are very, very few wixen who could’ve managed that.”

“Oh, absolutely! I planned on becoming the muggle equivalent of that before getting my Hogwarts letter, and I have no intention of completely changing course now. Do any of you want to pet them? They’ll be out for at least an hour or so.”

Tracey joins him in doing so immediately, and after a few beats of hesitation, so do Blaise and Hannah. Everyone else stays exactly where they are. “If you’re quite done, Hari, we should really get back to our dorms before anyone notices we’re missing.”

He sighs at Daphne’s words, but Hari knows she’s right. Filch is long gone now, and if they want it to stay that way, they’ll need to move quickly. “Alohomora.”

They make it to the dungeons without further incident, parting ways with Hannah and Susan before their group splits again and darts for their respective dorm rooms. It isn't until they all flop onto their beds with a sigh that Theo mutters, "It's always going to be an adventure with you, isn't it, Hari?" Artemis's continued laughter is all the answer he needs, no translation necessary.

As his friends get ready for bed, Hari pulls out a roll of parchment and begins to write.

Dudley,

You won't believe what happened today! Our study group went great, but more importantly than that, I got to meet a cerberus! A real, life cerberus! And that tip in *National Compendium of Beasts* totally worked, by the way. A lullaby put them right to sleep, and then I got to pet a dog with heads as big as my entire body!

I don't have much else to share with you, but I figured you would want to know right away. Oh, and I'll attach my homework for you to look over whenever you get your graded ones back. Let me know how I did!

Hari

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Three chapters in two days? I am going absolutely feral about writing this. It helps that I didn't have work yesterday or today, of course, but still... Insanity. Hope you're all ready for the Halloween chapter >:3 It's a ride, that's for sure.

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

'Italics' = Athena's Speech

'Bold Italics' = Hogwarts

Their classes pass by in a blur. Between keeping busy with two sets of homework, studying, and sneaking out to go visit the cerberus, who Athena informed him is named Fluffy, Hari can hardly believe how quickly Halloween creeps up on them. Outside of Millicent asking to join their study group a couple of weeks into term, nothing notable has happened since they first met Fluffy, and if Hari has any say in the matter, it'll stay that way. He only risks going to visit Fluffy because he can tell how lonely he is, and Hari looks at the dog locked into a room far too small for him and forgotten about by the world and... Well, he sees a little boy locked in a cupboard. He can't just leave him.

It's strange to think that he's sadder about Fluffy's fate than his parents' deaths, but... Even now that he knows Halloween is the day they died, Hari doesn't really feel sad about it. He doesn't mourn them. He doesn't miss them. How could he? He doesn't know anything about them. And if they were still alive... Would he still have this life? Would he have been sorted into Slytherin? Would he have made the friends that he has? Would he have met his familiars? He doesn't know. All he knows is that he wouldn't trade the life he has now for anything, not even for his parents.

Despite coming to terms with that, his familiars refuse to leave his side today. Kratos is the only one forced to stay behind, Hari really needs to learn the shrinking charm, and since he doesn't have Potions today, even Athena follows him around from class to class without any of their professors saying a word about it.

Even Malfoy and his friends are being weirdly respectful today. It goes beyond showing a united front to the school; they aren't even heckling him in private. When he asks Blaise about it, he simply shrugs and says, "It's Samhain. They're not going to be dumb enough to disrespect the dead today, no matter how much they don't like you."

There's a certain sort of energy buzzing through the entire student body today, and Hari is not immune to it in the slightest. Granted, he knows that most of them are excited about the Halloween feast, not Charms, but the sentiment is the same.

Today is the day that they finally get to cast the levitation charm. "Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing! Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the incantation properly is very important too. Never forget the wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself with a buffalo on his chest."

Hari and Hermione partner up, as per usual, and both instantly cast the spell on their feathers with a firm, "Wingardium Leviosa!" The feathers slowly rise into the air, and Hari grins as he nudges his to twirl around Hermione's in slow circles.

"Oh, brilliantly done, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger! Fifteen points to each of you." As everyone else continues trying to get their feathers to float, with a few managing it for a few seconds before it immediately falls back down, Hari is left to entertain himself. Hermione is already back to reading ahead in their textbook, as if she hasn't already read it at least a dozen times by now, and Hari decides to try the spell on his textbook as well. It really isn't much more difficult to lift heavier objects. Just as he's starting to get restless, Flitwick walks up to his desk and says, "Would you like me to teach you another charm? We could give the class a little demonstration."

"Yes, please!" Hari jumps on the opportunity immediately. "What do you want me to do?" Flitwick leads him up to the front of the class, and a hush falls over the room as everyone waits to see what he's planning to do, thoroughly distracted from the task at hand. Even Hermione puts her textbook down and watches them with sharp, curious eyes.

"Now, it's perfectly natural for learning new spells to take time and practice! Don't let yourselves get discouraged just because someone else masters it first. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and it will do you well to remember that. That being said, I can see that some of you are getting frustrated, so I wanted to give you an incentive. Mr. Potter, if you wouldn't mind drawing your wand." He does just that, eyes gleaming and eager to see what his favorite professor has planned. "The disarming charm is an incredibly useful one in a duel, ending it in an instant if your opponent is unable to use

wandless magic. This charm forces whatever your opponent is holding to fly out of their hand, and if you are particularly skilled with it, into yours.”

Flitwick sharply moves his hand down, moving his wand in a tight spiral before saying, “Expelliarmus!” A bright red jet of light springs to life from Flitwick’s wand, snatching Hari’s wand out of his hand as his magic bristles and swirls around him at the loss. His professor is watching him very carefully when he steps forward and hands Hari’s wand back, smiling as he says, “Now you try it, Mr. Potter.”

Hari’s magic trembles all around him as he mimics his professor’s wand movement, focusing on that jerking sensation as he barks, “Expelliarmus!” Flitwick’s wand flies into his hand so quickly that it smacks against his palm, leaving a stinging, red mark across it that almost makes him drop it.

“Very good! That’s another ten points to you, Mr. Potter. Try it again, with a bit less power behind it this time.” He does so, and catching the wand doesn’t hurt nearly as much this time. “Excellent! Miss Granger, if you wish to come up here and attempt it yourself...?” He barely has to suggest it before Hermione is out of her seat. “Any of you who can master the levitation charm before the end of class will be taught the disarming charm as well! And if you can perform that spell to my approval, I will allow you to break off in pairs and mock spar, using only the disarming charm. How does that sound?” Flitwick asks with a wink.

Everyone suddenly starts taking class far more seriously. By the end of the period, only Tracey, Millicent, and Terry are still struggling with the levitation charm, and Hari, Hermione, Ron, Blaise, Daphne, and Padma are taking turns sparring with each other while Flitwick instructs the others on the disarming charm. It’s a very productive class, and when he sees how disheartened the students who haven’t quite gotten it down yet are, Flitwick promises, “We’ll review the levitation charm again during Monday’s class. Practice it over the weekend, and any of you that shows progress, any progress at all, will be taught the disarming charm too. Those of you that are already practicing the disarming charm, I better not see you using it in the halls. I’ll let you all practice sparring next class.

Excited chattering breaks out at that information, and it isn’t until they’re approaching the Slytherin table for the feast that Hari realizes they’re missing someone. “Hey, where’s Millicent?”

“You didn’t hear?” Tracey asks with a troubled frown tugging at her lips. “Corner was making fun of her for not being able to get the levitation charm to work. As if I was managing more than a couple of inches myself... Berks like him always think she’s an easy target when she can’t just turn around and hit them.”

“As if any civilized wixen would resort to their fists,” Malfoy scoffs. Hari levels him with a look, glances over at Crabbe and Goyle, and silently cocks his eyebrow. Malfoy’s cheeks tinge pink with embarrassment as he averts his eyes and falls quiet.

“I’ll set some pumpkin pasties aside for her, then,” Hari decides. “I know she’s been looking forward to them, and I don’t want her to miss out.” Millicent is the most uncertain of their friendship within the group, and that’s likely why she retreated to regain her composure in the first place. The first years might not care all that much, but the upper years... Millicent is in a particularly vulnerable position within Slytherin. They do have an unusually high number of half-bloods in their year, but Tracey is clearly under Daphne’s protection and Hari is... An exception to many, many rules. This is his way of making it clear that Millicent is under his protection as well, but even then, that can only help her so much if she shows up during the feast red-eyed and crying.

Slytherin politics. As much as he enjoys the challenge, he really wishes his friends would stop getting dragged into this mess.

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It isn’t until well into the feast that Hari freezes in place, fork hovering just outside of his mouth before he drops it with a sharp clatter. Several heads turn in his direction, but he’s not paying any attention to that. His wand is ringing. It’s ringing louder than he’s ever heard it ring before, and his heart is thundering in his chest as Quirrel comes barreling into the Great Hall. He runs straight up to Dumbledore with a panicked expression before saying, “T-Troll! In the dungeons! T-Thought... You ought to know.”

The Great Hall falls into a dead silence for a few, horrified seconds as Quirrel falls into a dead faint, and only Hari, with narrowed eyes and a sharp look, sees that their professor’s magic is very much still active and awake. Quirrel is a scarily good actor. Then there’s an uproar as panicked voices start shouting, and it takes Dumbledore firing off several exploding, purple firecrackers from his wand to restore order.

“Prefects, lead your Houses back to their dormitories immediately!”

“Is he mad?!” Hari snarls. “Half the schools’ dorms are in the dungeons!” The Slytherin and Hufflepuff students remain right where they are, as thankfully, their Prefects realize this.

“Millicent doesn’t know,” Tracey whispers, eyes wide and horrified. With the pandemonium around them, Hari knows that no one else would have heard her. “Someone has to tell her.” And the Prefects... They’re all busy rounding up the students, and even if they weren’t, it’s unlikely that any of them would risk their lives for a half-blood firstie. Any Prefects from another house are going to assume that they’re trying to trick them since they’re Slytherins, and Hari knows, deep in his bones, that what he’s about to do is incredibly stupid. But what other choice does he have, really? Millicent is his friend. He’s not just going to leave her behind!

“Tracey, I need you to cover for me. Tell the Prefects that I heard Dumbledore order us to go down into the dungeons with the troll, panicked, and ran off the other way if you have to. Do you know where Millicent is hiding?” He could probably search out her magical signature with enough time, but time is something they don’t have much of at the moment.

“The girls’ bathroom. It should be the one just down the hall from Charms. Thank you, Hari.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Hari ducks and weaves through the panicking crowd as Athena trails behind him, silently willing the eyes of anyone looking their way to slide right over them. The magic of Hogwarts thrums beneath his feet, as if encouraging him forward, and it only makes him move more quickly. He’s very nearly out of the Great Hall when a hand rests on his shoulder, and he whirls around with a snarl on his face that melts away the second he sees Neville.

There’s a steely glint of determination in his friend’s eyes that makes it more than clear that Neville could have made it into Gryffindor on his own merits, even without Hari inadvertently encouraging him to do so. “Whatever you’re about to do, I’m not letting you do it alone.”

“... Thanks, Neville.”

The two of them slip outside of the Great Hall unnoticed, and the second that they’re outside of it, they start running. Hogwarts’ magic hums as a secret passageway opens to their left, and Hari drags Neville through it without a moment of hesitation. They’re let out just on the opposite side of the Charms classroom, and one sharp left turn later, they are rapidly approaching the girls’ bathroom where Millicent’s magical signature is all shrunk in on itself and swirling in a miserable shade of brown.

His wand starts ringing even louder, vibrating so strongly in its holster that his entire arm is shaking. A rotten stench is slowly growing more powerful, and Hari grits his teeth and bursts into the bathroom, knowing that they don’t have a moment to spare. “Millicent!” he barks out, and a hiccuping sob cuts off at the urgency in his voice. His wand whips into his hand as his magic shakes and shudders beneath his skin.

“... Hari?”

“We’ve got to go! There’s a troll loose in the school, and it’s getting close!!” Millicent bursts out of the only closed stall with wide, terrified eyes that are red with tears. Her wand is in her hand in an instant, and the soothing brown of her magic trembles and shakes like an earthquake.

But they’re too late.

The floor shakes with the troll’s heavy footsteps, and their best bet is silence as they freeze in place and hold their breaths. Neville only moves to unsheathe his wand as well, looking mere seconds from passing out as Hogwarts erects a stone wall in place of the door in a final, desperate attempt to keep her students safe. *‘No, no... Not again!’*

The wall explodes. Only Hari’s quick, “Immobulus!” keeps them from being bludgeoned by the heavy stone.

Athena races forward, darting between the troll’s legs with bright, glowing eyes as she promises, *‘I’ll go get the professors! Hold on, Hari! Camulus, you better bite this thing if you get the chance!!’*

“W-What do we do?” Neville stammers. “It’s a troll! Magic can’t touch it!”

Much like dragons and larger serpents, trolls are infamous for their thick hides that shield them from most spells. Attacking directly is a horrible idea, but... Hari’s eyes trail down to the rubble shattered around their feet as the beginning of a plan starts forming. “Wingardium Leviosa!” Hari forces his magic to blanket the mass of broken stone and treat it as a singular object, lifting and hurling it at the troll in a desperate barrage. “Use any spells you know to distract it and throw physical objects at it!” he answers sharply. “Magical attacks might not work, but look!” A few of the troll’s teeth have been chipped by the rocks, and a few of the sharper bits of rubble have left scratches and scrapes on the troll’s body. It’s not much, but it’s something.

Then the troll roars with fury, and Hari’s wand starts wailing like a tornado siren. He and Neville throw every bit of rubble they can at the troll to drive him back, and at one point, Hari’s magic even rips one of the sinks out of the wall to hurl at the

troll's head and give them more, sharper ammo with the shattered ceramic. Millicent, on the other hand, is throwing reductor curses at the walls, sinks, toilets, anything that gives her rubble that she can physically pelt the troll with.

But they're only delaying the inevitable. If the professors don't get here quickly, then they're all going to die, and try as Camulus might, it's difficult for him to get close enough to the troll to bite it without getting crushed in the process. He's currently draped across Hari's shoulders, willing and ready to risk that if the troll gets too close to them, and Nisaba and Artemis are hiding underneath his robes, clinging onto him as tightly as they can.

He needs to think of something, quickly.

It hits him when he watches the troll swing its club into one of the mirrors, shattering it into millions of pieces as Hari immediately trains his wand on the weapon. "Expelliarmus!!" His magic, desperate and whirling and agitated already, puts far too much power behind the spell. The troll loses its grip on the club, but it goes hurtling past Hari and into the wall behind him, snapping clean in two.

The troll rushes Hari with rage in its eyes, and unknown to him, shadows start swirling around his wrists as he freezes in place, eyes blown wide with fear. He doesn't even register that Camulus is poised to strike. He doesn't register anything at all until he hears Neville's desperate, terrified scream of, "Stupefy!!"

With a solid thud, the troll drops to the ground like a sack of bricks. Millicent comes rushing forward with the thicker half of the troll's club grasped in her hands, bashing it over the head for good measure with a desperate, shuddering sob. They all slowly sink to the ground with wide eyes and racing hearts, and Millicent drapes her arms over their shoulders as she bursts into tears. Neville is clutching his smoking, fried wand like a lifeline as he leans into her side with a sob, and Hari... Hari's magic is tinged even darker around the edges, and he swears that he can see shadows flickering over parts of his body.

"You saved me!! Oh, Merlin, you both saved me!" Millicent sobs.

Neville giggles nervously, maybe a bit hysterically, as he says, "You saved us too. That spell wouldn't have held for long."

"I couldn't have done it if Hari didn't disarm the thing," Millicent murmurs quietly. "So I guess we all saved each other."

'Hari! Hari, we're almost there!!' Athena comes barrelling through the shattered doorway mere seconds later, leaping into Hari's lap and rubbing her cheek against his soothingly. *'It's alright now, kit. It's all going to be alright.'*

"What on earth were you thinking?!" Hari glances up to see Professor McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrel standing just on the other side of the door, and as soon as Quirrel sees the troll, he drops into a 'faint' again. You're lucky you weren't killed! Why weren't you in your dormitories?!"

"The Slytherin dorms are in the dungeons," Hari whispers with wide eyes that aren't exaggerated in the slightest. He's still shaking. "The troll was supposed to be down there! But... But Millicent wasn't at the feast. She didn't know. I had to go get her! What if she went down to the dorms by herself?"

Snape sneers as he asks, "And why, Mr. Potter, did you not deign to inform a Prefect of this matter?"

"They wouldn't have come." Millicent is the one who answers, voice trembling with fear even with the utter certainty in her words. "For me? Not a chance. And even if they had... They would've been too late. If Hari and Neville had been even a few seconds slower..." Great, heaving sobs shake Millicent's shoulders as she hugs them both close. "I would have died! I almost died!!"

That takes the wind right out of Snape's sails, and the genuine concern in his eyes cannot be masked by his sneer. Professor McGonagall is far gentler when she asks, "And how did you get involved in this, Mr. Longbottom?"

"I... I saw Hari moving in a real hurry in the Great Hall, the exact opposite direction that everyone else was going in, and I couldn't let him go alone. Not with a troll in the school. I knew he wouldn't be sneaking away like that if it wasn't important. And it was. I would do it again." Neville looks McGonagall in the eyes as he says this, squaring his shoulders defiantly. It's the boldest he's ever seen his friend act.

"Thank Merlin that you did," Hari murmurs. "Or I would've wound up a bloody smear on the wall. That was the strongest stupefying charm I've ever seen."

"I panicked," Neville chuckles. "And completely destroyed my wand in the process." He waves the burnt, crumbling wood around a bit for emphasis. "But hey, it worked. That's all that matters, right?"

Professor McGonagall tuts quietly, looking undeniably proud and fond as she says, "It would seem we'll need to get you a new wand, Mr. Longbottom. You've earned five points for Gryffindor for your sheer bravery, and Mr. Potter? Five points to

Slytherin for your loyalty to your friends. Come along, then, Mr. Longbottom. I'll escort you to your dormitory." Professor McGonagall leads Neville off with a gentle smile, leaving only Hari, Millicent, and Snape in the wreckage of the bathroom with Quirrel 'unconscious' just outside of it.

Hari helps Millicent to her feet, and she leans on his shoulder as she stands up, palms scraped and bloody from hurling things at the troll. Snape pinches his nose with a sigh, walking up to them both. Hari's magic tenses, and the weight of the air is heavier as Snape pulls out his wand. It only settles when Snape murmurs, "Episkey." and he watches Millicent's scrapes and bruises swiftly fade away. "I will escort you both to the dormitory. And Heiress Bulstrode, if your housemates continue to give you trouble, I expect you to inform me of such a thing."

Millicent's eyes linger on Hari for several long moments before she looks back at Snape and stares him in the eye. Snape's magic jolts slightly when she does so, and Hari confirms a suspicion that he's had for several weeks now: Snape is a Legilimens. And even if Hari can't see what thoughts, exactly, Snape is seeing that makes him flinch minutely, he doesn't have to when Millicent's magic is positively swirling with distrust.

She turns to Hari without uttering a single word to Snape, saying, "You can call me Millie." It's a clear declaration. Snape cannot expect her to trust him when he treats her friend, the very person who just saved her life, so poorly. She has no reason to trust him. And for all that Slytherins make a public show of supporting one another, it's an entirely different matter behind the scenes. Any weakness can be exploited. You have to really, truly trust someone before you risk exposing one to them. They all know that. Millicent won't tell Snape a thing.

Considering that it looks as if Snape has just bitten into a sour lemon, he hears her message loud and clear. He dips his head slightly as he murmurs, "Very well, Heiress Bulstrode."

Only time will tell if anything ever comes of that acknowledgement. Hari's not holding his breath on it, though. Snape still won't even look at him.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

And another one! Not quite sure how I managed to finish this around my shift today, but I did. I hope you all enjoy the chapter!

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The tension that Millie used to carry on her shoulders constantly completely melts away whenever she's with their group now. She insists that everyone call her Millie, and she slots into their group well as someone with more experience than most in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"My mom is a muggle," she explains with a shrug when Susan asked her how she knows so many jinxes and curses. "And my dad knew that his old school friends wouldn't like that very much. Knew I'd probably end up in Slytherin too. He didn't want to throw me to the wolves."

Hari is delighted to see her opening up, and he's delighted by the fact that he's guaranteed to become the Slytherin Prince for their year now. Even if Theo feels the need to keep up appearances by voting for Malfoy, Hari has over half the vote. Not that it matters this year, firsties never get to be part of the Slytherin Court, but next year? It'll be an important part of establishing himself in this world from the beginning. Considering how morose Malfoy has been lately, he understands the position he's in now, too.

Their study group has started meeting on Saturday and Sunday evenings after dinner, with them very carefully monitoring the time now that every single one of them can use the time-telling charm, but this week, their Saturday meeting is being cancelled for the first Quidditch game of the season.

"Do I have to?" Hari whines as Ron drags him out of bed. "Theo isn't going!" He looks over at Theo, curled up with a book and waving with a smug smirk tugging at his lips, enviously.

"Theo has seen a Quidditch game before, and you haven't. Come on, Hari, please? Just one game? You can even bring a book with you!"

Blaise snickers at Hari's despairing sigh, already dressed up and ready to go. "Fine, I guess... Just give me a minute." He grumbles under his breath the entire time, grabbing his copy of *Dragons Across the Globe* to keep himself entertained. The weather has been steadily getting colder, and none of his snakes want anything to do with those bitterly sharp, November winds, even with warming charms involved. In the end, Athena is the only one to come along with him.

"Why does Quidditch season start in winter?" he grumbles, even if the cold doesn't affect him nearly as badly as most. "You'd think they'd want to play when it's nicer out."

"That's part of the challenge!" Ron protests. "Getting your hardest games out of the way at the beginning of the season gives you more time to come back from them."

"So you keep saying, but the Chudley Cannons never manage to come back, do they?"

"Oh ha, ha, very funny, Blaise. Like the Holyhead Harpies are any better."

"They are. You're just in denial, Ron."

Hari doesn't understand sports. He doesn't understand sports at all.

Almost the entire school is out in the stands today, and Athena jumps up onto his shoulder to avoid getting stepped on in the crowds. He's pleasantly surprised to see Hannah and Susan sitting among his other friends, plopping himself down between Susan and Tracey as he pulls out his book.

Millie snorts at the sight of it. "I was about to say that I'm surprised to see you out here, but this makes more sense. These two drag you to the game?"

“You know it. Have any of you guys seen Hermione? I need to return her book.”

“She and Terry are sitting with Neville, Lavender, and Parvati,” Susan answers without looking up from her own book. “I’m sure they’ll meet up with us later.” Hari nods at that, flipping his book open to the page he left off on while Tracey leans against his shoulder to read alongside him.

“How did I end up friends with a bunch of swots?” Ron moans. “Are any of you even going to try out for the Quidditch team next year?”

“I am,” Millie answers immediately. “Going for Beater, I think. You should too. Our Chasers are pretty solid, and Heir Bletchley is a damn good Keeper, from what I’ve heard. We both know Heir Malfoy is going to get Seeker. Derrick and Bole are awful Beaters, though. There’s an opportunity for us there.”

“Huh... Now there’s an idea. Bet I could watch Fred and George practice over the summer, get some ideas from them.”

“There’s the spirit!”

Hari chuckles as he refocuses on the next entry of his book, eager to learn as much as he can about dragons now that he knows he can speak with them.

Norwegian Ridgeback

The Norwegian Ridgeback closely resembles its cousin, the Hungarian Horntail, save for the black ridges on its back and its less hostile attitude toward wixen. Native to Norway, these are one of the few dragons that are sexually dimorphic in appearance, with females having smoother webbing connecting their ridges while males have sharp dips and spikes between their own.

Do not let their more docile behavior fool you, however. Norwegian Ridgebacks are just as lethal as any other dragon, possessing venomous fangs and developing the ability to shoot flames earlier than any other species of dragon, starting at a mere one month old.

Norwegian Ridgebacks prefer large mammals as their prey, and they, unlike most dragon species, will target aquatic prey as well. They are unlikely to eat a human on purpose, but there are records of them doing so nonetheless, so exercise caution if you ever come across one.

He’s so engrossed in his book that he nearly misses when his wand starts to ring in a low, warning tone. Hari blinks rapidly when he registers the sound, ignoring Tracey’s disappointed groan when he snaps his book shut. “Aw, come on, Hari... I love dragons, and my parents won’t let me buy any Care of Magical Creatures books that aren’t on our syllabus until third year!”

“Something’s wrong.” Two words are all it takes to make their entire group fall quiet, and Hari scopes out the field in front of him before a bludger hurtling in their direction tells him exactly what the problem is. Familiar, malignant magic coats it like a second skin. He shudders as he whips out his wand, shouting, “Immobulus! Wingardium Leviosa!” His second spell keeps the iron ball from crashing into the stands, and Hooch blows her whistle to pause the game as she flies over to retrieve the bludger.

“Nice reflexes, Mr. Potter! I’ll take it from here.” She doesn’t even give him a chance to explain what’s going on before flying off, and his opinion of the professor only drops further.

“That was... Strange, wasn’t it?” Blaise murmurs, voice heavy with meaning.

Malfoy scoffs, rolling his eyes dismissively. “Bludgers go stray all the time, Heir Zabini. Not everything is an attack on Heir Potter.”

Blaise doesn’t pay Malfoy any attention, watching Hari for the subtle nod he gives him. He sharply elbows Ron after Hari does so, muttering lowly that he needs to pay attention to what’s happening outside of the game. Ron inhales sharply when one of the bludgers hurtles back toward them again, eyes narrowing in a way that Hari knows means he’s focusing on the magic surrounding it.

Even Malfoy starts looking nervous when Hari disables the bludger again, and Hari’s eyebrow twitches violently when Hooch does the same exact thing as last time before he can say a word. “Would it kill our professors to look further than their own noses?” Daphne covers her laughter with a polite cough.

Hooch doesn’t realize that something is wrong until Fred and George give up on hitting the bludgers toward the Slytherin team at all. They move in perfect sync as they beat the errant bludger away from the Slytherin stands, standing guard with their typically bubbly yellow magic thrumming with protective determination. It looks like they might be in trouble when the

second one starts acting up as well, but Derrick and Bole are quick to join them once they realize that the Slytherins are being targeted. Unfortunately, Millie wasn't exaggerating when she called them poor Beaters, and another bludger nearly makes it past them before blue flames erupt in the professor stands.

Both bludgers drop like, well, iron, onto the Quidditch pitch, and Hooch is forced to call the game to a halt as she inspects the bludgers for tampering.

"Way to go, Hermione," Hannah murmurs, much to Malfoy's consternation. He has no clue that those bluebell flames are her signature, and Hari knows that she must have seen that Quirrel was jinxing the bludgers just as surely as Hari did, even if she can't see magic. The Gryffindor stands are far closer to the professor stands...

Malfoy swallows heavily. "That... Was actually targeting you, wasn't it, Heir Potter?"

"Probably," Hari answers idly, as if he isn't absolutely sure of it. "But that's not surprising. I told you there was something off about Quirrel."

"Do you really think he would attack you in broad daylight? That sounds like poor planning for a Ravenclaw."

Hari doesn't get the chance to answer Malfoy's question, but in the end, he doesn't have to. Hermione, Terry, Neville, Lavender, and Parvati race over from the Gryffindor stands, red-faced and panting as Lavender cries out, "Hari, it was Quirrel!" There's too much grumbling about the game for everyone to hear her, but she immediately catches all of the first years' attention. "His eyes were locked onto that bludger, I swear he never blinked, and his lips were moving the whole time!"

A mean little grin tugs at Hermione's lips as she says, "So I snuck beneath the stands and set his robes on fire. Forced him to break eye contact. And wouldn't you know it, the bludgers stopped acting strange after that."

Malfoy openly gapes at her, magic quivering in newfound fear, as Hannah gives her a wide grin and repeats, "Way to go, Hermione!"

"Man, it's no wonder you never go outside," Ron grumbles. "It's like the forces of the universe conspire to kill you the instant you do."

"It certainly seems like it," Hari agrees with a chuckle. "But they haven't been successful yet, and I'm not particularly inclined to roll over and let them be."

Neville's magic wavers slightly, hesitant, before he squares his shoulders and looks Hari in the eye. "Hari... The way Quirrel acts around you... You don't think he could be one of...?" 'Voldemort's' goes unsaid but not unheard.

A wan smile is Hari's answer, making Malfoy pale even further. "At this point, I wouldn't be surprised."

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Thankfully, the weeks that follow do not result in further attempts on his life, and before he knows it, winter hols are right around the corner. Everyone is excited to take a break from all the studying and classes, and Hari is no exception. He does find himself surprised by how excited he is to return to the Dursleys, or rather, to see Dudley, though.

Exchanging letters with his cousin is great, but it's just not the same as talking to him in person. Besides, he can't wait to see how Dudley reacts to how much bigger Nisaba, Camulus, Artemis, and Kratos have gotten since he started Hogwarts. It's only been a few months, but the heavily saturated magic of this place combined with Hogwarts actively favoring him and supplementing his magic with her own has seen them shed several times since the term started. They're definitely getting bigger, and a lot faster than any of them anticipated.

"It's a good thing I finally figured out the shrinking charm, huh? I think you're getting close to ten feet now, Kratos."

The boa constrictor preens at the awe in his voice. ***"I will get larger. Your magic is strong, and our bond is too. Even Artemis is three feet long now."***

And considering the fact that adders, as a rule, don't even get two feet long, that's no small feat. Hari chuckles as the massive constrictor makes himself at home in his lap as he unfurls a roll of parchment and begins to write another letter.

Dudley,

I can't believe how quickly the winter hols have snuck up on me, but I'm excited that we'll get to see each other again soon. How goes convincing Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon to get you a pet? You seemed pretty confident that you were nearly there last time, and I can't help wondering if I'll come home to proof of your success.

I'm glad to hear that I did well on these worksheets as well, though I apologize that I am, as you put it, 'Doing better than you when I'm not even attending the bloody classes.' That's one of the benefits of being such a swot, I suppose.

On the subject of our friends... I am only just now realizing that I have a lot of friends to buy gifts for this year. Do you think you could convince Aunt Petunia to take us to Diagon Alley? The sooner the better. I don't want all the good gifts to get sold, and I'd hate to not find something in time.

Hari

PS: I've attached two more boxes of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as a bribe.

PPS: I think you might have a problem, cousin. No sane person can enjoy biting into candy that tastes like grass clippings or dog food, no matter how many good flavors there are to compensate for it.

Almost as soon as Hari sends off his letter, Blaise rejoins them from the bathroom, using the levitation charm to carry everything that he won't need to use tonight or tomorrow morning so that he can pack it now.

"It's a shame that none of you can visit over the break. I bet you'd love Italy. I wonder... Oh, I know! I'll ask Mamma about hosting you all for a couple of weeks in the summer. We can invite your families too, of course. It'd be fun, don't you think?"

"I'd rather you didn't invite my father," Theo snorts as a smile tugs at his lips. "But I'd like to go if it's possible. I'm sure my father will be easy enough to convince."

"I dunno if Mum and Dad will be up to traveling again when they're already visiting Charlie over the break, but it won't hurt to ask. I'm sure they'd let me go either way. Let me know what your mom says."

"The Dursleys will take any excuse to travel," Hari answers with a wry grin. "And they've been wanting to go to Italy for a while now. It'll put me further in their good books, so if you don't mind that they may be a bit... Wary about magic, then I'm sure they'd be up for it."

Blaise claps his hands together with a wide grin. "It's a plan, then. I'll have to be discreet about inviting the others along, though. We hardly want Malfoy inviting himself... Hm, I'll send the invitations along with their Yule gifts, I think. I'll know for sure whether Mamma is fine with it and when you'd be able to come over by then anyway."

They all walk down to the Christmas feast together, unfortunately bound to their House tables since it's a formal feast. "Are you sure you don't want to visit Malfoy Manor over the break, Theo? You know my mother and father would be delighted to have you."

"I'm sure, but thank you, Draco. I can hardly leave Weasley in the dungeons by himself the whole break, can I?" Theo's father is not likely to be happy about him not coming home, but Theo has made it abundantly clear to them that he will only do so over the summers, when he has no other choice.

"I suppose..." Malfoy has slowly gotten used to the idea of Theo 'tolerating' them, and if it wasn't for the fact that it is extremely risky for Theo to reveal their friendship, then he likely would have by now. But he is not willing to gamble on his father's reaction when that news inevitably reaches his ears.

Nearly the entire table stiffens when Fred and George dart past them, winking at Ron and shooting him a thumbs up. "Do I even want to know?" Hari asks with a wry grin, and Ron's answering smirk is tinged with vindictiveness.

"I may have given them a few hints about Quirrel. I'd bet anything that he'll be the focus of their pranks for a while." That suspicion is confirmed only moments later, when McGonagall grabs them each by the ear and gives them detention for bewitching snowballs to constantly pelt the back of Quirrel's head.

Blaise bursts into laughter. "Oh, imagine if they'd been in Slytherin too! I guess they don't bother much with hiding what they're up to, but the potential if they did..." Several of the older years pale at the mere thought of it, and Hari snickers under his breath at the way their magic collectively recoils in horror.

The feast begins in earnest once Hagrid brings in the last, giant fir tree for Flitwick to decorate with a few flicks of his wand. They all go to bed with warm hearts and full bellies, and the true chaos doesn't begin until the next morning. Blaise and Hari don't have very much to pack, Hari keeps almost everything in his trunk anyway to ensure it's as safe as possible, but considering how it's taking their friends to meet up with them, that clearly isn't the case for everyone.

"Hari! Blaise! Sorry for being late; Terry misplaced one of the books he plans on reading over the break, and we simply could not leave without it." Hermione's hair is frizzy and wild in that way it is whenever she goes on a research binge, and Hari has a feeling that her search of the Ravenclaw dorms was nothing short of militant.

“You still beat the others here,” Hari reassures her with a smile before turning to Terry with an inquisitive hum. “What are you looking into now? You already figured out the answer to your question about number theory in spellcrafting, didn’t you?”

“Yep! I won’t be able to do much more with that until I’m taking Arthimancy, so I’m delving into Ancient Runes now. If nothing else, I can memorize every runic alphabet that I can get my hands on.”

“Considering the amount of danger Hari keeps getting himself into, I’d start with the protection runes,” Padma mutters, and Terry nods seriously.

“I was already planning on that.”

Millie claps Terry on the shoulder as the Slytherin girls join them, giving him an approving nod. “Good thinking. He might just manage to make it to graduation if we all put our heads together.”

“Oi!”

Daphne hides a laugh behind her hand at his indignant outcry. “You must admit, Hari, you have a tendency of wandering into trouble.”

“Wandering? The first thing he did when he heard Millie was in danger was run off to handle it himself, and I’d bet that he’s still visiting that cerberus. Are you?” Hari doesn’t humor Tracey’s teasing question with a response, mock huffing as he turns his head. “I knew it! See? He marches straight into trouble. He’s just good at getting out of it too.”

“He wouldn’t have to do it at all if the professors could do their jobs!” Parvati cuts in as the trio of Gryffindors finally joins their group. “I mean, honestly, how did none of them notice what Quirrel was doing?”

“I still can’t believe that there’s a cerberus in the third-floor corridor,” Lavender mutters with narrowed eyes. “Why would they keep something so dangerous in a school? And behind a door that any first year can open! No wards, no alarms, no nothing! They’re just asking for someone to get hurt!”

Neville grimaces, eyes darting around the room as he says, “Let’s talk about this later. We should grab a compartment before all the good ones are gone.” It’s not the most subtle change of subject, but it doesn’t have to be. It gets the job done. They all stick to lighter subjects as they board the Hogwarts Express and find their own compartment, and Hari locks the door behind them as soon as they all cross the threshold. Athena, the only one of his familiars to dare braving the cold while the rest snooze in his trunk, curls up in his lap with a purr. Her gentle rumbling is the only sound in their compartment for a few long seconds. Then, Neville’s eyes glint with determination that thrums in his very magic, twisting and angrier than Hari has ever seen it.

“I think... I think Dumbledore knows. About Quirrel trying to kill Hari. The Quidditch match got me thinking... Hogwarts is infamous for its wards. A troll couldn’t have just wandered into the school on Halloween! Someone would have to let it in. And since Quirrel is the one who told everyone about it in the first place...”

“He’s the first suspect.” Padma’s eyebrows furrow in thought. “And after the Quidditch game, that likelihood only got higher. The only problem is that the troll went after Millie, not Hari, and while she had joined our study group... She wasn’t especially close with us back then. Why would he target her?”

Lavender bites her lip as she murmurs, “A warning? Maybe he was trying to scare her away.”

“Trolls aren’t smart enough to follow orders.” His friends all immediately turn their attention to him, and Hari tries not to squirm under the weight of their gazes. “I don’t think I was his primary target, at least not then. Trust me, I know he wants me dead, but... Dumbledore has to be guarding something in the third-floor corridor. Why else would Fluffy be there? Whatever is down there, Quirrel wants it. And throwing the whole school into chaos by letting a troll loose in it gives him a pretty good chance to go scope it out.”

“It just feels so... Sloppy.” Daphne’s nose scrunches in distaste. “No one paid any attention to the fact that he wasn’t at the feast. He could have done it without all the dramatics. And he’s a professor, with assigned patrols at night, so it wouldn’t be difficult for him to slip away during one. Why would he cause a scene?”

“Maybe the professors are onto him?” Hermione suggests hopefully. “He could’ve been trying to throw them off his trail.”

Parvati snorts. “You put far too much faith in our professors. They would’ve kept him from hexing the bludger if they had any idea what he was up to.”

“... I know.” Hermione sighs as she starts tugging on her hair, magic flaring with irritation. “Ugh! It’s just infuriating. How can they miss what’s right in front of them? They spend way more time with Quirrel than any of us, and they still can’t see

it?!”

Terry’s eyes widen in horror as a realization shakes him to his core. “It’s a test. The fact that first years can get past that door isn’t a coincidence. Dumbledore knows that Quirrel wants whatever is down there, and he knows that Quirrel is going after Hari too. He wants Hari to fight him, to protect whatever is down there. But why?”

“Because the Dark Lord is probably coming back,” Blaise whispers. “And whatever Hari did that night... I think he wants him to do it again.”

The entire compartment falls into horrified silence. Hannah is the one who breaks it, yelling, “That’s a load of hippogriff dung! We’re all kids! Dumbledore can’t just...! Just! What kind of horrible test is that?!”

“A trial by fire.” Millie clenches her fist in fury. “It’s a bloody trial by fire. Throw him into the thick of things and see if he survives now, see if he’s worth training later. Bet that’s why they took so long to find the troll too. Do they even care if any of us die?”

“Probably not,” Tracey says with a shrug. “Isn’t there that ghost of a student that still hangs around Hogwarts? And I heard there used to be a lot of deaths in Potions before Snape took over, but they still didn’t sack the guy. He retired.”

“... Merlin, this is all so messed up. I’ve heard my aunt complaining about it, but I never really thought...” Susan’s eyebrows furrow and a frown tugs at her lips. “We need to document everything. And I mean everything. It’ll probably take years before we can do anything about it, but this gross negligence has to stop. And we won’t be able to get anyone to act against Dumbledore without proof. Tons of it.”

“We’re agreed, then?” A sea of nods answer Neville’s question, and Hari can feel his eyes watering at the sight of it. He really does have the best friends.

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Hari ducks through the crowd of wixen with ease, waving farewell to his friends and leaping through the barrier to King’s Cross Station. “Hari!!” He’s barely two steps past the barrier before Dudley tackles him in a hug, carefully avoiding Athena’s carrier but nearly knocking Hari down regardless.

“Oof! Hey, Dud! Man, you’ve been training hard, huh?”

“You know it! You’re the brains, and I’m the brawn. You keep getting smarter, so I’m not gonna slack off either. I won’t be left behind.” Dudley’s words are teasing, but he can hear the thread of insecurity in them nonetheless.

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving you behind,” he promises, turning to face his aunt and uncle with a nervous smile.

Aunt Petunia is watching on fondly, and her smile calms the storm churning in his stomach. Even Uncle Vernon is being surprisingly pleasant today, though Hari suspects that’s because he made sure to wear muggle clothing. He doesn’t look out of place among all the other passengers stepping off their trains and meeting up with loved ones, and that sense of normalcy buys him some leeway with his uncle.

Hari knows how it works by now. So long as his magic is kept hidden from the world at large, all will be well. “Hello, Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon. Thank you for coming to pick me up.”

“Of course. Did you have a pleasant ride?” Hari plasters a smile on his face as he nods, following his relatives to the car as they exchange idle, meaningless pleasantries. Uncle Vernon keeps a close eye on him the entire drive home, frequently looking in the rearview mirror as Hari lets Dudley ramble about Smeltings and the wrestling team.

“But what about you, Hari? How are Fang and Fluffy? Is your Defense professor still being a jerk?”

Hari is impressed with Dudley’s subtlety. Considering what he’s told him about the things going on at Hogwarts, this is probably the least alarming way he could have asked about the cerberus and his murderous professor. “Fang still slobbers a ton, and it’s getting to the point where I have to talk different friends into visiting because they’re sick of it. Fluffy has been kinda lonely, but Athena goes to spend time with him whenever she can. It helps, I think. And yep, he’s still being a complete jerk. I swear, he hates my guts for no good reason.”

“... Who are Fang and Fluffy?” Aunt Petunia dares to ask, and Dudley is the one who answers her.

“The school dogs! Hari has been spending a lot of time with them between his classes and studying. I’m just glad he’s doing something other than reading books.”

“I watched a Quidditch game!”

“You brought a book. That doesn’t count.”

“So you like dogs, boy?” Hari flinches at his uncle’s form of address, gritting his teeth as his magic violently trembles beneath his skin. It’s not even an accusatory question, but something about being called that still sets Hari on edge. It reminds him of lashings and going hungry and crying himself to sleep in his cupboard, wishing more than anything else in the world that he was normal. He used to try so hard to be normal. “We’ve been thinking about asking Marge for one of the pups in her next litter. Wasn’t sure if it’d cause problems with your cat, though.”

“I like dogs!” he stutters out once his heart stops pounding in his chest. “And Athena likes them too. Kneazles understand dogs pretty well compared to most other animals. It shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Yes!! See, I told you, Mom! I told you it would be fine!”

“I know, Diddykins,” Aunt Petunia says with a fond smile. “But we had to be sure. We... We spent far too long not considering how Hari felt in all of this. I don’t want to make that mistake again.”

“... Thank you, Aunt Petunia.”

“We can all go do your Christmas shopping tomorrow,” his aunt says, and tears pool in the corners of his eyes before he even realizes why. She sounds just like she does when promising something to Dudley right now. She sounds like she actually means it. “They never took our necklaces back, after all. And I think it’ll do Vernon some good to see that Diagon Alley really isn’t so strange.”

That shocks Hari back into the present, and his head immediately whips over to see Uncle Vernon’s vaguely uncomfortable expression. Even still, he catches Hari’s eye and nods firmly, committing to it without hesitation. Is he dreaming? This doesn’t feel real.

“I need to understand how all that freakishness works if we’re to profit off it. I won’t have you slacking on me, boy.”

That makes far more sense. Hari covers up his snort with a cough, but he’s too pleased by the outcome to care about his uncle’s reasoning. Besides... The thought of Uncle Vernon wandering through Diagon Alley is an amusing one indeed. He’s curious to see how this goes.

Chapter End Notes

Heheh, the Christmas chapter is next! And with it, the reveal of what's going on with Hari's magic ;3 I do wonder if any of you have put those clues together...

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Finally, nearly 8,700 words later, this chapter is ready for you all >:3 The big reveal as to what is going on with Hari's magic is here, and oh boy am I excited for the reactions to it. I hope you all enjoy!

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They leave for Diagon Alley bright and early the next morning. Dudley is practically vibrating with excitement beside him, and though a part of Hari is screaming for him to shut up and go along with it, an even larger part is demanding answers. “Why do you hate magic so much, Uncle Vernon? You obviously see the utility in it, so I just... Why didn’t you encourage me to use it to your advantage from the start? It would’ve been easy. All I ever wanted was to be accepted by you guys.”

“... You and Dudley were too young to remember it, but I didn’t always hate magic. I didn’t like it, mind, but I married Petunia despite her sister being a witch. We had Dudley despite knowing there was a small chance our child could have magic. But that was when I thought magic was mostly benign.”

“Lily’s accidental magic was always easily handled,” Aunt Petunia whispers. “She would summon her favorite toys or make flowers bloom beneath her feet once she started walking, that sort of thing. And it was cute and special, so our parents always encouraged it. But you... It doesn’t excuse what we did, but you were a terror, Hari. Your magic was the kind that knocked out power on the whole street and shattered all of our windows. And you cried so much. It never stopped. You were in absolute agony all the time, and there was nothing we could do about it. And your scar... No matter what the doctors tried, it just kept reopening and bleeding over and over again. It’s a miracle that you didn’t get an infection from it, but I could tell it was hurting you, even when it stayed closed. Of course it was. And the worse you felt, the more dangerous your magic got. So we thought... If encouraging her magic made Lily do those things more often, then maybe punishing yours would make it stop.”

“It wasn’t too harsh at first. Mostly locking you away until you wore yourself out and fell asleep. But as you got older, things only got worse. Do you remember that old car we used to have? The one I only drove to work and back?”

“Yeah!” Dudley furrows his eyebrows with a hum. “I think you showed me a picture of it. It was an old Mustang, right? Didn’t you sell it?”

Uncle Vernon stares Hari dead in the eye as he says, “When you were both... Five or so, we sent Hari to bed without dinner one night, and the next day, the engine started causing me problems. It wound up catching fire on my way to work. It had just been serviced, there were no problems with it before, and I barely got out of the car before it exploded. Magic was ruining our lives and damn near took mine. That’s when we swore to do whatever it took to put a stop to it. We’d beat it out of you if we had to. Because that damned wizard refused to let us send you to an orphanage or give you to anyone else, and you were putting us all in danger. And for a while, it worked.”

“It’s like you were just as afraid of your magic as we were. We never called it that, thought it’d be easier to suppress if it didn’t have a name, but there was a long period of time where you never used it at all. We thought it was over. Then Dudley tripped you, and you just got so angry all of a sudden and...” His aunt shudders. “That’s when you destroyed all of the windows. Glass went flying everywhere, cut all of us up, and it was like these... Strange, shifting shadows started creeping up your skin. Your eyes were glowing. You looked like a demon. It was one of the most terrifying things I’ve ever seen. And then a few weeks later, it just... Stopped. That was around the time you found your first familiar, right? I wonder if that had anything to do with it.” Aunt Petunia’s expression is so utterly, heart-wrenchingly guilty that Hari’s words are caught in his throat. “We weren’t equipped to take care of you. We had no help and minimal knowledge, and we were afraid, Hari. And I am so, so sorry. Maybe if we had been gentler from the start, if we had encouraged you like my parents did for Lily... Maybe it would’ve become less dangerous on its own. Maybe you were just grieving. I don’t know. We can’t take back what we did, but just know that I regret it. You were just a baby. I should have tried harder.”

“No, I’m sorry,” he whispers. “You didn’t deserve to have me dumped on you like that. And... It makes sense. You were afraid, and fear can make you do awful things. Especially when whatever you’re afraid of is a threat to you. I’m lucky you didn’t kill me outright after all of that, honestly.” Hari has never claimed to be a good person, and he’s not sure that he would’ve managed half as well as they did in their place. Things were awful for a long time, even if his memories of that time

are nothing more than a hazy blur, but after he met Nisaba, they really started easing up on him. Come to think of it, he was so afraid of her getting hurt that his magic mostly focused on hiding her after that point, with the exception of a couple far more harmless incidents here and there. It's enough to convince him that they're both being honest, that he really did do those things. Besides... Fear doesn't come from nowhere. And his aunt and uncle have been terrified of him for as long as he can remember. "Thank you. For doing what you could."

"... Being grateful shows that you've got more common sense than any of the rest of them," Uncle Vernon grumbles under his breath. "Guess we did that much right."

The rest of the car ride is very quiet.

Thankfully, Dudley is in such high spirits upon seeing the Leaky Cauldron that the lingering awkwardness melts away. "Come on, come on! We never got to stop at that sweets shop last time, and I'm dying to see what else they have! You'll tell me which ones are safe, right, Hari?"

"Of course! I'm sure there are things I haven't tried or even heard of, but we can always ask."

Sugarplum's Sweets Shop is obnoxiously bright, standing out starkly against the more uniform shops with its hot pink walls and retro sign. In other words, it looks exactly like any other sweets shop in one of the big cities. It's only the candies themselves that stand out as unusual, and Hari is honestly relieved that this is their first stop. He doesn't intend to buy any gifts here, but this is a good way to ease his uncle into the more obviously magical parts of Diagon Alley.

"Wicked!" Dudley gasps as soon as they step foot inside, head turning every which way as he takes in all the colorful displays. "Ooh! They've got Drooble's Best Blowing Gum! And I'll be able to stock up on Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans too! Fizzing Whizzbees? What do those do?"

"Oh, that's one of Ron's favorites! They just make you float a few inches off the ground for like an hour or so? Should be perfectly fine for you as long as you're not planning on leaving the house." Dudley grabs a few and shoves them in his basket, and Hari can't help chuckling at his cousin's enthusiasm.

"He didn't even let us stop by the bank first," Aunt Petunia murmurs wearily. "I doubt they'll take pounds, and I don't have much left over from last time."

"I've got it," he reassures her with a smile. "It's not like some candy is going to make a dent in my vaults anyway."

Uncle Vernon's eyes glint with clear intrigue. "Vaults?"

Hari glances around, but the worst of the holiday rush hasn't hit Diagon Alley yet. There are a few customers here and there, but none close enough to listen to them without using magic to do so. And he would notice them trying, so there's no harm in giving his uncle a bit of incentive to play nice, really. "Mhmn. Turns out I'm an heir to several lordships. Four, actually, and I'm the lord presumptive of three. I've got a pretty hefty inheritance in my trust vaults alone, but once I come of age... Well, so long as we continue to get on as we have recently, I'd like to repay you for taking me in."

"... What kind of inheritance are we talking?"

"Oh, something to the effect of about ten million pounds," he murmurs, grinning as his uncle chokes on air. "Of course, that number is likely to go up with King Bloodclaw personally overseeing my investments. We've come to something of an accord, you could say."

Uncle Vernon stares at Hari for several long moments before muttering, "Maybe you're more like us than I gave you credit for."

Hari's smile is a vicious little thing. "Thank you, uncle."

When Dudley rejoins them, it's with a basket laden with all of his favorites and a few particularly eccentric candies to try. Sugar Mice, Jelly Slugs, and Sugared Butterfly Wings get Hari's seal of approval, and a bag of Pepper Imps goes back on the shelf after Hari says, "Those will make you breathe fire. I don't think that'll agree with you very well." His aunt and uncle look incredibly relieved when Dudley puts them back immediately.

Once they've stepped out into the brisk air, his aunt asks, "Well, where to next?"

"Oh, oh, let me guess!" Dudley's teasing grin stretches from ear to ear. "Flourish and Blotts. How many of your friends are getting books?"

“No!” Hari protests weakly. “... I was gonna suggest Obscure Books, actually. They have a wider selection outside of the required textbooks and supplemental texts.”

Dudley snorts. “Books are books, Hari. Come on, let’s go shop for your swot friends.”

He immediately picks up a copy of *Wixen Customs and Traditions* for Hermione. He knows that she’s been getting frustrated over the lack of resources for muggle-born wixen to learn more about the world they’re coming into, beyond the academic part of it, and the book has certainly been a huge help to him. Terry gets a copy of *Spellman’s Syllabary*, and Hari hopes that the collection of ancient runes and their translations will prove helpful for his personal project. Padma gets a copy of *Practical Potions and How to Brew Them* since she actually likes potions quite a lot, but, like Blaise, cannot stand Snape’s teaching style. She won’t feel like she’s wasting ingredients with practice brews if they have a use. As soon as he sees *Dragons Across the Globe*, Hari immediately snickers and picks the book up for Tracey. Her parents might not let her buy it herself, but there’s certainly nothing stopping him from sending her a copy. Dudley is clearly getting bored, and he’s just about to go check out when one final title catches his eye: *Heirs and Legacies (And How to Circumvent Them if You So Choose)*. He flips through the pages, discovering that it’s an autobiography by Eleanor Burke, the last known member of the Burke family, and something about her story...

There is no denying that family holds great importance to wixen. We address each other by family name unless given leave to be more casual. We are expected to be sorted into the same house as our family. We are expected to uphold our family’s values and legacies above all else. But my family... I ask that you think of me as Eleanor, for the name Burke brings me nothing but shame.

Elizabeth Burke was perhaps our most well-known family member, but despite becoming the Headmistress of Hogwarts, she was never more than a cruel, tyrannical witch who hated anyone that wasn’t exactly like her. Her portrait still exists in the Slytherin Dungeon, belittling any half-blood members and encouraging harassment of muggle-borns, and she serves as a reminder that legacies are not always a good thing to uphold.

Before you can ask, I sorted Hufflepuff. It’s one of my proudest moments in life, second only to having my son.

The Burke name will not continue on as it was. I will not curse my son with the burden that was placed upon my shoulders, the constant whispers of how I must be a dark witch in the making, that I had somehow tricked my way into Hufflepuff... No, that version of the name dies with me, for all that I know my son will carry on the name itself.

I may not be able to stop my father from selling Borgin and Burke’s to someone else to continue the family legacy in that way, Merlin knows I was written out of his will as soon as I sorted Hufflepuff, but everything else? The vault, the heirlooms, the money... He has no one else to will it to, and he bloody well knows it. His pride demands it stays within the family. My son will be his heir.

We did not ask for the burden of this name, but we will use it for good if it’s the last thing we do. I will ensure that my son can live as he bloody well pleases. And one day, when I’m old and gray and all of my classmates realize that the horrors they were waiting for me to commit never came, I hope they feel ashamed. I hope they learn from their mistakes so that the generations that follow do not repeat them.

How else are we ever meant to break free of this endless cycle of hatred and blame that plagues our country?

Well, with an introduction like that, how can he not buy it for Theo?

“Finally!” Dudley groans as they step outside of the shop. “Please tell me that we’re gonna do something more interesting next.”

“... Does going to Scribbulus Writing Instruments count?”

His cousin’s despairing sigh turns a few heads, but they get moving before anyone can realize that Hari is shopping in Diagon today. He has no desire to get swarmed like he did at the Leaky Cauldron the first time.

Hari is immediately drawn to the quills once they step inside the shop, eyeing the ones made of magical feathers with sharp interest. Much like with his wand’s core, quills made from the feather of a magical creature maintain certain magical abilities. He ends up grabbing an occamy feather quill for Susan, which can grow or shrink if she nudges it with her magic, and a thunderbird feather quill for Daphne. He’s not sure how effective it will be at warning her of danger, but anything helps. Lavender gets a glittery ink set that he knows she’ll adore, and with that, they’re back out on the main path of Diagon Alley once more.

He’s not certain if the street vendors rotate depending on the time of year or availability, but much to Hari’s relief, the vendor he remembers peddling magical plants during his first visit is open despite the cold. “Hello, sir!”

“Hello, lad! An aspiring herbologist, I take it? Not many your age come looking for plants.”

“Magizooologist, actually,” Hari corrects with a sheepish smile. “But I do love Herbology! And I’ve got a couple of friends who are definitely headed down that path. I was looking for gifts for them, actually.”

“Got anything specific in mind?” The vendor looks like he’s prepared to painstakingly walk him through the entire process, but thankfully, Hari knows exactly what he wants.

“One of your Flitterbloom and the Mimulus mimbletonia.”

“Right, one Flitterbloom and—” The vendor’s voice cuts off sharply with a splutter. “Pardon? I must have misheard you. Do you know how rare Mimulus mimbletonia are? It would cost you 250 galleons.”

Hari quirks an eyebrow, suddenly remembering that he is, in fact, wearing muggle clothes and likely giving the impression that he can’t afford such a thing. He chuckles as he reaches into his Mokeskin pouch, depositing the gold onto the vendor’s booth as his eyes blow wide. “And how much for the Flitterbloom?”

After a lot of stammering and Hari handing over another five galleons, his newly acquired plants join his snake familiars in the temperature-controlled compartment of his trunk. Neville’s gift might be a bit overkill, but what are 250 galleons to someone who saved his life? If anything, it still doesn’t feel like enough. And Hannah loves Flitterbloom for its resemblance to Devil’s Snare without the nasty temperament, so her gift was an easy choice.

“Hey, Dudley. You wanna go look in Quality Quidditch Supplies?”

His cousin positively lights up at that, practically dragging him into the building while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon race after them. “Must you encourage him?” his aunt huffs with a fond smile. She moves to ruffle his hair, but despite knowing that, every fiber of Hari’s being tenses as his magic writhes beneath his skin. Aunt Petunia draws her hand back with a far more strained, sad smile.

“I needed to come here anyway,” Hari quickly deflects. “I’ve got a few friends hoping to join the Quidditch team next year.” He moves with purpose as he grabs a new quaffle for Ron, he’s been complaining about how their old one is falling apart at the seams, alongside a beater’s bat. Millie also gets a beater’s bat, but she gets a bludger instead of a quaffle. He also picks up one of the fancy practice snitches for Parvati since she plans on trying out for Gryffindor’s Seeker next year. Blaise and Ron would probably consider it utterly blasphemous for him to give another team an advantage like this, but Hari doesn’t care enough about the outcome of Quidditch matches for that to stop him.

Dudley seems quite disappointed that brooms require magic to operate, and in an attempt to cheer his cousin up, he decides to go buy his present next. He slips off to go talk with his aunt and uncle while his cousin browses the shelves, trying and failing to find any way that he can get involved in the magical sport. “Can I buy Dudley robes?”

Aunt Petunia startles at the question, leveling him with a confused look. “I suppose? But why would you want to?”

“... Because I can see how much he wants to be part of this world. I can’t make it possible for him to play Quidditch or go to Hogwarts, but I can buy him robes, share magical candies with him, and invite him to spend time with my friends. He’s afraid I’m going to leave him behind. I want to make it clear that I’ll never do that.”

Uncle Vernon grimaces, and it looks as if it physically pains him to say, “He has a point, Pet. As long as he only wears them around the house or to places like this...”

“After everything we did to you, how are you still a better brother to Dudley than I ever was to Lils?” his aunt whispers with teary eyes. “Yes, we can go get him robes.”

Hari gives his aunt a moment to compose herself, joining Dudley in front of the brooms. The smile that was on his cousin’s face when they walked into the store is nowhere to be seen now, and he can’t help thinking what a funny pair they make. A muggle boy who wants nothing more than to be magical and a magical boy who wishes he was a bit less so. “Hey, Dud. Wanna go get your Christmas present?”

“Huh?” Dudley blinks rapidly, startling slightly when he notices Hari standing right next to him. “What do you mean?”

“Well... You can say no if you want something else, but I thought I’d get you fitted for robes. Then we can both wear them to Diagon or whenever we hang out with my friends!”

“... You want to introduce me to your friends?”

"Of course I do, Dud! Blaise has to talk to his mom about it, but he's planning on inviting everyone over during the summer hols. In Italy. You're invited too."

Dudley crushes him into a hug. His cousin's arms tremble around him, and when they separate, Dudley's smile is from ear to ear. "Then what're we waiting for? Come on, let's go!!"

Madam Malkin seems delighted to see him again, and while most wixen would sneer at the thought of a muggle wearing robes, she immediately starts asking Dudley about which colors he prefers and showing him examples of different styles of robes. "We're getting a casual and formal set!" Hari calls out from across the room. "And don't worry about the price! I'm covering it."

"Understood, Heir Potter! I'll get your cousin set right up, don't you worry. Do you want them owled to you, or do you have more shopping to do?"

"Have them owled. I only need to find one more... Gift." Hari comes to a dead halt in front of a small selection of jewelry. They're clearly aimed at Hogwarts students, small collections of lions, badgers, eagles, and snakes in their corresponding house colors, and when Hari sees a silver, metal tie clip shaped like a snake with a faintly glowing green eye, he knows that he's found Blaise's gift. His friend loves wearing dress shirts and ties, even on the weekends when they're allowed less formal clothes, so it's sure to see plenty of use. Besides, it's very pretty, and Blaise likes pretty things. "Scratch that, this will be our final stop. How much for the Slytherin tie clip?"

"For you? I can throw it in with your cousin's robes."

"It's for a gift, so I really must insist on paying."

"Oh fine," Madam Malkin huffs playfully as an amused smile tugs at her lips. "Then I'll sell you two for eight galleons. That way you can match! Do we have a deal, Heir Potter?"

"Yes. Thank you, Madam Malkin."

"Of course! I wish you good luck, Heir Potter."

Hari's not quite sure what she means by that, but he shrugs it off and pulls a book out from his trunk while they wait on Dudley's fitting to be over. His cousin is practically skipping as they leave Diagon Alley, and once they're all in the car and on their way home, Dudley asks, "What'd you think, Dad? Isn't it just the coolest?!"

"... It wasn't half as bad as I expected it to be."

Coming from Uncle Vernon, that's practically glowing praise.

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"Wake up, Hari! Come on, wake up, it's Christmas!!"

The sky is pitch black, the only birdsong to be heard is the distant hooting of owls, and even Hari is tempted to roll over and go back to bed. "Ugh... What time is it, Dud?"

"Three. But it's Christmas, Hari!! Come on, I already woke Mom and Dad up! And don't forget your mailbox; I wanna see what your friends get you!"

Hari forces himself out of bed with a groan, blearily rubbing at his eyes as he hefts up the metal box and follows his cousin down the stairs. His aunt and uncle are in similar states of grogginess. Aunt Petunia is hovering over the tea kettle with her favorite blend sitting on the counter, and Uncle Vernon is already nursing a cup of coffee. His uncle takes one good look at his face before he silently pours another cup. Hari sets his mailbox down next to the couch with a dull thunk and accepts the offer gratefully.

Coffee tastes absolutely rancid, but he feels a bit more awake now.

"Well, don't just sit there!" Dudley huffs from where he's kneeling in front of the tree. "Come on, come open your presents!"

Hari can feel his magic, constantly moving and flowing around him, stutter to a near halt. "I... I have presents?" His eyes water as he stands up and takes a halting step forward, taking in the two distinct piles of gifts with awe. His pile is noticeably smaller than Dudley's, but he doesn't care about that. He's still in shock that there's anything for him at all.

“Merry Christmas, Hari.” His aunt’s whisper nudges him forward, legs shaking and unsteady like a baby deer. Dudley hasn’t opened a single present yet. He’s been sitting here the whole time, and yet... His cousin passes him a present with a patient smile. Hari doesn’t notice the shadows curling around his throat as he bites back a sob, clutching the carefully wrapped gift that has his name on it so tightly that the paper rips beneath his fingernails.

Dudley’s smile doesn’t waver in the slightest. “Let’s open them together.”

Hari’s hands tremble as he peels the wrapping paper away to reveal a soft, Slytherin green blanket. It’s the first blanket he’s ever owned. He drapes it over his shoulders, and he can feel his magic vibrate beneath his skin as a tear slips down his cheek. The shadows start creeping down to his chest. Their steady journey is only halted when Nisaba and Artemis join him downstairs, curling around his neck and wrist as their eyes faintly glow green. Athena darts down shortly after that, curling up in his lap and purring so loudly that it vibrates in his chest. The shadows start to recede. Kratos and Camulus join them shortly after that. The massive boa rests his head on top of Hari’s, and Camulus drapes himself across Hari’s shoulders.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he opens them once more, the shadows, still unseen to Hari himself, are gone. “Thank you,” he whispers. “Thank you.”

His gifts are all small, simple things, but that makes them all the more precious to him. A pair of socks with a big cat over the toes, fuzzy pajama pants with snakes all over them, some quills and ink, a stuffed dragon from Dudley... Tears flow in a steady stream down his face. Because this is everything he ever wanted, isn’t it? To be part of their family for real?

“I’m sorry,” he snuffles. “I’m sorry...!”

Thin arms wrap around his form, and Hari is too exhausted to even flinch away from them. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” his aunt whispers. “None of this is your fault.” She presses one last present into Hari’s hands when they separate, and while her smile is a bit wobbly around the edges, it’s no less genuine. “It’s okay if you don’t like them. I know they might be a bit girly, but I saw them and immediately thought of you, so... I can always return them if you don’t want them.”

Three silver, gleaming hairpins rest inside the final box, each depicting a snake in a different pose. The first one is curled up and at rest, the second one is poised and wary, and the third is mid-strike. They’re absolutely beautiful. “I love them. Thank you, Aunt Petunia.”

“Of course.” This time, when she goes to ruffle his hair, he doesn’t shy away from the touch at all. “Now come on, you two. Breakfast is ready.”

Hari gets to sit at the table with the rest of them. He gets to eat however much he wants to, far more than he used to be capable of after getting used to the feasts at Hogwarts, he gets to talk about his classes, and he gets to laugh at Dudley’s jokes without fear of being overheard. It’s the most liberating feeling in the world. And Hari knows that the day is only going to get better when his mailbox starts to glow.

“Come on, come on! I’m dying to see what they sent you!”

“It’s probably a bunch of books, Dud,” Hari warns him with a teasing smile. “You sure it won’t bore you to sleep?”

“No way! Come on!”

Hari steadily empties his mailbox of packages until the glow fades away, and just to mess with Dudley a bit, he decides to open all of the presents that are clearly books first. His first present ends up being from Blaise, and he cackles outright when he reads the title of the muggle book that his friend bought for him: *How to Take Over the World in Ten Easy Steps*.

Hari,

I fear the repercussions of encouraging you like this, but alas, I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to walk into your hostile takeover of wixen society unprepared.

In all seriousness, I got a good laugh out of this, and I hope that you do too. Mamma agreed to host everyone for two weeks near the end of the summer, leaving a few days before the hols are over for everyone to get their shopping for the term done. Your family is invited so long as you want them to be.

Blessed Yule,

Blaise

“Hey, Aunt Petunia? Uncle Vernon? Do you want to go on holiday to Italy this summer?” Hari asks, waving the letter with a pleased little smile. “Blaise’s mum is letting everyone come stay with them for a couple of weeks. But there’ll be a lot of

magical kids, so I understand if you don't wanna come. You don't have to decide now."

"We'll think about it, Hari," his aunt promises him. "But you and Dudley can go either way."

Content with that answer, Hari moves on to the next gift. *Advanced Charms for Specialized Wixen* is his gift from Daphne, and he doesn't even need to read her letter to know that half the reason she bought it for him was to help everyone in the study group.

Hari,

I hope you find this an interesting read. I must admit to being partially selfish in gifting you this, knowing that you will teach us everything you find interesting in it, but I believe you will enjoy it nonetheless. You pick up charms so quickly that it's almost frightening. I'm curious to see if that talent extends to spells far above our grade level.

Blessed Yule,

Daphne

Hermione also gifts him with a muggle book, and while it promises to be far more immediately practical, the contents of her letter also have him stifling a laugh.

Hari,

Trying to read your notes is positively exhausting. How do you ever look over them again when they jump from thought to thought without warning? I suppose you can do whatever you wish for your personal notes, but if you could refer to this book while writing down Charms notes for the study group, then that would be appreciated.

Sorry, that was terribly rude of me, wasn't it? I hope you're having a good time with your family. I know I've certainly missed my parents. It feels like so much has happened this year already; it's nice to have a bit of normalcy in the midst of all of it.

Merry Christmas,

Hermione

Hari grabs what has to be the densest book in the pile next. His eyes gleam with interest when he unveils Theo's gift: *Ancient Rituals and Their Importance in Wixen Culture*.

Hari,

I nicked this from the Nott family library ages ago, and I thought you might find it useful. The information is good to have, if nothing else, even if you never use any of the rituals. Be careful not to let anyone outside of our dorm see you have it, though. This book has been outlawed for over a decade.

Blessed Yule,

Theo

Hari's intrigue is only sparked further, and he silently vows to never take this outside of his trunk at Hogwarts unless he's in their dorm with his familiars standing guard for visitors. Information like this is far too interesting to risk losing. The next book he unwraps is from Tracey, and a smile tugs at his lips at the sight of *Potion Ingredients and How They Interact for Aspiring Potioneers*.

Hari,

You're not nearly as bad at brewing as Snape likes to pretend, and I think it's stupid that he'll never actually teach you. It's the background knowledge that you're lacking more than anything else, an understanding of the magical properties of the ingredients and why they make the potions they do when mixed together, so I thought this might help you.

Prove our Head of House wrong. Show him exactly how you got into Slytherin in the first place. An O is within your grasp, and imagine the look on his face when he's forced to give you and Neville one... I'd carry that memory with me forever, I think.

Blessed Yule,

Tracey

“Man, pretty much all of these are books, aren’t they?” Dudley snorts as Hari grabs yet another book-shaped package. “Your friends know you well.”

“Knowledge is power, Dudley. And I intend to be powerful.”

The next gift is a book that catches even Dudley’s attention: a self-updating Quidditch rulebook from Parvati with moving picture examples of every foul it’s possible for someone to commit.

Hari,

If you’re going to read during our Quidditch games, then it should at least be about Quidditch. Then you can mock Hooch for making bad calls, at least. I know I find it cathartic to do so.

Blessed Yule,

Parvati

Hari snorts at that, moving on to the next book with a smile tugging on his lips. Susan’s book promises to be another interesting one, and he gently runs his thumb over the title: *Heirships: Political Power and How to Wield It*.

Hari,

There is no denying your interest in politics from what I’ve seen you pulling with the Slytherins, and you’re one of the most politically powerful members of our generation, without a doubt. Once you reach your majority, everyone is going to be watching you and waiting to see what you do. I don’t intend to let you walk into that blind.

Let me know if you have any questions. Even if I don’t have the answers myself, I can always ask Aunt Amelia.

Blessed Yule,

Susan

His next gift is a dragonhide journal from Padma, charmed to prevent any water damage.

Hari,

Every Slytherin needs a good notebook for keeping their plots straight, no matter the weather. The future Prince of his year doubly so. I hope this proves useful to you.

Blessed Yule,

Padma

The pile of presents is steadily growing smaller, and only a couple of presents remain that are clearly books. Hari has to admit that he’s curious to see what else people got him, even if he is incredibly excited about the books. Neville’s gift is especially exciting, and Hari knows that he’ll be referencing it many times in the future. *Caring for Magical Creatures* is a more advanced, professional book on the subject written by Newt Scamander.

Hari,

Even wixen with a gift for taming magical creatures need to know how to do it, so I had to buy a copy of this for you. I hope that you like it! Maybe wait a few years before trying to work with anything too crazy, though.

...Who am I kidding? You’re already best friends with a cerberus. At least this will help keep you safe.

Let’s avoid fighting any more trolls this year, please. I’d like to keep this wand for a while.

Blessed Yule,

Neville

And finally, Hari is down to the final book-shaped package, though there is a surprising chunk of them left to go after that. He studies the title with furrowed eyebrows, wondering why Professor Flitwick sent him *Obscurials, Near-Obscurials, and How They Are Created*. It’s another title by Newt Scamander, so maybe it’s a book about another kind of creature? He’s never heard of Obscurials before.

Heir Potter-Black-Peverell-Slytherin.

I'm afraid there isn't a delicate way to put this, so I will simply say that I believe this book will be of personal use to you. The Goblin Nation detected an anomaly in your magic when you came in for a blood test, but Obscurials are so rare that they didn't come to that conclusion right away. It's only through observing the way your magic reacts to perceived threats that I figured it out myself. I have hope that your continued survival means you are a Near-Obscurial and not one in the truest sense of the word, but those are even rarer than Obscurials. There have only ever been two other documented cases, in fact. This book goes into heavy detail regarding said cases.

Be wary of who you let see this book. And know that if your situation at home ever becomes unbearable, though I suspect things have gotten better since you decided to visit over the holidays, the Goblin Nation is willing to shelter you as one of their own. You need only say the word.

Blessed Yule,

Filius Flitwick

"An Obscurial..." Camulus hisses lowly with despair lingering in his voice. ***"Merlin, it makes entirely too much sense. I thought you were simply too powerful for your body to handle now, that perhaps the curse scar from the Dark Lord forced your magic to develop too much too soon to protect yourself, but this... Perhaps it was a bit of both, but you need to read this as soon as possible, Hari."***

"I will. This seems far too important to put off." Hari sets the book to the side with trepidation creeping down his spine, trying to focus on his other gifts with limited success. Ron gifts him some Chocolate Frogs and a nearly complete collection of the cards that come with them, and Hari wonders exactly how many Chocolate Frogs Ron has eaten throughout his life to accumulate that many doubles. Maybe his brothers have been helping him?

Hari,

I'm sorry that I can't give you more than this, mate. One day, when I've made a name for myself, I'll make up for the lackluster gifts, I swear. On the bright side, I told my mum about what a great friend you've been, and she sent along a gift for you as well! I think there's even something for your cousin in there.

I can't wait for you and Blaise to come back. Theo refuses to play Wizarding Chess with me again after I beat him three times in a row. I think I wounded his pride a little.

Merry Christmas,

Ron

Millie gifts him with a detangling hairbrush for Athena, specifically designed to get through the unusually thick coats of kneazles.

Hari,

I know you already take really good care of Athena, but I swear by this brush for Victoria. Her coat has never looked better. Plus, there's a minor heating charm on it that makes kneazles positively melt beneath it instead of fighting you the whole way.

I figured that any book I wanted to get you was probably something one of the others had already bought, but I hope you still like it'

And hey, my offer to curse anyone giving you trouble still stands.

Blessed Yule,

Millie

Terry's present is a few more bottles of Hari's shampoo and a new conditioner to try, and he's touched by the fact that he would go out of his way to ask his mother about that.

Hari,

I'm willing to be that almost everyone else got you books, but I wanted to do something a bit different. Mum mentioned that you came into her shop before the term started, so I got her recommendations and sent them your way.

Long hair is quite common among Lords and Ladies. It's a status thing, I think? I never really paid much attention to my etiquette lessons, honestly. But anyway, it's important that you actually take care of it if you're going to keep it long. Another thing for me to look into, I suppose...

Blessed Yule,

Terry

Lavender's present is utterly fascinating, even if it's likely a fairly simple thing among wixen. He wonders how the charms for a talking mirror work, especially in a compact one.

Hari,

Honestly, it's unfair that you're one of the prettiest boys in our year without even putting any serious effort into it. I figured you could at least make an attempt to look like you're trying.

In all seriousness, I thought you'd find the charms involved interesting. I won't be upset if you wind up dismantling the magic to study it; I know you. Besides, a mirror doesn't have to give advice to be useful.

Blessed Yule,

Lavender

He decides to tackle the strangely wrapped gift next, wondering what could possibly be such a peculiar shape. He's absolutely delighted to discover that Hannah has sent him a Puffapod.

Hari,

I know you've been itching to work with a more obviously magical plant, and Puffapods are impossible to kill, even if you try. Not that I think you will, but it's a good place to start.

The beans inside the seed pod will blossom as soon as they come into contact with any solid object. Puffapod flowers cause some minor dizziness, and I've heard that trolls are allergic to them too. You know, just in case that winds up being useful.

Blessed Yule,

Hannah

His Puffapod is immediately tucked away into his trunk for safekeeping, and Hari finds himself very grateful for having such protective friends. Of the three gifts he has left, he assumes that the heftier of the three is from Lady Weasley, so he opens that one next.

Hari Potter,

I was ever so worried for Ronald when I got word that he sorted into Slytherin. I knew our family's reputation would hinder him there, and I was afraid that he wouldn't be able to make any friends because of it. To learn that you are one of his best friends, that because of you, he's met and befriended kids not just from Slytherin but from each of the houses, was such a great relief.

It might not be much, but I wanted to thank you anyway. I knitted a sweater for you and your cousin that will automatically adjust to your size and grow with you for a year or two before the charm wears out. I've included some homemade fudge as well! Ron wasn't sure whether or not you had any allergies, so I stuck with basic chocolate this time. I hope you and Dudley enjoy them!

Merry Christmas,

Molly Weasley.

"Hey Dud, this is for you." Hari tosses his cousin the emerald green sweater that is an identical copy of Hari's, save only for the letter D being sewn onto it in silver instead of H. His cousin smiles from ear to ear as he pulls it over his head, gaping as it extends a few inches to fit perfectly.

"Wicked! Make sure to tell them thanks from me!"

"I will," he promises, having every intention of writing thank you letters to everyone who sent him a gift. He moves on to the smallest of the two remaining packages, and when he opens it to reveal a hand-carved flute from Hagrid, tears spring to his

eyes again. He chuckles after blowing into it, wondering how Hagrid managed to make it sound so much like an owl that Artemis instinctively stiffened for a few seconds.

Hari,

Hope yer havin a Merri Chrismas! It ain't much, but I wanted ta get ya somethin as thanks. I haven't had so many visitors in years! Thank ya fer everythin.

Merri Chrismas,

Hagrid

That leaves only one gift to open, and Hari is well and truly stumped on who it could be from. It isn't until he picks the package up that he notices a note magically fastened onto the bottom of it.

Heir Potter,

This package nearly met the same fate as all other bewitched gifts and letters sent to you. However, what is contained within it never should have left your possession to begin with and only the wrapping surrounding it could be bewitched. The artifact inside of it is far too powerful for a compulsion charm to stick, no matter who cast it. We took the liberty of destroying that nasty bit of magic and forwarding the package to you, and when you see what's inside of it, I'm certain you'll understand why.

I do not have to tell you to remain wary of who sent this to you. You'll know who.

May Your Enemies Fall at Your Feet,

King Bloodclaw

Potter Accounts Manager

He does not miss the significance of Bloodclaw signing off with a farewell between goblins instead of a standard one for respected wixen. Hari is still wary when unwrapping the gift, but not because he doesn't trust that they've done their jobs well. He's worried about the implications of this gift, not the gift itself.

A note falls out of smooth, silvery fabric that is positively radiating magic. Its magic sings of secrets and shadows, of hiding and waiting, and Hari feels safer simply for holding it. That does not stop the dread that crawls up his throat when he picks up and reads the note. He recognizes the handwriting, of course he does. The loopy, pretentious script is the very same as the handwriting he saw in the letter to Arabella Figg a couple of years ago.

Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to You

Hari doesn't like this. He doesn't like this at all. What does Dumbledore want from him that involves giving him access to an Invisibility Cloak?

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It isn't until long after the Dursleys have all fallen asleep that Hari dares open *Obscurials, Near-Obscurials, and How They Are Created*. His heart pounds in his chest as he begins to read.

Obscurials have long since been a subject of interest for me. Far too few wixen are willing to research them because to do so is both quite a dangerous endeavor and forces them to admit that they have so utterly failed one of their own. They may have become rare in recent years, but there is still much for us to learn about Obscurials.

An Obscurial is a wixen who, after years of suppressing their magic due to physical and/or emotional abuse, develops a dark, parasitic magical force called an Obscurus. It should be known that despite this, an Obscurial both remains themselves and maintains complete control until they are pushed to emotional extremes. That is when the Obscurus is unleashed. Despite the parasitical nature of an Obscurus, their primary directive appears to be the same in every Obscurial: protect their host. The cause of their emotional distress will always be the primary target, and it is often only through coincidence that anyone else is harmed. Collateral damage, someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time... Generally, an Obscurus will not attack without purpose.

Most Obscurials do not live past their tenth birthdays. Their magical cores are put under too much strain as their magic grows and develops with them, and the Obscurus becomes so powerful that an Obscurial's continued attempts to restrain their magic stops their heart. There are, however, exceptions to this. Most do not manage to live for more than a few extra years before their bodies finally give out on them, but in one notable instance, an Obscurial lived to their thirties. It was initially believed that this was due to nothing but their sheer power. They were capable of utilizing spells as any other wixen would, after all, but further research led me to a different conclusion: the existence of Near-Obscurials, for lack of a better term.

A Near-Obscurial is created when a child well on their way to becoming an Obscurial allows their magic freedom once more. It cannot undo the damage already done to their magical pathways nor will it rid them of the Obscurus that was steadily growing stronger within them, but it can prevent them from fully developing into an Obscurial.

What is the difference, you may ask? Beyond an extended life expectancy, the Obscurus of a Near-Obscurial becomes more sentient than a true Obscurial's is. As they use their magic and the strain of containing it within themselves eases, the Obscurus becomes even more protective of their host. Perhaps it is because they gain awareness that their continued existence relies on their host living, as any Obscurus formed dies alongside the Obscurial they developed within unless a wixen successfully manages to separate them moments before the child's death.

As one might imagine, the defensive and offensive capabilities of a Near-Obscurial's magic is unmatched. I have only gotten the opportunity to speak to one Near-Obscurial about their experiences growing up, a different one from the one who lived to their thirties whose identities I am intentionally keeping anonymous, but from what they had gathered, learning defensive and offensive magics, or those that can easily be seen as such, were easy as breathing. Their Obscurus was eager to learn any new skill that might aid them in keeping their host alive. The difficulty lies in learning less practical magic.

An Obscurus prioritizes survival above all else, and so a Near-Obscurial's magic will do the same. Any natural affinities will remain, but spells outside of those two categories, the magic most innate to the Near-Obscurial and the magic most innate to the Obscurus, are immensely difficult to master. And even once they allow themselves to use their magic again, a Near-Obscurial's magical pathways often struggle to adjust to the surges in power. There is only one thing that can ease the transition as they reach their majority, and without it, even a Near-Obscurial is guaranteed to die young: magical connections.

A mentor can fulfill that role if they are powerful enough, but it is more likely for a Near-Obscurial to rely on familiar bonds to prevent their magic from overwhelming them. The greater number of familiars needed, the greater the magical power of the Near-Obscurial, but they almost always need at least three. Three is a stabilizing number, and anything less than that is unlikely to help the Near-Obscurial enough to ensure their continued survival.

The Near-Obscurial who consented to an interview with me many decades ago lived to be nearly fifty. Despite the magical aid of three familiars and their spouse, their body still eventually gave out from the strain. In the end, the nature of an Obscurus is to slowly kill their host, and Near-Obscurials are no exception to this rule.

To become an Obscurial or Near-Obscurial is one of the cruelest fates a wixen can suffer, slowly poisoned by the very thing that makes them who they are, and we should always seek to save our children from meeting such a grisly end. There has been no known documentation of an Obscurial since the oldest Near-Obscurial's passing, and it is my hope that the information contained within this book will ensure one never comes to be again.

But if such a thing was to happen... I hope that this book can bring some measure of closure to any Obscurial or Near-Obscurial that stumbles across it. I know that it's scary, but hang in there, okay? Hope is not lost for you.

The next chapter will cover the proven methods of calming any Obscurial or Near-Obscurial who starts losing control.

He snaps the book shut. Hari's magic vibrates beneath his skin as he closes his eyes, trembling like a leaf. "Are... Are you in there?"

When he opens his eyes, he sees wisps of shadows curling around his wrists. Never has a confirmation of something he already knew to be true felt so damning.

Hari doesn't sleep very well that night.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that Obscurus Books is technically only known as a book publisher with an office in Diagon in canon, but for the sake of extra foreshadowing, we're gonna pretend that they also sell the books they're responsible for publishing.

Having said that, I put literally so much effort into building the lore behind Obscurials and Near-Obscurials here based on the canon information we have and reasonable assumptions to be made from that. I've been dying to write this chapter for ages.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A bit of a shorter chapter today, but no less important for it! We're really ramping up toward the end now, and I cannot wait for it >:3 May not be able to post chapters every day, but rest assured that I'm gonna be working on them. I've well and truly hit that adrenaline rush of a story nearly being complete.

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

'Bold Italics' = Hogwarts' Speech

'Italics' = Athena's Speech

Returning to Hogwarts is a relief. The castle greets him like a mother welcoming her child back home, and it isn't until he feels the brush of her magic against his own that he realizes just how much the castle has been helping him stabilize his magic. He supposes that's why he didn't absolutely lose it on the troll, as terrified as he was.

"Thank you," he whispers as he heads down to the dungeon.

'Must protect the heir.' Hogwarts' magic lingers around him, fighting back the worst of the shadows that have clung to him, hidden within his magic itself, until the pressure in his chest lessens. **'Must protect all of my children. You are hurting. Wish you did not have to.'**

The door to the Slytherin common room opens for him as soon as he walks up to it, no password necessary. It draws some sharp looks from the Slytherins who know he hasn't had the chance to speak to Ron or Theo yet, but Hari ignores them and immediately makes his way to his dorm room. Blaise has already started unpacking, and both Ron and Theo are lounging around as he does so. Hedwig is very pleased by all the attention her human is giving her.

Blaise lights up as soon as he sees Hari, eyes glinting with mischief. "Ah, il mio cuore! If I had known you felt that way, I would've sent you a better book. Still a book, I know you, but a better book."

Hari's thoughts are racing as he tries to figure out what in the world Blaise is talking about. No matter how far back he digs, he cannot think of it, though. In the end, he winds up biting his lip and asking, with no small amount of trepidation, "What did I do?"

Blaise snickers. "Wixen only gift each other jewelry when they intend to propose marriage, Hari. And this gorgeous tie clip very much counts. You're even wearing a matching one of your own... Staking your claim on me so soon, hm?"

"Wha-?!" Hari's face burns red to the tips of his ears. "*Wixen Customs and Traditions* doesn't say anything about that!" he protests. "You're having me on!"

"He isn't." Theo's lips twitch with a smile as he scratches beneath Hedwig's chin. "Wixen courtship is an extremely complex topic. There are several books written about it alone, and *Wixen Customs and Traditions* is too broad an overview to include it. I'd recommend *The Art of Courtship*. The courting process can look a bit different depending on where the wixen involved are from, and that book best covers those differences. Gifting jewelry to the party you're interested in is universally considered a declaration of intent, though."

Hari groans at that, flopping onto his mattress as he hisses, **"Why didn't you warn me, Camulus?"**

His familiar looks up from where he and the others are curled up in front of the fireplace, leveling him with an unimpressed look. **"Do you think I pay any attention to the strange mating rituals of humans? Because I do not."**

He groans again, dragging his hand down his face with a sigh. Blaise flops down next to him with a short laugh, and Hari is relieved to see an utter lack of judgement in his friend's eyes when he can force himself to open his own. "It's alright, Hari! I know you didn't mean it like that. I just didn't want you to make the same mistake with someone who might try to trap you into it. And also let you know that people will talk if they find out you gave it to me. My mother is going to tease you relentlessly when you come to visit, though, as fair warning."

"I can live with that," he grumbles. "I'm so sorry, Blaise. I can get you something else over the Easter hols."

“... Nah, don’t worry about it. I want to keep it if you’ll let me.”

Hari’s blush burns across his face, and Ron laughs so hard that he almost makes himself sick. “All that fuss just to say you wanna keep it either way! Merlin, I missed you two. It was so quiet without you here.”

“As nice as the peace has been, I missed you both as well,” Theo murmurs. “The quiet is only enjoyable for so long.”

Yeah, it’s good to be back.

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Hari waits until everyone else has fallen asleep to pull out his Invisibility Cloak. Whatever Dumbledore’s intentions behind gifting this to him were, he knows that it’ll be suspicious if he doesn’t use it. And he doesn’t want to drag anyone else into this until he can confirm those intentions.

“You will not go alone, little speaker,” Nisaba chides him as she winds around his shoulders. ***“Allow us to protect you.”***

“Yeah! I’m coming with you. There are far too many predators lurking around our nest.” Hari picks Artemis up with a fond smile, chuckling as she curls up in one of his pockets.

“Are you sure? The castle will be much colder than our dorm room.”

“We have lived for many years with only your warming charms to heat us, little speaker. Spending a few hours away from the fire will not harm us.” Nisaba’s tone leaves no room for argument, so he shrugs the Invisibility Cloak over himself without further protest.

‘How strange. Our bond tells me you are there, but I cannot sense you at all.’ Athena scrutinizes the place he is currently standing, and Hari decides to test the limits of the cloak while he can safely do so.

“Can you hear me?”

‘Yes. I cannot smell you though.’

That’s useful to know. A ball of light springs to life in his hand, and Hari allows it to illuminate the area around him with a curious hum. “Can you see anything now? Does the light shine through?”

‘I still can’t see you, but I can see light around where you’re supposed to be.’

“Huh... Guess it hides me by absorbing any light from the outside coming in, but it can’t stop light from coming out. That makes sense; I probably wouldn’t be able to see out of it otherwise. Sucks that we’ll have to wander around in the dark, though.”

‘I’ll lead the way,’ Athena reassures him with a chirp. *‘Where do you want to go?’*

“Let’s go visit Fluffy,” Hari decides, slipping his hand outside of his cloak so he can grab a few magically preserved treats out of his trunk for Fluffy. “I bet he was lonely over the hols.”

They silently slip out of their dorm and the Slytherin common room. Their door opens for familiars without any need for a password, allowing them to come and go as they please, so even if any of his housemates were still awake at this hour, they wouldn’t think anything of it opening as Athena walks through.

The Invisibility Cloak makes sneaking around the school so much easier that it’s laughable. Even Mrs. Norris ignores him completely so long as he’s very, very still when she walks by. He’s never had such an easy time making it to the third-floor corridor, and he has every intention of bringing the cloak with him for all future visits. He’ll probably keep it on him at all times, actually. Better safe than sorry.

Fluffy growls as the door to the third-floor corridor opens, but he relaxes when he sees Athena walking through it. And when Hari shrugs off the cloak? “Woah, easy!” Hari laughs as Fluffy runs up to him, tail wagging so hard that it hits the wall with a solid thunk. “I missed you too, Fluffy! Here, I brought a steak for each of you.”

He receives several grateful, slobbery kisses that leave him utterly drenched after Fluffy devours the steaks. Hari sits down with Fluffy for a while, running his hands over the cerberus’s short fur until he finds an itchy patch that makes his leg thump. He should probably be more worried about petting a creature that can crack stone with his paw on accident, but Hari knows that Fluffy won’t hurt him.

"I'm sorry that we left you for so long. You were probably waiting for me, huh? Does anyone else visit you at all? Well, I suppose they'd have to. You do get fed enough, right? I can bring you more food! It'll be easier for me to sneak over here now."

'Hagrid takes care of him. Or I'm assuming it's Hagrid since Fluffy calls him nice big furry human. But he also loves treats and would love for you to bring them more often. It gets boring sitting here alone and guarding the trapdoor all day and all night.'

"Hm... I wonder if they make dog toys that can stand up to a cerberus. Or I could learn the enlargement charm, maybe? There has to be something I can do to make this better for you. I just hate that I can't let you out."

One of Fluffy's gigantic heads bends down to lick his face again. Hari doesn't need to be able to talk to him to understand that he's being forgiven, but he feels better when Athena confirms it nonetheless.

"Cages!" Nisaba hisses sharply, thoroughly disgruntled. ***"What is it with humans and cages? Fluffy can barely turn around in here."***

"Why is he not in the forest with the other great predators? It is where a hunter like him belongs. He cannot even find his own prey in this place." Artemis pokes her head out with a mournful hiss, and Fluffy huffs as he rests his heads on the floor and slowly lets his eyes drift shut.

"Do you wanna go to sleep, buddy?" Hari is answered by three soft, simultaneous woofs. Fluffy's tail gently sways back and forth as Hari sings him a lullaby, only stopping once gentle snores fill the room. "Goodnight, Fluffy," he whispers. "I'll visit again soon, okay? I promise."

Hari slips on his cloak and sneaks out of the room, looking around cautiously before he casts the locking charm on the door. He still isn't really feeling up to going to sleep. Having to let his thoughts wander as he does nothing but lay there and wait for sleep to take him... The trail of thought his mind travels these days doesn't lend itself very well to sleep.

He's been having a lot of nightmares lately.

With a quiet sigh, Hari decides to keep wandering around until he tires himself out. Maybe that will keep away the nightmares of sinking into an endless abyss and never rising from it again.

He carefully avoids Filch and Mrs. Norris, silently takes note of the fact that the ghosts of Hogwarts seem more active at night, and aimlessly walks the halls until he senses an incredibly powerful, unknown source of magic that does not belong to Hogwarts herself.

"Do you sense that?" he hisses quietly, and both Nisaba and Artemis hiss in the affirmative. He contemplates turning around and walking away from it, but... His wand isn't ringing. And the source of magic doesn't feel dangerous, per se, just strange. Slippery, almost. Definitely cloying.

Hari feels himself start walking toward the source of magic before he truly even registers it. He shakes his head slightly, eyes narrow and wary. His next step is purposeful. ***"Whatever this is... I don't like this feeling. But I'm not going to be able to relax until I figure out what the hell is causing it."*** His magic hums beneath his skin. ***"Be careful. And if this thing puts me in some sort of trance, I'm counting on you three to snap me out of it."*** A sharp chill creeps up his left hand, and he does not have to look down to know that shadows are creeping up it. ***"... I'm counting on you four to snap me out of it."*** The chill fades away into a gentle warmth, and Hari breathes out a sigh. Now that he knows about his Obscurus, they seem far more inclined to communicate with him in the only way they know how to. It's definitely going to take some getting used to.

The source of magic is tucked away in one of the unused classrooms. It's in a very familiar unused classroom, actually, and the fact that it has been put inside their study room cannot be a coincidence. ***"Is this what Dumbledore wanted me to see, then? I don't like it, but... If I don't go, then he'll know his compulsion didn't stick. I can't risk it."***

He steps inside the room, and the first thing he sees is a giant mirror that stretches from floor to ceiling propped against the wall. The magic swirling around it latches onto his own, urging him to move closer. He can feel his magic snap at it, and it's only once those intrusive tendrils of magic back off that he allows himself to take off the cloak and walk forward.

"Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi? That's not any language I recognize. A cipher, then? But this is a mirror so... I show not your face but your heart's desire! Oh, that is clever." And though he knows it isn't wise, Hari can't resist the urge to take a peek into that mirror.

The Hari staring back at him is older, and his magic radiates around him in a clear display of power. He's wearing his lordship ring. He looks confident. Untouchable. He looks like the kind of person that no one can ever dream of controlling.

Athena rubs against Mirror-Hari's ankle, and his snakes cover his body as they slowly shift and make themselves comfortable. All of his familiars' eyes are glowing green as they bask in the power surrounding him. Even Fluffy is there, tail wagging and running through the grassy fields that act as a backdrop to the scene before his eyes.

Older versions of his friends stand beside him too. None of them shy away from the dark edges of his magic, laughing and smiling as they talk to him with words that Hari cannot hear. They look confident too. They look sure of themselves and their place in the world. They look unafraid.

Dudley runs up to them with a smile from ear to ear, and each of his friends greet him as readily as Hari does. He's put on even more muscle after what is, undoubtedly, years of hard work on the wrestling team, and Hari can even see Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon lingering in the background. They're not in the center of the picture, but they are still there, smiling and at ease with him in a way that Hari has never seen. Their smiles look so much lighter when they aren't tinged with fear.

This mirror... It shows acceptance, happiness, and safety. It shows freedom. "... How?" he whispers. How does this mirror reach into the deepest depths of his soul and pull out the sweetest dream he can possibly imagine?

He can't bring himself to look away.

'Hari!'

"Snap out of it, little speaker!"

"A predator is coming, Hari. Come back to us!!"

It feels as if ice-cold water has been dunked over his head. Hari averts his eyes immediately, shaking his head slightly with a groan. "Merlin, that thing is dangerous. Why the hell is it here?"

He can feel Dumbledore's magical signature quickly moving toward him, and the slimy, oily sensation makes him shudder as it grows closer. Dumbledore's magic feels like poison dripping on your tongue, hidden behind the scent of sugar and false smiles. And looking at it? It feels as if he's staring into the sun. Dumbledore's magic is a white so bright that it burns his eyes and makes his chest ache.

It takes an incredible amount of effort to keep shadows from creeping over his skin as Dumbledore steps through the threshold. The headmaster is invisible to the eye, but Athena turning her head back gives him an excuse to whisper, "Hello, Headmaster. How are you tonight?"

Dumbledore's spell melts away, and his chuckle makes every hair on the back of Hari's neck stand on end. "I see the rumors are true, then. To have a familiar so young... Few ever manage it, you know?"

"So I've learned. I never thought much of it until coming to Hogwarts."

"I suppose you wouldn't," Dumbledore murmurs so quietly that he almost cannot hear it. "So... I see that you, like hundreds of others before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"Yeah. What is an artifact like this doing here, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore sidesteps his question entirely. "I expect you've realized what it does by now?"

Hari's eyes narrow. "Yes. It shows what you want most in the world, doesn't it? 'I show not your face but your heart's true desire.' That's what the text says when read backward; it's just broken up in a way that makes it less obvious."

"You're just as clever as Filius always boasts." Hari physically represses a shudder as Dumbledore moves closer to him, feeling rather like a rabbit caught in the maw of a fox. "Tell me, my boy, what is it that you see when you look into this mirror?"

Dread crawls up Hari's throat. He knows that the truth is innocuous, that it isn't anything he will ever be ashamed of wanting, but the thought of Dumbledore having that knowledge, the thought of him holding it over his head somehow or using the people he cares about as leverage in this twisted game he's trying to play...

"I see my parents, sir." The lie flows easily from his tongue. The dead cannot be used against him. "What about you?"

"Me? Why, I see myself holding a pair of thick woolen socks." Dumbledore chuckles at his disbelieving expression. "One can never have enough socks. And yet another Christmas has come and gone without anyone gifting me any. They always insist upon sending me books."

Dumbledore reaches out as if to pat the top of his head, and Hari flinches back with a barely silenced snarl. “You ought to head back to bed, my boy,” Dumbledore murmurs. “It is past curfew, after all, but I think we can overlook that just this once.”

When he and Dumbledore part ways, it is with the knowledge that both parties are well aware that they’ve just been lied to.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

And another one >:3 I'm on a roll here.

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

Italics = Athena's speech

The fireplace crackles merrily, suffusing their room with warmth as Hari hunkers down with *Ancient Rituals and Their Importance in Wixen Culture*. Athena keeps guard by the door, ensuring that neither Snape nor any of their Prefects can sneak up on him while he's engrossed in the text.

Rituals are often seen as a branch of dark, sacrificial magic, but that makes them no less important to our culture and society. Wixen hear the world ritual and instantly think of death and sacrifice, forgetting that our very holidays, each Yule log burned and every communion with the departed on Samhain, are rituals too. Knowledge of our rituals is being purged from existence. Fear is making us irrational. And so, I will record everything I know and all I have learned of rituals, including those that polite society are so afraid of. The loss of this magic, of our communion and direct bargaining with Mother Magic herself, would be an unbearable shame. I refuse to let it happen.

Hari's eyes glint with interest as he flips through the pages, reading not only about rituals in general but also the purpose that specific rituals serve. There are painstakingly detailed instructions alongside each entry. He's mostly reading this out of academic curiosity, but one ritual catches his attention and holds it in a death grip.

Forging Lord-Vassal Bonds

Lord-vassal bonds are one of the most sacred connections between wixen that can be formed. They are second only to our marriage rituals in terms of the magical closeness that it fosters, and it is because of this that many wixen are wary of them. A lord or lady seeking to form these bonds need only perform a blood ritual while standing in the center of a rune circle (see graphic) primarily made of protection runes. By doing so, they devote their very blood and magic to the protection of any who wears their mark, and they, too form a mark that acts as a tether to all the others. The mark is largely representative of their intentions behind performing the ritual, of what they and their vassals hope to do in the world, and the placement of those marks is vitally important.

True lord-vassal bonds will always mark the lord or lady on their backs. It is symbolic of entrusting their marked wixen to fight at their backs, to defend them and see them at their weakest points, and is absolutely crucial for establishing a magical connection between the lord or lady and their vassals. Without this mark, it is impossible for them to share magic with one another during times of crisis. The lord or lady is the centerstone, the well of power for all their vassals to draw from, and one should ensure that their magic will be capable of withstanding that strain before performing this ritual.

It should be noted that any lord or lady that does not bear their own mark is attempting to con wixen into accepting a bastardized version of lord-vassal bonds. These bonds are akin to those imposed on house-elves in recent times, for even their bonds were once considered as sacred as these and allowed for far more freedoms (see True Bonds with House-Elves, pg 237), and should not be mistaken as anything less than slavery. An unmarked lord or lady will exploit their vassals without fail, for why else would they refuse to honor them in turn?

True lord-vassal bonds will mark its vassals over their hearts. It is both symbolic of the trust placed in their lord or lady, that they entrust them with their very life, and allows for the most efficient flow of magic into their system should their lord or lady need to aid them.

The power of these bonds should not be underestimated. Even the weakest of wixen can become a terror on the battlefield with their lord or lady's magic thrumming through their veins, and that shared magic remains long after the battle is over. They will become stronger each time that their lord or lady comes to their aid.

It is little wonder that such a bond is feared. If a lord or lady is capable of supporting such bonds, then they are already a force to be reckoned with, and forging these connections will only ensure that those surrounding them are too.

Performing the Ritual

The first stage of forging lord-vassal bonds must be performed by the lord or lady alone.

Beneath the light of the full moon, inscribe the runes in the diagram above into the very earth, channeling your magic into each one as you draw them. A final pulse of magic once the circle is complete will link the runes together. Once this step is complete, use a ritual dagger made of pure silver to cut a shallow incision into your forearm. Allow the blood to flow naturally, and wait for it to fall to the earth before beginning the ritual chant.

“Illis me do. Virtutem meam, magicam, et animam meam communico. Semper eos tuebitur.” Repeat this incantation three times. If it is performed successfully, the rune circle will begin to glow, and the caster will feel a sharp pulse of magic across their back. This creates the lord or lady’s mark.

The second stage of forging lord-vassal bonds is when vassals become involved. Any wixen the lord or lady wishes to share their power with must create a shallow cut in front of their heart and allow the blood of their lord or lady to mix with it. This forms the mark above their heart, and it forges a magical connection between them and their lord or lady that cannot be severed by any form of magic.

Lord-vassal bonds are an ultimate show of trust for both parties, and they are not something that can be undone. To forge them means to expose your very soul to those linked with you. It would do you well to reflect on that before attempting this ritual.

This is... *“I wonder... Near-Obscurials need magical bonds to stabilize their magic. Would something like this work? But I don’t know how my magic would affect other people. What if I just end up shortening their lives instead?”*

“Our bond indicates that such a thing won’t happen,” Camulus reassures him with a hiss. *“I have only grown stronger since bonding with you. I am larger, my venom is more potent, my mind feels sharper... And the hint of darkness about your magic has always been present. It has not caused us any ill effects in the years that we’ve been bonded with you. Do not forget that magic is based in intent. You wish to protect us, so your magic does too. So long as those you forge those bonds with are the same, your magic will protect them as well.”*

“But you don’t actively use magic! They do. What if it starts poisoning their magic too?”

Kratos drapes himself across Hari’s lap, and the weight feels steadying, somehow. *“Try not to worry about it just yet. You’re still too young to perform this ritual, and you won’t have the opportunity to practice runes until your third year anyway. We can find out if it’s a viable option later.”*

“Besides,” Nisaba nudges his cheek with a curious hiss. *“Didn’t that book mention a Near-Obscurial’s bond to their spouse? Any wixen bond should work if that one does.”*

“We need to focus on more immediate problems!” Artemis hisses sharply. *“The Obscurus doesn’t mean you any harm. We have many, many years before the darkness risks poisoning you, and we will slow that progression the best we can. The Headmaster is a bigger danger! Do not let your fear blind you to the predator lurking around the corner!”*

“... You’re right,” Hari agrees with a sigh. *“Whatever is happening at Hogwarts, I don’t like it. I need to focus on protecting myself from that for now.”*

“You’re awfully talkative over there,” Theo murmurs. He’s also curled up with a book, enjoying an evening of relaxation while Blaise and Ron further explore the castle. “Find anything interesting?” He’s walking over to Hari’s side before he can even begin to answer, and Theo’s lips quirk with amusement when he sees which ritual he was reading about. “I thought you might like that one. Let me know if you ever decide to use it. I wouldn’t mind being the first test.”

Hari almost can’t breathe around the lump in his throat. “You would really trust me with that?” he whispers. “A bond like this... Theo, I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could. You want to. I can see it in your eyes, and I can see it in your magic. And besides...” Theo’s smile turns a touch strained. “Better that I carry your mark than the Dark Lord’s. And if he ever comes back like my father swears he will... I doubt I’d be given much choice in the matter. Let me choose, Hari.”

“... Okay. I’ll let you know if I ever do it.”

“Thank you.” Theo returns to his bed, sprawling out with a contented sigh while Hedwig perches on the headboard. Her eyes are locked onto Hari, and they look distinctly approving as she hoots quietly.

Hari cannot return to reading so easily. His mind keeps swirling around lord-vassal bonds and how they might be the solution to even more problems than he initially thought.

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Hari can barely keep the smug smirk off his face when he and Neville hand in a potion so close to perfect that even Snape can't give them anything less than an O without losing face. Neville has been slowly gaining confidence ever since Halloween, and Hari reckons that about half of that is because their professor isn't as scary as nearly dying to a troll while the other half has more to do with how much better this wand channels Neville's magic. Regardless of the reasoning, he's had a steadier hand in Potions recently, and his Herbology knowledge makes him a real powerhouse in the subject now that he isn't flinching back every time Snape looms over them.

That doesn't make either of them any less eager to get out of the Potions classroom.

"Are you guys looking forward to Astronomy tonight?" Lavender's face is lit up with a smile, and her magic swirls around her in an excited, pink vortex. "I've been looking forward to this meteor shower for weeks! This is the kind of thing that some people go their whole lives without seeing, you know?"

"I'm never excited for Astronomy," Ron groans. "Why does it have to be so late? You can see the bloody stars before midnight. And we have classes the next morning! At least Professor Sprout doesn't get angry when I doze off on Thursdays, but still... I can't wait until I can drop it in fifth year."

"You don't like anything that gets between you and sleep," Hari teases, turning to Lavender with a warm smile. "I'm certainly excited. I may not know half as much about stars as you do, but this is going to be a beautiful sight to see. I know that Dudley plans on staying up late to watch it as well."

"How is your cousin, by the way?" Tracey tilts her head slightly as they head out to the courtyard, and they all enjoy the pleasant breeze now that the weather is slowly beginning to warm up again. "Has he gotten his puppy yet?"

"Yep! They took him home about... A week ago, I think? Dudley named him Apollo. I'm really excited to see him over Easter hols."

They all sprawl out in the grass and chatter idly until the sun begins to set and they head to the Great Hall for dinner. The Slytherin table doesn't even acknowledge the presence of so many extra firsties sitting with them anymore. They've resigned themselves to Hari's maneuvering at this point, and while they can wish they'd all sit at another table all they like, all of Slytherin has come to terms with the fact that Hari is going to be his year's Prince by now. It would be poor form for him to sit elsewhere.

Hari's group reluctantly parts ways once dinner is over, returning to their dormitories until they're able to head for Astronomy. Hari pulls out *Heirships: Political Power and How to Wield It* almost the instant that they're inside their room, and Ron rolls his eyes when Theo brings out a book moments after. Ron ends up roping Blaise into a game of wizard's chess that he utterly trounces him in. Again and again, no matter what Blaise tries, Ron always ends up winning. He's scarily good at battle strategy.

"We should probably start getting ready," Blaise mutters after Ron wipes the floor with him for the fifth time. "It always takes forever to climb up those stairs."

Ron groans, but he doesn't protest beyond that. Hari goes around and casts featherweight charms on all of their telescopes, and after that, they begin their trek to the Astronomy Tower. They meet up with Neville, Lavender, and Parvati along the way. They're all breathing heavily by the time they make it halfway up the tower, and Lavender's magic is glowing so brightly with joy that it dulls his senses to everything else around him. Hari almost doesn't realize that something is wrong.

And then his wand starts ringing.

Quirrel's nauseating, sickly green magic is nearby, and Hari barely has the time to register that fact before he feels himself being jerked back sharply and loses his footing. His heart jumps to his throat, and he can feel his Obscurus preparing to tether him to the walls around him before a hand firmly grasps his arm in a flash.

"You alright there, Hari?" Parvati asks with concern shining in her eyes. "You're not usually the clumsy type..."

If Quirrel is close enough to attempt something like this, then he is certainly close enough to overhear them. He laughs nervously. "Guess I'm more tired than I thought. I knew I shouldn't have stayed up late reading last night." His evasive answer only makes his friends more certain that something is wrong, and Hari subtly taps his wrist where his holster is hidden. Daphne's eyes widen in sudden understanding, and without saying a word, she nudges their friends to close ranks around him.

Quirrel won't be able to cast another spell unless he intends to send a whole cluster of firsties tumbling down the staircase. Hari isn't putting that above him, but he's willing to bet that Quirrel won't risk drawing that much attention on himself. One

'accident' is unfortunate and tragic. Ten 'accidents' will cause an outrage, especially with how many heirs are involved. They manage to climb the rest of the tower unaccosted, but both Hari and his Obscurus remain on edge. His wand is still ringing. He's starting to get the feeling that it might not stop doing so for quite a while.

Things are starting to get really dangerous around here. He doesn't like it one bit.

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The Easter hols are a welcome break from the tension at Hogwarts, even if it is only for the weekend. Hari thinks he's going to go mad from the constant, low humming of danger from his wand that only quieted once he got on the Hogwarts Express. Thankfully, Dudley seems eager to help him forget about all of that for a little while.

"Good boy, Apollo." Hari pets the enthusiastic puppy with a warm smile, giggling as his stubby little tail wiggles back and forth. The bulldog is utterly uncaring as Athena brushes her cheek against him, and though he watches Artemis for a few tense moments, it doesn't take long for him to decide that he'd rather get treats than chase her around. It seems like everything is going to be just fine, no magic necessary.

"That's a relief." Dudley breathes out a sigh. "I know bulldogs usually don't chase stuff, but I was still worried. You know how Ripper is."

Hari snorts. "That's the understatement of a century." He lets Apollo chew on his fingers for a while, gently discouraging him whenever he starts getting a bit too rough. By the end of the day, Hari has him chewing on rubber toys instead of the furniture, and his aunt and uncle look so grateful that it verges on unsettling.

"... Lils always had a gift with plants. Guess his lies more with animals, huh?"

"The snakes made that kind of obvious, Pet."

Hari can't help the quiet giggle that escapes him, but his smile slowly fades away as he thinks about Fluffy and the situation they're both stuck in. With things getting so dangerous at Hogwarts... Hari really can't afford to keep visiting him right now. Whatever Dumbledore is hiding in the school is going to be beneath that trap door. With Quirrel going after both Hari and whatever is being protected, he needs to stay far, far away from the third-floor corridor while his wand constantly warns him of danger. He doesn't like it, but he doesn't have any other choice.

'I'll keep visiting him, Hari. He'll understand. And I can always get Victoria and Mrs. Norris to help me carry steaks to him in exchange for some salmon or tuna.'

"... Thanks, Athena," he whispers. "I'll get ahold of some for you."

The weekend flies by, and a disgruntled Hari returns to Hogwarts. His wand starts ringing as soon as he enters the castle. Hari tries to distract himself by studying for his rapidly-approaching exams, but it doesn't take long for him to get restless and frustrated by the constant threat that leaves both him and his Obscurus on edge. It's absolutely exhausting.

"You look like you're about to keel over, mate." Ron's eyebrows furrow with concern. He observes Hari for a few long moments before saying, "Wanna take a break? We can go visit Hagrid. All this studying is about to do my head in anyway."

He doesn't even get the chance to agree before Tracey slams her textbook closed. "Oh, thank Merlin! I was about to go spare if I had to review one more charm. My brain is melting out of my ears!"

Hari snorts at his friends' dramatics, but he's always up for any excuse to visit Hagrid. The others are so caught up in their studying fervor that he doubts they'll even realize that they've left for an hour or two.

Ron waits until they're outside of the castle to ask, "Seriously, though... Are you alright? You're looking kinda sick."

"My wand won't stop ringing," he mutters with a groan. "It's not loud enough to be an immediate threat, but I'm in constant, life-threatening danger either way. It makes it hard to focus. Or sleep. I've got a bloody awful headache."

"You should go see Madam Pomfrey." Tracey's eyes shine with open concern, and he hates knowing that he's worrying his friends like this. He hates knowing that he would worry them even more if they knew what he is. "Leave out the wand thing and just tell her you have a persistent headache. It should help, if nothing else."

"Put your wand in your trunk overnight, mate. You shouldn't be able to hear it then."

"And if Quirrel tries anything while we sleep?"

Ron quirks his eyebrow in a way that clearly says ‘A boomslang literally sleeps in your bed, idiot.’ without needing to say a word. “Our dorm is pretty protected, Hari. It’ll be worse if he catches you off guard because you’re sleep deprived.”

Hari hates that they’re both right. This is already affecting his ability to think clearly, even with his familiars and Hogwarts helping him the best that they can. “Thank you, both of you. I’ll do that.”

Hagrid’s home has an unusual swell of magic around it that immediately sets Hari on edge. It is only because this magic feels like a sunny day beneath clear skies without a hint of malice to it that he continues walking forward, hesitantly knocking on the door.

“Jus’ a minute!”

As if it isn’t strange enough that the curtains are all drawn shut, Hagrid loves letting in the sunlight and usually leaves the windows open, there is a series of banging and shuffling as Hagrid makes his way to the door. Hari, Ron, and Tracey all exchange a look just before Hagrid cracks open the door.

“Oh! It’s jus’ you three. Come in, come in! Don’t mind tha mess. Been doin’ some rearrangin’ lately.” It is suffocatingly hot inside of Hagrid’s cabin. So much so that Hari has to turn down the offered tea and drink so much water that he feels vaguely ill instead. Foreign magic burns throughout the fire, and while Ron seems content to talk with Hagrid and ignore the heat entirely, Tracey’s gaze follows his own.

She freezes in place as a flicker of flame allows them to see what is sitting in the middle of the fire. “That’s a dragon egg.”

Hagrid and Ron’s conversation swiftly falls into dead silence. “It’s a Norweigan Ridgeback egg,” Hari murmurs. “No other dragon eggs are such a pitch black.”

"Tha's mighty impressive, Hari! Even I had ta look up what it is."

“How’d you get ahold of one?!” Ron cries out. “They’re illegal in Britain, and no one outside of dragon preserves is allowed to breed dragons anymore.”

“Won it off a fella in the Leaky. Seemed ta be in a big hurry ta get rid o’ it, and I couldn’ let anythin’ happen ta it. Been doin’ lots o’ research, see?” Hagrid holds up several books on dragons that Hari recognizes from the Hogwarts library. “An’ not many people can safely raise a dragon! I have ta do it.”

“... Hagrid, you live in a wooden house.” But Hagrid doesn’t pay Tracey any mind, merrily stoking the fire as he leaves all three of them to wonder what it’s like to live a peaceful life.

Hari levels Ron with a sharp look as soon as they step outside of the cabin, and Ron heaves a sigh as he nods. “I’ll write a letter to Charlie. We need to get Hagrid out of this mess before he slips up in front of someone who will actually report him.”

How do they always find themselves in the middle of these messes?

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I hope you all enjoy today's chapter! I'm really knocking these out, and I am so excited for the next chapter, especially >:3

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

The good news is that the Romanian dragon preserve is willing to take in the baby dragon. The bad news is that they have to wait for the egg to hatch before it will be safe to transport, so they still run the risk of Hagrid getting found out before that point. Hari feels a bit guilty for being relieved that they're the only ones who ever go out to visit him, but it's incredibly convenient right now.

A combination of putting his wand away at night and drinking the disgusting headache reliever prescribed by Madam Pomfrey makes the constantly pounding ache in his head slowly fade away. His magic is still unsettled and on edge, but Hari is too. He can hardly fault his Obscurus for echoing his own emotions.

His shadows are starting to feel more like a chilly autumn breeze than jumping into an ice-cold lake during the winter, and he wonders what it means that even the darkest parts of his magic don't hurt quite so much anymore. Is it because he's growing closer to his Obscurus? Or is it simply that the hovering threat of danger is causing him so much pain that he's beginning to grow numb to it? He honestly isn't sure.

It happens on a Friday. They're in the middle of eating lunch when an owl flies over to the Slytherin table, dropping a letter in front of Ron that only has two words: It's hatching.

Ron and Tracey both want to skip History of Magic and go to Hagrid's immediately, and Hari feels the same way. However... "We don't usually skip classes," he murmurs lowly. "And we can't afford to draw suspicion right now." His wand's persistent ringing has not eased up in the slightest, so though none of them are happy about it, they decide to wait.

That doesn't make waiting easy. Hari attempts to distract himself with a book to make the time go by more quickly, and it takes everything he has not to instinctively pull out *Dragons Around the Globe*. It's usually his go-to book while outside of their dorm, almost their entire year knows how much he likes animals and magical creatures at this point, but it just doesn't feel worth the risk.

He, Ron, and Tracey practically dart out of the classroom the second third period is over. The others don't think much of them waving them off for now, they know they'll tell them everything later, but the action certainly catches Malfoy's attention.

Malfoy's magic has seemed a lot less certain of itself lately. Muted silver curls around him hesitantly, equal parts curious and wary. In the end, that doesn't stop him from following them at a distance. Hari likely wouldn't have noticed him at all if it wasn't for his magic sensing, and he's not particularly inclined to stop Malfoy from following them now. If anything, this might make Hagrid quicker to agree to send the baby dragon to Romania. Hagrid has been so excited about seeing a dragon hatch that he hasn't been willing to listen to reason, they haven't even been able to bring up the dragon preserve, and this might just be the dose of reality that he needs to snap out of it.

Hagrid opens the door for them before they can even knock. His face is flushed with excitement as he ushers them in, saying, "It's nearly out!" They slam the door shut behind them, and Hari can feel the moment that Malfoy starts swiftly walking in their direction.

The egg has several large cracks covering its shell, and a strange clicking noise comes from the inside of it as it wobbles. **"Speaker...?"** All of a sudden, the egg splits in two. A gangly, black hatchling sprawls out of the egg, shaking off the goop that coats her with a disgruntled huff that sends a few sparks flying. Wide, orange eyes immediately fixate on him. **"Speaker!!"**

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmurs. He reaches out a hand to stroke the hatchling's head, and she only snaps at his fingers for the effort, revealing sharp, pointy fangs. "Bless him. Look, he knows his mummy!"

"She's a girl, actually. You see the way her ridges are connected? The webbing between them is all smooth and curved instead of pointed."

“Huh, well lookit that! Yer right, Hari.” Hagrid attempts to take a closer look, but the hatchling snaps at him again, hopping toward the edge of the table unsteadily in an attempt to get away. Hari sees what she’s about to do seconds before she jumps off of it. He catches her before her egg-slick wings, still delicate and unable to fly just yet, can send her plummeting to the floor.

“Speaker! Speaker safe. Speaker protect.” The dragon croons, relaxing now that she’s ensconced in his arms.

“Blimey, mate...” Ron whispers with wide eyes.

Tracey has been stunned into silence, torn between wanting to approach the two of them and knowing that the dragon isn’t going to treat her any differently than Hagrid. “Aw, lookit that! She really likes ya, Hari! Reckon ya ought to name ‘er, then.”

“Name? Speaker name?”

“Nyx,” he murmurs, carefully keeping himself from slipping into parseltongue as he stares the hatchling in the eye. “Greek goddess of the night.”

“Nyx? Nyx name? Like name!! Good speaker!” Nyx nuzzles his cheek with a delighted rumble, blowing a faint trail of smoke from her nostrils in her excitement.

Hari can feel the instant that Malfoy’s magic freezes in shock at the sight of the scene before him. Hagrid glances out the window, and the smile instantly slips from his face as he pales and runs to snap the curtains completely shut. Malfoy’s magic swiftly distances itself from the cabin.

“What’s wrong?” Ron’s eyebrows furrow in concern, and Hagrid looks vaguely ill.

“A kid was lookin’ through the gap in tha curtains. He’s runnin’ back up ter the school.”

Tracey pokes her head out the door, and her magic spikes with irritation when she sees the head of platinum blond hair in the distance. “It was Heir Malfoy. Hagrid, this isn’t good. He’s going to tell someone!”

“But there’s nothin’ I can do,” Hagrid murmurs. “She’s too little. I can’t just let her go. She’d die.”

“Charlie could take her.” Hagrid turns to Ron with wide, hopeful eyes. “I wrote him a letter as soon as we found out about the egg. Figured she’d need somewhere else to go pretty quick. They’d have to smuggle her out, but Charlie has some friends that are willing to help him do it.”

“Really? You’d do tha’?”

“Of course we would. I even have a plan for sneaking her to them,” Hari reassures him. “She’ll be well taken care of, Hagrid. And able to be with others of her kind. The last thing either of you needs is to get caught. You’d end up in Azkaban for it, and she’d probably be killed. We don’t want either of those things to happen. Please, let us help you.”

Hagrid nearly crushes him in a hug that has Nyx snapping at him again. “Thank ya, Hari. Thank all o’ ya. Ain’t ever met a better bunch o’ Slytherins than yer lot.”

It’s a bit difficult for Hari to convince Nyx to stay put without speaking parseltongue, but he manages it. Barely. Once they leave Hagrid’s hut, Ron immediately owls Charlie and lets him know that the dragon has hatched.

Thankfully, Charlie and his friends have been standing by ever since they heard that an endangered dragon species was going to hatch soon. They receive a return letter obscenely quickly.

Ron,

I’m glad to hear that she hatched without difficulties! The fact that she’s a female, too... There are so few Norwegian Ridgebacks left, and most of them are male. This is a miracle. Ah, but I won’t bore you with my dragon talk.

Meet us on top of the Astronomy Tower on Sunday at midnight. That means no going to bed early on Saturday, just to be clear. We’ll need the cover of the night if we’re going to smuggle her out of the country.

See you soon!

Love,

Charlie

Now there's nothing left to do but wait.

-

"How are we gonna get to the top of the Astronomy Tower without anyone noticing?" Tracey whispers. They're alone in the common room right now, but that doesn't mean they need to risk anyone overhearing something they shouldn't.

Hari smirks as he slips his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket, and Ron gapes at him as he beckons them both closer and drapes it over their shoulders. It's a tight fit, but the three of them make it work.

"How on earth did you get ahold of one of these, mate?!"

"Shh!" Hari hisses sharply. "People can still hear us. And it's a family heirloom."

"Wicked," Ron murmurs, far more quietly this time.

"Won't someone notice the door opening for no reason, though? That's just as suspicious as us walking out without hiding at all."

"That is the beauty of having a familiar, Tracey." His friends' eyes go wide as Athena stalks toward the door with a meow, watching it open without them having to say a password at all. It only takes a few short seconds for them to jolt into action and dart out behind her.

The journey to Hagrid's home is deathly silent, but thankfully, they don't stumble across any patrols along the way. Hagrid is waiting for them by his door. He cracks it open as Hari slides the Invisibility Cloak off them and drapes it over his arm, and Nyx tackles his leg immediately.

"Speaker! Speaker!" Her wings shiver in excitement, and even knowing that young dragons develop very quickly could not prepare him for her leaping into the air with a flap of her wings. She perches on his shoulder with a proud puff of sparks, and Hagrid chuckles at the sight of it.

"Was wonderin' if I'd need to put her in a crate fer ya, but I guess not. She really likes ya, huh?"

"I guess so," Hari murmurs with a fond smile. His friends look more than a little jealous that Nyx lets him pet her. "We'll take it from here, Hagrid. Thank you."

"Thank ya. Be careful, now. Don't go gettin' caught fer me."

"We'll be careful!" Tracey promises him with a mischievous smirk. "Slytherins are good at that."

Hagrid's booming laugh goes a long way to ease the tension that has settled on Hari's shoulders. "That ya are! Now go on, ya don't wanna be late."

They slip back out into the night, and once they're shrouded by the cloak again, they begin making their way back toward the castle. **"Why no speak?"** Nyx rumbles morosely. **"Why? What happening? Where going, Speaker?"**

And Hari can't do this. He can't let Nyx be confused and scared when there's no reason for her to be. Ron already knows, and Tracey... Tracey can keep a secret. **"People don't know I speak,"** Hari hisses quietly, and Tracey nearly comes to a dead halt at the sound of it. It's only Ron nudging her forward that keeps them moving. **"It's not safe for them to. Not yet. And we're making sure you get a big home with open skies, lots of prey, and other dragons nearby. It'll be everything you could ever want. Somewhere better than the castle. Somewhere less dangerous for you. Will you be good for the other wixen while they take you?"**

"... Speaker no come?"

"I can't, I'm sorry." Hari rubs his thumb over the bridge of her snout with a sad smile. **"The same predators that would hunt you if you stay will hunt me if I leave. I have to prove that I'm the biggest, strongest predator first."**

"Speaker stay safe. Important." Nyx concedes with a nod. **"If no bite humans, speaker visit?"**

"The first chance I get," he promises her, and Nyx nuzzles his cheek with a puff of smoke. She seems content enough with that compromise.

Tracey is still wide-eyed with disbelief as they slip into the darkened hallways of Hogwarts. "Since when were you a parselmouth?" she hisses quietly.

“Runs in the Potter family,” Ron answers with a whisper. “Now be quiet. We *cannot* get caught.”

They steadily make their way toward the Astronomy Tower, painfully aware of the time as it creeps toward midnight. Everything is going suspiciously well until they begin to approach the corridor that leads into the Astronomy Tower, and Hari holds up his hand in a silent warning. He can sense Professor McGonagall and Malfoy’s magical signatures just ahead. Their movements slow to a crawl as they creep forward, and the flare of a lantern reveals Professor McGonagall holding Malfoy by the ear with a stern look on her face.

“Detention!” she shouts. “And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you—!”

“You don’t understand, Professor. The groundskeeper has a dragon! Weasley’s brother works with them; he and Heir Potter are going to smuggle it out of the castle. I saw Heir Potter’s kneazle roaming around!”

“Of all the preposterous—! How dare you tell such lies?! You think you can get yourself out of trouble by starting such an absurd rumor? And dragging your own housemates into it, no less. You ought to be ashamed of yourself Mr. Malfoy! And you should know by now that familiars have free roam of the castle. We’ll see what Professor Snape has to say about your behavior.”

Professor McGonagall drags Malfoy off as he protests, magic curling in on itself like a kicked puppy. It almost makes Hari feel bad. Almost. He is right, after all. Hari has to give him some credit for figuring out their plan and the best way for them to execute it.

Once they can no longer hear echoing footsteps in the distance, they make their way up the spiralling staircase. Hari feels a shiver crawl up his spine as they pass the section that Quirrel tried to kill him on, and they begin moving just a bit quicker after that.

It doesn’t take much longer for them to step out into the night, greeted by twinkling stars as Hari safely tucks away the cloak once more. They’re a bit early. He’s incredibly grateful for that with Tracey turns to him with a mock-hurt expression. “I cannot believe you, Hari! You’ve been able to talk to dragons this whole time, and you didn’t tell me? I thought we were friends. Shame on you!”

“Brushing up on your Professor McGonagall impression?” Ron asks with a snort. “But seriously, it’s a secret, Tracey. You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t. But why are you hiding this? It’s such a rare and amazing gift, Hari!”

“And the last one who had it was the Dark Lord.” Hari’s words make the smile slide right off Tracey’s face. “I’m not ashamed of it, not in the slightest, but I have to be careful about how this comes to light, Tracey. If people find out before I can establish a reputation for myself...”

“They’ll crucify you. Might even try to say you’re the next Dark Lord,” Tracey whispers. “I get it now. I won’t tell anyone, honest! I still think it’s really cool, though...”

“It is,” Hari agrees with a smile, giggling as Nyx firmly presses her snout against his face.

“No sad! No fear! Big predator no fear! Be strong!”

His heart twists in his chest. It should not be this hard to let a dragon that he just met go. ***“Thank you, Nyx.”***

“Speaker name? Before go.”

“My name?” Nyx nods, tilting her head ever-so-slightly with sparks dancing in her mouth. ***“My name is Hari.”***

“Good name. Proper name! I remember!”

Hari looks to the sky when he senses five magic signatures approaching them from above, and a squad of wixen descends from the sky in perfect unison, hovering just above the ground on their brooms. Considering the red hair, the one leading the group must be Charlie.

“Hello, Ron! It’s good to see you. Now where is the— Holy Merlin!” Charlie stops short when his eyes glance over Hari’s form, freezing when he sees the dragon perched on his shoulder. “Did you take no precautions at all? How in Merlin’s name have none of you been bitten? Don’t you know that Norweigan Ridgebacks are venomous?!”

“She likes Hari,” Ron answers with a shrug. “He’s got a way with magical creatures.”

A hissy laugh escapes Nyx's throat as she jumps up on top of Hari's head, settling down with a content chuff. ***"Silly human. Serpent protect serpent, always."***

Charlie and his friends are all gaping at him. "Please tell me you intend to become a dragon tamer," Charlie begs. "With a gift like that..."

"I'm definitely going into magizoology!" Hari smiles as he runs his fingers against Nyx's scales one final time. "And being a dragon tamer sounds right up my alley. I'll definitely consider it."

"Please do." Charlie and his friends start rigging up the harness that would safely suspend Nyx between them. "Now, we've just gotta figure out how to get her in here—"

"Be a good girl, okay?" Hari cuts Ron's brother off with a wry grin. "Don't give them any trouble."

"No bite human!" Nyx agrees easily enough, flying over to the harness without a protest. She even lets Charlie's friends strap her in without snapping at their fingers, eyes fixated on Hari throughout the whole process. ***"I be good."***

"Please, please consider it," Charlie repeats with a hint of desperation in his voice. "I have never seen... Let me know if you apply to any dragon preserves. I'll put in a good word for you."

"I will. Thank you guys!"

"Bye Hari! Bye!"

"Bye," he hisses once Charlie and his friends are out of earshot. ***"I'll see you again someday. I promise."***

They all cover themselves with the Invisibility Cloak once more before making their way back down the Astronomy Tower. Good thing they did, too. Filch is pacing up and down the hall that leads to the tower, muttering under his breath about students being out of bed, and it takes both patience and careful timing to slip past him.

But they do, and now both Hagrid and Nyx are safe.

-

It isn't difficult to tell when Malfoy served his detention. He's pale as a ghost the day afterward, and his magic trembles with fear. It's even faded into a tarnished silver instead of its typical shimmery shade, and Hari can't help being worried about what detentions at Hogwarts are like if they inspire that kind of reaction.

He resolves to never find out for himself.

But Hari has bigger problems to worry about than future detentions right now. "I'm going to fail Transfiguration," he groans as his head hits his desk with a solid thunk. "I can't turn a mouse into a snuffbox no matter how hard I try. I'm going to be a laughingstock... They're going to hold me back a year!"

Susan pats his back consolingly. "So long as you do well enough in your other classes, it shouldn't matter. They won't hold you back for one grade. And you understand the theory perfectly fine, so you should be able to scrape by with an Acceptable even with a failed practical. Just don't miss any questions."

"Snape is going to kill me!" Hari moans, and his friends all snicker at his dramatics.

"Don't worry so much," Theo says with a snort. "Heir Crabbe and Heir Goyle are really struggling with most of their classes. He'll be more concerned with their grades than a single poor one on your part, no matter how much he hates you."

And Hari knows that he's telling the truth, but even still... He has a really bad feeling.

Is he just imagining things, or has his wand's ringing been a bit louder lately?

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

And the chapter I've been eagerly anticipating for so very long has finally come >:3 On that note, warning for some fairly graphic violence here. I don't think it's bad enough that it needs to be tagged on the fic itself, especially not for one scene, but let me know what you guys think.

'Italics' = Athena's speech

"Italics" = Reading text aloud

It feels like their exams pass them by in a bleary haze of studying and very little sleep. He's certain that he does well on all of his written exams, even Transfiguration only has one or two questions that he isn't sure about, but his practicals...

Well, he actually manages to turn the mouse into a snuffbox, at least. It still has whiskers and a tail, but they're made of metal and almost look like a design choice rather than a flaw. Almost. He still absolutely gets points docked for it, and Hari can only hope that he's done enough to scrape an Acceptable before moving on to his other practical exams.

Those go far more smoothly. Thank Merlin for small mercies.

His wand is still ringing faintly as the entire first year treks up to the top of the Astronomy tower for their last exam. Professor Sinistra has them sketch out constellations for their practical, and while Hari isn't sure why they have to do the exam at midnight as well, he's too happy that they're over to care. They're finally, finally free of cramming. The next week will be nothing but waiting on their results to post and spending time with his friends, and Hari is looking forward to it.

But... The ringing is definitely getting louder.

-

Hari's magic feels distinctly unsettled. Athena brushes up against his legs with a purr that dulls some of the sharp edges as he, Ron, Blaise, and Theo get ready to head down for dinner. *'I'm going to go visit Fluffy. Let me know if you need any help, okay?'*

This is the first time that Nisaba, Camulus, Artemis, and Kratos have all gone into shed at the same time, and they're all grumpy, with blue eyes and limited vision, as they wait for the old layer of skin to slide off. "I will," he promises her as he gently scratches under her chin. "Have fun! Tell Fluffy hi for me."

Athena runs off, and Hari isn't left to think on his lingering sense of dread for long. His dormmates are doing their best to take his mind off of things, but he still looks a bit pale as they sit down in the Great Hall.

Hari's friends have been spending so much time together that they've all started eating meals at their own tables again, at least for now. He can't blame them for that, he doesn't want them to be isolated from their own houses, but he can't deny that the distraction that their eager conversation brings would be very welcome right now. The Slytherin table feels so quiet without them here.

"What's wrong with you, Heir Potter?" Malfoy asks with a quirked eyebrow. "You look ill. Think you did that badly on your exams? I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

He usually doesn't humor Malfoy's jabs, this one doesn't even have the same heat to it as it usually does, but he just can't shake this feeling. "No. Something is..." His wand's steady ringing crescendos with a sharp burst of urgency, and Hari's magic writhes beneath his skin. "Something is wrong."

His eyes slowly trail over to the Head Table, and his breath catches in his throat when he sees who is there. Or rather, when he sees who isn't there. Dumbledore isn't present tonight, but it isn't him that he's worried about right now. "Where is-?" Hari's voice dies in his throat as his magic suddenly *burns*.

'Hari!! Hari, he got me; I'm sorry!'

Athena. Quirrel has Athena. The Slytherin table falls into dead silence as their dishes begin to rattle, cracking under the strain of Hari's magic as it radiates from him in a suffocating, oppressive wave of fury. Shadows start curling around his wrists. "Pardon me," he bites out with a forced grin. "It seems I forgot to take care of something."

Ron, Blaise, and Millie wordlessly follow behind him as he stalks away from the table, and he can hear Daphne, Tracey, and Theo doing damage control. He barely makes out them reassuring the others that he's just been really tense because of the exams, but that doesn't stop Malfoy's magic from racing after them in as close to a sprint as he can manage without drawing too much attention to himself.

"Heir Potter! Don't do anything stupid. I know you didn't see what was out there, but--!"

"Quirrel has my familiar." Malfoy's words splutter to a halt at that revelation, eyes blowing wide in a strange blend of shock and understanding. "So either shut up and follow us or get out of my way. I will not warn you again." Hari stalks forward as the shadows begin creeping up his forearms, quite certain that Malfoy will turn tail and run. But he doesn't. That silver magic sharpens with determination and falls into line.

"I'm not letting our year's Prince of Slytherin go off and get himself killed," Malfoy mutters under his breath. "It'll make all of us look bad."

And that's that. Hari follows the tug of Athena's bond directly to the third-floor corridor, utterly unsurprised as he unlocks the door and continues onward. Malfoy's magic trembles with fear at the sight of Fluffy, but he doesn't so much as growl at them. In fact, one of Fluffy's heads bend down to grab the metal ring attached to the trapdoor and lifts it open with a muffled bark. "Thank you, Fluffy," he murmurs as another one of his heads gives him a slobbery kiss. He can smell a faint hint of blood on the cerberus's breath. "We'll get her back."

A ball of light springs to life in his hand without a word, illuminating the abyss beneath the trapdoor to reveal Devil's Snare lying below. "Hari, wait--" He ignores Blaise and jumps. Ron groans before following, but even Malfoy jumps down without more than a moment's hesitation. The Devil's Snare is already withering back slightly from the light in Hari's palm, but it isn't enough for it to let them go. He sets the vines on fire.

"Merlin, Heir Potter!" Malfoy gasps as they finally hit the ground. "Remind me not to piss you off once we get out of this mess."

"You're not likely to need a reminder," Millie says with a snort. "Once you see him like this, it's hard to forget it."

A stone passageway is their only way forward, slanting downward and leading deeper underground. Hari presses onward, and he can feel Hogwarts' magic desperately attempting to soothe him as he ventures deeper into the darkness. He's lucky that the glowing ball of magic held in the palm of his hand makes it look as if the shadows dancing across his skin are mere tricks of the light.

"Hey, do you hear something...?" Ron murmurs. He can hear a soft rustling and the clink of metal against metal at the end of the passageway, snuffing out his light as they enter a brilliantly lit chamber. The ceiling stretches so high that he's surprised it doesn't cut into Hogwarts itself, and it's filled with jewel-toned, fluttering blips of magic that fly around the room. "Do you reckon they'll attack us if we try to cross the room?"

"Only one way to find out," Hari mutters as he stalks forward. They do not. He tugs on the door once he's on the other side of the room, but it will not budge. "Alohomora!" Nothing. Hari growls with frustration, whirling around and squinting at the fluttering objects above their head.

Millie squints at the wall just beside the door, aiming her wand at the stone and shouting, "Reducto!" Even that does nothing, much to her chagrin. "Guess we've gotta get one of those keys," she mutters. "But which one? There are hundreds of them. And how?"

"We fly, obviously," Malfoy drawls as he pulls a broom out of a tucked-away alcove within the chamber. "You're lucky I decided to come along. None of you could fly Seeker if your lives depended on it."

Ron and Millie join Malfoy in the air, helping him keep an eye out. "It'll probably be a big, old-fashioned key. Silver, like the handle!"

"I know that, Weasley!"

Hari's magic sparks with agitation as the shadows creep closer and closer to his shoulders. His nails feel... Sharp, unnatural, and it's only Blaise's steady hand on his shoulder that keeps him from losing it completely while they search for the right key.

Suddenly, Malfoy dives after a key with bright blue wings, one of which is slightly ruffled as a clear marker that someone else has already grabbed it before them, and snatches it just before it can fly away. He keeps a firm grip on the key as he lowers his broom to the ground, shoving it into the lock as Hari prepares to cast a freezing charm, just in case. The lock clicks. Hari shoves the door open so harshly that the hinges squeal, and the key tears itself out of the lock before rejoining the others in the chamber.

'Hari! Hari, don't come! Quirrel is working with the Dark Lord! They'll kill you!!'

Not if he kills them first. "Thank you, Heir Malfoy." Malfoy gives him a jerky nod, and they continue forward. The hallway is so dark that Hari nearly lights it up again, but once they enter the next chamber, light suddenly floods the room.

They stand on the edge of a giant chessboard. The black pieces, all made of stone and several times larger than they are, stand on their side, and the white pieces stand on the other. "Don't tell me we have to play across. We don't have time for this!" Hari snarls.

Ron's eyes glint as he calculates the fastest way to go about this, but Millie beats him to the punch. She pulls out her wand, aims it directly at the white king on the other end of the board, and shouts, "Reducto!" This time, it works. "Sometimes you've just gotta smash your way through," Millie chuckles under her breath as Ron and Malfoy gape at her. "Didn't seem likely that they would be spelled against damage like the last room. Wizard's chess is bloody violent, after all."

And just like that, they're able to continue on. None of the other pieces so much as twitch as they make their way across the board, though Millie's wand held high in threat and Hari's magic thrashing beneath his skin likely had a lot to do with that. The pieces almost feel afraid.

Hari knows exactly what awaits them in the next room from the smell alone. "As if we needed any more confirmation that Quirrel set that troll on the school," Blaise mutters under his breath. A roar shakes the walls as the troll smashes its club into something, and every single one of them has their wand in hand in an instant.

The troll has a large lump on its head from when Quirrel came through, and judging by the way its swinging around in a blind fury, it's only just woken up. Before anyone else can even utter a word, Ron points his wand at the club and says, "Wingardium Leviosa." The club is torn out of the troll's hand, and it whirls around to face them just as Ron drops the club on its head, knocking it out cold.

Ron snorts at Malfoy's wide-eyed look. "I can't let you guys steal all my thunder," he jests. "And there's no point in messing around when we already know something that works. Let's go."

Several corked bottles and a riddle await them in the next room, and fire springs to life behind and in front of them as soon as they cross the threshold. They will not be able to go through either door without solving this riddle. Blaise walks forward and picks up a piece of parchment with a furrowed brow, reading the text aloud.

"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

Two among our number hold only nettle wine,

Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line,

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,

To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:

First, however slyly the poison tries to hide

You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;

Second, different are those that stand at either end,

But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;

Third, as you see clearly, all are a different size,

Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;

Fourth, the second left and the second on the right

Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight."

"What in Merlin's name..." Malfoy mutters. "Why all the tests and riddles? And if we're not meant to be down here, then why has every test so far had an obvious solution? We're only first years, for Merlin's sake!"

"Now you're getting it, Heir Malfoy," Blaise says with a derisive snort. "Now let me concentrate." Blaise studies the bottles closely, walking up and down the line with narrowed eyes before coming to a clear decision. "The smallest bottle will let you move forward. The largest one will let us move back. Don't touch any of the others. I'm probably the only of us one that's able to tell the difference between nettle wine and poison at a glance."

Hari only has to look at the tiny bottle to know that there's only enough for one of them. He grabs it immediately, knocking back the potion before anyone can protest. His Obscurus rages beneath his skin, and he barely even feels the cold that creeps down his spine as the potion takes effect, stalking toward the pitch-black flames that separate him and Quirrel. He hesitates just outside of the fire, turning back to whisper, "Thank you for coming with me," before letting himself be engulfed in flames.

Quirrel awaits him on the other side. It's only the active bond between himself and Athena and the fact that she is currently unharmed that allows him to fight back the surge of magic that wants nothing more than to tear Quirrel to shreds. He cannot afford to act rashly here. He doesn't know how dangerous Quirrel is, he doesn't know where the Dark Lord is, and he doesn't even know what he's after. One mistake could mean both his and Athena's death.

His Obscurus settles slightly beneath his skin, waiting and ready to pounce but allowing him to keep hold of the reins.

"I wondered when you'd be showing up, Potter. I suppose the rumors are true, hm? She truly is your familiar."

There's no point in denying something he already knows, so Hari nods. "What do you want?" he asks in a whisper, unable to stop himself from taking a single, cautious step toward Athena.

"None of that." Quirrel clicks his tongue and snaps his fingers. Ropes materialize out of thin air and bind themselves around Hari, and only the knowledge that he's able to destroy them easily keeps his magic from lashing out at the sensation. "You know, you're nothing like I expected you to be, Potter. Nothing like any of them expected you to be." Quirrel's magic feels more sickly than usual, all oily and dark in a way that Hari has never seen before.

It's almost as if he isn't the same person at all.

"The mirror is the key to finding the stone... Dumbledore would come up with something like this, but it's no matter. I'll be long gone by the time he comes back." Blood-red eyes glance over Hari, and he jolts with shock.

'The Dark Lord possessed him. But don't let that hold you back! They were talking to each other earlier. They're working together.'

"I can see myself with the Stone, but where is it? How do I get it out of the mirror? No retrieval spells have worked so far, and shattering it is likely to end with the Stone lost forever..." The Dark Lord turns his chilling gaze directly to his prone form, walking forward and lifting him off the floor. Hari is dragged in front of the mirror, and the Dark Lord whispers, "Tell me what it is that you see, Potter."

He tries to avoid looking into it, but the Dark Lord forces his gaze to meet his reflection's. It's not the same thing that he saw before. A perfect mirror of himself stares back at him, eyes glowing green as shadows writhe around him. And at his feet... Hari smirks. "I see you," he whispers, glancing back at the Dark Lord as his Obscurus trembles with excitement, "Dead at my feet."

"... Pardon?"

Everything happens very quickly after that. The ropes binding him are torn to shreds by his magic as shadows swirl to life around him, covering Hari from head to toe. His mind feels a bit fuzzy as the Obscurus takes over. The Dark Lord only manages two steps before his Obscurus rends flesh from bone, and he distantly registers something warm splash across his face. It feels like he's drenched in it, actually.

Quirrel's body falls to the ground like a puppet with cut strings, and the shade of the Dark Lord rises from it. It rushes Hari with an enraged screech. Hari's Obscurus screeches even louder.

And then he's blinking back into the present. A puddle of red surrounds his feet, and Hari can feel exhaustion down to his very bones as he staggers forward. He sinks to his knees in front of Athena's stunned form, casting the reversal without saying a word. The drain on his magic nearly has him collapsing then and there.

Athena yowls as she leaps into his lap, rubbing her cheek against his bloody face and smearing herself with red. *'I was so worried! You did so well. He'll think twice before going after you again.'* Her golden eyes glow like miniature moons as she works overtime to soothe his agitated, worn-out magic. He can feel his eyes shuttering closed as the danger finally passes, his wand finally falling silent, and slumps against the wall with a sigh. *'Rest, Hari. Rest. I'll guard you.'*

He drifts off to the sound of pounding feet and panicked voices rushing toward him.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

And... We're done with the first book! Thank you so much for everyone that has come along on this ride with me, and I hope you enjoy the final chapter. Don't worry, I should start working on the second book before long :3

"Bold Italics" = Parseltongue

'Italics' = Athena's speech

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"That poor boy... Did you see the state of him? He must have been so scared." Pomona sniffles as she wipes the tears out of her eyes. "It's hard to imagine. He's always so sweet in classes, eager to help anyone who needs it. For his magic to be capable of doing anything like that..."

Quite frankly, Filius is impressed with Heir Potter's self-control. An Obscurial having that degree of control over the destruction left in their wake is unheard of, and it only solidifies his belief that Heir Potter didn't quite slip into becoming a full Obscurial. "He thought he was going to die," he murmurs quietly. "His magic reacted to save his life. That's pretty standard for accidental magic, and even something of this scale isn't unusual for Mr. Potter, is it? Even as a baby, his magic was powerful enough to fend off You-Know-Who. Why wouldn't it have gotten stronger over the years?" Of course, Filius knows very well that Lily and James are responsible for their son surviving that night, that sort of power can only be found in blood sacrifices and rituals, but it's the story that Albus went with and it's convenient for Heir Potter now.

"I can't believe Quirrel would do such a thing!" Minerva is utterly indignant with rage, and Filius wishes he could afford to express that same anger. "Working with You-Know-Who to kidnap Mr. Potter's familiar and lure him down into the corridor... If he had been any less powerful, he would have died."

The mere memory of the aftermath of what they stumbled into down there is enough to make a lesser wixen cower in fear. Nothing was left of Quirrel's body. Only bloodstains as far as the eye could see, covering the floor, covering the walls, and covering Heir Potter. If not for his ability to see magic, Filius would have thought the boy was dead.

Minerva had to shift into her Animagus form and speak with Athena to confirm that the puddle was ever Quirrel at all. And with Heir Potter still unconscious in the Hospital Wing, the kneazle's heavily edited version of events is the only information that they have to go off of.

"That foolish, foolish boy!" Severus paces back and forth with a twitching eyebrow. "I have never seen a group of snakes so reckless! Rushing into danger like a bunch of Gryffindors while their housemates cover for them...!" He pinches his nose with a sigh. "Why did they not inform anyone?"

Because Heir Potter was seconds away from losing it in the Great Hall, and it was in all of their best interests that he moved quickly. But, well... He can't quite resist stirring the pot a little. "Have you given them any reason to believe they could trust you with something like this?" A haunted look lingers at the edge of Severus's eyes, as if only now remembering something of great importance. "Or did they have every reason to believe you would dismiss the issue outright because it involved Mr. Potter? Slytherins are resourceful, Severus. If you don't give them the tools they need to survive, they often wind up forging them themselves."

It is then that Albus returns, a grave expression on his face that Filius does not like in the slightest. "Albus!" Minerva cries out. "How is he? Is Mr. Potter alright?"

"He's quite alright, Minerva. Magically exhausted, but otherwise unharmed, save for some minor rope burn. None of the blood was his." Filius has never seen his coworkers look so relieved and horrified at the same time. None of them would make it a week in the Goblin Nation. "I'm more concerned for his state of mind..."

Albus is concerned that he's created another Voldemort through his negligence, and if Hari was any less protective of those he calls his, Filius might share that fear. But Hari Potter is a boy who cares so much that it hurts him, horribly and irreparably, not a boy that doesn't care for anyone but himself. He isn't anything like a young Tom Riddle at all. "There's nothing for it but to wait and see," Filius murmurs. "Though I'd advise he see a mind healer over the summer. He'll likely need help processing what happened."

But he knows before Albus can say a word that he has no intention of allowing that to happen. Because rumors will fly if it's discovered that Heir Potter was nearly killed while at Hogwarts, and if they started digging... Well, then they would find that it was hardly Quirrel's first attempt to do so.

"I will watch over him." Filius's finger twitches with the urge to wield his wand and keep the headmaster far, far away from Heir Potter, but doing so would expose their hand far too early. "The rest of you focus on the student body. We don't want the students to panic when they realize Quirrel is missing, hm? Perhaps it would be wise to inform them that he's gone on another sabbatical."

And just like that, a year of willful negligence is swept under the rug.

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His head feels like it's stuffed with cotton. Hari slowly blinks his eyes open with a groan, squinting at the glint of gold hovering over him. Only Athena's rumbling purr as she lays across his chest keeps him from jolting at Dumbledore's presence, and even then, his heart starts pounding in his chest. He very carefully avoids making eye contact, staring at the bridge of Dumbledore's nose instead.

"So you've finally woken up." Hari's magic bristles at Dumbledore's tone, so he takes a deep breath and averts his eyes entirely, allowing them to linger on a table that's covered in a pile of sweets and flowers. "Tokens from your friends and admirers. You seem to have an awful lot of those, don't you, Mr. Potter?"

Despite the situation he's in, he can't keep a smile from tugging at the edge of his lips. "I'm very lucky," he whispers. "Are there notes for who sent what? I'll need to write thank you letters..."

"I rather think there are more pressing matters at hand." Even the false warmth that usually suffuses Dumbledore's voice is long gone now. "What happened, Mr. Potter?"

"Quirrel kidnapped Athena." Hari runs his hand over her fur as she purrs even louder, murmuring, "I could feel her calling out to me. And I couldn't risk... I had to move quickly. Ron, Blaise, Millie, and Heir Malfoy all followed me down, and they helped me get through the puzzles as quickly as we could. But the last one only let one person move forward, and it had to be me. That was my familiar in there. And then Quirrel bound me and started talking about some... Stone or something? I didn't really pay attention, honestly. But he was threatening me and Athena both and then my magic just... Reacted. I'm really sorry, Headmaster. I didn't mean to..." He forces tears to well up in the corners of his eyes by imagining what could have happened if he was too late, clenching the blanket draped over him as he lowers his eyes.

"And why didn't you inform any of your professors, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore's voice is taking on a sharper edge now, and Hari knows, deep in his bones, that he can tell Hari is lying. He's just trying to catch him out in it. "We would have gotten her back for you."

"Nothing was done the other two times Quirrel tried to kill me," he answers with a little shrug. "Why would this time be any different?"

"... Two times? I admit to suspecting something was amiss after hearing what happened at the first Quidditch game, but when did the second incident occur, Mr. Potter?"

"On our way up to Astronomy class just before Easter hols. I was at the back of the group, and about halfway up the tower, I felt a sudden, sharp tug backward. No one was behind me. Parvati was the only reason I didn't crack my head open on the stairs." Hari crosses his arms over his chest with narrowed eyes. "So forgive me for not trusting any of you to save her, but you didn't seem particularly inclined to protect me either."

Dumbledore's blinding, oppressive magic twists with unease. "Have you had any incidents like this before, Mr. Potter? Any times where your magic reacted without you thinking? The staff will need to know in order to best aid you."

He wants to say no, but Dumbledore already knows about there being surges of magic around the Dursley home. Thank Merlin that Athena intercepted that letter back then. "A couple of times, I think?" He words it as a question, tilting his head and furrowing his brow as if thinking very hard about it. "I know that I got scared and blew out all the windows once. And I think there were a couple of other little things, but I don't really remember them. Why? I thought it was normal for wixen to have accidental magic like that growing up."

"It is, but most grow out of it by the time they reach Hogwarts age. So it is very strange indeed that your magic did what it did to Quirinus. Are you certain you have no idea how it happened, Mr. Potter? You will not be in trouble. You were only defending yourself."

That is a lie, and he knows it. "I'm sure," he murmurs, shrinking in on himself as his magic writhes beneath his skin. "I really don't know what happened, Headmaster."

"Enough of this, Albus!" Madam Pomfrey looks incensed as she enters the room with several potions delicately balanced on a tray. "The boy has only just woken up. I will not have you interrogating him in my Hospital Wing!"

"I apologize, Poppy." Dumbledore dips his head with a chuckle. "It would seem I got carried away. I will leave him to you."

"You'd better," she grumbles as he finally leaves the room, turning to Hari with clear concern in her eyes. "Your heart rate is quite high, Mr. Potter. Are you feeling alright?"

"There are spells for that kind of thing?" he murmurs in clear interest before shaking his head slightly. "Sorry. I think so? The Headmaster was just making me nervous."

"Honestly, the nerve of that man. Badgering one of my patients as soon as they wake up... Let me run some quick diagnostics on you, Mr. Potter." The magic that washes over his skin feels vaguely intrusive but non-malicious, so he does his best to grin and bear it. "Your magic has replenished itself shockingly quickly. I'd like to keep you for a few hours longer just to be certain, but you should be free to go after lunch."

"Have any of my friends stopped by recently?" He tilts his head slightly with wide, pleading eyes. "I'd really like to see them..."

"They've been practically camped outside the Hospital Wing," Madam Pomfrey snorts. "Only leaving for meals and curfew, I swear... I suppose I could let them in. But try not to get too rowdy. Even if you are my only patient right now, I've still got a mountain of paperwork to sort through before the end of term."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey!"

His friends practically sprint inside the door when Madam Pomfrey opens it for them, and Hari is pleasantly surprised to see not only Malfoy but also Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle present as well, all without a hint of malice in their magic. "If you get too loud, I will kick you out!" Madam Pomfrey warns them with a stern glare as she walks out of the room. "So behave yourselves."

"Hari, are you okay?" Tears streak down Hannah's cheeks as her shoulders tremble. "We were all so worried!"

"I know I said I didn't want to fight any more trolls this year, but you still should have grabbed me," Neville chides him with a nervous laugh. "Don't leave us out of it next time!"

"I'm really quite disappointed that I didn't get to set Quirrel on fire again," Hermione mutters lowly. "But he's run off on sabbatical after trying to kill you again. I suppose I'll just have to keep my eyes peeled."

"Is that the story they're going with?" he asks with a hum. "Huh. That's convenient."

"And what do you mean by that, Heir Potter?" Parkinson asks with narrowed eyes. He's a bit surprised by the lack of tension between Malfoy's group and his own, but he supposes they've spent a lot of time together these past few... However long it has been.

"My magic vaporized him," he says bluntly. "It was pretty gross. There was blood everywhere; it was a real mess."

"Good riddance," Blaise snorts. "Couldn't have happened to a worse man. Imagine putting up with another year of him trying to kill you."

Malfoy's group looks more than a bit stunned by how casually they're discussing this, and Hari focuses on them with an amused smile. "What brought you four here? I understand the others, of course, but I must admit to being surprised you've been waiting for me."

"After something like this?" Parkinson murmurs disbelievingly. "Draco's right; no one else in our year could dream of becoming Slytherin Prince. We have no intention of weakening our year's court. We're behind you now. For better or for worse."

His eyes widen in pleasant surprise. He expected to have to put up with a lot of contention, both in his year and outside of it, moving into the next year, and avoiding that hassle from his yearmates is ideal. It'll make his position stronger going into second year. "Then you may all call me Hari," he says with a dip of his head. "Thank you for backing me."

"Pansy, then. I look forward to working with you, Hari."

"I suppose you can all call me Draco..."

"Vincent."

"Gregory."

Once permission is given all around, Ron turns to Hari with a calculating look. "What's the plan? I feel like we should probably catch everyone up on what's been going on, but that's up to you. It's just... We have no clue what next year is gonna bring, but I have a feeling it won't be easy. We'll be able to help you more if everyone is on the same page."

"... You're right. Athena, will you get Professor Flitwick once Madam Pomfrey releases me?"

'Of course!' she meows while purring up a storm. *'And I'll go get the others from your dorm now. They'll want to know that you're awake anyway.'* Athena leaps off his bed and runs out the door, causing the others' magic to swirl about in mild confusion.

"I'll meet you all in our study room," Hari reassures them with a smile. "Should be in a few hours. We'll talk more then."

It's best not to risk anyone overhearing more than what they've already said.

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"Well, your readings are all still coming back normal. But no more magic for the rest of the term, Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey taps her fingers against her clipboard with a stern look. "You need to rest or you'll end up right back in this bed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey. I'll be careful."

"Run along, then."

She doesn't have to tell him twice. Hari walks out of the Hospital Wing and ducks around a corner before draping his Invisibility Cloak over himself. Now that he's hidden from view, he steadily makes his way to their study room, smiling once he can see all the magical signatures waiting for him there.

"Hari!!" Artemis races toward him the second he steps through the door, winding up his body until she's hiding in his hair. ***"You have prevailed over a great predator! You've shown them all that you're not prey."***

Nisaba's pace is far more sedate, but she curls herself around his neck with relief dancing in her magic. ***"Little speaker, I'm so glad that you're alright."***

"So you've finally decided to bear your fangs," Camulus hisses with a clear nod of approval. ***"Good. I am proud of you, speaker."***

Kratos gently bumps his head against Hari's hand as he curls protectively around his feet. ***"You will get us first next time. We cannot protect you if you do not let us, Hari."***

"I know. I'm sorry. I was just so worried..."

'And they're not angry at you,' Athena reassures him as those not in the know gasp with shock. *'Just worried. You scared us all, Hari. We're a team. We've gotta make sure we're working together.'*

"You're a parselmouth?!" Padma is the first one to recover from the shock of it, eyes gleaming with intrigue. "I didn't know that enough of the Potter's Indian heritage remained to make that possible! They've been intermarrying with British families for so many years that I thought... Oh, this is amazing!"

Hari glances at Professor Flitwick, and the half-goblin's magic dances merrily as he dips his head in a nod. "I've already set up privacy wards, Heir Potter. I assume you wish for me to be the bonder again?"

"If you don't mind," he confirms with a sheepish smile. "That would be safest for all of us."

"What's going on, Hari?" Lavender's eyebrows furrow with concern. "Why all the secrecy? Are you alright?"

He takes a deep breath, steadying both himself and his magic with the exhale. "I am fine. But in order for me to tell any of you more than what I already have, I'll need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow. You can say no," he reassures them when he sees a few uneasy faces. "I'll still be your friend. But I won't be able to tell you everything, and you'll have to live with that. I

have to protect myself first. And it will be very, very dangerous for me if the wrong people find out about any of this too soon, including me being a parselmouth.”

Pansy’s eyes narrow sharply. “And what are the terms of this Unbreakable Vow?”

“Simply that any secrets shared among us remain as such,” Hari reassures her. “Ron, Blaise, Theo, we’ll have to expand our own vow to cover secrets shared outside of our dorm room too. Basically, anything that someone tells you is a secret will be protected by the vow, and if you ever overhear any of us saying something, then you won’t be able to share that either unless you ask permission. Everything else is unaffected. I’m not going to draw attention to the fact that I’m making vows like this if I can help it.”

It’s silent for several long, painful moments. Hari’s heart feels as if it’s going to beat out of his chest. “I’ll do it.” Neville is the first one to speak, and Hari can feel the relief flooding his magic as soon as he does. “You’re my best friend, Hari. If you feel like you need to keep this a secret, then I want to help you do that.”

“I’m in, obviously,” Millie draws. “I’d be dead without you. I’d be insulted that you think I’d expose your secrets, but you’re trying to protect us all from a Legilimens, aren’t you?”

“Yep. Dumbledore is one.” Ron shudders at the thought of it. “And with the way he ignored what was happening this year... I don’t like it.”

“Snape is one too,” Hari adds, causing several of his friends to pale. “And he hates me. If he finds out something like this, then even if he doesn’t make it obvious he knows... He could spread rumors. Hogwarts’ gossip mill moves quickly. I’m not risking it.”

“I don’t think he would be that petty,” Draco murmurs. “But I can’t fault you for thinking it either. I’ll agree to the vow.”

One by one, each of his friends agrees, and once everyone has expressed their approval, Flitwick requests Mother Magic’s aid with another vow. The magic feels brighter this time, almost electric and crackling with energy, as it flits from person to person, taking just the slightest bit of magic from each of them before the vow settles and the magic dissipates.

“Me being a parselmouth is a secret,” Hari says immediately. “As are the rest of my familiars. Athena is already a target because of me, and I am not about to put the rest at risk for no reason.”

“Of course,” Daphne agrees easily. “And it would be rather difficult to convince the Hogwarts Board of Governors that they are all your familiars in any case. It would turn into a media circus.”

“And the last thing you need is media attention right now,” Susan murmurs. “Everyone might believe that Quirrel just left for now, but when he never comes back...”

Parvati’s magic sparks with curiosity when she asks, “Speaking of Quirrel, are you going to tell us that full story now? Because I want to know what that murderous creep was up to.”

“I’m going to preface this by saying that everything I say here today is a secret,” he says with a snort. “Quirrel was working with the Dark Lord. They were after whatever it was that Dumbledore was hiding in the third-floor corridor, and the Dark Lord was possessing him completely by the time that I got down there. But Athena heard them speaking together, and she assured me that Quirrel was fully aware of what he was doing.”

“I think I saw him out in the Forbidden Forest that night...” Draco murmurs with a haunted look. “Something was attacking unicorns, killing them and drinking their blood, and my detention was to go out there with Hagrid and find out what was doing it. It was so dark that it was hard to tell for sure, but... It looked like a person.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Hari agrees with a shrug. “There’s a reason I killed him. And though the story everyone will hear is that it was an accident, it was not. He intended to kill me, I killed him first, and I will not apologize for it. But I’m not about to let myself get crucified for it either.”

Flitwick’s grin grows a bit sharper. His magic burns with pride that has Hari flushing and averting his eyes.

“Hear, hear!” Terry cheers. “You’d better not apologize. I don’t think there’s a single one of us who didn’t want him dead. Most of us couldn’t have done it ourselves, mind, but I’m hardly complaining. Besides, we’ve all watched him try to kill you.”

“Precisely,” Hermione agrees with a smirk. “Anything you may or may not have done to him was something he brought onto himself. He could not have expected to outrun karma forever.”

“You’re vicious, Hermione,” Vincent murmurs with wide eyes, and a hint of fear threads through his magic.

“Thank you!”

Gregory can’t even look her in the eye as he whispers, “That wasn’t a compliment. You’re actually scary.”

“Hm... Let’s see, what else happened this year? Oh, I suppose I ought to tell you about the dragon—”

“Ha! I knew it!” Draco cries out. “You did smuggle it out of the school, didn’t you?! I guess that makes more sense now with the whole parselmouth thing...”

“Yep!” Ron’s cheeky grin speaks for itself. “Sent her back to Romania with Charlie. Was easy as can be with Hari there. I swear, Charlie has been talking more about you in his letters than anything else. He wants you to work up there so bad.”

Hari snorts at that. “Let him know that I’m heavily considering it. If this is how my first year at Hogwarts is, then I have a feeling I’ll want to leave Britain by the time I graduate.”

“I wouldn’t even blame you,” Theo murmurs. “You value peace and quiet as much as I do, and you’ll never get that here.”

“Only six more years. Just six more years...”

“Do let the Goblin Nation know if there is anything we can do to assist you when the time comes, Heir Potter.” Flitwick winks at the others before saying, “This information is secret, of course.”

“This is really serious, isn’t it?” Hannah whispers. “I mean, we knew it was serious when Quirrel kept trying to kill you, but... Obviously, we’re not on the Dark Lord’s side, but we’re not on Dumbledore’s either. So... Where does that leave us?”

“On Hari’s side, obviously,” Blaise answers with a smirk. “On the winning side.”

And the warmth that buzzes in Hari’s chest when none of them refute that statement doesn’t have anything to do with his magic at all.

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Hagrid is bawling when Hari goes to visit him the next morning. “It’s all my ruddy fault!”

“... Huh?” Hari’s eyebrows furrow in confusion. “What are you talking about, Hagrid?”

“I told ‘im how to get past Fluffy!” Hagrid sobs. “The one who gave me tha’ dragon egg... It must’ve been Quirrel! He was the only fella I told about it. And if I hadn’t told ‘im, then he wouldn’t have been able to hurt ya! I’m so sorry, Hari!! I’ll never drink again, I swear it!”

“It’s okay, Hagrid. He would’ve found a way either way, you know? I’m just glad he didn’t hurt Fluffy, and I’m alright. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Yer really too kind,” Hagrid sniffles, wiping at his eyes as great, big tears fell to the ground. “Guess ya got a bit o’ Lily in ya after all. Speakin’ of...” Hagrid digs around in his pockets for almost an entire minute before he pulls out a leatherbound book and gives it to Hari. “I wanted ta make it up ta ya, so... Sent owls off ta all yer parents’ old school friends, askin’ for photos. Knew ya only had the one o’ Lily so... D’ya like it?”

Nothing could have stopped Hari from tackling Hagrid in a hug. “I love it,” he whispers. “Thank you, Hagrid.” He may not be chasing after the ghosts of his parents, but that doesn’t make a gift like this any less special. The sheer amount of effort that went into this alone... “Thank you.”

Hari really, really wishes that he could tell Hagrid everything. Maybe someday...

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The end-of-year feast passes them by without incident, and though most of the school seemed disgruntled at the sight of silver and green banners, Hari’s spirit is lightened by the fact that his friends were clearly happy for them.

“Honestly, it isn’t as if it really matters,” Hermione mutters the morning after, rolling her eyes when a group of passing Gryffindors boo at them. “Our exam results are far more important than the House Cup.”

Hari agrees, but so many of their friends look at Hermione like she’s just said something blasphemous that he keeps his mouth shut. He doesn’t say a word at all until they’re looking up at the results for their year. “Yes!” he cheers. “I got first in Charms!

And I actually passed Transfiguration!”

He barely scraped an Acceptable in it and is sitting at thirty-five out of forty in the rankings, but Hari will take what he can get. And his other scores are all consistently in the top five, alongside Hermione, Draco, Daphne, and Susan, with Neville and Hannah blowing them all out of the water in Herbology.

“Huh. I actually got second in Potions?” Blaise scratches his head with a laugh. “I mean, I know my stuff, but with Snape grading it...”

“Good job, Neville!” Hannah cheers with a sunny grin. “But I’m gonna beat you next year, just you wait!”

“Thank Merlin for Daphne and Susan,” Ron mutters. “Look at the scores for History of Magic outside of our group; they’re all awful.”

“With Binns teaching, is that really a surprise?” Pansy asks with a snort. “I always fall asleep in his class, and I actually try to pay attention.”

“We’ll get your scores up next year,” Daphne promises her. “And we’ll help you both as well, Vincent, Gregory. I know Snape’s been giving you a hard time.”

Draco sighs with relief. “Thank you. I understand the material, but I am not a good teacher.”

“Don’t I know it,” Millie says with a snort that sends the two bickering as they join the other students in the Great Hall.

They all chatter about their summer plans as they board the Hogwarts Express, stopping to ask an upper year to merge two compartments together so they could all fit in one, and despite stepping away from a place filled with so much magic that welcomes him so warmly, Hari is happy to be going home.

Huh... Home. Yeah, he supposes that he actually does have one of those now.

It’s good to be going home.

Chapter End Notes

Tomorrow I will be going to Repticon and doubtlessly coming home with more reptiles (I have been preparing for so long for this), but in the meantime, I want to leave you all with pictures of my newest baby, Cardamom. She's in quarantine rn, so don't mind the paper towels haha; it's easiest to monitor their health that way.





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