



TERRIFYING,
ISN'T IT?

YOU GET USED
TO THIS?

BY FIFTH YEAR, SOME
STUDENTS START JUMPING
BETWEEN PLATFORMS INSTEAD
OF USING THE BRIDGES.

THAT SEEMS
UNNECESSARILY
DANGEROUS.

PROFESSOR TEMPESTA
HAD US PRACTICE EMERGENCY
AERIAL RECOVERY BY PUSHING
US OFF THE ASTRONOMY
BUILDING.

SHE PUSHED
YOU OFF A
BUILDING?

WITH SAFETY
CHARMS.

*Professor Tempesta
would get along disturbingly
well with Mad-Eye Moody.*

The morning sun hit Seravella's floating towers and turned them gold. Harry stood on one of the open balconies of the main castle, watching students cross the swaying bridges between buildings casually. These people had completely forgotten that falling meant dropping through clouds into empty sky thousands of feet below.

A group of second-years raced across the bridge to the Transfiguration building, laughing as the structure swayed beneath their feet. One girl, small, with dark curly hair, stumbled at the midpoint where the bridge dipped. Her friends caught her arms, steadied her, and they continued forward without breaking stride.

Harry thought of Hogwarts' moving staircases, which at least had the decency to provide solid stone beneath your feet even if they occasionally stranded you three floors from your destination. This place made its students earn their education through a daily exercise in controlled terror.

"Terrifying, isn't it?"

Harry turned to find Veronica Lombardi beside him, looking far too comfortable leaning against the balcony railing with nothing but open air beyond. She wore her Seravella uniform, navy blazer, white shirt, the short cape with its gold tower-and-clouds crest tugging in the morning breeze.

"You get used to it," she continued, following his gaze to where another group of students navigated the bridge. "By third year, you stop thinking about the height. By fifth year, some of the more reckless students start jumping between platforms instead of using the bridges at all."

"That seems unnecessarily dangerous."

"Professor Tempesta encourages it. She teaches The Art of Flying, not brooms alone, but wind magic, levitation theory, how to control your body during a fall." Veronica's smile turned slightly wicked. "Last term, she had us practice emergency aerial recovery by pushing us off the Astronomy building."

Harry stared at her. "She pushed you off a building."

"With safety charms in place, obviously. But you didn't know they were there when you went over the edge." Veronica's expression suggested this was perfectly reasonable educational practice. "Made us very motivated to master the wind-cushioning spell on the first attempt."

Harry decided Professor Tempesta would get along disturbingly well with Mad-Eye Moody.

"Maestro Vettori asked me to bring you to the workshops," Veronica said, pushing off the railing. "He thought you'd want to see where students work on their crafting projects."

The workshop occupied an entire satellite building connected to the main castle by one of the longer bridges. As they crossed, Harry noticed the bridge surface was engraved with runic

patterns he recognized as structural reinforcement matrices, the same theoretical foundation he'd used in his talismans, but applied to architecture on a scale that made his head hurt trying to calculate the power requirements.

"These runes," he said, crouching to examine them more closely. "They're compensating for stress distribution across the suspension points."

"You can read them?" Veronica sounded impressed. "Most students don't start learning architectural runework until fifth year."

"I've been studying runes since first year. You need to understand magical theory if you want to build talismans that don't explode." Harry traced one particularly complex sequence. "This is modified Etruscan, isn't it? Similar to what I saw on Professor Basile's robes."

"You noticed that too?" Veronica's smile widened. "Professor Basile is going to want to keep you. He was thrilled when you identified the binding sequence yesterday. Said it was the first time a visiting student recognized pre-Roman runework on sight."

They reached the workshop building, a structure that reminded Harry of an enormous glass greenhouse, walls and ceiling made of clear panels that let in the full morning light. Inside, long tables held tools, materials, and half-finished projects in various states of completion. Students worked in clusters, navy uniforms bright against white marble.

Harry could admit it freely: the workshop was impressive. He walked between the tables, noting the equipment, the range of materials, the fact that each crafting discipline had its own dedicated workspace.

But.

The materials storage occupied an entire wall, organized, labeled, accessible. Silver wire, copper sheets, crystals of various types, preserved creature parts stored properly in stasis jars. Good quality. Sufficient for most student projects.

Not exceptional. Nothing like the Lunargent he'd purchased in France, or the basilisk skin,.

The tools were solid but standard. Well-maintained engraving sets, precision measuring instruments, portable forges. Everything a student artificer would need to produce competent work. He thought of the equipment he'd seen during Fleur's tour of Beauxbatons, tools that adjusted themselves to the user's magical signature, devices that detected microscopic flaws in runic matrices before they could cause catastrophic failures. That equipment existed nowhere else in Europe. Seravella wasn't competing in the same category.

Even Hogwarts, for all its educational shortcomings, had it very easy to buy some materials, except when the Minister decided to be a dick about it.

"What do you think?" Veronica asked, watching his face carefully.

Harry chose his words with the political caution Andromeda had been drilling into him. "It's very well organized. The natural lighting must be excellent for detailed work."

It was true. It was also not an answer to the question she'd actually asked.

Veronica's expression suggested she heard what he didn't say. "But not as good as Beauxbatons' workshops."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Your face went all diplomatic." She leaned against one of the empty tables, arms crossed. "It's alright. We know Beauxbatons has better crafting facilities. They've been perfecting their program for eight hundred years and have connections to every materials supplier in Europe. We can't compete with that."

"Then what does Seravella do better?" Harry asked, now that she'd given him permission to be honest.

Veronica's smile turned proud. "We save lives."

She gestured toward the windows overlooking the castle's central courtyard, where Harry could see the distinctive white stone of the Healing Wing. "Beauxbatons produces brilliant craftsmen. Hogwarts produces the likes of Dumbledore, Newt Scamander, Alastor Moody, The Four Founders of Hogwarts, many others and...You." She said, looking at Harry for a brief moment, and Harry felt good in his chest in that moment. "But Seravella produces Healers who can walk into any magical hospital in Europe and immediately start saving patients everyone else has given up on."

"Professor Greco," Harry said quietly.

"Professor Greco, Professor Amato's advances in potion-based treatments, Professor Valli's creature-healing techniques that work on humans too." Veronica pushed off the table. "Every student here learns enough emergency medicine to stabilize someone until professional help arrives. Do you know how many lives that saves every year?"

Harry thought of Lorenzo Lombardi, Veronica's brother, alive because Harry's talisman had kept his heart beating long enough to reach help. "Yeah. I think I do."

"When you design your talismans," Veronica said carefully, "you're thinking about protection. Defense. Keeping people from getting hurt in the first place. That's brilliant work, and my brother is alive because of it." She met his eyes directly. "But here, we focus on what happens when protection fails. When the talisman breaks. When the shield spell wasn't fast enough. When someone gets hurt anyway and you're the only person there who might be able to fix it."

Harry didn't argue. Beauxbatons for crafting mastery. Seravella for the healers who fixed what went wrong when magic and good intentions weren't enough. Hogwarts was for great wizards who came once in a century.

"I'd like to learn more," Harry said. "About the healing magic. The theory behind it."

Veronica's look suggested she understood exactly why a talisman-maker known for protective enchantments would suddenly be interested in healing theory. "Professor Greco said you wanted to meet with her. She's cleared time this afternoon, says any young wizard interested in medical applications of artifact magic deserves proper guidance."

Three hours later, Harry found himself in Professor Greco's private office adjacent to the Healing Wing. The room smelled of herbs and something astringent that reminded him of St. Mungo's. Every available surface held either medical texts or labeled specimen jars.

Professor Isadora Greco herself sat across from him, white healing robes pristine beneath her navy Seravella overcoat. She was younger than Harry had expected, perhaps forty, with sharp grey eyes that made him feel like a diagnostic puzzle she hadn't solved yet.

"Signorina Lombardi says you're interested in healing applications for your talisman work," Greco said, her English thick with Italian. "This is unusual. Most artificers focus on offensive or defensive capabilities."

"Most artificers aren't thinking about the right problems," Harry replied carefully. He'd rehearsed this conversation in his head a dozen times since waking up. "A talisman that protects someone from getting hurt is useful. But a talisman that could help someone who's already hurt, or sick, or—" He stopped. The word he wanted was too specific.

"Or cursed?" Greco finished softly.

Harry's head snapped up.

Greco smiled, but it was sad around the edges. "I am a Healer, Mister Potter. I recognize the kind of desperate hope that brings someone to my door asking questions they are too afraid to make specific." She folded her hands on her desk. "You know someone who is sick. Someone whose condition is not responding to conventional treatment. Someone you care about enough to travel to Italy looking for answers."

There was no point denying it. "Yes."

"May I ask the nature of the illness?"

Harry hesitated. Daphne had trusted him with Astoria's secret. He'd promised to help, but that didn't give him the right to broadcast her sister's condition to every medical professional he met.

But Professor Greco specialized in conditions other hospitals had given up on. If anyone might have insight-

"It's not my secret to tell in detail," Harry said finally. "But it's a blood curse. Hereditary. It affects the magical core, every time the person's magic tries to grow stronger, the curse converts that growth into poison. The stronger they become, the faster the poison spreads."

Greco's expression went very still. "How old is the patient?"

"Twelve."

"*Merda*." The curse was quiet but felt. Greco stood and moved to one of her bookshelves, pulling down a heavy leather-bound tome. "A blood curse targeting core development in a child. That is extremely rare. And extremely dangerous."

She returned to her desk, opening the book to a section marked with slips of parchment. The pages showed anatomical diagrams of magical cores in various states of corruption, the text dense and in Italian.

"Blood curses are among the most difficult conditions to treat," Greco said, running her finger down a page. "They are woven into the family magic itself, passed down through generations like eye color or magical strength. You cannot simply remove them without unraveling the person's entire magical identity."

"But there must be something," Harry insisted. "Some treatment, some way to stabilize-"

"To stabilize, yes. To cure, no." Greco's voice was gentle but firm. "Mister Potter, I am going to tell you something, and you must listen very carefully. Are you listening?"

Harry nodded, his throat tight.

"You cannot cure a blood curse," Greco said. "Not with potions, not with spells, not with artifacts. The curse is not something attacking the person-it is part of the person, woven into their magic at the deepest level. Trying to remove it would be like trying to remove their ability to cast spells entirely. The best we can do is manage the symptoms, slow the progression, buy time."

"How much time?"

"That depends on the specific curse, the patient's magical strength, how fast the condition is advancing." Greco's expression gave nothing away. "In the worst cases, perhaps a year. In the best, with proper treatment, they might reach adulthood. But eventually..."

Harry remembered all the way Daphne had told him that House Greengrass had used to fight the curse, all of them ended in one place. Buying time, but never fully curing the curse.

"You said 'in the worst cases.' What's the worst case you've personally seen?"

Greco was quiet for a long moment, her gaze distant. "I was a student here, seventh year, taking my final examinations. There was a girl in my year, brilliant, truly gifted in healing magic. She came from an old pure-blood family, very minor nobility. House Fioravanti."

The name meant nothing to Harry, but he listened.

"She knew she carried her family's curse," Greco continued. "Everyone knew. It had killed her grandparents, her mother, two of her uncles. She was the last of her line. But she wanted to become a Healer anyway, wanted to help others even knowing her own time was limited."

Greco's voice went softer. "The practical examination required demonstrating advanced diagnostic magic on a volunteer patient. Complex spellwork, significant magical output, the kind of casting that showed you could handle emergency situations under pressure. She was doing beautifully. Her diagnostic matrices were textbook perfect, her magical control was flawless. And then..."

"What happened?"

"Her magic broke." Greco met Harry's eyes. "One moment she was the top student in our year. The next moment her magical core just... shattered. Like glass under too much pressure. She collapsed. We tried everything, every emergency protocol, every stabilization charm, every healing technique we'd learned. Professor Greco, the previous Professor Greco, my mentor, worked on her for seven minutes before declaring her dead."

The silence in the office was heavy enough to crush stone.

"She was seventeen years old," Greco said quietly. "The most talented healer-in-training I've ever studied alongside. And the curse didn't even give her time to say goodbye. Seven minutes from perfect health to dead on the examination room floor, and there was nothing any of us could do except watch."

Harry couldn't speak. His mind kept showing him Astoria, bright, laughing Astoria with flowers in her hair and a friendship bracelet on her wrist, collapsing in the middle of a Charms class while everyone watched helplessly.

"That day," Greco said, "I decided I would dedicate my life to magical illnesses. Not because I thought I could cure them. I knew even then that some conditions have no cure. But because I could help people buy time. Manage symptoms. Give them months or years they wouldn't have had otherwise. Give them time to make memories, tell their families they love them, have one more birthday, one more summer, one more chance to live before the curse takes that away."

She closed the book gently. "If your friend has a blood curse affecting their magical core, the best thing you can do is help them live as fully as possible with the time they have. Do not promise them a cure. Do not give them false hope. Just... be their friend. And when the time comes, be there. That is the only magic that truly matters in the end."

Harry's hands were clenched so tightly in his lap that his knuckles had gone white. He forced himself to breathe. To think. "There is a second case," he said, his voice steadier than he felt. "Different type of curse. The patient's magic becomes weak over time. Their skin turns very pale. It seems like using magic might trigger or worsen the condition, but we're not certain of the mechanism."

Greco's gaze sharpened. "Progressive magical weakness with physical symptoms? That's unusual. Blood curses typically attack the core itself, they make magic more dangerous, more volatile. What you're describing sounds like magical depletion or core degradation."

She pulled down another book, this one with a dark green cover. "How long has the patient been symptomatic?"

Harry thought back to what Sebastian had said about Anna. "Since she was a child, maybe longer. The weakness comes and goes, some days are better than others. But the overall trend is down."

"And you said using magic seems to trigger episodes?"

"It's just a theory," Harry said. "The patient experiences worse symptoms after casting spells, but it's not consistent."

Greco was quiet for a long moment, flipping through pages of medical notes. "Without examining the patient directly, I can only speculate. But if magic use triggers the curse's activation, then the underlying mechanism is likely different from traditional blood curses." She looked up. "It's possible, and this is purely theoretical without proper diagnostic work, that the curse is parasitic rather than integrated. Feeding on the patient's magical energy when it's actively channeled."

"What's the difference?"

"A traditional blood curse is part of the person's magical identity from birth. It grows with them, evolves with their core. A parasitic curse is something imposed later, it attaches to the magic but isn't truly part of it." Greco allowed herself a fraction of optimism. "If that's what we're dealing with, there might be treatment options. Magical rest protocols, core stabilization potions, possibly even curse removal if we can isolate the parasitic elements without damaging the underlying magic."

The pressure behind Harry's ribs eased. Not a cure, but maybe help for Anna. "What would you recommend?"

"The patient needs to stop casting. Every spell could be feeding the curse, strengthening it while her core weakens. She should be examined by a specialist in curse damage, someone who can run detailed diagnostics to identify exactly what we're dealing with." Greco paused. "And she should come to Italy. To Trizina Hospital. I've seen cases like this, and the sooner treatment begins, the better her chances."

Harry was already composing the letter to Sebastian in his head. Anna needed to stop using magic. Treatment was possible if they could get her to Italy. "I'll pass that along," he said.

"Is there anyone else you need help with?" Greco prompted.

Harry hesitated, thinking of Crystal-Harmony struggling to walk on a French beach, her legs trembling beneath her, the agony of transformation written across her face, her words that it was only a matter of time before she was unable to transform anymore, and her visits would end permanently. "This one is different. Not a curse, exactly. More of a... biological incompatibility."

"Go on."

"Is it theoretically possible," Harry said slowly, "for a water-dwelling creature to walk on land? Not just temporarily, but for extended periods. Without pain. Without the transformation itself being dangerous."

Greco went very still. "You're asking about organism mutation."

"I suppose I am."

"Mister Potter." All trace of gentle encouragement left Greco's voice. "Organism mutation is one of the most dangerous branches of experimental magic. What you're describing, altering a creature's biological structure to function in an incompatible environment has been attempted many times. Every attempt has ended in death, or suffering bad enough that the subjects wished for it."

Harry's stomach dropped. "Every attempt?"

"Every documented one." Greco stood and moved to a locked cabinet, withdrawing a slim volume bound in black leather. "In 1547, a French wizard named Beaumont tried to make dolphins amphibious, guardians for coastal villages. Twenty-three subjects. All dead within a month. Their organs couldn't handle the pressure changes, their skin cracked and dried, and the ones that lasted longest went mad from the pain."

She flipped through pages marked with grim illustrations. "1702. A Russian alchemist gave four volunteers gills so they could explore underwater without magic. Dead within three days, blood chemistry went toxic, their brains swelled."

"But those were centuries ago," Harry protested. "Surely with modern medical knowledge—"

"1958," Greco said. "St. Mungo's. A Healer tried to stabilize a werewolf's transformation. Make it voluntary, controlled, painless. The patient volunteered, understood the risks, signed consent forms. The procedure took six hours. He survived eight days. His core couldn't sustain partial transformation, it burned itself out trying to hold two incompatible forms at once."

She closed the book. "That's not the Middle Ages, Mister Potter. That's modern magical medicine with every resource available. The result was still death." She set the book down. "Living things have forms for a reason. Force a creature into a state its body was never built for, and you get failures at every level, cellular, magical, neurological. They cascade."

Harry thought of Crystal-Harmony's whispered *I believe you* before she dove back into the Mediterranean. His promise to build something that would let her walk between worlds without pain.

"What if," he said carefully, "it wasn't a permanent transformation? What if it was stabilization, something that made the temporary process less painful, extended the duration safely, allowed regular transitions without cumulative damage?"

Greco studied him for a long moment. "You're talking about an external support system. Not changing the creature's nature, but providing magical scaffolding to help maintain a form their body can already achieve on its own."

"Yes."

"That's... less impossible than full organism mutation." Greco returned to her desk. "If the creature already possesses the ability to transform, if the magic is inherent to their species rather than imposed from outside, then you might be able to stabilize that natural ability rather than forcing an unnatural change."

"So it could work?"

"I said less impossible. That's different from possible." Greco's voice carried warning. "You would need to understand the exact mechanism of the creature's natural transformation. How the magic rearranges their biology. What causes the pain. What limits the duration. What damage accumulates with repeated shifts. Without that understanding, any attempt at enhancement could make things worse."

"I need to try anyway," Harry said finally.

"I know." Greco's smile was sad. "I knew the moment you walked in here. You're going to attempt all three impossible things, aren't you?"

"Yes." Harry said without hesitation.

Greco pulled out a sheet of parchment and began to write. "But Mister Potter, I have been studying magical illnesses for twenty years. I have access to research from every major magical hospital in Europe. I have examined hundreds of patients. And I have never seen a blood curse cured."

She finished writing and handed him the parchment, a detailed list of references, medical texts, research papers. "This is everything I can share about blood curses, progressive magical

weakness, and transformation magic. Study it carefully. Understand what you're attempting. And please, please be careful. Too many brilliant young wizards have destroyed themselves trying to achieve the impossible."

Harry accepted the parchment, scanning the extensive list of sources. "Thank you, Professor Greco. You've been very helpful."

"Have I?" Greco's expression was searching. "I've told you that one of your goals cannot be achieved, another is only possible with the patient coming to Italy and stopping magic use, and the third is so dangerous that every previous attempt has ended in death or suffering. I'm not sure that qualifies as helpful."

"You've told me what conventional medical wisdom says can't be done," Harry corrected. "That's different from impossible."

Greco's slight smile held more sadness than amusement. "You remind me so much of her. That same stubborn refusal to accept limitations." She walked him to the door. "I hope you prove me wrong, Mister Potter. Truly, I do. But I have been disappointed by hope too many times to trust it anymore."

As Harry left her office, the parchment felt heavy in his pocket.

Three impossible things.

Three promises he couldn't break.

And now he knew exactly how impossible they really were.

And if the disease was in the magic then trying to cure it would be like trying to remove the foundation from a house and expecting the building to remain standing.

But what if you could rebuild the foundation without tearing down the house? What if there was a way to reconstruct someone's magical core from scratch, using something powerful enough to override the curse's grip?

That's what Cassiopeia Greengrass believed the Black family magic could do. That's why she was fighting so hard for Astoria to become Heir, because the ancient bloodline magic might provide the raw power necessary to perform an otherwise impossible reconstruction ritual.

Harry's mind was already working through the theoretical framework. The Black family library would have information on blood magic, core reconstruction, hereditary curse management. The liquid Aqualis could serve as a medium for incompatible magical traditions. Flamel's Essence of Potential would stabilize experimental combinations.

But all of that required access to resources he didn't yet have. And all of it assumed Cassiopeia's theory was correct, that Black magic was powerful enough to do what centuries of magical medical research said couldn't be done.

"Mister Potter?"

Harry looked up to find a cluster of students watching him from the other end of the corridor. They wore the Seravella uniform, a mix of years from the varying heights, and they were clearly working up the courage to approach.

"Yes?" Harry said, trying to shake off the heavy thoughts from his conversation with Professor Greco.

The girl in front stepped forward carefully, as if trying not to embarrass herself. "We just wanted to say that we think your talisman work is brilliant. The Enhanced version, especially. The self-sacrifice function is..."

"It saved my cousin," another student interrupted, a tall boy with dark hair. "He's an Auror in Naples. Took a curse to the chest during a raid. Would have died if the talisman hadn't activated."

"My sister's applying to the Auror training program next year," a girl with glasses added. "She wasn't going to, said it was too dangerous. But then she heard about your talismans, about the survival rates improving, and she decided maybe she could be brave enough if she had proper protection."

More students were gathering now, drawn by the commotion. Harry recognized a few faces from yesterday's tour.

"Do you think you'll make more versions?" the first girl asked. "Better ones?"

"I'm working on it," Harry said, slightly overwhelmed by the attention. "Always trying to improve the design. Figure out what works, what doesn't, what could be better."

"Could you make one that helps with healing?" A younger student pushed forward, first or second year, small and serious-faced. "My mum is a Healer at the hospital in Rome. She says the biggest problem in emergency situations is that patients go into shock before proper treatment can begin. If there was something that could stabilize someone immediately, keep them conscious and coherent until real help arrives..."

Harry's mind immediately started working through the technical requirements. Shock prevention would require monitoring vital signs, detecting dangerous drops in blood pressure or heart rate, triggering automated responses to stabilize the body's systems...

"That's actually a really good idea," Harry said slowly. "The coordination protocols I developed with Nymphadora Tonks could be adapted for biological monitoring instead of inter-talisman

communication. You'd need to incorporate diagnostic charm matrices similar to what Healers use, but simplified for automatic activation..."

He was talking more to himself now than to the gathered students, his hands moving through the air as he visualized the runic arrangements. Several students exchanged glances.

"You're doing it again," Veronica said, appearing at Harry's elbow with amusement in her voice.

"Doing what?"

"Designing revolutionary magical artifacts in your head while standing in a corridor talking to fans." She turned to the assembled students. "He does this. Gets a faraway look and starts muttering about resonance frequencies and matrix integration."

"It's not muttering," Harry protested. "It's productive thinking out loud."

"That's what muttering is."

The students were grinning now.

"If you make a healing talisman," the young student said hopefully, "would you consider selling them to hospitals? My mum's hospital can't afford the Enhanced versions, they're too expensive for bulk purchase. But if there was something cheaper, something focused just on stabilization instead of full protection..."

Harry thought about the British Ministry's contract, one thousand Enhanced Talismans at forty Galleons each. Enough to outfit a significant portion of their Auror force but nowhere near enough to provide widespread protection for healers, researchers, curse-breakers, or any of the dozens of other dangerous magical professions.

The Enhanced Talismans were expensive because they did everything, protection, emergency healing, coordination features, self-sacrifice. The materials alone cost nearly fifteen Galleons per unit, and that was with Harry doing all the assembly work himself instead of hiring specialized craftsmen.

But a simpler design, focused purely on biological monitoring and shock prevention, could potentially be produced for a fraction of the cost. Maybe ten Galleons per unit if he optimized the materials. Maybe less if he could find cheaper alternatives for the non-essential components.

Which would mean hospitals could afford bulk orders. Which would mean more healers protected. Which would mean more patients saved because their Healers survived long enough to treat them.

"I'll think about it," Harry said. "No promises, but... yeah. I'll definitely think about it."

"Can we get your autograph?" someone asked, producing a scrap of parchment.

"I don't really do autographs-"

"Please? My little sister keeps asking if I've met you yet. If I go home with proof..."

Harry sighed and accepted the parchment. "Just this once."

"Just this once" turned into fifteen minutes of signing scraps of parchment, class notebooks, and, memorably, one student's Seravella uniform blazer ("My mother is going to kill me, but it'll be worth it").

By the time Veronica finally rescued him, Harry's hand was cramping and his face hurt from smiling at enthusiastic teenagers who kept calling him "brilliant" and "inspiring" and one memorable "the future of magical innovation in Europe."

"You're good at this," Veronica observed as they escaped to a quieter corridor.

"At what?"

"Talking to people. Making them feel like they matter." She glanced at him sidelong. "You didn't have to spend fifteen minutes signing autographs. You could have excused yourself after the first few. But you stayed, and you listened when that first-year talked about her mother, and you took her design suggestion seriously."

"It was a serious suggestion," Harry defended. "The biological monitoring idea has real potential."

"I know. That's what I mean." Veronica stopped walking, turning to face him fully. "You're going to be important, Mister Potter. Not just famous. Actually important. The kind where your decisions affect thousands of lives."

Harry shifted under her gaze. "That's a lot of pressure to put on someone who's thirteen."

"You're already carrying it. I'm just pointing out that you're handling it better than most adults would." Veronica's smile went wry. "My mother says you remind her of Albus Dumbledore when he was young. Brilliant and idealistic, determined to fix everything wrong with the world through clever application of magic."

"I hope I do better than he did," Harry muttered, thinking of Daphne's warning about Dumbledore's chess-master tendencies.

Veronica's look suggested she'd caught the implication but was too polite to push. She checked the ornate watch hanging from her blazer. "It's almost noon. Minister Lombardi asked if you'd join her for lunch, she has some people she'd like you to meet."

"More business discussions?"

"Almost certainly. But the food will be excellent, and there's no rule that says you have to agree to anything just because they feed you well."

Harry thought about Cassiopeia Greengrass, about every negotiation he'd sat through since his talismans attracted international attention.

"No," he agreed. "There's definitely no rule about that."

Lunch was held in a private dining room in Seravella's main castle, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the cloudscape below. The table could have seated thirty but held only thirteen: Harry, Veronica, Minister Lombardi, Marco Bianchi, Professor Greco, Andromeda, Ted, Nymphadora, Newt, two wizards Harry didn't recognize, and an elegant older witch in deep purple robes.

"Mister Potter," Minister Lombardi said warmly, rising to greet him. "Thank you for joining us. I hope Veronica has been taking good care of you during your visit?"

"She's been brilliant," Harry said honestly. "Seravella offers perspectives on magical education I hadn't encountered before. The specialized building approach is fascinating...I can see why your students excel in their chosen fields."

The Minister's smile suggested this was exactly the response she'd hoped for. "Excellent. Please, sit. We have much to discuss, but first-" She gestured to the unfamiliar wizards. "Allow me to introduce Signor Benedetto Rosi, who represents Italy's Guild of Magical Craftsmen, and Signor Tommaso Verdi from our Department of Magical Trade."

Both men nodded. Rosi was middle-aged with craftsman's hands and appraising eyes that reminded Harry of Ollivander. Verdi was younger, sharp-suited, a leather portfolio under his arm that almost certainly contained contract proposals.

"And this is Duchessa Vittoria Montessori," the Minister continued, indicating the purple-robed witch. "She oversees much of our country's magical infrastructure and has taken a particular interest in your work."

The Duchessa inclined her head. "Mister Potter. Your reputation precedes you."

"So I've been told," Harry said, settling into the indicated chair between Andromeda and Tonks. "Usually right before someone tries to sell me something."

Scattered laughter around the table. Andromeda's slight smile suggested approval of his diplomatic wariness, while Tonks's hair flickered amused pink at the edges. Verdi's expression didn't change. Definitely here to sell him something, then.

The food arrived, course after course of Italian cuisine that made Harry understand Marco's passionate disdain for English cooking. Pasta with a sauce that had never seen the inside of a

jar. Bread still warm. Vegetables that made him wonder what Hogwarts had been doing to tomatoes all these years. This food looked better than Beauxbatons' food.

Conversation stayed light through the meal. Ted asked detailed questions about the water sculptures in the Ministry's main hall, the lost transfiguration technique behind them, and Marco promised to introduce him to the Historical Preservation Department before they left. Nymphadora got Professor Greco talking about metamorphmagus healing: whether the constant cellular restructuring affected injury recovery, how diagnostic charms read a body in perpetual flux. Greco seemed genuinely delighted, mentioning she'd worked with only three metamorphmagi in her career and would love to publish research if Nymphadora was willing to participate. Andromeda and Duchessa Montessori were deep in a conversation about infrastructure funding and educational models that Harry recognized as a careful dance, each woman testing the other's positions. Newt told the table about accidentally releasing a bowtruckle colony in the Seravella library yesterday, three hours of negotiation to convince the creatures that returning to his case was preferable to colonizing Professor Conti's manuscript collection. Marco's laugh suggested this was exactly the kind of chaos he'd expected from the magizoologist.

It was only when dessert arrived, something involving chocolate, cream, and what Marco proudly announced was "zabaglione" — that Minister Lombardi steered the conversation toward business.

"The Enhanced Talismans we purchased have exceeded all expectations," she began, her tone shifting from warmth to professional assessment. "Our Aurors report feeling more confident in dangerous situations. Response times have improved. Casualty rates have dropped thirty-seven percent in the four months since deployment."

Harry felt Andromeda's posture change beside him.

"I'm glad they're working well," Harry said, following Andromeda's silent cue to keep his response minimal until they showed what they actually wanted.

"We would like to purchase more," Verdi said, finally opening his portfolio. "An additional two thousand units, if possible, with delivery over the next eighteen months."

Two thousand units at forty Galleons each. Eighty thousand Galleons. His fifteen percent commission would be twelve thousand, more than most wizarding families earned in a decade.

Andromeda's fingers tapped once against her wine glass. *Wait.*

"That's a substantial order," Harry said. "The Enhanced Talismans require basilisk materials. My current supply is limited."

"We're aware," Verdi said. "We're prepared to assist in material acquisition. The Italian Ministry has connections with several creature preserves that might provide alternative sources for comparable components."

Harry doubted there were "alternative sources" for basilisk skin, but he appreciated the offer. Beside him, Andromeda tilted her head slightly - *probe deeper*.

"I'll need to review my production capacity," Harry said. "The Enhanced version requires precise runework, rushing the process would compromise quality."

"Naturally." Verdi made a note. "What timeline would you consider reasonable?"

Harry thought about his workshop at the Tonks house. The hours hunched over his workbench last year. Andromeda finding him asleep at his desk. He glanced at her, and she gave the smallest nod.

"Eighteen months is doable for two thousand units," he said. "But I'd need to scale up. Hire assistants for the basic assembly work so I can focus on the specialized enchantments."

"We can recommend several qualified craftsmen," Rosi said. "Guild members who specialize in precision metalwork and runic inscription. They would work under your direction, of course."

That solved a problem Harry had been worrying about. He couldn't personally craft every talisman; there weren't enough hours in the day. But hiring help meant teaching someone his techniques, which meant risking them selling those techniques to competitors.

Italian Guild craftsmen, recommended by the Minister herself, would at least come with reputations they couldn't afford to damage.

"I'd want to interview them first," Harry said. "And they'd need to sign confidentiality agreements about the specific runework sequences."

"Standard practice," Rosi assured him. "Guild members understand proprietary techniques. We could arrange interviews during your visit, several candidates are working on projects in Roma's magical district now."

Andromeda's voice cut in with the precise diction that meant full Lady mode. "Would these craftsmen be working in Harry's personal workshop, or would Italy prefer to establish a dedicated facility?"

Verdi glanced at Minister Lombardi before responding. "We would be open to either arrangement, though a dedicated facility in Italy would allow for closer quality oversight and easier material acquisition."

"It would also," Andromeda said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, "establish Italian control over production methods and potentially compromise Harry's intellectual property rights."

The table went quiet. Harry saw Ted hide a smile behind his wine glass. Tonks's hair flickered purple, then cautious orange.

Minister Lombardi's expression gave nothing away. "We have no interest in compromising Mister Potter's proprietary methods, Lady Tonks. Our concern is simply ensuring consistent quality for products that will be protecting Italian Aurors in life-threatening situations."

"A concern that can be addressed through oversight of craftsmen working under Harry's direct supervision," Andromeda replied. "Regardless of the facility's location."

Verdi nodded, making another note. "Of course. We're flexible on the specifics, our primary interest is securing the additional units."

"With appropriate protections for all parties," Andromeda added. The threat was velvet-wrapped but clear.

Harry understood now why Cassiopeia Greengrass had sent Fudge to negotiate rather than confronting Andromeda directly. His mother in full aristocratic mode was terrifying.

Minister Lombardi leaned forward, redirecting before the conversation could sharpen further. "There's another matter we'd like to discuss. The biological monitoring concept you mentioned to students this morning."

Harry's head snapped toward Veronica, who looked entirely too innocent. Tonks snorted, then tried to disguise it as a cough.

"Word travels fast at Seravella," the Minister said. "Professor Basile was quite excited to hear you'd proposed adapting coordination protocols for vital sign detection. He thinks it could change emergency magical medicine."

"It was just a theoretical discussion," Harry protested. "I haven't even started working out the technical details-"

"But you could," Duchessa Montessori said. Her voice left no room for doubt. "You could develop a healing-focused talisman that would save lives in emergency situations. And Italy would very much like to be your partner in that development."

There it was. The real reason for this lunch.

Andromeda shifted beside him, not enough for anyone else to notice, but Harry read the cue. This was the negotiation that mattered. The Enhanced Talisman order was significant, but this healing design was what they'd actually invited him to discuss.

"What kind of partnership?" Harry asked.

"Research funding," Verdi said. "Access to our medical facilities for testing and refinement. Guild craftsmen to handle production once you've finalized the design. In exchange, Italy receives priority access to the finished product."

"Not exclusive access," Minister Lombardi added, glancing at Andromeda. "We're not asking you to work solely with us. But priority, Italy's hospitals would receive the first production run before the design is offered to other nations."

It was a good offer. Better than good, it would give Harry resources he needed to develop the healing talisman at all.

But.

Astoria Greengrass, dying from a blood curse that couldn't be cured. Anna Sallow, still weak from whatever parasitic curse was feeding on her magic. Crystal-Harmony, struggling to breathe on a French beach with legs that would never work properly without the talisman he'd promised to build.

All the impossible things he needed to accomplish. All the resources he still lacked.

"I need something in addition to research funding and craftsmen," Harry said slowly.

Everyone at the table went still. Andromeda tensed; he was going off-script from whatever she'd planned. Ted's hand moved fractionally closer to hers. Tonks's hair flickered to worried grey.

"What do you need?" Minister Lombardi asked carefully.

"Access to Professor Greco as a consultant," Harry said, meeting the Healer's gaze. "Not just for the healing talisman development, but for my own private research projects. I need someone who understands magical illness at the theoretical level, someone who can tell me if an approach I'm considering is innovative or just dangerous. Someone who's seen enough failures to recognize when I'm about to repeat them."

Greco's expression shifted immediately. She understood.

"The three cases we spoke about earlier," Greco said, not quite a question.

"Yes."

The rest of the table looked confused.

"Experimental magical medicine is extraordinarily dangerous," Greco said carefully. "Even with guidance, attempting to address three different conditions that conventional medicine has declared impossible-"

"I know." Harry met her eyes directly. "I heard you. I believe you. But I also can't accept that those three people are just going to suffer and die because conventional wisdom says nothing can be done."

"So you're going to try anyway," Greco said.

"With proper supervision and consultation, yes." Harry's voice was steady despite thirteen people watching him. "I'm not reckless enough to experiment on people I care about without expert guidance. That's why I'm asking for someone who's spent twenty years studying these conditions. Someone who can tell me which of my ideas might actually work and which ones are going to get someone killed."

Andromeda spoke. "My son does not make promises he cannot keep. If he believes he can help these people, then he deserves access to expertise that might make that possible." She turned to Minister Lombardi. "Italy has an opportunity to support genuine innovation while ensuring proper medical oversight. The question is whether you're willing to facilitate that."

Minister Lombardi studied Harry, then Andromeda, then the family united around them. "Isadora, would that arrangement be acceptable to you?"

Greco was quiet for a long moment. "I would require complete honesty about what you're attempting, —no hiding dangerous experiments because you're afraid I'll say no."

"You have my word," Harry said immediately.

"And one condition." Greco's voice went firm, almost hard. "If I assess an approach and determine it is truly impossible, not just difficult, not just unprecedented, but genuinely impossible and dangerous, you will stop. You will not proceed. You will not endanger yourself or the people you're trying to help by pursuing something that *cannot* be done."

Harry felt the weight of that demand. She was asking him to promise that if she declared something impossible, he would give up. Accept defeat. Watch Astoria die, or Crystal-Harmony lose her ability to transform forever, or Anna's magic continue to deteriorate.

But.

Professor Greco had twenty years of experience. She'd seen the Fioravanti girl die on an examination room floor. She knew, intimately and personally, what happened when brilliant young wizards chased impossible dreams without recognizing genuine limits.

"Yes," Harry said quietly. "If you tell me something is genuinely impossible and too dangerous to attempt, I'll stop. I'll look for other approaches. I won't proceed with something that's going to kill someone I'm trying to save."

Something shifted in Greco's expression, respect, perhaps. "You understand what you're promising? That there may come a point where I tell you there's nothing more you can do?"

"I understand." Harry's throat was tight. "I'm asking for your expertise because I need someone who can recognize that point. Someone who can tell me when I'm being innovative and when I'm just being reckless. I'll trust your judgment, that's the whole point of asking for consultation."

"Even if it means accepting that you can't save everyone?" Greco pressed.

Harry thought of Andromeda's words after his birthday: *You cannot fix everything. Not being able to save someone isn't failure, it's being human.*

"Even then," Harry said.

Greco held his gaze for several more seconds, then nodded slowly. "Alright. But we do this properly. Before you attempt anything experimental, you bring me your theories, your proposed methods, your safety protocols. I assess the risks. We discuss alternatives. And if I determine something crosses the line from dangerous innovation into impossible recklessness, you accept that judgment."

"Agreed."

"And in exchange," Verdi interjected, apparently deciding this was the moment to secure both agreements, "Italy receives priority access to the healing talisman design once developed, as well as the additional two thousand Enhanced Talismans?"

Harry glanced at Andromeda, who considered before nodding slightly. "Yes," Harry agreed. "Eighteen-month delivery timeline, with Italian Guild craftsmen working under my supervision. Location to be determined based on practical considerations rather than territorial concerns."

Verdi looked like he wanted to negotiate the location point further, but Minister Lombardi raised a hand slightly. "A fair arrangement. Signor Verdi will draw up the formal agreements, which Lady Tonks should review before signatures are finalized."

Andromeda inclined her head. "Naturally."

"And Professor Greco's consultation arrangement," the Minister continued, "will be formalized as an advisory contract with appropriate compensation and clear protocols for communication."

Greco nodded. "I'll want regular progress reports. Not daily details, but significant developments and proposed experimental approaches."

"That works," Harry said, relief settling into his chest. Not unlimited freedom to pursue impossible things, but something potentially better, an expert consultant who could guide him through medical complexities while preventing him from destroying himself or others in the process.

Minister Lombardi raised her wine glass. "To productive partnerships, proper oversight, and the advancement of magical medicine."

Everyone raised their glasses. Harry clinked his against Veronica's, noting her proud smile, then against Tonks's (her hair cycling to pleased pink), then Andromeda's (whose expression suggested they would still be having a long conversation later, but approval flickered in her eyes).

Ted leaned close enough to whisper, "That was significantly less mad than I thought it would be. You accepted limits. That's growth."

"Still fairly mad," Harry whispered back. "Just with better supervision."

"The best kind of madness."

Marco's booming voice announced, "Bene! Excellent business! Now, we drink properly, not these tiny glasses!" He produced a bottle that looked considerably stronger than dinner wine. "To celebrate new partnerships!"

Newt cleared his throat. "Perhaps not for the thirteen-year-old?"

"Ah! Sì, sì. For the young Master Potter-" Marco switched bottles. "The best Italian fruit juice! Nearly as good as wine!"

"Nearly as good" proved generous, but Harry accepted the glass. Around the table, the formal tension dissolved back into friendly conversation.

Days Later

"Maestro Vettori wants to see you before you leave," Veronica said, leading him through familiar corridors toward the Headmaster's office. "Nothing serious, just a formal farewell."

Maestro Vettori's office occupied a tower room with windows on all sides, giving a full view of Seravella's satellite buildings and the cloudscape beyond. The Headmaster himself stood at one window, hands clasped behind his back, watching the sunset. Harry wondered for the third time this year if this was a headmaster thing — if all headmasters and headmistresses stood at windows when they were expecting someone. He'd have to ask Dumbledore.

"Ah, Mister Potter," Vettori said without turning. "Come, look at this."

Harry joined him at the window. The light was extraordinary, gold and orange and deep crimson layered through the clouds, the satellite buildings dark against it.

"I never tire of this view," Vettori said quietly. "Eight hundred years, this castle has floated here. Thousands of students have crossed these bridges, studied in these halls, learned to become Healers and scholars. And every evening, the sun sets in colors no artist could properly capture."

Harry waited. This wasn't about sunsets.

"You're going to change things, Mister Potter," Vettori continued. "Perhaps you already have. The talisman work you've accomplished at thirteen would be remarkable for a wizard three times your age. The theoretical work you discussed with my professors today suggests you're only beginning."

"I'm just trying to help people," Harry said quietly.

"Yes. That's what makes you dangerous." Vettori turned from the window, his dark eyes sharp despite the gentle smile. "The wizards who seek power for its own sake are easy to understand. Predictable. But someone who sees suffering and immediately starts working on solutions-" He shook his head. "That kind of wizard moves mountains. And sometimes, they don't notice the avalanche until it's already falling."

Harry thought of the Fioravanti girl in Greco's story, brilliant and doomed, determined to help others knowing her own time was limited. He thought of his promises to Astoria, to Crystal-Harmony.

"What if the mountain needs moving?" he asked.

"Then move it carefully," Vettori said. "And remember that sometimes the best way to help people is to teach them to move mountains themselves, rather than doing it for them."

He produced a small card from his robes, elegant script on heavy parchment. "Seravella's doors are always open to you, Mister Potter. If you ever wish to study here, even temporarily, send word."

Harry accepted the card, running his thumb over the embossed tower-and-clouds crest. "Thank you, Maestro."

"You're collecting options, aren't you?" Vettori's smile sharpened. "Beauxbatons has offered you opportunities. Italy has offered you resources. And I'd wager Russia will make their own proposal when you visit next week."

Harry's silence was answer enough.

"Smart boy. Keep your independence as long as you can. The moment you commit fully to one nation's magical establishment, you lose your ability to work freely across borders. And I suspect you'll need that freedom for what you're trying to do."

.

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The departure the next morning was quieter than their arrival, no magical cannon launch, just a conventional Portkey scheduled to activate at nine o'clock.

Harry stood in Seravella's main courtyard watching students cross the morning bridges to their classes. Three days, and he didn't want to leave.

"You'll come back," Veronica said, appearing beside him. "Everyone who visits Seravella comes back eventually."

"That confident?"

"That aware of how addictive proper magical education is once you've had a taste." She held out her hand. "It was an honor meeting you, Harry Potter. Try not to upend too many fields of magic before we see each other again."

Harry shook her hand, grinning. "No promises."

"Naturally." She glanced past him to where Andromeda, Ted, Tonks, and Newt were gathering their luggage. "Your family is wonderful, by the way. Your mother intimidates half the professors here, they're all hoping she'll consider teaching diplomacy courses. And Tonks has been charming everyone despite claiming she's terrible at formal events."

"Tonks is good at pretending she's not good at things," Harry said. "Makes people underestimate her."

"She learned that from you."

"I learned it from her."

Veronica laughed. "Perfect match, then."

Before Harry could work out how to respond to that, Marco's booming voice announced, "È ora! Time to go! Everyone gather, per favore!"

The Portkey was the same battered kettle they'd arrived with. Harry gripped the handle, noticing Tonks's expression of resigned dread.

"Safe travels," Veronica called. "And Harry, whatever you're trying to do, I hope you manage it."

"Thanks," Harry said. "I hope so too."

The world hooked behind his navel and yanked.

The National Portkey deposited them in the International Portkey Arrival Chamber of the British Ministry of Magic with the usual gut-wrenching lurch.

Harry kept his feet this time. He was getting better at landings.

The gray stone walls and gray stone ceiling greeted them like an old headache. After Italy's frescoed halls and marble floors and water-wave domes, the British arrival chamber looked like the inside of a filing cabinet.

Tonks's hair went flat brown the second they landed. "Oh good. We're back in the sad box."

"It's not a sad box," Ted said without conviction. "It's a government facility."

"Those are the same thing."

A customs inspector approached with a clipboard, looking like he hated his job.

"Documents."

Andromeda produced their travel papers before the inspector finished the word. She'd had them in her hand since before the Portkey activated, pre-sorted by department approval, arranged in the exact order customs required. The inspector flipped through them, found nothing to complain about, and looked disappointed.

"Purpose of visit to Italy?"

"Diplomatic and educational exchange," Andromeda said. "As noted on page one, authorized on page three, and countersigned on page five."

The inspector stamped their papers with the enthusiasm of a man hammering a nail into his own coffin. "Welcome back to Britain."

"Always a pleasure," Ted said cheerfully.

They collected their bags and crossed the atrium without incident. No Fudge lurking near the fountain this time. No Rita Skeeter appearing from behind a column. Just the usual foot traffic of Ministry workers heading home for the evening, none of whom paid attention to a group of tired travelers.

Small mercies.

Andromeda led them to the Floo Network fireplaces along the atrium's east wall. Ted went first, vanishing in a burst of green flame. Andromeda followed. Newt tucked his case under one arm, stepped into the grate, and was gone.

Tonks grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, then paused. "If I come out the other end on fire again, I'm blaming Italy."

"You won't come out on fire."

"It happened once."

"You tripped into the mantelpiece. That's not the Floo's fault."

"The mantelpiece was in the wrong place." She threw the powder down and disappeared.

Harry took his handful, stepped into the green flames, and said "Tonks Residence."

The living room fireplace spat him out with a gentle stumble. Everyone was already inside, shedding cloaks and travel dust.

Ted collapsed onto the sofa with a theatrical groan. "I love Italy. Beautiful country, wonderful people, extraordinary food. But I am never getting shot out of a magical cannon again."

"It was exhilarating!" Tonks protested, her hair bright gold now that they were home and she could stop pretending to be dignified.

"It was terrifying."

"Those are the same thing."

Andromeda was already organizing their luggage. "Newt, you're staying for tea? I want to hear about your discussions with Professor Valli."

"Love to," Newt said, carefully setting down his leather case. He opened it, and Itisa walked out looking annoyed. "Gregory is a bit peckish. Might I use your garden to let him stretch his wings?"

"As long as he doesn't eat the rosebushes."

"Of Course not, you know me."

Harry sank into his favorite armchair. Italy had been extraordinary. The floating castle, the Healing program, Greco's research, the students who'd asked him for autographs, and those autographs weren't because of 'The Boy Who Lived' but because of what he himself achieved. That felt good.

But this was home. This was where he could think without performing.

"Harry," Newt said, settling into the opposite chair with tea Andromeda had somehow produced already. "I wanted to mention. The Russian trip is scheduled for six days from now."

"We know," Harry said. "Ekaterina's owl confirmed timing last week."

"Yes, well." Newt adjusted his bow tie. "I felt compelled to give you advance warning about Russia. It's... different from France or Italy."

"Duh, it's a different place," Tonks groaned loudly.

"Colder, for one thing," Newt said. "Not just the weather, though that's a factor. The entire magical culture operates on different principles than Western Europe. More formal in some ways, more brutal in others. The hospitality is genuine once you're accepted, but getting there requires navigating social expectations that aren't obvious to outsiders."

Tonks took a bite out of a biscuit. "Are you trying to scare Harry, or just being informative?"

"Both?" Newt admitted. "Russia is fascinating, and I'm excited for you to experience it. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that the Academy of Matushka Rus makes every other school in the

world look modern. Their magical traditions date back to the tenth century, and they're proud of maintaining methods the rest of Europe abandoned as 'too dangerous' or 'excessively medieval.'"

"Lovely," Harry said dryly. "Looking forward to it already."

"The food is excellent," Newt offered. "Very hearty. You'll need it. Moscow in summer is pleasant, but their idea of 'pleasant' still involves temperatures that would make a Londoner reach for winter cloaks."

Andromeda emerged from the kitchen with more tea. "Newt, you're not filling my son's head with horror stories about Russian magical education, are you?"

"Merely providing context."

"Context sounds suspiciously like horror stories."

"Both can be true simultaneously."

Harry let the banter wash over him; his eyes felt heavy, and before he realized, he was sleeping, and a voice echoed in his head.

"Not Harry, Please."

Azkaban

The cell in Azkaban was darkness made metal. Cold that bit through flesh to gnaw at bone. Stone that wept with moisture and despair.

Bellatrix Lestrange sat curled in the corner, her once-beautiful face gaunt and hollow. Dark hair hung in matted tangles. Robes that had been fine black silk were now rags. Her hands, which had once cast the Cruciatus with artistry, now trembled with constant cold.

"My Lord," she whispered to the empty cell, her voice cracked and broken. "Where are you, my Lord?"

The Dementors glided past her cell door. She felt them, the sucking void of their presence, the way they pulled at every good memory, every moment of warmth. The screaming Longbottoms, such a good memory. But then she remembered the worst memory...The Dark Mark burning on her arm like never before, then, slowly fading away like ink in water.

And the Dark Lord's disappearance. That was the worst memory. The one the Dementors fed on most eagerly.

"You promised we would destroy the mudbloods," Bellatrix moaned, rocking back and forth.

"You promised we would live in a new world. Where are you? Where did you go? Why did you leave us? Why did you leave me?"

Her laughter echoed off stone walls. "I was loyal! I was faithful! I served you! I tortured the blood traitors! I would have done anything! WHY DID YOU ABANDON ME?"

The Dementors drew closer, sensing her anguish. Their rattle-breath filled the corridor.

Bellatrix's eyes rolled back. Her body convulsed. The cold pressed in from all sides. She could feel them feeding, pulling at her, draining what little remained of her sanity.

"My Lord," she sobbed. "Please. Please come back. I'm still here. I'm still yours. I'm still-"

Bellatrix...

She froze.

The voice was a whisper. Less than a whisper. A breath of sound that might have been imagination, or wind through the stones, or the last remnant of her mind finally shattering completely.

But she knew that voice.

"My Lord?" Her head lifted. Her eyes, bloodshot and wild, searched the darkness. "My Lord, is that you?"

I need you, Bellatrix...

A sob of pure joy ripped from her throat. "Yes! Yes, anything! I'm here! I'm still here! Tell me what to do!"

Soon. Be ready. When the time comes... I will call for you. I will need your blood...

"When?" Bellatrix pressed herself against the cold stone wall, straining toward the voice that seemed to come from everywhere. "When will you come? When will you free me? I've waited so long. So long. Please, my Lord, please-"

But the voice was gone.

The Dementors drifted past, unaware. Or perhaps they had heard, and simply didn't care. They fed on despair, not on the impossible promises of lords.

Bellatrix Lestrange slumped back into her corner, trembling. But her lips curved into a smile.

"Soon," she whispered to the darkness. "He said soon. He needs me. My Lord needs me."

Your Blood... She remembered.

Her laughter echoed through the cell once more.

The Dark Lord had spoken to her.

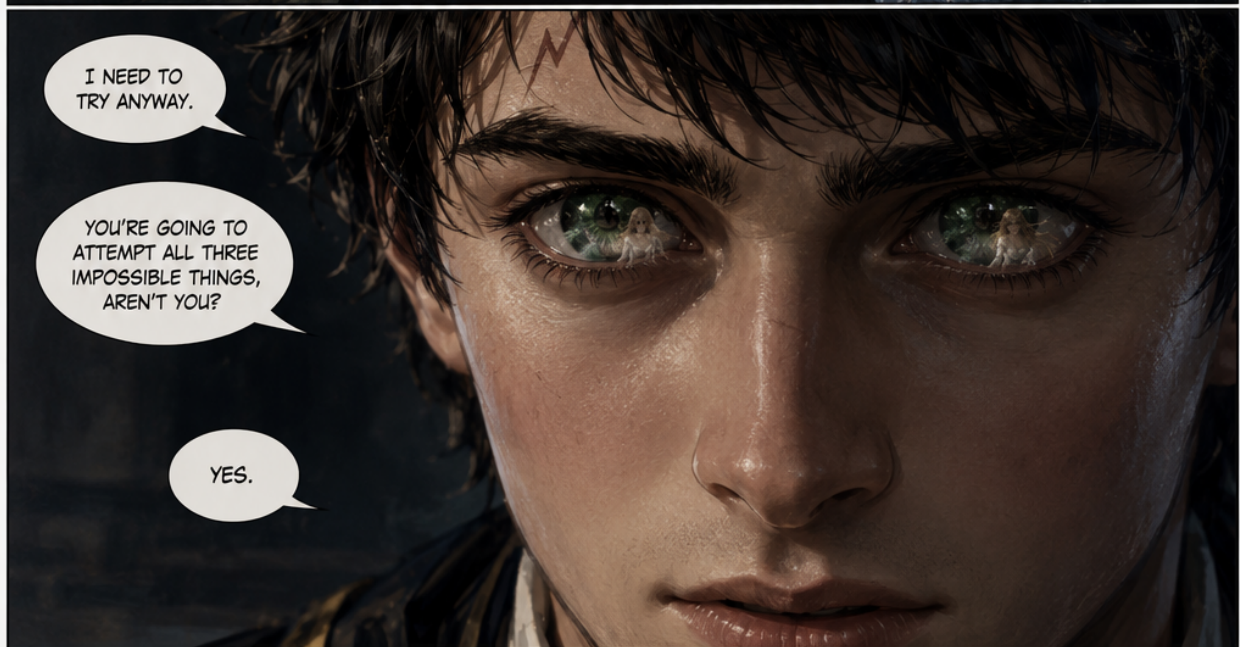
And when he called, Bellatrix Lestrange would answer.

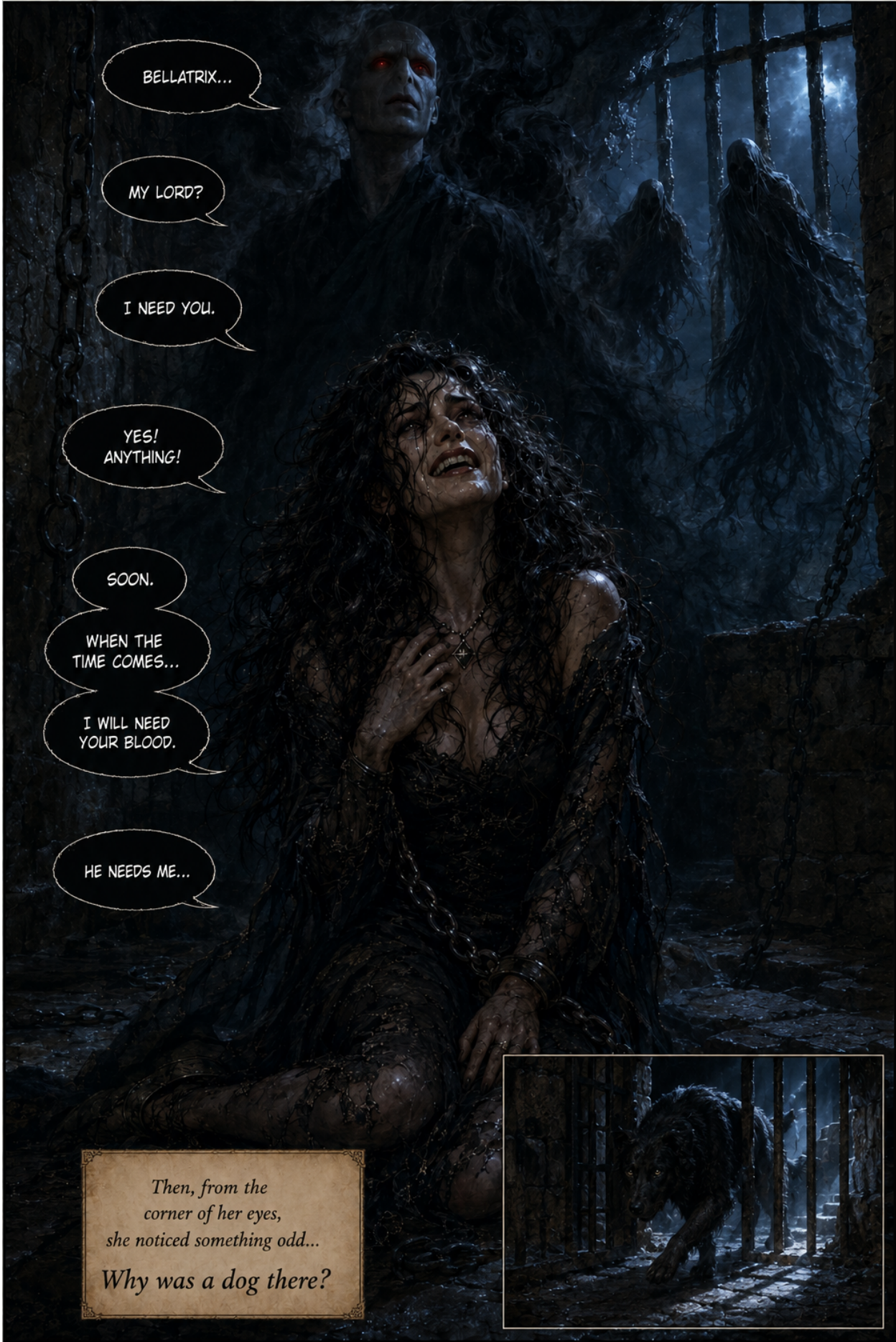
She always had.

She always would.

Then, from the corner of her eyes, she noticed something odd...why was a dog there?!

(Manga Pages Below)





BELLATRIX...

MY LORD?

I NEED YOU.

YES!
ANYTHING!

SOON.

WHEN THE
TIME COMES...

I WILL NEED
YOUR BLOOD.

HE NEEDS ME...

*Then, from the
corner of her eyes,
she noticed something odd...
Why was a dog there?*

