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Saturday

Harry

He stirred awake, feeling stiff. It took him a few moments to blink away his blurry vision until he was squinting at the familiar ceiling of the Hospital Wing.

How... How was he here again?

The memories returned with the force of an angry hippogriff and made him cringe. Basilisk, Harrymort, and... Juno.

"You're awake." Her voice shook him from his stupor. "Slept well?"

She sat beside his bed on a chair, engrossed in what looked like a riveting textbook that even he had yet to read, *'The Limits of Transfiguration: A Study of Permanent and Reversible Changes'*.

"Yeah," Harry said, words scratching at his throat, voice raspy. "How long was I asleep for?"

"Seven days. It's Saturday again."

"Oh." He stood up and started stretching the stiffness away. "Feels like I had a long nap, not a seven-day sleep..."

There was an odd energy between them. It was a lingering... feeling, akin to seeing something at the very edge of Harry's peripheral vision, but only to turn around and see nothing. Yet, it was not a visual thing. Maybe he was imagining things?

"Well, Madam Pomfrey has been feeding you a nutrition potion every two days," Juno drawled. "And Nyx has been helping too."

"How?"

Juno's lips twitched. "Magic. Something about gorging herself so you have enough. She couldn't really explain it well, either."

"Right." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Did anything happen while I was asleep?"

A dark, delicate-looking wand appeared in her fingers, and within a second, the air was faintly humming under the weight of a potent anti-eavesdropping charm.

"Hmm. Quite a lot has happened," she began, but Harry's eyes couldn't help but pause on the dark curls she was twirling around her finger. "I salvaged the basilisk bones with part of the hide and some scales for you. I also started repairing and cleaning the Chamber with the help of my house elf, though it will take months to get rid of the centuries' worth of dampness and accumulated sludge and bones. A pity—if Salazar ever left anything, they were definitely pillaged by his descendants or the Dark Lord. Oh, and Dumbledore announced he had caught the culprit."

His heart skipped a beat. "Who?"

"A cursed object. He was very convincing about it, too, and I believe he found Tom Riddle's diary."

Harry swore under his breath. If the headmaster claimed he had found the cursed item, then it was true. Dumbledore was many things, but a liar was not one of them.

"Perhaps... that's not necessarily a bad thing," he muttered reluctantly.

"Oh? How so?"

"Dumbledore is no friend of the Dark Lord. This way, he finds out *how* Tom Riddle has survived without drawing attention to ourselves. I believe the forbidden hallway on the third floor last year was bait for the Dark Lord, and Quirrell and Petrov were caught up in it. There's a good chance the monster hunter was working for Voldemort."

"Hmm. I suppose that's a good point." Juno's face turned pensive as she finally closed the book and tucked it in her bag. "This brings us to the other Horcruxes. Their whereabouts must be *checked*. Do you remember or recognise their locations?"

"Right. Slytherin's Locket should be either in a damp cave somewhere along the British shores or in Grimmauld Place--"

"What?!" Her face twisted as if she had swallowed a whole lemon.

"Err." Harry coughed. "Sirius' brother might have tried to steal it away."

"Regulus... he just disappeared in '79, according to my dead grand-uncle Arcturus. They weren't sure if he escaped to one of the colonies or perished."

"The very same... I think. Well, the Dark Lord is not one to be crossed easily, and he could have failed, so we would have to check inside the cave instead. But his former house elf, Kreacher, ought to know."

"Ah, the slob my grand-aunt beheaded for failing to even clean the house." Juno's unfeeling response made his insides twist.

"Beheaded?" he croaked out, earning himself an unamused glance.

"Of course. Such is the tradition for old House Elves who refuse to work."

"Can't you just... release them?"

Juno raised an eyebrow.

"And have them die without a master's magic or just from the indignity of the insult? Worse, what would happen if they find a new master and spill the family's secrets? I suppose you can Obliviate them anyway, though that's an even crueller fate than most."

Harry opened his mouth to say something... but had no words left. Instead, he looked at his palms, unable to meet her amused gaze. They were pale, childish still, and woefully small. This was a painful reminder that he was speaking not only to Juno but to the head of House Black, the prim and proper pureblood daughter of Bellatrix and Voldemort.

Was she wrong?

Winky had spilled Barty Crouch's secrets that way. Dobby had done it voluntarily, even. And Kreacher had helped get Sirius killed gleefully even.

And yet, he could not forget how the elf had turned for the better in the end. To have that potential, that *hope*, taken away like that. It all felt a taste of bitterness in his mouth.

"It's cruel." Harry balled his fists.

"The world often is." Juno sighed. "But is it truly cruelty? The relationship between elf and wizard is one of mutual gain. Magic, shelter, and longevity from us in exchange for loyal service. But when they can no longer serve properly or loyally, they become parasites who only take with nothing to offer back. Worse, they know that, and it *eats* away at their minds, slowly driving them insane."

Harry had always suspected Hermione had not been right with SPEW at all, but if Juno was not lying, she had been worse—terribly misguided. Thinking about it, even her points about the elves' mistreatment at the hands of wizards warranted further questions. The only one truly mistreated house-elf Harry had seen was Dobby. Was Dobby a singular case, or were there more like him? If he recalled right, during the fiasco of the world cup, Amos Diggory was a berk to Winky, but her master Crouch seemed to treat her right even when dismissing her.

He didn't know. A selfish part of him didn't care to find out.

"I don't like this. Isn't there another way?"

"It speaks to your credit that you hold such high regard for fairness," she drawled. "But the world is neither black nor white nor fair."

"I try to be an optimist," he dryly noted. "And is this Juno speaking or Cassiopeia and Arcturus Black?"

"Both, Harry. I have had the pleasure of years of being taught the *whys and hows* of proper wizarding ethics to the point I can recite it in my sleep. But selflessness is the worst form of charity in the end. Charity is well and good, but go too far and you will benefit others to your detriment. If you keep giving to and helping others without any measure, nothing will be left for you or yours."

Why couldn't he find any way to refute her words? Had Harry given so much to others that there was nothing left for him last time?

A raspy chuckle escaped from his throat as he slumped on the bed. Juno was right, for he knew where that road ended. It ended with walking to his death.

Things were different this time. Harry... *wanted* to be selfish. Live for himself, even if the guilt gnawed in his gut. A part of him got angry, for something with her words did not sit right with him.

"I'm aware the world isn't fair. It doesn't mean I have to accept it all the time," he replied. "If everyone thought like that, then what's the point of justice and fairness? It's easy to say this now with acceptance when there's no cost to it, but you will sing a different tune when you are on the short end of the stick."

Just like Juno said, she was regurgitating what her family taught her. She did not know what fair or unfairness was like; what injustice like what he had to endure from the Ministry in his fifth year was like. Or the constant harassment by Snape and the Slytherins.

"Of course." Juno nodded lightly, watching his face closely. "I would have thought less of you if you did. The strong make their own justice, and you're far from being weak to bend for others. But what I mean is different. Too much selflessness is detrimental. You can play to the charity, of course. Raise their expectations. Make them dependent on you. And now, they have grown reliant on your very existence, which is a powerful position or a terrible burden that can be exploited. My grand-uncle spoke at great lengths about how to use such tactics. Charity can be *dangerous*, a double-edged sword. I know you're a smart wizard, Harry. Think before you leap. Or... trust me and let me do it for you. I thought that was why you requested my aid, after all."

It sounded so... simple. A part of Harry knew that already but refused to acknowledge it. Fairness through strength. What was that but fighting for your own convictions? Wasn't that what he planned to do anyway if framed differently?

He had done it before, but not... as boldly. Never as boldly. Then, a darker thought wormed into his mind, making his veins freeze. Had the headmaster carefully cultivated his desire for selfless sacrifice all along? Was he like this because this behaviour had been carefully rewarded every step of the way?

No! He was being far too paranoid when it came to Albus Dumbledore. Harry had always been...well, not kind, but helpful to those in need. The boa constrictor he saved in the zoo so long ago came to mind, even if he had released it by accident. There's nothing wrong with helping others, but... did he not suffer the whimsical nature of Magical Britain last time with their expectations? Ron had told him about that secret radio while they were on the run; even after the ministry fell, witches and wizards opted to hide rather than fight, all the while hoping he, The Boy Who Lived, would fight their battle for them.

That irked him greatly, and he was beginning to see Juno's point, even if the girl was hopelessly overconfident in the teachings of her family.

"Yeah..." Harry swallowed heavily. "It is as you say—I asked for your assistance, which you eagerly provided. But..." He paused, trying to articulate the tangle of thoughts in his head. "Sometimes, you just need to do things without carefully measuring pros and cons like you're haggling with some dodgy vendor in Knockturn Alley. Sometimes, you must just *do* things. Sometimes, the world won't give you the time to calculate whether involving yourself will benefit you. Everything will be set on fire, and you will have no choice but to fight or burn!"

Juno blinked at his harsh tone but offered no retort. Her face scrunched up almost adorably. She wasn't helping him out of the goodness of her heart either, for they had a common goal. Or perhaps it was the friendship and the assurance that Harry would help in her endeavours—or merely the wholly ironical but not undeserved loathing Juno held for her sire.

But he had no proof to back such scandalous conclusions; it was just a gut feeling. Perhaps she was the daughter of Rudolphus, and she possessed the ability to speak Parseltongue by sheer luck inherited by a distant ancestor, similar to Tonks' talents as a Metamorph. For good or bad, all those excuses and assurances sounded weak in his ears.

"Let us continue to the more important things," Juno finally deflected, looking far more thoughtful than earlier. "A diary entrusted to Lucius Malfoy is now in the hands of headmaster Dumbledore. A locket belonging to Slytherin could be in my estate or elsewhere."

"Or not exist entirely." His insides twisted at either possibility. "Or be a different item. I told you the visions aren't exactly... reliable. Anyway, next is Ravenclaw's diadem, which should have been hidden in-" *the Room of Requirements*.

But his throat had constricted, and his lips refused to move.

"In where?"

"In-" Harry's body strained as he could feel a pressure on his throat as if the air around his lips had solidified and rendered them unable to move. "Inside the castle. In a place I cannot speak of."

Juno leaned closer, her eyes glowing with interest. "Will not or cannot?"

"Cannot. It's a-" *secret room*. His face twisted as he cursed inwardly.

"Can you show me?"

"No, I tried with Nyx, and she couldn't even see anything," Harry groused. "Bloody hell!"

"Amazing. Such level of secrecy and magic." Her eyes shone with delight. "This means you must fulfil a certain requirement even to perceive its existence or speak of it. Even Salazar Slytherin didn't bother with such protections for his room. This could only be the doing of Merlin, Godric Gryffindor, or Rowena Ravenclaw. Try telling me the conditions?"

"First in *all* the mandatory classes for a single year," Harry coughed out, and her face curdled.

"Anyway. Next should be Helga Hufflepuff's cup in Bellatrix Lestrange's vault."

"M-My *Mother*?" Pure, unadulterated loathing and surprise were fighting on Juno's face.

"Yep, Voldemort's most loyal lieutenant. Didn't you say she confessed all of her misdeeds and proclaimed ardent loyalty to the dark lord for all of the Wizengamot to hear so she could rot in Azkaban?"

"*Indeed*," Juno hissed with a sibilant undertone, much like a snake, but Harry understood it anyway. Then, the anger drained from her face, turning it as blank as a stone. "At least the existence of that one should be easy to verify. What else?"

"The Gaunt family ring should be hidden somewhere in the Gaunt Shack in Little Hangleton, and the last one is maybe a snake named Nagini."

Then, they heard the sound of a door opening, and Poppy came out of her quarters.

"Very well. I shall have each and every location checked, but it might take a couple of moons," Juno whispered as she waved to dispel the Privacy Charm.

"Miss Black, you promised to merely watch over the patient and let him rest-"

"I feel quite well-rested after seven days of sleeping, Madam Pomfrey," Harry countered firmly. "A bit too stiff that I had to stretch a little."

Poppy's lips thinned so much they might as well have disappeared, but she gave a curt nod and waved her wand over Harry, doubtlessly casting Diagnostic Charms. "Very well. You are in fine health, Mr Potter. Perhaps another day of rest here would be wise."

"Absolutely not!" Harry vehemently denied. "I have missed a whole week of classes and practice. Any more, and I'll fall behind!"

Poppy snorted. "Fall behind? You? Perhaps for your O.W.L.s. No, Mr. Potter, you need bed rest until the evening at the very least. Magical exhaustion is no joke, and you came here by overworking yourself in the first place. No magic until Monday either!"

Harry had the decency to blush. The excuse might have saved him plenty of scrutiny, but now many might hover over his head for 'overtraining' as if he were a newbie who didn't know the perfect moment to stop after squeezing in as much practice as possible.

"Fine, I'll stay until the evening," Harry grouched, tugging himself back in bed. "Anything else?"

"Well, visiting hours are over." Poppy turned to his friend. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to vacate the hospital wing, Ms Black."

"A minute more to finish our conversation, Madam Pomfrey?" Juno requested with a polite bow.

"Very well. But only a minute."

With a huff, the mediwitch turned around and gave them a small measure of privacy.

Juno leaned in to whisper, "Do I have your permission to inform my grandaunt?"

"Only if she swears to silence," Harry responded after a moment of hesitation. A callous part of him had already decided to be selfish. Unlike Sirius, he didn't know Cassiopeia Black and wouldn't miss her if she perished. "Additional assistance will be appreciated, but this will be quite dangerous."

"It would only excite her more." The young witch chuckled. "Rest up, Harry. Oh, and by the way, think what you will say to Sirius; he hovered over your bed every free moment last week. And remember. The best way to lie is to say something, skirting as close to the truth as possible, aiming to make the smallest omission of truth or deception uncheckable. See you at dinner!"

Juno turned around and left with a spring in her step while Harry swore under his breath.

In the next two hours, Draco, Hestia, Flora, Diana, Padma, and Anthony Goldstein came over to visit, but Poppy chased them away angrily, and they barely got to talk. Harry was very glad that his friends came over; he even felt happy to see Malfoy's face for once. As usual, his fuck-up was the talk of the school—or, well, the version that Juno had fed them. At least he managed to catch that the rumour mill was now calling him *Tryhard Potter*.

While his friends considered it mocking, Harry thought it didn't sound bad compared to all the other nicknames he had earned before. He was trying hard, after all.

Lastly, Sirius showed up, but the mediwitch didn't bar his way—staff privileges.

"How are you feeling?" Sirius' usual cheer was replaced by solemn intensity and large bags under his eyes as if he had scarcely gotten a wink of sleep the last few days.

"Quite well." Harry shrugged. "A bit hungry."

"When I found you in the Hospital Wing in the morning, I almost died in fright, you know?" He ran a shaky hand through his dark mane of hair that looked as unkempt as he had been on the run. "I could barely hold my Divination classes that day. So... what happened?"

Harry swallowed heavily, trying to centre himself. Letting his emotions flow freely but trying not to get pulled into their current. *Half-truths*.

"The Forbidden Forest was dark and mossy," he began, reminiscing over the trip he had made in his previous life. "I made my way forward slowly, trying to be careful and alert, but some nasty snake got the better of me."

"A snake?" Sirius rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Couldn't you command it with Parseltongue?"

"I can speak with them, not command them," Harry admitted. "It's weird. The tongue is magical, and I have this feeling in the back of my head that I can try and impose my will on the snakes I speak to by using it as a focus... of sorts. It's not absolute, as I found for myself—they could resist me with sufficient willpower. Or just ignore my words. Magical snakes even more easily so, and this serpent was quite mad. I defeated it without much fuss, but it managed to bite me after playing dead, even piercing the enchanted robes you bought me."

"Poppy said you were unharmed." His godfather's voice was even, but Harry caught the hint of irritation in his undertone.

"Got Anti-Venom Potion, dittany, and all that," the young wizard admitted. "The problem is that I drank the Animagus Potion first by mistake in my haste."

"Before the storm?"

A storm? Harry barely managed to hide his surprise. He had seen it pitter and rain after Juno had dragged him up, but that was hours later.

"It was just beginning to rain, but there was no lightning yet." The lies felt like hot coals on his tongue. "Everything had started to hurt as if my insides were trying to rearrange themselves, so I... rushed into the castle, heading for the hospital wing, but the pain had already passed by then, and if I showed up in the middle of the night—"

"You would be asked too many questions," Sirius finished knowingly. "And break your unblemished record of no mischief. Tut, tut." He glanced at the ceiling while clutching his head theatrically. "James, where did I go wrong? Your son is getting in trouble to avoid trouble!"

"Ha-ha, very funny!" Harry deadpanned. "And yeah, Juno agreed to cover for me, dispose of all evidence, and help me up to the Hospital Wing after she realised I was magically exhausted."

Now came the risky part. Harry had no idea what happened when you failed the final step of turning into Animagus—or when activating a bloody ritual supervised by a mangled soul fragment of a power-hungry dark lord.

Sirius's stare was getting intense. Harry almost missed the tick in his fingers, and they clawed as if they wanted to grasp something. Perhaps a wand.

"Hmm. Poppy did say you're fine," his godfather acknowledged, but then his tone turned grim.

"Messing with advanced Transfiguration often sends you to the Permanent Spell Damage Ward or an early grave. You were lucky, so damn lucky! I don't want to scold you, Harry, because I know you're a smart boy, and *you know* you did something wrong, but I will have to punish you, just so you realise your actions have consequences and affect others, too. You..." his voice trembled. "I don't know what I would have done if I lost you."

Harry felt like a proper arse, then. What did his friends think when he walked to his death back then? Did they think him a fool? A coward? Yes, death was selfish, but so was letting Voldemort live.

"A bigger punishment than botching the Animagus Ritual? Your notes said that there was only one chance to succeed, and if you screwed it up, the opportunity was forever gone...."

"Indeed, but I'm not sure that's the case here," Sirius hummed. Harry gaped in surprise.

"But I failed. I failed to do it the proper way!"

"Right. Errr, I suppose I have to explain some things. That's one of the proper ways that we were absolutely sure had the highest possibility of working. This is more of a case of many roads leading to Rome. The ancient druids and shamans across the corners of the world had delved into shapeshifting in different manners—though many were highly convoluted and mercurial in their results. Rituals were never really an exact thing, as I explained to you earlier."

"Are you... sure?"

"Perhaps. There are other scenarios, of course. Maybe you don't have an inner animal for some reason," Sirius mused slowly. "It's quite possible. You see, the treatises we've read estimated that every fifth wizard cannot become Animagus because they lack an inner beast - something about the first Animagus being part animal or totemic magic...or something. Or perhaps your magic isn't mature enough. You know, magic in your body ripens and thickens like a fruit until you reach the age of majority."

Harry had seen the first theory in the notes, but it never occurred to him that it would happen to him if his father had managed to become Animagus. Alas, perhaps the whole thing was because he had botched the ritual far worse than Sirius expected.

"I've read of thickening before," Harry said, awkwardly scratching his brow. "But I thought it was just another way of saying increasing the magic your body can hold."

"Nope, it's a change in quality, not quantity. Putting aside the incantation, will, understanding of theory, mastery of the spell, and magic cost, the next reason young adolescents cannot cast advanced spells is the baseline density of magic. Imagine an eleven-year-old's magic is like water. It slowly thickens into oil with time and practice, and the truly powerful wizards might succeed in transforming it into something as dense as liquid mercury. For example, while your father and I were still in school, we theorised that a stinging hex from Dumbledore would functionally perform as a bone-breaking curse unless he holds back."

"Very educational, Professor Black." Harry clapped in an attempt to lighten the mood, earning himself a snort as Sirius reached over and tousled his hair.

"You brat," he said fondly.

After a few moments, Harry finally managed to fend off the offending arm.

"So, Sirius. I might have ended up simply not being Animagus, which is pretty much the same as if I had failed anyway. Or... something about the thickness of the magic."

"It's just a conjecture of mine since no wizard has been recorded to attempt—or at least succeed it as young as you." His godfather shrugged. "You might have succeeded with the process but failed to transform into your Animagus form because you simply lacked the magic for it—thus, the severe magical exhaustion. It might mean that as you grow older, you will be able to get a feel of your inner animal, but transforming might be quite the challenge without the potion for a catalyst. Though, I wouldn't want to give you false hopes. I might be entirely wrong about this, you know?"

"I failed, so I'm not expecting success," Harry explained. It would have been nice to join his godfather as a Marauder officially, but he didn't feel too sad about it. If anything, Harry felt oddly happy to be alive.

Feeling your life literally slip between your fingers as the world grew colder with a gaping hole in your chest definitely had a way of changing one's perspective.

"Quite mature." Sirius' grin turned sly. "Perhaps too mature, I say. You should live a little. I figured out your punishment. You have until Christmas to prank three people or else receive no more duelling practice from me. Yep, this is it!"

After much arguing with Poppy, he managed to escape the Hospital Wing an hour before dinner, leaving him some free time. Oddly enough, he didn't feel hungry, even though he ought to have. Nutrition potions aside, he hadn't eaten for a whole week!

He hastily made his way to the Room of Requirement while trying to avoid any students. The missing cloak and map were direly felt, and he had yet to tell Sirius that he had lost both. He pushed the feeling of loss aside. *It only means I have to master the Disillusionment Charm.*

Five minutes later, he managed to slip into the Room, now looking like a magical boot camp with its magical dummies and obstacle course.

Harry stared at his yew wand. It felt even better in his hand. He would never admit it aloud, but it even felt better than his holly wand. Only, there was a tiny problem. His wand-holster was gone, and the wand was longer than his childish forearm.

"Not a problem," he mused aloud. "I can just owl-order one later. Hedwig would love to stretch her wings."

But first...

"Flipendo!" A red jet of light struck one of the heavier dummies, barely toppling it over. Nothing seemed to have changed... though his magic felt odd. Not in a good or bad way, merely... *different* in a way words failed to describe.

As tempting as it was to do a proper exercise gauntlet, Poppy's warning was still fresh in his mind. Perhaps tomorrow. Today would be a good time to relax. Feeling too lazy to re-enter the room and risk encountering students in the hallway just yet, Harry decided to try something else.

He focused really hard and wished for a hot bath.

After a few moments, his surroundings wiggled and morphed into a plain Roman-style bath with a steaming pool of water in the middle.

'I definitely didn't expect that to work.'

With this, he practically had the privileges of a prefect without any responsibilities... How many things had he not even tried because someone told him it wouldn't be possible or because he never cared to think of the possibilities?

There was much to learn, it seemed.

He shrugged off his school robes and instantly jumped in fright, wand glowing, as he saw a layer of thick black scales adorning his torso from the waist all the way to the neck. No, it was not scales but a mark... a moving tattoo looking dreadfully similar to the dark mark. It was like a giant black serpent had coiled itself around him.

Then, the scales twitched, and Nyx's head popped out from behind his shoulder, looking slightly bigger than before. No, her head literally emerged from his shoulder, not behind it.

"Harry, you're awake!"

Harry blinked, rubbed his eyes, blinked again, and pinched his wrist. But the view before him didn't change.

"Nyx! What in Merlin's beard is this?!"

The triangular head tilted in confusion.

"I see no beards here."

"I mean... what are you doing?"

"Master said I was too heavy to carry around. And you never take me for the fun stuff! Now, I can come along anyway, and it won't even weigh you down! Promise."

Harry pinched his brow. Of course. Why wasn't he surprised? *"How?"*

"I ate well! I even helped you feast on the Queen's magic and helped you digest the meat while you were sleeping, too!"

At this point, Harry was too numb to care. Even Hagrid wouldn't have an explanation for this.

"Any more new tricks in stock?"

"Uhh... no more. But my fangs are strong!"

"Of course they are," he agreed indulgently. *"Now, go back to napping... or get out because I want to take a nice bath."*

Nyx hissed happily and melded back into his skin. It looked creepy, but his body barely felt a tingle. There was no additional weight, and if anything, he felt lighter than before. Harry shrugged and dipped into the hot water—this was hardly made the top five weirdest things that had happened in the last week.

21st of November, 1992 (14 days later)

The good news was that the stint in the Chamber hadn't done anything to his body, and his magic was also unchanged, as far as Harry could tell. Well, slightly better, to be precise, despite the seven-day nap. The passing days saw Sirius' concern slowly fade as Harry's routine returned to monotony. While Juno spent her time exploring the Chamber of Secrets and dismantling the basilisk, he dwelt in the Room.

Nyx got under his skin—quite literally—preferring to nap away like one giant serpentine tattoo wrapped around his torso. And just like a tattoo, she was weightless, and Harry didn't feel a

thing—aside from the occasional whisper in his mind when she awoke. He didn't mind, considering his serpent was dead set on snoozing through most of the day.

Apparently, they could speak telepathically while his familiar was merged with him. Not only that, but Nyx explained that she had fed him magic that way while he was knocked out because he had been very *hungry* for lots of magic. And when Harry asked, "*How did you have enough magic to feed me?*"

He got a proud, "*I ate the old Queen as is proper!*" And then Nyx fell asleep before Harry could ask further. But Juno confirmed that the basilisk had been eaten clean, with only the bones and half of the snakeskin remaining.

At least with the diary in Dumbledore's hands, Harry could focus on his training again. Hours of gruelling spell practice against dummies that would retaliate with Stinging Hexes of their own to internalise each wand motion, moving, dodging, deflecting, and all such things.

They were perfect for practising spell deflecting, even with the swift but weak hexes flying his way. Being busy made his mind not wander, so it was good. Spell combinations were next on his practice list, but Harry didn't care to use the standard ones because they were too predictable—everyone knew them. According to the Hit-Wizard manual, they were the bread and butter of every powerful wizard, but Harry didn't want to be merely a powerful wizard.

He had seen Dumbledore and Voldemort duel, and neither had bothered with your standard spell-chains. If he ever wanted to reach their level, he had to be able to chart his fighting style. All it took to make your own spell chain was to tie up the consecutive wand motions one after another, with the footwork for it. It sounded simple, but it wasn't. It was a slow, tedious process of trial and error, filled with mistakes and frustrations, but that was nothing new for Harry Potter.

As the days passed, Harry slowly unveiled another difference from before. He was getting tired slower, magic, body, and mind, and had worked up a larger appetite, but he couldn't say if the latter were because of his greater daily exertion or something else.

As his mind calmed, the sense of urgency from before faded slowly. After reviewing the battle in the Chamber of Secrets—and in Limbo against Harrymort, Harry concluded that he needed to expand his repertoire. Not through more spells; he knew enough of those. He needed something for when they caught him unawares or got the drop on him when he was wandless, like when facing Harrymort.

He needed to master some wandless magic. Not complicated stuff that was nearly impossible without a focus, but simply the Summoning Charm and Knockback Jinx could prove advantageous when he found himself in a pinch.

Of course, that meant that most of his training was waving his hand and glaring at the lifeless dummy as if nothing had happened for hours to no end after his usual practice.

"You look ridiculous." Helena Ravenclaw's voice echoed from below as a ghostly head cautiously peeked from the floor mats.

"As ridiculous as a spying ghost?" Harry replied.

"Don't bite off more than you can chew, boy," she sniffed arrogantly. Even with her face on the same level as his ankles, Rowena Ravenclaw's daughter managed to nail the haughty, disdainful glare that looked down on him. "You have no talent for this—I can tell."

Harry finally paused as his hand was growing numb from all the waving.

“What? Are you offering to teach me?”

“Not only stubborn but deaf too. Perhaps if you kiss my feet and apologise, I might consider it.”
Helena smiled viciously. “Begging would be even better.”

“Whatever. Go away before I hex you.”

The cowardly ghost hid behind one of the bookshelves and sadly continued to pester him. “At least it seems like you gave up on finding my mother’s prized creation.”

“No, I merely took a break.” Harry sighed. He wasn’t even sure why he was indulging the rude ghost. “Is there a point to all of this needling?”

Silence was the only response he got, and Harry could finally return to his practice in peace. His attempts to modify basic spells or bypass them with pure intent went slightly better. After ten days and dozens of hours of pouring his magic into his wand and stabbing it at the transfigured cup on the desk, it had finally moved slightly.

No incantations were used, no wand motions, only pure intent and magic. It wasn’t easy on the psyche, either—it also made his mind numb, preventing him from focusing enough to cast a simple Lumos for the next hour.

Time would tell if he could make this raw form of spellcasting into something useful or it would ultimately be a trick.

The late afternoon saw him meeting with Juno in an abandoned classroom.

“Aunt Cassiopeia finally returned,” she confided. “And has agreed to aid us and keep secrecy, of course.”

“That was quick.”

“Well, you see, she doesn’t hold the dark lord in high esteem.”

“That’s a dangerous way to approach a man who was very close to bringing Wizarding Britain to its knees,” Harry cautioned.

“While true, it’s not what he did, but why and how he did it,” Juno said as she tapped the parchment in her left hand with her wand and watched it turn to dust. “Tom Riddle was ultimately a coward. A powerful coward, but one who avoided facing Dumbledore. He avoided confronting the Aurors in the open, preferring ambushes, nightly attacks, and such—and let’s say my aunt despises cowards.”

That was certainly one way of seeing it. Harry could only say, “I hope she approaches her tasks with caution. Coward or not, Voldemort has power and cunning in spades.”

She scoffed. “Of course, Cassiopeia Black didn’t become one of Grindelwald’s trusted lieutenants by being incompetent.”

4th of December, 1992 (13 days later)

Friday

Albus Dumbledore

Nurmengard was just as he remembered it, if far darker and colder at the onset of winter. His old friend's room had stacks of magazines and newspapers, both muggle and magical, clearly an indicator that someone had managed to make it all the way here. The dates on some of them were from the last three years, which means the visitor had been all the more recent.

But they had failed to kill or free him. Juno's ritual... was this how much it had taken?

How far had his former friend fallen to give out something as priceless as a custom-tailored ritual for a stack of trivial magazines?

His presence was quickly noticed.

"Ah, Albus." Gellert gave him a wry smile. His previously golden mane was now snowy white, making Albus feel the full brunt of the passage of time. "I didn't expect to see you again. You know the rules, though."

"Surely you would indulge an old friend?"

"An old friend, you say." His tone turned bitter. "But old friends don't fight to the death!"

"We're both quite alive, Gellert," Albus pointed out mirthfully. "Over a hundred, too."

"Alive but not living. Death would have been more merciful, and you know it. But you lack the steel to do the deed, Albus. You always baulked at the truly hard choices. You will find a way to compromise yourself with indecision sooner or later, my friend."

"I suppose never mincing your words has always been one of your finest traits. I have come here for a favour, as you can imagine."

"I will help you, but it won't be for free. Give me something interesting."

Gingerly, Albus levitated a bag of lemon drop candies through the bars. "I made them myself."

"Truly?" Gellert's face, however, showed no sign of surprise as he grabbed the bag and inspected its contents. "Entering the muggle sweets production as a hobby?"

"Nothing so pedestrian, old friend," Albus said with a merry hum. "I merely made them after dabbling with Alchemy."

The old dark lord laughed and happily popped a lemon drop in his mouth. "Only you would ever waste time on such a mundanely pointless endeavour. How delightful!"

"Is the pursuit of expanding the frontiers of magic truly pointless?" The begrudging silence was all the answer Albus needed. "Regardless, let us get to business. I need your opinion on a cursed item."

With a flick of his wand, he focused and channelled enough power to twist space and send the iron box too big to pass through the bars into his friend's hands.

Gellert clicked his tongue. "Still fearing a wandless old prisoner whose life and magic are shackled by the stones of his very prison?"

"Boldness and risk are better left to the young," Albus offered with a smile. "I respect your abilities too much to underestimate them, Gellert."

With a tap of his finger, the iron sheets fell to the side, revealing Tom Riddle's diary. For a few minutes, his old friend inspected each page and every inch of the book as if trying to get a feel for it.

"Hmm. I suppose you want to ask me what this is?"

"Quite." The headmaster focused, with a spin of the Death Stick, conjured himself a comfortable rocking chair and sat on it. "I would be more than thankful. I have a vague idea, but the Dark Arts have always been your forte, not mine."

"Well, bring another bag of lemon drops personally brewed by Albus Dumbledore next month." Gellert eagerly popped another candy in his mouth. "These have just the right balance of sweet and sour."

"It wasn't easy," Albus offered lightly. Though it had definitely been amusing to test Miss Black's patience. "But you will have your second bag."

"Yes, yes." Nodding to himself, the imprisoned dark lord squeezed the book between the two fallen iron sheets. "I have some ideas. This feels like a sort of phylactery from classical antiquity's style of black magic. Either Hellenic or Etruscan. Highly dangerous and mind-numbingly challenging to make. I've seen similar implements from the extinct Chinese blood mages and the Aztec priests. But a random fool would never have the knowledge, power, skills, or resolve to succeed in such an endeavour. Who is Tom Riddle, Albus?"

So it was something like this in the end. Dumbledore thoughtfully stroked his beard.

"A former student of mine who decided to tread a similar road to yours but with intentions far less noble."

"Noble?" Gellert snorted. "Perhaps you would give me your favourite phrase about how the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But as much as you merely pay it lip service, my cause was noble, for it would bring me power and freedom as it would do so for wizard-kind. One hand washed the other. You should understand that there can be no virtue in a position of weakness, Albus, only duplicity and cowardice. Alas, alas, my ship has long sailed."

"Self-depreciation doesn't suit you," Albus chided. "You have grown quite chatty."

"Surely you'll indulge a lonely old man like me in some harmless banter?" After a few seconds, Gellert shook his head. "Ah, so heartless, Albus! Try spending fifty years alone, locked only with your memories."

"But you have had some visitors," he pointed towards the worn-down magazines strewn around the cell's floor.

The old dark lord slumped. "Fine, I suppose we'll have it your way. So this Tom Riddle must be the infamous Lord Voldemort who stumped you so badly by exploiting your indecisiveness."

Gellert's voice finally lost its previous cheer.

"The very same." Albus sighed. "What can you tell me about these phylacteries? Surely there's some drawback, for violation of the soul breaks the sacred trinity in the most heinous manner."

"Of course there are drawbacks, old friend," the imprisoned wizard chuckled. "Significant drawbacks that are quite precarious. Based on what you told me this item could do, I would bet anyone's sanity would be damaged to a degree with each split!"

"Each split?" Albus jerked away, horrified. "You mean there can be more than one?"

"I don't see any reason not to." Gellert tapped the diary on the ground. "You see, sanity can be a slippery slope, and once you slip down, a fall is all but guaranteed. But of course, there are other drawbacks. Fracturing your soul makes you able to avoid premature death and perhaps live on as a wraith or perhaps craft yourself a homunculus for a body, but it does not actually make you immortal. Our so-called *Flight From Death* is an imbecile who's doomed himself."

The former dark lord started humming, "You should very well know that the soul is sacred because it is eternal, but let's leave aside how madness and the passage of time are a dangerous, self-destructive combination. It's not merely a fracture of the soul but of the mind, no matter how minuscule. Retaining the sentient soul-shards in an item is slowly bound to drive them mad, and the fracture makes the soul *impermanent*." His voice thickened with mockery. "Voldemort has set himself upon a certain death of mind *and* soul somewhere down the line—quite possibly within a century if he fractured it enough, even if he manages to achieve an immortal body."

The irony of the statement wasn't lost on Albus, considering the natural lifespan of powerful wizards was over two hundred years.

"But a century dealing with an unhinged Dark Lord of significant power is not something I can afford," Albus declared with steel in his voice. "Do you have a way to spot them and perhaps weaknesses, for this one proved quite sturdy despite being all paper?"

"What is power before your finesse and control of magic, Albus? I still see that you wield the Death Stick, which would make a disparity in power moot—you should be able to smack him around."

"Wanton killing won't end him for good, I'm afraid. The problem is that Tom always manages to become stronger after each fight. Even fighting him feels like water seeping through your fingers. He is more sinister than a dementor, as slippery as an eel and troublesome to deal with, avoiding direct confrontations in favour of acts that would undermine everything you stand for and hold dear," Albus explained. "I'm weary of fighting and killing, my friend. You know I have never taken joy in violence, even more so at 111 years old. I do not think I can keep it up for another hundred."

"Then you must walk the path of destruction, no matter how reluctantly!" Gellert roared with laughter, taking a dark delight at the situation. "You should best know that peace can be only achieved by the wand, no matter how reluctant you are to use it. The ironies of fate are as amusing as they are delicious."

"Gellert—"

"I already said I'll aid you, but surely you must see my cause for amusement." His former friend waved energetically, yet Albus was far from amused. "For destroying an item like a phylactery, I believe all curses can be corroded by basilisk venom or devoured by the primal fires of hatred. Casting it into the depths of the Abyss or a star would probably do the trick, too. Perhaps there are more obscure methods and minutia of the details, but I believe those three would work without fail."

Why wasn't Albus surprised that his friend listed three of the vilest things in existence? But he wasn't wrong.

"Thank you, old friend." The headmaster bowed politely. "I shall bring the second bag of lemon drops before the turn of the year."

"Wait!" Gellert cried out just as Albus was standing up from his chair. "Perhaps indulge an old friend for a bit more?"

The headmaster cursed the pang of weakness in his heart.

"I suppose a little talking wouldn't hurt," he conceded.

Two hours of idle banter later, Albus finally left Nurmengard with a lighter heart but a heavy mind—despite everything, Gellert was his friend, and simply chatting with him did wonders to improve his mood. He had much work to do. Destroying the diary would be easy now that he knew how, but not before squeezing it for all it was worth. Then, there was the research of Tom Riddle's footsteps and history in detail to see how deep he had dived into insanity. But it was peering through the veil of the darkest of magics again that he dreaded the most, for even the Death Stick vibrated with excitement at the prospect.

Just as he finally arrived at his office, the floo vibrated with great insistence. With a wave, Albus unsealed it.

With a flash, the green flames ignited, and Fudge's worried face popped up from the middle.

"Dumbledore! Thank God you finally arrived! Where have you been all day?!" the Minister cried out urgently. "The prisoners have escaped Azkaban!"

Kill them all!

Albus clamped down on his mind, ignoring the chill going down his spine.

"What do you mean *the prisoners have escaped Azkaban!*?"

"It is as I said." Cornelius's voice trembled, and Albus could imagine him nervously wringing his hands on the other side. "All the prisoners are gone, Dumbledore. Every single cell is empty, and the dementors are furious! What do we do?!"

"Ah, but Cornelius, I believe you ought to consult with Scrimgeour, the head of the DMLE, first," Albus wryly reminded. "It's his job to deal with such matters, for I am merely the headmaster of Hogwarts."

Author's Endnote:

Alright, all of the Chamber fiasco has been officially wrapped up. We have Juno and Harry clash on the grounds of ideology and philosophy. A delightful meeting between old friends, and last but not least, Gladiusx sets shit on fire without any shame.

Onto the next wild adventure!