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Harry Potter

“We don’t need to trust Dumbledore to use him,” Juno said when he shared his conversation with Helena Ravenclaw. “What we can trust in is his commitment to stand against the Dark Lord.”

The two of them gathered in the Chamber of Secrets again, the lone desk joined by two sofas and a lacquered ebony table laden with snacks and steaming cups of tea prepared by Wally. Harry never imagined this dreadful place could be cosy or welcoming, but Juno managed to make it such.

“So, what do you propose, then?” he asked, pushing down his wariness against the headmaster. He would not be fooled again by trusting a man who could easily betray him if the circumstances called for it.

Harry understood why the headmaster did what he did; he understood the reasoning and even agreed with it. It was why he had walked to meet his end at the hands of Voldemort. But he never intended to become a martyr again, regardless of the reason.

Once was enough.

“An anonymous delivery,” she said. “I can use Wally and a few proxies to hire an owl service to send for Slytherin’s Locket and Hufflepuff’s Cup in a way that wouldn’t be traced to us. House Black has specialised in matters like this for centuries.”

“I see.” Harry rubbed his chin. “This way, Dumbledore won’t waste time chasing down Horcruxes that have already been dealt with. But what about Ravenclaw’s Diadem and the Gaunt Ring?”

Juno absentmindedly flicked her inky black locks. “Let’s not rush things. Powerful wizards like Dumbledore do not grow so old without being as cautious as they are cunning. The more knowledge we give him at once, the more wary and suspicious he will grow. Secrecy and haste also do not mix well. Leave this to me.”

“Very well, then.”

Harry looked at his open palms. They were rough, imprinted by the marks of his thousands of hours of training and hard work. The effort had borne fruit, for he was stronger than ever, he knew. Stronger now at nearly thirteen than he had been back when he decided to walk to his death. His magic felt like a raging river beneath his skin, ready to be unleashed at his beck and call.

It was not enough. Not enough to contend against Voldemort, not enough to surpass Dumbledore or to hold the Ministry of Magic at bay. Not enough to live his life freely.

As much as Harry liked to think Voldemort would perish before regaining his body, he knew the terror of the Dark Lord. Despite his efforts, despite his knowledge, and despite moving in the shadows, the power of Tom Marvolo Riddle was not to be underestimated. He knew of the vicious, dangerous titan of magic who clung to life at all costs, where no dark deed was too much and no cost was too high to pay. Harry still vividly remembered the malice, so thick in the air that it weighed upon one's chest and made limbs feel like jelly.

He remembered the sheer power that made you feel like an ant in front of a giant. He was still far, far away from such a level, but the steady progress gave him hope.

The year... had been productive, twice as productive as the one before. After Hallow's Eve, it felt like he was improving far faster than before, despite the similar training volume. If only his fire spells stopped behaving like unruly children.

Despite all odds and his own stupidity, Harry Potter lived to breathe another day. He had succeeded in disposing of two Horcruxes, found out a third had been destroyed and that Dumbledore had taken the fourth one. The basilisk had been slain, too, if at the bitter cost of his father's cloak and the Marauder's Map. He had yet to ask Sirius about creating a new one.

Was it out of guilt? Perhaps shame? Or was it that Harry didn't need the map anymore? While undeniably useful, the sneaking around and about was a memento of a more childish, innocent time. A time that he had left behind.

"What are you thinking?" Juno's silky voice brought him back to the present.

"There's not much we can do now," Harry muttered. "We've hit a wall with the Death Eaters running free. A snake whose whereabouts are unknown, and a ring that's nearly impossible to reach. Can we hire someone to just... torch the Gaunt Shack with Fiendfyre?"

"Too flashy," she said. "Fiendfyre always makes the international news, Harry, and the scrutiny by the Ministry will be very risky. Worse, Voldemort will find out and move to protect the snake. Moreover, we don't know if merely destroying all the soul shards will dispel his wraith for good or if it needs to be bound to a vessel of some sort first before we can ultimately kill him. I've read at least three methods of binding wraiths to the world of the living in the Black Library, and the Dark Lord probably knows far more about such magic than a thirteen-year-old witch does. Based on Aunt Narcissa's information, I'm afraid we should just prepare for Voldemort's return."

Hearing his own fears voiced at him was sobering. But a part of him had expected this, dreaded it, even.

"So it's come to this," he sighed. Hatred coiled like a snake in his stomach, and the fires of anger seared through his veins like poison. It was all aimed at himself. If only Harry had done better and planned more. Even so, he felt reluctant. "It will be so much better if we could stop him from coming back. There has to be a way!"

“We don’t know the precise location of his wraith.” Juno’s cool voice contrasted with the surprising warmth of her hand on his shoulder. “It would be like searching for a needle in a haystack in the middle of the night with our eyes blindfolded. Worse, both of us are targets for Voldemort’s followers. Showing ourselves in public is a risk, as we’ve already experienced, even under the protection of anonymity. You’ve already been training desperately as if trying to prepare for Voldemort’s return.”

Harry let out an aggravated sigh; Juno’s words had not blindsided him. God, he was just reluctant. He logically knew and agreed with everything Juno was saying. The current situation and the possibilities had played out a thousand times in his mind in the last few months.

He even considered going to the DMLE and trying to convince them. But Harry knew the Ministry—they would probably dismiss him as a boy gone mad on his self-importance or jail him in a DMLE cell. There was even the plan to venture into Albania, chase the Death Eaters, and hunt down Voldemort’s shade. It couldn’t even be called a plan, more of a desperate last-ditch attempt to curtail the inevitable. He wasn’t confident in his survival in such a venture, let alone success, exactly the sort of thing Harry had promised himself not to do ever again.

No matter how much he thought and planned and schemed and dreamed and trained, it seemed Voldemort would return regardless.

But perhaps it was better to accept it now so he could adequately prepare. “But, for all of our success, we’re still merely schoolchildren, damn it. Surely there’s something we could do? Anything!”

Juno’s lips quirked. “Grow more powerful. All this worry would have been for nought if we had ten more years. No, even four would have been enough. If your parents faced Voldemort on their lonesome at eighteen and lived, we could do it at sixteen!”

“Facing the Dark Lord is not the same as defeating him,” he reminded grimly.

Juno stiffly bowed her head in acknowledgement.

“Still, we are not directly opposing the Dark Lord as Dumbledore does. We have time to grow if we avoid making our stance known—the Ministry and the headmaster’s forces will be his main goal, and neither are so easily toppled.”

“As good as it sounds, we probably don’t have that much,” Harry noted as he shoved one of the biscuits on the platter into his mouth. It tasted good, but he couldn’t find the appetite for a second one.

“According to my visions, Voldemort supposedly hides somewhere in Albania, and Barty Crouch Junior, Augustus Rookwood, and their group are already near enough they might as well be there. I mean, it’s not like I will stop training or anything. But you should know as well as I do that there are only two of us, and it’s unlikely it will be enough to weather the coming storm.”

“I know,” Juno agreed quietly. Then, she gave him a very intense look. “We should expand our influence and find more allies. Become too big to just ignore, sideline, or destroy without consequences.”

It sounded like a spiffing idea except for a slight problem.

"That seems like a tall order for a bunch of schoolchildren, considering the headmaster is probably already recruiting his own people to stand against the Death Eaters and Voldemort."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Harry grimaced. Juno gave him a patient smile and continued, "It's worth a shot regardless. From now on, we should keep a low profile and stick to working in the shadows like we did in the Alley."

"Don't mention that damned fiasco. I'm still wanted by the DMLE," he said gloomily. "Unless you want me to take a page out of Voldemort's book and use a disguise to kill folks I disagree with..."

However, Juno paused as if considering it.

"That's not a bad idea, actually," she said. "It would instil fear and caution in the Death Eaters, and even the Dark Lord. But it's going to be quite risky in the long run. What do you think about it?"

Harry wanted to reject immediately, but stopped himself. While he didn't feel guilty about killing those murderers in Diagon Alley, he paused to consider the offer. He could see the possible advantages, but could he do it? Could he dirty his hands for victory like that when the Ministry and the DMLE did their job, albeit slowly? His stomach tightened into a painful knot, and he knew the answer.

"I don't think I can lift my wand to attack, let alone kill unaware wizards and witches who have done nothing to harm or threaten me," Harry confessed. "I'm just not that sort of person."

"Very well." Juno hummed, her face inscrutable. "We are reduced to passively reacting, I suppose. The last but most important thing we must do is secure the safety of our homes. Hogwarts is protected as long as Dumbledore stays here, but everywhere else..."

"Indeed." Harry's eyes fell on Juno's pale hands, cupping the teacup she had yet to drink from. Why couldn't he shake the feeling that his friend was uneasy? "Has something happened?"

"Grimmauld Place was assaulted last week, and the wards of Black Manor were tested two days ago," she said evenly. "Headmaster Dumbledore has agreed to cast the Fidelius Charm on it."

"That's good," he said cautiously. "What does the headmaster want for it? Who will be the Secret Keeper?"

"Dumbledore has agreed to do it out of concern for my safety." Juno's voice was as quiet as a whisper. "As for the Secret Keeper, I only trust one person."

Juno's blue eyes almost looked like the blue summer sky as she held his gaze. At that moment, Harry realised that, well, Bellatrix's daughter was *pretty*. Her sharp, pale face was proud but not to the point of arrogance; her black hair almost shone in the light of the Chamber, looking like a cascading waterfall of ink.

Chances were she would only grow more beautiful.

In a year or two, Juno would turn many heads, and some of the older boys were already throwing subtle glances at her, which were beginning to get on his nerves.

He ruthlessly suppressed that line of thought and shook his head.

“Wait... me?” Harry blinked, finally processing what she said. He rubbed his elbow, well aware of the rising feeling of awkwardness. “You trust me that much?”

“Harry, you literally *killed* people to save me from what could have been a trap without blinking an eye,” she deadpanned. “If I don’t trust you, whom will I trust?”

The Carrow Twins. Wally. Could a House Elf be a Secret Keeper? Anyone else?

No, why was he feeling so wary about this? Was it the responsibility of Juno’s well-being?

His whole life, nobody had actually trusted him with their life, not like this, never like this. Harry Potter was always treated like a child, a clueless young wizard to be protected, shielded from the ‘cruelties of the wizarding world’, and had always been forced to rely on others, not the reverse. When responsibility fell on his shoulders because everyone else failed, and nobody else could pick up the slack. Such open, nearly blind trust made him uncomfortable. Had he been like that with Dumbledore? It almost reminded him of the blind worship the students showed him during his sixth year.

It wasn’t the same, though. Somehow, Harry knew Juno wasn’t asking this with ulterior motives. Worse, he would be well aware of the irony of Bellatrix and Voldemort’s daughter trusting him like this over everyone else. Accepting this would be crossing yet another line. It was a burden of responsibility for her life and safety, and being Juno’s Secret Keeper might even put him in a direct clash with Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters.

Juno clearly knew this, and she waited patiently for his reply. But there was the barest sliver of fear in her eyes, accompanied by a hint of madness.

It was sobering to see the usually unflinching young witch possess such emotion.

“...I’ll do it!” Harry Potter declared with surprising boldness. A part of him loathed the idea of retreating. If he was scared of Voldemort’s band of mad murderers now, how could he ever stand against the Dark Lord, let alone surpass him? “When?”

“As soon as the last exam results are out.” Her voice thickened with irritation. “It took some convincing, but I arranged to leave before the End of the Year Feast by floo to avoid certain risks. Albus Dumbledore is surprisingly forthcoming when it suits him—he wants me to end up in Bellatrix’s grasp as much as I do. And... thank you, Harry. I appreciate this, I really do.”

He beamed. “No problem. I’m sure you’d do the same for me.”

Two days later, they were at the edge of Black Manor’s grounds on an ancient cobbled road that looked a few hundred years old, facing the gate in the middle of the moss-covered stone fence taller than Hagrid. It was a cloudy, windy day, but the air was choked with the chirping of birds from the nearby woods.

The twinkle in the headmaster's eyes was replaced by solemn grimness, and his robes were a dark maroon colour, lacking their usual flair.

"Do you, Juno Bellatrix Black, the rightful owner of Black Manor, entrust the secret of its location to one Harry James Potter?"

"I do."

The young witch did not hesitate at all. Dumbledore paused as if trying to look through the two of them, and Harry cleaned his mind and clamped down on his mental defences even harder. But the expected brush against his mind never came.

Eventually, the wizened old warlock nodded and then coughed.

"Do you, Harry James Potter, agree to keep the location of Black Manor a secret?" The headmaster asked solemnly.

"Yes."

"Then, let it be known that Harry Potter has been entrusted with a solemn secret." The Elder Wand made a complex motion in the air. Harry felt all his hair rise as Dumbledore felt like an unscalable mountain instead of a mere human as the tip of the Death Stick pointed at his heart. "***Custodi Arcanum Fidelis!***"

The world quieted as he felt an intangible burden settle on his shoulders.

Juno grasped her head and gasped as she looked at the wall of her Manor, but her eyes struggled to focus. Harry himself could *feel* it; the brick walls of the Black Manor seemed twisted to his senses as if hiding behind a thin glass; it was not merely hiding the location and distorting perception but twisting space itself.

"Mr Potter, if you would," the headmaster reminded.

"Black Manor is hidden in the rolling hills of Dartmoor, Devon," Harry intoned.

"That—that was unsettling," Juno whispered, her voice shaky. "I can see why the Fidelius Charm is unbreakable."

"The cost is not light," Dumbledore explained. "Absolute secrecy comes at the cost of absolute trust, which can be quite fragile at times." His eyes settled on Harry. "The magic is too demanding for many to cast, and the act of *hiding* a secret takes a toll on your soul. Young Mr Potter will not be able to hide another secret while this Fidelius is active, and I myself will be unable to cast the charm properly for at least a few months. Magic is ultimately a fair arbiter, and there are no absolutes, even in powerful spells like these. A Secret Keeper cannot remain inside a protected location for too long, or the secret will unravel."

"What of the Unforgivable Curses, sir?" Harry asked. "If no absolutes exist in magic, why are they so powerful?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard, and the twinkle in his eyes returned as Harry cursed himself inwardly. Speaking with the headmaster was dangerous. But the old wizard seemed in the mood right now and would not make trouble for his students.

"Their power is relative," Dumbledore explained slowly as if taking delight in every word. "A clever and timely use of Conjuraton, Summoning, or Transfiguration can negate them. Not only that, but the requirements are immense, beyond pure magical power and emotion. The Killing Curse, the Imperius, and the Cruciatus have to be intoned, no matter how powerful or skilled you are at them, significantly lessening their danger compared to curses that could be cast silently. There's another reason, of course. Those three spells can be considered Conceptual Magic."

"Conceptual Magic?" Juno echoed, not bothering to hide her curiosity.

"An obscure classification of magic that fell out of favour long ago. But there's some truth to it, at least where the Unforgivables are concerned. The Killing Curse kills, and it kills on a conceptual level. It doesn't rip out your soul, nor does it stop your heart or cease your bodily functions. You literally *stop living*, with all that it entails. But as I said, there are no absolutes in magic."

Two sets of blue eyes settled on Harry's brow where the pale lightning bolt scar lay, making him shuffle uncomfortably.

"It was my mother," he offered weakly. "If it weren't for her, I would have perished."

"Indeed, the power of a mother's love. Remarkable power that Voldemort never even considered significant."

"Purest form of selfless sacrifice, you mean," Harry corrected, still feeling irritated. "Probably some sort of desperate ritual."

Dumbledore merely smiled. "But isn't that what real love is about? Not infatuation, lust, or merely pleasure of the flesh, but the purest form of willingness to make selfless sacrifice?" Harry just blinked as his mouth hung open. The headmaster... was not wrong. Even Juno was listening attentively. "Now, back to the topic at hand. The Imperius Curse is about domination, but can be resisted, and the Cruciatus is the concept of agony made magic. Even if you severed all of your nerves and couldn't feel a thing, the curse would trigger intangible torment into your mind and down to your very soul."

"Thank you for the lesson, Headmaster." Juno bowed her head, and Harry reluctantly nodded along.

"Teaching is an educator's greatest joy, Miss Black. Anyway, congratulations on finishing first place in your year, though I imagine many are disappointed at your decision to take the second year exams, including a certain Gryffindor witch." Dumbledore paused, peering under his glasses at Juno. "It's a pity you have yet to witness the End of the Year Feast, but needs must. Mr Potter, do you want to return, or will you join your godfather, who has already left with little Estelle?"

As much as he was tempted to return, staying in Hogwarts for another two days was just a waste of time.

“The school year has already ended, so I’d rather not stay, Sir,” Harry decided. “But I would appreciate it if I could come one last time to collect my luggage and say goodbye to our friends.”

It all went without a hitch—he had left Juno a strip of paper with the secret written on it. Dumbledore had not spoken to him further, content to observe silently, even if his silent judgement set Harry on edge.

Sadly, the headmaster broke the silence as he apparated them to Hogwarts’ grounds. “You seem cautious of me, Mr Potter.”

“Of course, Sir,” Harry said, clamping down on his emotions. “I might be young, but I am not a fool. Trust should go hand in hand with honesty that you denied to me last year, should it not?”

A tired sigh rolled off Dumbledore’s lips. He hesitated for a moment, watching the other happy students who had spread across each corner of the sunny Hogwarts grounds. “A mistake borne out of an old man’s hubris, in hindsight. If you ask me any questions, I shall do my best to give you an answer, Mr Potter.”

A peace offering, wrapping up a promise of answers that he had so desperately longed for in another life.

Harry hated himself as he considered it, if for a brief moment.

“I’m afraid I will have to decline, Professor Dumbledore,” he said softly. “Not out of lack of curiosity, but out of lack of trust.”

“Have I shown myself untrustworthy?”

“The Grey Lady told me a most interesting tale.” Harry’s voice lowered to a whisper. “That it was not Professor Quirrell who had died last year, but Petrov. The same Quirrell who was quite possibly possessed by Voldemort himself, if Lady Ravenclaw is not lying. And only one wizard is powerful enough to cover up such a thing from the Ministry. You.”

The headmaster closed his eyes, and for a moment, Harry thought he would deny it or change the topic.

“So I did. But you’re right; I did things for the school that I am not proud of, Mr Potter.” The headmaster gave him a wan smile.

Then, Dumbledore looked distant, his grandfatherly voice replied with something colder, more dangerous. “It’s part and parcel of being in a position of authority and responsibility. Each decision you make will affect countless people, and there’s rarely a ‘correct’ choice that leaves everyone alive, let alone satisfied. Oh, how often have I been forced to choose between the lesser of two evils? Voldemort was always fond of such insidious games. This and his charisma made him all the more dangerous than sheer magical power alone. Alas, I understand your mistrust better. I would appreciate your discretion in this matter, of course.”

Harry wanted to get angry with the headmaster, but he couldn’t muster any emotion right now.

Why did Dumbledore's words make so much sense? Why was he explaining so candidly?

"I've heard nothing, then," Harry said curtly.

Dumbledore acknowledged with a nod and moved towards the castle's entrance. A handful of steps later, he paused and turned around to pin Harry with his twinkling blue eyes.

"You are young, bright, and driven beyond your peers, Mr Potter," his voice carried in the wind. "I have rightfully earned your mistrust, but know this. I might not know what drives you to push yourself to such an extent, but you need not carry such weight alone. A burden shared is a burden halved, and *help will always be given in Hogwarts to those who ask for it.*"

Words said, the headmaster gave Harry one final, searching look before departing. He breathed heavily, but felt too numb on the inside and couldn't even bring it in himself to summon some anger.

The next few hours were a blur as he packed his things with the help of Dobby and released Hedwig to fly back to the Potter House. The ecstatic House Elf had just been purchased from the Malfoys for five hundred galleons, all too happy to work for '*The Great Master Harry Potter Sir*'. His desire to be free was not mentioned even once. Had Dobby's desire for freedom merely been the need to escape the Malfoys?

It felt weird to solve one of his problems with money, but why did it feel so... good?

He was happy, Dobby was bursting with joy, and even the Malfoys were delighted at the arrangement. It made him feel like a fool for his clever tricks in his last life.

"Must you truly leave so early?" Diana asked, looking quite glum. Padma was nodding from the side.

"I must help Sirius—he is quite lost without me," Harry deflected eventually. "Little Estelle is far more than he can handle alone."

That much is true. Thankfully, his friends reluctantly let it go. His twin cousins were just as understanding, even if it took Harry ten minutes to pry himself away from their surprisingly strong embrace. The students, for the most part, looked carefree, with the last of the exams having concluded a few days earlier.

And for good reason; there had been one attack in the last month on some Muggle village in Yorkshire, and Mad-Eye Moody had killed Dimitri the Fraud and two more. The rest of the Azkaban escapees had decided to hide as if waiting for something. Instead, the students were far more worried about more mundane things. Like grades, their love lives, and juicy gossip about who was dating whom.

Some complained about how Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup yet again, or that Ravenclaw would keep winning the House Cup as long as Potter and Black were still in school. Many even gave Harry nasty glares and loudly mentioned how they would file a petition to Dumbledore to exclude him and Juno from the House Points system, as they made it unfair, making him shake his head.

Harry had long stopped caring about such trifles as House Points; it was the teachers who handed them out like candies.

It was carefree and distant, but in a good way. The time when he would simply bury his head and ignore the looming problems or, worse, delude himself that they would magically go away without affecting him had long passed. While the Ministry loudly proclaimed how effective its efforts and the DMLE were, Harry knew at least twenty more Death Eaters hid in Wizarding Britain under the command of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Ignorance was bliss. But perhaps it was for the better that the children enjoyed their childhoods while they could.

Harry cursed himself, then. Was that what Dumbledore had been thinking about him? Making the decisions for others without giving them a choice?

As the afternoon progressed, Harry Potter left Hogwarts for the school year through the fireplace in Flitwick's office, still feeling conflicted.

The ruin that Harry remembered was nowhere to be seen. The new Potter home was too big to be called a cottage, but too small to fit the standard of a mansion.

His skin tingled with a pleasant, familiar feeling as he felt magic settle over him. The place's protections had been bolstered significantly.

"I just got the house connected to the Floo Network yesterday while avoiding being put in the registry by name," Sirius explained after Harry had entered with a spin. "Had to grease some palms to see it happen, of course."

There were large bags beneath his godfather's eyes.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Only if you get caught," Sirius said with a chuckle. "Come, let me show you around. There are nine bedrooms, five bathrooms, two bath houses, a few drawing rooms that I'm not sure what to do with, a basement as large as the rest of the house combined that is heavily enchanted against all magic and can serve as a duelling room, a potion lab in the attic, an office with an accompanying small library, an actual library... what else? Oh, can't forget the kitchen and dining room."

He paused at the bathroom full of fancy marble tiles that could give the Prefect's Bathroom a run for its money with how luxurious it was. At least there was no mermaid mosaic peeking at him or perverted ghosts like Moaning Myrtle. Everything looked almost too posh for Harry's taste.

But perhaps he could get used to this, having a bathroom and showers to himself. After all, he had already gotten used to using the Room of Requirements as his personal bathroom, where he could shower undisturbed after each training session.

"The plumbing is partially magical. Don't ask me how it works—I have no clue—but I was told maintaining it is simple enough once I get my hands on the manual the builder left. Anyway, the house is completely separated from the muggles in every way. All the locations of this estate have been scrubbed

clean of any documents, and the magical protections could rival my parents' house—my father was a paranoid bastard who would make Arcturus look like a Gryffindor. We have powerful Repelling Enchantments to send away any unwanted visitors, and even the very bricks the house is built with should be incredibly sturdy.”

“Sturdy?” Harry echoed.

“Some secret brick-baking technique that makes them hard and magically resistant.”

From the outside, the house was nothing special, if skilfully hewn from brick, granite, clay, and wood. The only thing that Harry could notice was that the masonry looked impeccable. The insides were larger than seen outside, though not by much. The floors were lined with lacquered wood, the walls were plain white, and the property's borders were marked by a thick brick wall. Harry noticed something suspiciously like Devil's Snare nestled in the northern sides of the walls. To the east lay two empty greenhouses that could be filled with flowers, magical plants, or vegetables. To the west, there were empty tool sheds and an outhouse.

Finally, to the south, just by the walkway to the main gate, was a proper Quidditch pitch with three rings on each side.

“There's nothing for Dobby to do!” Dobby wailed as he saw the empty rooms. From the rooms they had visited, only the master bedroom, where Harry would sleep, had a comfortable-looking double bed, a desk with two chairs, and a table. It was a ridiculously large room, in truth, over twice the size of his Hogwarts accommodations.

“Where's Estelle?” Harry asked.

“In my room, finally asleep,” he said, exhaustion seeping through his voice. “Took me an hour to get her to calm down. She keeps crying in the middle of the night, the little star.”

“Dobby will take care of the little miss!” The House Elf instantly came over, his eyes about to pop out with excitement.

“So this is the House Elf, eh? He certainly looks better than the one my parents had back in the day. Much more cheery. I didn't expect you to actually get Malfoy to part with his elf so easily.” Sirius rubbed his stubble. “Do you know how to take care of toddlers, Dobby?”

Dobby bobbed his head eagerly. “Yes, Master Serious. Dobby can feel the supplies in the kitchen for her already...” and just like that, he popped away.

“I still have a lot of furniture to purchase,” his godfather said, visible exhaustion fighting the twitch in his lips as he heard his new title. He slumped on the sole chair in the living room, choosing not to make the joke that Harry had been expecting.

“The house already must have cost a fortune,” Harry observed. “And you look dead on your feet, Sirius.”

“I could use some sleep,” Sirius admitted with a yawn. “At least I think I know how to raise a baby after visiting Andy... mostly.”

And just like that, he was already snoozing on the chair. Harry sighed, conjuring a blanket over his godfather.

Raising Estelle already seemed to be taking a heavy toll on Sirius, but he hoped they would manage just fine with Dobby's assistance. Being a godfather was yet another responsibility settling on Harry's shoulders, but one he had taken gladly. It steeled his resolve to grow stronger and survive at all costs.

"I suppose it's time to test that training chamber in the basement," he murmured to himself, squeezing the yew wand in his fist.

Harry's future still looked bleak; his enemies were powerful and numerous, and there was no telling what problems the future held, which meant that he had to grow stronger still.

As he passed through the hallway, he felt his familiar stir underneath his skin.

"Ah, this place feels different now," Nyx said after slithering out of his sleeve, tearing it in the process.

"Tired of napping for over half a year?" Harry asked. His familiar had grown slightly in length but, surprisingly, not much else. Her scales somehow looked a deeper shade of black and had a different feel as he ran his fingers through them.

"Hey, I wake up to hunt at least twice each week!" she hissed out in protest. *"Why does it smell like fire and feathers again? That new bird stayed?"*

"Of sorts. She's Sirius' daughter, and I will also take care of her."

Nyx tilted her triangular head in a manner that would have looked cute if she weren't bigger than the average constrictor. *"Two-legged feathers like that one he mated in the far south?"*

"Exactly. You should always protect her if you can. She's part of the family now."

"Only if the little one behaves, not like white feathers!" Just as Harry was shaking his head in exasperation, the serpent turned to the nearby window. *"Oh, here she comes."*

In a few seconds, something knocked on the window, and Harry opened it to let Hedwig in, whose bright yellow eyes inspected the insides. Her feathers were tousled, her beak was painted red, and her talons were dripping blood as she tightly gripped a rolled-up letter without any string attached.

"Did you rob some owl on the way here?" Harry asked, earning himself an unhappy hoot. "You can't just attack owls that come to deliver mail here!"

Hedwig puffed up her chest and barked as if to deny him. Harry bemoaned the bloodthirstiness of his owl. Or was it that the owl had failed to enter the premises, and Hedwig had... *'helped'* it along?

Shaking his head, he took the letter, opened it, and froze.

Hey Padfoot,

I'm finally back in Britain now, and I heard you were looking for me. We should meet when it's most convenient, just send me an owl.

Best regards,

Moony

Frustration and joy mingled inside Harry. They had even thought the man was dead. A part of Harry remembered that shameful moment when Remus tried to join them on their adventure, leaving his pregnant wife behind... but that part was quickly squashed aside. Remus Lupin was still his father's friend, who taught him the Patronus and was probably the only adult ever to treat Harry like he wasn't made of glass.

Besides, he did make him godfather to Teddy...

Harry was afraid, though. Was this the same Remus Lupin? For one treacherous moment, he entertained the idea of burning the letter. Why? Why now? Sirius had searched for Lupin for over a year!

No, it was better to count their blessings. Perhaps some extreme circumstances had kept Lupin from contacting them. For now, knowing that his former—future DADA teacher was alive was enough.

But such matters could wait. His godfather was in dire need of sleep, and Harry had magic to spare for one nice training session.

Harry set a small goal for himself for the summer: fixing his control over fire magic. That, and drilling himself into the ground, body, magic, and mind.

15th of June 1993, Tuesday

Sirius Black

He watched with no small amount of surprise as Nyx carefully swayed her tail over Estelle's crib like some toy, making his daughter giggle happily. The enormous black serpent was a worry, but the concern quickly melted away when he saw Nyx and the baby getting along better than everyone else.

Estelle still seemed spooked by Harry's presence, but loved tugging on Nyx's tail, and the serpent loved tickling the small toddler with it. She was incredibly gentle for a snake weighing over a hundred pounds of muscle and scales. And wasn't that a surprise—that the serpent could somehow grow in strength and size while spending the better part of the last six months asleep?

At least Nyx had managed to bond with Harry in a way that allowed her to bypass the difficulties of magical travel.

Sirius had stopped being surprised by things like this long ago. Then there was Hedwig, who seemed to have appointed herself as a silent protector for his daughter each night, perching over her crib as if miffed that the baby Veela liked a snake more than her.

Dobby's overly enthusiastic addition to the family was also welcomed. Sirius had finally had a full night's sleep for the first time in weeks and could finally function without resorting to Pepper-Up Potions and

copious amounts of coffee. No longer having to go through his daily war against stinky nappies was also just as welcome.

Harry was in the kitchen, carefully sorting through a bundle of letters.

"Ah, how fares your young and charming Lady Black?" Sirius ribbed. "Perhaps another date?"

"Nah. She's decided to spend the summer focusing on training," Harry replied absentmindedly.

"Well, that wouldn't do," he tutted. "I thought Bella's daughter was better than this. If a gal tries to play hard to get, you should let her get a taste of loneliness—"

"Her mother is literally trying to kidnap her, so she would rather avoid showing up in public, Sirius," Harry interrupted, visibly annoyed. "And for the thousandth time, we're not dating!"

"For now," Sirius agreed with a sly smile. "Anyway, is there anything interesting in that pile?"

"An invitation to the Malfoy Gala. They have decided to host it in the Ministry this time, probably because of safety concerns. I'm not going, but I'll have to send a letter to Draco and a small gift to Lady Malfoy, at least."

"I'm still amazed how you can suffer those blonde ponces."

"The Malfoys are decent," Harry declared righteously, making him snort.

"And I was the most outstanding model student to ever walk the halls of Hogwarts," Sirius said with a deadpan. "Come now, pull the other one. Associating with their sort is dangerous. They supported the Dark Lord for real during the war, and there's no guarantee they don't subtly nudge and help their comrades who are now on the wrong side of the law."

"I'm aware, Sirius. I'm aware that they're everything that makes a pureblood irritating. Wealthy, arrogant, with disdain if not outright hatred of all things Muggle, always seeking to align themselves with the winner. But for all of that, Draco and his mother have been generous with their assistance and genuine with their offers of friendship."

"These things do not come for free," he warned. "It's easy to get into their groups like my brother did, and before you know it, you're already breaking the law—"

"Sirius," Harry interrupted, his voice tight. "Lucius Malfoy thinks I'm the next coming of Dumbledore or the Dark Lord, but not as extreme as either, and thus a far more useful acquaintance, if not an ally. His son believes I'm an amiable friend and has voluntarily backed me in school on every possible occasion. Your cousin, Narcissa, literally came over and offered to spy on Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters for me."

"Oh..." His godfather rubbed his face. "That's... that's exactly the sort of crap the Malfoys would get to, if far more daring than I expected. But those who play both sides are only loyal to themselves. I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'm just keeping my eyes and ears open, just in case." Harry shook his head. "As I said, the Malfoys are fine, at least in small doses and once or twice a month. And I have yet to trust them. But forget about all that. So, are you still hesitating about meeting with Lupin? I thought he was your close friend?"

"I thought so too, but you and Estelle come first," Sirius said. "My duty is to you two before anything. I expected my close friend to come out and greet me when I left Azkaban, not to search far and wide and not even find a hair or hear a whisper of him, you know? It made me wonder how much our friendship was real. And besides, I'm very busy. I have to visit Ted for potions and schedule vaccinations for Estelle. There's still picking out furniture, buying tools, books, and toys, and a million things that require my attention around the house. I have responsibilities now, and they do not include Moony."

The most damning part was that Remus Lupin was Dumbledore's man through and through. The unprecedented debt of a werewolf finishing Hogwarts was not something his friend could ever repay, and Moony knew it. Dumbledore knew it, too, and Sirius didn't want to risk getting pulled into the headmaster's plots and groups. He was no longer young and brash and had to look after a daughter and a godson.

"That's why we have Dobby to help around. You should probably hear Mr Lupin out first," his godson wisely pointed out. "I mean, the wildest things could have happened. Pretty much everything is possible in the magical world, isn't it?"

"I suppose I should meet with him sooner rather than later instead of sulking like a spurned girlfriend," Sirius mused with a small measure of self-deprecation. His gaze landed on Estelle, who was already cutely snoozing in her crib after Dobby fed her a bottle of milk. Now that he was no longer stressed out and lost on how to handle things, he could appreciate how absolutely adorable she looked when she was asleep and not crying for attention. "Perhaps I can arrange a meeting after I buy some furniture tomorrow."

Author's Endnote: Whew, that ended up being a more transitional chapter than I would have liked. But I realised some things needed to be cleared up between Harry and Juno, and at least some sort of talk with Dumbledore was due. One or two more chapters of summer before I dive into year three.