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2nd of October, Friday, 1992

Juno

They exchanged bows, and the duel began.

Harry stood there, carefully inspecting her; his wand pointed to the ground on the other side of the classroom, less than ten meters separating them. There was a new harshness to him compared to last year. He was taller, and his wiry frame had begun to fill out, yet his mind was still like a motionless pool of water.

Juno surpassed him in terms of pure magical power; she could feel it. But it didn't make beating him any less daunting, for his understanding and mastery of magic outclassed hers, no matter how much she was loath to admit it. Harry Potter's gaze was far more intense than before; he stood still like a statue, observing with his piercing green eyes, awaiting her first move.

He was her friend; he was her rival, he was her goal, but could Juno claim to be skilled or talented when a boy nearly a year her junior had so easily demolished her again and again?

This was more than some measly victory. Juno wanted to prove that she was no lesser than he was. That Harry could rely on her. Even if the advantage of rituals was cheating, she wanted her friend's acknowledgement as his equal—perhaps his better—and she longed for the thrill of success, the exhilaration of victory.

Nothing worthwhile was ever easy, they said, and she agreed.

Juno burst into motion, and four spells erupted from her wand. Harry simply lurched out of the way of the Cheering Charm and the Knockback Jinx and batted away the Stinging Hex and the Disarming Charm.

They slammed into Juno's hastily raised shield, and it held, if barely, and she conjured a smokescreen that was quickly blown away by Harry before she could even reposition. Some things never changed; despite Juno becoming much faster in the past three months, Harry had not slacked off and he effortlessly cast three spells for each two of hers. He stood there like an indomitable mountain, undaunted by any magic she threw his way. Each one was avoided, blocked, or even flung back at her with laughable ease.

'First, second, and third-year spells won't work on him,' she realised.

She needed something more powerful, even if it meant discarding silent casting.

Juno avoided the angry red streak that looked like another Disarming Charm and spun her wand, "Impedimenta, Impedimenta!" It was her swiftest, and the spells splashed against a conjured granite block, forcing her to pour everything she had into a "BOMBARDA!"

Debris flew everywhere, and the room was filled with dust, but Juno didn't stop and cast another curtain of smoke using the dust in the air. Her eyes were filled with magic as she focused on her friend's blurry aura, visible even now.

“Impedimenta!” she roared, then her hand turning into a blur, casting silent Disarming Charms and Binding Jinxes in Harry’s direction as swiftly as possible, the trump card she spent practising the last month.

All the jets of colourful light sank into the dust, but it was as if she had thrown a rock in a pond without producing any ripples. There was nothing, none of the telltale sound of magical shield cracking, conjured rock or wood breaking or body falling.

Her heart hammered in her ears when she noticed no more movements in the dust-filled room as the air slowly cleared. When her eyes began to tear up from the dirt, she stopped to wipe them. Surely, even Harry wouldn’t be able to withstand the barrage of eight spells in under two seconds?

The dust falling through the room glowed pink as something slammed into her chest, followed by darkness.

Juno awoke, blinking at Harry’s serious face as realisation sank in. She had been struck with a stunner. But why did she stop seeing Harry’s aura if he wasn’t knocked out?

Her friend looked completely unharmed if covered by grey dust. He did not even look winded, as if the duel was merely a warm-up exercise.

“Best of three,” the bitter words rolled off her tongue before she could hold herself back. ‘*I am not a sore loser. This was just bad luck,’* she lied to herself.

“Sure,” Harry nodded earnestly, no trace of joy as if defeating her was just… nothing important. Yet he had done the same thing hundreds of times, so perhaps it wasn’t.

They returned to their initial positions, nine meters apart, and bowed.

This time, Harry was the first to move, rushing forth.

He batted away her Slug Vomiting Hex and a flock of tiny but angry birds shot out of his wand. Juno conjured a burst of fire, dispersing them, but Harry had already halved the distance between them.

“*Aguamenti!*”

Faster than she could react, the jet of water sizzled through the flames and slammed into her chest, knocking the air from her lungs. The world exploded in pain as her back collided with the floor, and she got a good view of the old ceiling, fingers grasping for a wand that was nowhere near her.

“Are you okay?” Harry’s concerned voice carried over as a pained groan slipped from her lips. His worried face replaced the dusty rafters above as he offered her a hand to get up. “That came out slightly stronger than I’d intended.”

The pain wasn’t that bad; in truth, sparring with her aunt Cassiopeia was far more agonising. The worst of the damage was to her ego.

“I’m not a porcelain vase to be easily broken,” she snarked out, the words coming out far angrier than she intended as she climbed back to her feet and snatched her wand back.

Harry’s face remained placid, but Juno could feel a change in her friend.

“Best of five!” she demanded, sounding entirely too pathetic.

“Are you sure?” His emerald eyes glimmered with *something*, and she could sense the slightest tinge of irritation seeping from her friend’s well-controlled mind.

“Yes!” she hissed out before hastily schooling her mind. It wouldn’t do to let her control over her magic slip here.

They returned to the opposite ends of the classroom and bowed, and Harry’s hand blurred, summoning several sinister jets of magic so quickly it might as well have been instantaneously. Juno avoided the first spell, but the second one struck the floor ahead of her, covering it with a slippery sheet of ice.

Her attempt to shield herself from the last spell caused her to lose balance and crash onto the frost below. Her efforts to rise were shaky, and the ice burned her bare hands, but she managed to get onto her feet—only to slip and fall again.

“Enough,” Harry’s cold voice cut through her frustration, and the ice melted. Juno realised she had lost her wand again; surely enough, it was in her friend’s grasp.

Three losses in a row and the last one was in mere seconds. Harry didn’t even take her seriously. Her advantage in magical power was far smaller than before. Worse, he was faster, better, almost as strong as her, and far more capable in magic, even without any rituals. Perhaps he had been right to reject her help.

The rim of her robes was soaked wet, and the uncomfortable cold seeped through it into her feet and knees.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

Juno tried to school herself; Lady Black was not supposed to cry, but she was a far cry from the lady she should be.

It was too much: reviving a dying house with all its duties and expectations, pushing herself to the limit every day in magic, and stopping herself from enjoying the company of her friends due to her responsibilities. Dumbledore’s prodding and looming presence wore down her composure with each week with his insane requests, and to top it off, all her efforts could not even bridge the gap between her and Harry Potter, a boy who’d discovered the Wizarding World a year ago.

She couldn’t help but wonder what she’d been doing with her life.

“...Err,” Harry sat beside her on the floor and awkwardly slung an arm over her shoulder, his previous severity nowhere to be seen. “I apologise. Things can get a bit heated during a duel. I didn’t mean to be so harsh…”

…Had she always been so worthless?

“How?” She balled her fists. “How are you so much better?”

But no answer came. Not that Juno needed one; the rising shame threatened to overwhelm her. Why was she such a sore loser?

“I’m sorry,” a weak whimper escaped her throat. Had she ever been so miserable before?

But self-pity was unbecoming.

She wiped the frustrated tears from her face and slid out from under his arm, burying her gaze underneath her long hair. The pleasant weight and warmth over her shoulders disappeared. “Perhaps Lockhart was right, and maybe I am a fraud. A spoiled, *talentless* little princess with no idea how the real world works!”

“Out of all the garbage our dearest Defence professor sprouted, this is what you picked?” Harry snorted, and an involuntary but wet chuckle escaped from her throat. “No way. I’ve never seen someone as hardworking and talented as you. I'd say you can give sixth and maybe even seventh-years a run for their money. And, with some practice, a few of them at once.”

Silently conjuring a handkerchief, her friend offered it, completely ignoring that no second year should be capable of conjuration, let alone wordlessly.

“How can you say this?” Juno muttered, cursing her weakness as her vision started to swim once more. “I’m a talentless hack, a cheat, compared to you. And you’re eleven months younger than me!”

“That’s different,” Harry said, uncomfortably scratching his brow. The guilt was practically oozing from her friend then, despite Juno not trying to get a read on him. “I am not as good as you think I am.”

The conviction in his words was unmistakable. Harry Potter did not think himself unique or talented, even as he idly tapped on the dampness of her robes, producing a stream of hot air from his wand that quickly dried her garb. It only made Juno want to weep harder. If he was no good, what of her?

“I’m sorry,” she hiccuped weakly, remembering her earlier words and the completely inexcusable loss of her temper. Was this the drawbacks of the rituals her aunt warned her about? “My conduct was inappropriate. My emotions got-”

“It’s fine,” Harry held up his hands. “We can always duel more, two or three times a week if you want. It’s good practice.”

A painful tangle of feelings swelled in her chest again. Anger, happiness, disappointment, and… hope.

“I–I’d like that,” Juno said, swallowing her frustration. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge what a part of her already knew for over a year.

Harry Potter was better than her at magic. And it was not just a tiny gap but a chasm so deep she struggled to see its depths.

“I’ve heard the headmaster can be… irritating or confusing, so letting off some steam after your detentions with him would surely help,” Harry added. He stood up again and offered her a hand, and this time she took it. With a tug, he helped her up.

An involuntary chuckle escaped her lips. “That’s one way to put it.”

“At least this should be more fun than trying to produce muggle sweets.”

“It is,” Juno acknowledged begrudgingly, but the previous irritation that had been building up for weeks returned with full force. “See, I don’t mind the detention—but Professor Dumbledore *mocks* me by giving me an impossible task along with it.”

“An impossible task?” Harry echoed, his brow creasing dangerously. “You can always decline it if it’s outside detention.”

“I know, but I understand why people are so cautious of Albus Dumbledore now.” She looked at her wand, a dark thing of Hawthorn and dragon heartstring. It looked meagre between her fingers. “He

promised to teach me any piece of magic I desire, should I succeed in casting the *Patronus Charm*, of all things. It's beyond N.E.W.T.-level magic that even most Aurors struggle with."

Her friend looked uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"I… I know of it."

"Truly?" Juno felt lighter all of a sudden.

"...I *really* don't like dementors," Harry muttered, closing his eyes.

"I don't think anyone is an ardent fan of the soul-sucking fiends or their shroud of despair, not even Hagrid," she noted, but her mind began to race.

If she had Harry to motivate and compete against, perhaps her task wouldn't be so daunting. What had Dumbledore said in one of his rare bouts of wordiness during failed pastry creation attempts?

A burden shared is a burden halved, my dear.

"Hey," she hesitantly began. "Want to practice together if you truly dislike dementors?"

"Are you sure?" Harry frowned. "You never asked to practice together before."

She realised that this was where she had erred; her biggest progress had always been when she had faced off against Harry or competed against him in class. It made her feel foolish, but it wasn't fatal. Mistakes were to be learned from.

"Yes. I'm sure." Perhaps she could master it before Christmas, with Harry beside her. "Want to start now?"

"Dinner is soon," Harry noted, face neutral.

"The Patronus Charm is tiring," Juno pointed out. "In less than five minutes, we'll run out of magic and work up an appetite."

"Alright then, just show me."

"The incantation is 'Expecto Patronum', and the wand movement is a simple spin," she explained, not even bothering to suppress her giddiness.

She was promised any piece of magic she desired, and Dumbledore surely knew more than anyone else alive. She focused on that overflowing sense of joy, and her wand leapt into action. "Expecto Patronum!"

A funnel of light burst out of the tip of her wand, brighter and bigger than any before. After a few seconds, Juno released the hold on her magic, seeing as no corporeal guardian was forming.

"Not bad," Harry nodded, looking genuinely impressed.

"It's not good enough either," Juno said, somewhat abashedly. "Why don't you try it?"

Her friend focused, and she couldn't help but reach out with her mind, trying to get a read of his feelings. Yet… the barest sliver of joy slipped through as he brandished his wand with a practised motion, "Expecto Patronum!"

The bright light made Juno cringe away and cover her eyes; a familiar disappointment took root in her heart again. Harry's charm was visibly more powerful than hers by a significant margin. He let go of the spell as if looking completely dissatisfied by merely eclipsing her efforts.

Harry Potter took a deep breath; his eyes glowed with power, and Juno felt the hairs on her neck rise.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Juno was prepared this time and didn't look at the spell directly, but she was not ready for the light morphing in the air, changing into an enormous, serpentine shape. A titanic horned viper, its body over thirty feet long and as thick as Hagrid's shoulders with a familiar, triangular head twisted and turned, sailing through the room. But the classroom seemed like a vivarium for the ethereal beast.

With no foe in sight, it drifted, lazy, circling the two of them. An overwhelming feeling of joy warred with disbelief and… disappointment in Juno's chest.

Of course, Harry managed it on the second try. He was humble, powerful, and talented; she was just a talentless hack, lucky to become the Black heiress soon after her birth. No wonder he did not want her assistance.

He didn't need it.

Harry released the spell, and the joy was gone, leaving Juno with a broken ego. Why… why was she even trying?

"Good," she praised, but her voice came out hollow.

"I'll teach you," Harry said, not unkindly. A straightforward offer, expecting nothing in return, typical of her friend.

Juno wanted to be mad at him, to hate him, to curse him, but she couldn't find the strength in her heart.

"Thank you." Juno's voice treacherously trembled. She would have declined a week ago, out of pride than anything else. But her pride had been shattered to a million pieces just now, never to recover. Perhaps she could never compare to Harry Potter, but her love for magic had not diminished.

"I can-"

"Let's go eat," she interrupted. "I… need some time to think. We can continue this another time."

"Sure," Harry smiled awkwardly, doubtlessly feeling her apprehension. "Look. I don't mind practising together with you. But you've been putting too much pressure on yourself. Trying to rush ahead in each subject, duelling, detentions with Dumbledore, extracurricular practice, and whatever duties you have to your family. It's too much for one person to handle."

"I must," Juno said, her smile turning brittle. "You say it's too much for one person, yet you push yourself *harder* than I."

"Only in magic practice and running." Harry's face grew solemn. "Any more, and I'll break or go crazy. And if I do, Sirius promised to take away my wand and tie me to the hospital bed for a month, and for once, I don't think he was joking. Anyway, we should head to dinner, or we'll be forced to go hungry."

She quirked a brow. "I thought you knew the location of the kitchens?"

“I do, but students aren’t supposed to go there,” was the innocent response. “My godfather nags me about not breaking enough rules and being a goody-two-shoes.”

Feeling too drained to argue, Juno just huffed, and they headed down towards the Great Hall. While she knew Sirius Black was a laidback person–researching the one person who could contest her political power was a no-brainer–it was amusing to see how similar he was to her aunt Cassiopeia in some things.

But in others, he was completely different. His genuine care and worry about his charge starkly contrasted with her experience. *“Pain is the best teacher,”* her aunt usually said. *“You have the wits not to do something stupid and perish, and I lack the need or the patience to coddle you.”*

As long as it wasn’t fatal, Cassiopeia Black didn’t truly care what happened to Juno. *“Whatever doesn’t kill you will force you to learn and adapt. I won’t always be here to cover your arse.”*

Just as they approached the lower floors, a distant voice echoed. It was barely audible between her and Harry’s footsteps, but her friend suddenly stopped stiff in his stride, and Juno also halted, letting her hear it.

“*Come... come to me…*” Despite the distance, the sound was so eerie, dripping with such cold fury it chilled her to the bone marrow. “*Let me rip you... let me tear you… let me kill you...*”

“Did you hear that?” She turned to Harry only to find him completely frozen, eyes widening as rivulets of sweat ran down his brow despite not even breaking a sweat in their duel earlier.

“You… you *heard* it?” Her friend eked out; his voice jagged like a piece of broken glass, his emotions churning so violently that even she struggled to decipher them aside from the raw, unadulterated feeling of panic.

“Yes,” Juno said solemnly, her hand already on her wand. If Harry was worried, it didn’t bode well. “Sounds like someone has gone mad, talking of ripping and tearing people alive, I think. Someone dangerous, but it was like a distant echo, making it hard to hear properly. Do you think we should tell the professors?”

“No,” he said, clamming up as his face became even, betraying as much emotion as his mind–not at all. “Not unless something happens.”

Harry stiffly looked around, cursing under his breath. Yet, despite their caution, nothing happened. They even arrived in the Great Hall before dinner ended, and none of their friends had heard the murderous voice.

Yet Harry remained silent, thoughtful, and would barely look at anyone–even her.

10th of October, Saturday

Harry

He could appreciate the irony of having such a clandestine meeting with his former rival. How the tables had turned, Harry had to turn to Draco Malfoy for assistance, of all people, when his efforts to attract Fawkes’ attention had miserably failed.

“Phoenix tears?” Draco asked, face twisted into a frown. “I can possibly see if I can procure some with my father. Might take some time, though. Months. The real deal isn’t easy to come by even if you have the galleons to pay for it.”

The one thing he appreciated about the Slytherin boy was his discretion. He didn’t ask pesky questions like *‘Why do you need phoenix tears?’*

“Thanks,” Harry gratefully said. “Let me know if you have something.”

Hearing the basilisk’s murderous whispers had broken any of his hopes that the diary hadn’t made it to Hogwarts. He couldn’t keep deluding himself that his colossal failure made it possible for the basilisk to be unleashed inside the school again. Sure, it would be easier to find the Horcrux at the school compared to outside, but the risk was not to be underestimated. What if the students or teachers weren’t lucky enough to have a convenient reflection around this time? What if they gazed upon the serpent’s fatal gaze like Myrtle did?

The thought terrified him to no end; the only reason Harry had not descended into a full-blown panic was that Hagrid’s roosters were all alive. While the last time he had heard the basilisk at the start of September, the Chamber of Secrets had only been opened *after* the roosters had been slain.

Even as a student, Tom Riddle was as evil as he was vile, but he was not a fool.

Of course, while he couldn’t constantly stay guard or look over the Marauder’s map for suspicious things, Harry was not completely helpless.

“Watching the clucking feathers is boring,” Nyx complained last evening. “*I can’t even eat them! At least the half-giant gives me nice snacks*.”

Why did it not surprise him that Hagrid had immediately taken a liking to Nyx?

“And you’re sure you haven’t heard of a large basilisk in the castle?”

“The scent of the queen is old,” came the chilling response, *“And I spend most of my time in the forest. The castle and the other two legs are boooring...”*

For once, his scaly familiar showed none of her usual bravado. Harry was thankful for it; while Nyx seemed to thrive in the Forbidden Forest–and continue growing in size, he didn’t want her running off after the basilisk and turning into a snack.

Perhaps he was worrying for nothing, and Nyx could identify the student possessing Riddle’s diary the moment he approached the chicken coop. But Harry knew his luck and didn’t count on it, and his nightmares didn’t ease up either.

The castle was peaceful, unaware of the danger slumbering in the school's depths. Harry could hardly tell anyone in a reasonable manner—not that he wanted to; he was no longer naive. Even pointing out the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets or the like would raise many uncomfortable questions, doubtlessly putting him under scrutiny and suspicion.

Finding the Room of Requirement was a slight respite, providing him with a quiet and conducive environment for his practice away from the scrutiny of others aside from a certain annoying ghost. The dummies inside actually retaliated, if with low-powered spells, providing a new structure and rhythm for his training. However, his friends had begun to notice that he started disappearing for hours on end.

He couldn’t even explain where. When he tried to speak of the Room, no words escaped his lips, and his mind turned queasy and drifted towards other things. It was as Helena Ravenclaw had said–her mother had made certain that the Room was a secret only accessible to those who passed her criteria.

Another thing gnawed at him, too. Juno could understand–and probably *speak* Parseltongue. She had heard the basilisk, even if she had no idea what it was.

Speaking to snakes was quite rare in Magical Britain. He ought to know, supposedly being the second one who could speak the Parseltongue in the last half a century. It was one of those bloodline abilities passed down through the line of Salazar Slytherin himself. Why could Juno speak it? Did she have some connection to Tom Riddle? Did she hear him all those times he whispered to Nyx in the common room?

Once that thought lodged itself in his mind, Harry could not chase it away. The similarities were staggering. Juno was tall, charming, and powerful. She looked like her mother, but the aforementioned traits were painfully reminiscent of a sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle. There was even a passing physical resemblance, though it could be his imagination.

Then, there was the cunning and charisma behind her regal face; only this time, she could truly claim to be from a storied lineage, unlike Riddle, who was, at best, a bastard.

Had Juno been the daughter of Lord Voldemort all along?

Yet… *yet Harry wasn't sure*. It could have been his imagination. He could speak Parseltongue despite losing that ‘piece’ the dark lord had left. Or perhaps Dumbledore had been wrong all along, and that had never been the reason. It certainly wouldn't be the first time. Harry could have inherited the ability by chance, or even from his mother or any other reason.

A child… Tom Riddle fathering a child. It sounded alien. He didn’t look the fatherly type at all. Harry struggled to wrap his mind around the idea; it didn’t make sense. He should have laughed it off and dismissed it entirely, but he couldn’t. Voldemort was a monster in the flesh, one who had discarded his humanity for the sake of power. Harry had seen the gaunt creature that came out of that cauldron in the graveyard, and no matter how much he wished he could wipe that memory from his mind, even in another life, it was vivid in his eyes.

Having a child was implausible for Voldemort, as if the mere concept did not fit with the monster in his mind. It seemed so ordinary and mundane, especially for a man who feared death and aimed for immortality. Despite being young and foolish in matters of the heart, Harry knew having children was all about love or legacy, things that were not supposed to be of interest to the dark lord.

Then again, Bellatrix was precisely the sort of crazy who would probably jump the inhuman Tom Riddle anyway. Harry could imagine her doing it despite supposedly being the wife of Rudolphus Lestrange, which would raise a thousand questions more.

Harry didn't know what to think anymore, so he tried not to think about this problem. He had far more pressing matters to deal with, and Juno was still his friend.

So, as he had promised, they were training together again. He tried to put that whole Parseltongue thing out of his mind–it certainly wouldn’t be the first time he was overthinking things.

“I just can’t cast it,” frustration leaked in Juno’s usually calm voice. Something had changed in Bellatrix’s daughter since that duel they had the Friday before, but Harry couldn’t put his finger on it.

For a moment, he thought he had broken the indomitable girl, but that glimpse of vulnerability and despair never reappeared again, as if they had never existed. Juno was more thoughtful and at ease with herself, so it wasn't a bad thing.

"You certainly have the power for it," Harry mused slowly. "You need to use a better memory. The emotion is the key here, not power."

"Expecto Patronum!" The light from her wand was brighter but still struggled to coalesce into a form. This was what a true prodigy looked like; she was progressing a lot faster than he had in his third year, even without the threats of dementors lurking. Juno's progress was unrivalled for someone in the second, third, or fourth year.

His heart felt heavy. Harry felt like a cheat, a fraud, no better than Lockhart, especially when he had watched his friend almost break before him. And here, they considered him a genius. It felt like mockery, like an insult in his ears, and perhaps it was. Harry Potter might have possessed some fledgling talent in magic, but he was the furthest thing from genius. At twelve the last time around, he was still a foolish boy, bright-eyed and easily distracted by everything.

"I didn't learn this in one go either," Harry admitted carefully. "It took me quite a lot of practice to get it right. I told you, didn't I? I learned the Patronus Charm because I *loathe* dementors."

Juno's shoulders stood a bit straighter at that. Since that day, her blue eyes kept glancing at him with a feeling he couldn't decipher, but his friend had eased once she realised that he had practised the spell before.

"Are there any shortcuts?" She asked.

"Not exactly," Harry scratched his hair, making it even messier, as he sat on the teacher's desk, which had probably not been used for decades. "The key here is focus and *emotion*. Mere emotions like enjoyment, satisfaction, boasting, pride, gratitude, amusement, and the like are not strong enough. You need the purest form of *happiness* or *hope* to fuel a spectral guardian capable of defeating dementors and overpowering their aura of despair and hopelessness."

Juno stubbornly looked at her wand.

"Why a memory? Can't just channelling feelings be enough?"

"A memory is the easiest way," Harry provided. "It can be done without one, I believe. But an event or the person that invoked those feelings is far easier to recall than forcing yourself to produce the deep emotion from scratch, especially in the presence of dementors."

"What…" Juno's voice turned brittle, "What if I don't have a memory happy enough?"

His heart clenched. Harry really began to doubt his conclusion. How could this be Voldemort's daughter?

"You're pretty close," he reassured her. "Just keep trying. The last step is the hardest, but this is not something to be mastered in a week or three. Your current memory might not be strong enough, but it's very close. Try something else. Think of something… simple but meaningful."

"Simple but meaningful," she muttered, her face turning into a mask of focus. "Expecto Patronum!"

The shield was brighter than before, and Harry could feel the slivers of joy skirting through his mind. The stream of light twitched for a moment but didn't begin taking form.

'Scary talent', Harry sighed inwardly.

"Better, but enough for today," he voiced, seeing Juno's breathing had gone laboured. "We'll continue on Monday."

For a moment, it looked like Juno would argue, but she nodded curtly, and they made their way to the common room.

Despite pushing himself to the brink and feeling exhaustion seeping to his bones, Harry found sleep eluding him after dinner and another practice session in the Room. It was a common occurrence, and the constant nightmares of sinister red eyes further dampened his desire to rest.

It was easy to avoid Merula Snyde, especially when pulling on the invisibility cloak and silencing his shoes. The new caretaker was certainly more powerful and wily than Filch, but she lacked Mrs Norris' feline senses.

"*Rip… tear… kill*."

The cold, merciless voice made him shiver as if a thousand ants were crawling down his spine again.

"Damn it," Harry wanted to scream or tear his hair out. He wasn't ready to face a thousand-year-old basilisk alone. What if someone died because of his stupidity? Because he couldn't even steal a single diary?

A part of him wanted to get a rooster and force the damn thing to crow and be done with it, but he knew the price of haste all too much. What if the rooster's crow failed to work? What if it merely weakened the beast, not killed it?

He had to do something short of venturing down the Chamber of Secrets unprepared. Anything. So, Harry hastily snuck into the nearest obscure hallway leading to one of the many abandoned classrooms and hastily pulled out the Marauder's Map from his pocket. He stared at the second floor's girls' bathroom for hours but like the dozen times he inspected the map before, he saw nothing.

No names in or near the bathroom—nothing at all.

11th of October, Sunday

His whole body felt stiff. It shouldn't have been a surprise, especially since he had fallen asleep on one of the chairs in the cold, dusty classroom. The usual nightmare with the red eyes didn't help either. Thankfully, nobody had noticed his absence from bed.

"A spell to change a password?" Sirius rubbed his stubble thoughtfully, yet a devious smile was already dancing upon his lips. Leave it to his godfather to immediately think of mischief. "There are a few ways, but you must take control of the enchantment. It has to *recognise your authority* to make the change, which is easier said than done."

It was the simplest solution Harry could think of. Blocking the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. It was a temporary solution, but he was desperate enough to buy himself some time.

"Can you teach me?" Harry asked.

“Sure. I still remember McGongall’s face when I managed to swap the Common Room’s password, and not even she could get in for half an hour–”

Half an hour later, Harry was armed with too much knowledge about mischief.

“Don’t be in such a haste to leave just yet,” Sirius stopped him as he was about to rush out of his office. “I’m wounded that you use your dear old godfather as nothing but a spellbook.”

He theatrically grasped his heart and staggered, making Harry chuckle.

“Let’s have a snack, then,” the boy relented.

“You should sleep more,” his godfather pointed out as they sat on the desk. “Eat more, too. Naly, refreshments, please.”

A plate of chips, dried beef jerky, and pumpkin juice appeared before them.

“I plan to take a long nap this afternoon,” Harry admitted weakly. A chair could hardly compare to a real bed. He took a bite from the snacks and found them to his liking as usual.

“You look troubled as of late,” Sirius noted neutrally. “Something on your mind? Like girl trouble?”

“What?” Harry blinked in confusion. “Not really. I was just wondering. I did some research, and the only Parselmouth before me was… well…”

“You-Know-Who.” The previous cheer evaporated from his godfather, replaced by a steely harshness. “And the Gaunts before him.”

“Yes. And Parseltongue is one of those bloodline abilities. But neither my father nor my mother possessed it…”

“I understand your confusion,” Sirius said slowly. “But there isn’t much reason to worry. Every wizarding family in Wizarding Britain is related if you go far enough. Both you and I have some distant Gaunt and Sayre–their Irish branch– blood running in our veins. Bloodline abilities don’t necessarily pass down to all of your children, either. While unlikely, they can resurface after skipping seven generations or so my uncle Alphard claimed before he died.”

“Right,” Harry muttered, the answer failing to untangle the jumbled mess of suspicions that Juno’s ability to speak Parseltongue had elicited within him. “That’s good to know, though I think I attracted too much attention with Nyx.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t worry about that; the scaly princess is a sweetheart. The Ministry won’t do anything, especially to you, unless there’s significant trouble. So,” Sirius’ face grew uncharacteristically solemn, his earlier cheer forgotten. “How’s the mandrake leaf?”

“Still stuck at the roof of my mouth,” Harry opened his mouth widely and showed. After the first few days of annoyance, he hardly remembered the leaf’s presence. “Today’s the day of the next full moon, isn’t it?”

“Precisely. Here, a crystal vial that has been tempered in the pure rays of the moon.” A small, translucent vial was gently placed on the desk, looking slightly shinier than an ordinary vial.

Harry cautiously dislodged the now dark green leaf that had somehow shrunk in the roof of his mouth and pushed it into the vial.

“I suppose you’ve prepared the silver teaspoon of dew that neither sunlight nor human feet have touched for seven days?”

“I have,” Sirius gave him a roguish smile as he set up a small cauldron. “I also have a Death’s-head Hawk Moth chrysalis for you.”

An hour and a half later, Harry finished mixing the ingredients into the vial as the recipe had instructed and stirred it with his wand, which seemed particularly eager. Under Siriu’s watchful eye, Harry completed the potion without mishap. The end product looked like an opaque swirling mishmash of colours.

“Is it supposed to look like that?” Harry asked.

“Yep. That’s normal. Now, you put the vial in a dark, quiet place until the next thunderstorm rolls around. And don’t look at it, or you’ll break Schrödinger’s law.” Sirius rubbed his hands in anticipation. “And you mustn’t miss the incantation at each sunrise and sundown, though it shouldn’t be a problem for you. Recite it for me.”

“*Amato Animo Animato Animagus,”* he slowly recited. Harry had memorised every step of the process to heart; permanent Transfiguration wasn’t something you took chances with. “Done with the wand touching the heart. And I’m supposed to hear a second heartbeat at some point.”

His godfather stood up, smiling proudly.

“Now, off you trot. Remember: a dark place, and no looking at the vial until a thunderstorm. I personally used a soundless lockbox under my bed.”

Potion safely tucked inside his robe’s pockets, Harry prepared to leave. His choice was the same; it was the safest and easiest option. An idea appeared in his head, and he paused at the door, turning back to look at his godfather, who lazily sipped on his tea.

“Professor Black,” he began innocently. “I was wondering if you could divine the next thunderstorm for me?”

“Perhaps if you’re up to *no good*,” was the thoughtful reply. “Good boys who avoid mischief get no help from the Marauders. Now run off before your efforts are wasted.”

After putting the precious vial in its intended safe place and telling Nyx not to touch it, a part of Harry wondered what his animagus form would be. But he couldn’t bring it in himself to feel any excitement, and instead pulled on the invisibility cloak and rushed down to Myrtle’s bathroom.

“Who’s there?” She wailed, looking around warily, and Harry cursed inwardly. He had forgotten to silence his footsteps in his haste. “Someone is making fun of me. *I can feel it!*”

With a wail, Myrtle dived into one of the stalls; the toilets all exploded, flooding the tiled floor and making Harry sigh. Thankfully, the ghost soon dived into the pipes, leaving him alone with the sink engraved with a tiny serpent.

“I, Harry Potter, a student of Hogwarts,” the eerie hisses coming out of his mouth stretched his nerves thin to the limit. But he focused, his wand drawn and peeking between the folds of the invisibility cloak while trying to pour all the intent and magic into his words, a primal but powerful use of authority Sirius had taught him. “*I humbly request the change of password until such a moment the school needs Salazar’s beast.”*

It was a conjecture, one that relied on Slytherin not being a power-hungry wizard who believed in blood purity, as most records portrayed, but a relatively idealistic man who would put his efforts into educating the next generation. The latter wouldn't house such a dangerous beast inside the school for no reason, and the only reason that made sense was protection.

To his surprise, his magic thrummed. It might have been his imagination, but the eyes of the engraved serpent on the tap narrowed as if sizing him up.

The slightest feeling of approval echoed in his mind, and Harry somehow knew he was allowed to set a new password. He needed something that Voldemort would not think of, but nothing came to mind. The minutes tickled, and Harry grew tenser as he felt the magic press down on his mind.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good…"

The words rolled off his tongue, sounding all wrong and cold, yet it was a phrase he would not forget. It was a phrase Tom Riddle would have no way of knowing.

He felt an enormous pull on his magic, leaving him almost wrung out.

Something shifted in the air, and Harry knew it was done. His legs felt like lead as he dragged himself back to his bed for the much-needed nap.

His sleep was uneasy as usual, and a new, unwelcome thought wiggled into his mind. Tom Riddle was capable of making trouble even without a basilisk, even if not as deadly. He found himself staring at the Marauder Map again, just like he had often done in the last week, trying to spot anyone entering Myrtle's bathroom. And just like last week, he found nobody. Harry stared at the piece of parchment until his mind grew numb before groaning and finally giving up for the day.

The uncertainty, fear, and anticipation were far worse than struggling for your life. They numbed your heart and wore down your resolve. Clearing his mind, Harry threw himself into another round of relentless training, focusing on Transfiguration, trying to squeeze each drop of potential he could.

After performing the animagus incantation at sunset, Harry dragged his tired limbs to the Great Hall for dinner, but the mood was uncharacteristically sombre. Everyone glanced at the Slytherin table, some with amusement and others with wariness.

Yet all the students from Salazar's house looked disgruntled, irritated, or outright angry.

Harry sat between his friends in the seat Diana and Juno always reserved for him.

"Why do the Slytherins look like someone kicked their owl?" He asked.

"Botley *fell* down the stairs," Juno said after swallowing her bite of chicken roast. "He's in the hospital wing right now, and Pomfrey is fixing him for broken arms, spine, and many bruises. Rumour is he was very close to dying. Of course, his friends blame the Gryffindors, but they have no proof, and Slughorn is trying to find the culprit."

His blood chilled. This had to be Riddle's work. All his senses screamed so, and it happened just the day he barred the Chamber's entrance. It couldn't be a coincidence. Harry realised that finding the diary or the person Riddle possessed had become much harder.

Author's Endnote:

Uh… Starring: a mental breakdown ft 13-year-old girl driven to the brink by a ruthless guardian, big self-expectations, a trolling headmaster, and a well-meaning time-traveller. And let's not forget about Harry, who once again tries to do everything by himself.