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6th of September 1993, Monday (3 days later)

Ron Weasley

He strolled into History of Magic with a little more than resigned exhaustion and no expectations. Class began mundanely enough, with their new teacher taking roll.

Professor Remus Lupin was certainly far more engaging than Binns ever could be, even if the bar was not particularly high. The new professor was well-built and energetic, with a strange claw scar on his cheek and an intense look in his eyes. Ron got the impression that there was more to the man despite his plain, brown robes.

But his next words stirred the interest of sleepy Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs alike.

“Headmaster Dumbledore has authorised me to begin lessons with something far more recent and relevant for this month. A wise man once said that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, and I fully agree. As for the regular curriculum, we’ll return to it next month. First, can anyone tell me when Lord Voldemort’s—” Everyone flinched.

Professor Lupin merely shook his head in disappointment and continued, “Voldemort’s rise to power began?”

For once, Granger looked equally floored and fascinated, and her hand was not the first to be raised.

“Yes, Miss Abbot?”

“When strange disappearances started to happen in the Muggle and Magical Britain in the early seventies,” she said shyly.

“A good guess—take one point for Hufflepuff,” acknowledged the professor. “You’re not entirely wrong either, Miss Abbot. A person or two missing here and there once every few months went largely unnoticed for a long time. However, as the months passed, the disappearances grew more frequent until the Ministry realised there was a problem of a magical nature. The truth is nobody can agree when exactly Lord Voldemort became who he was, but we do know he aspired to rule over Magical Britain like a tyrant and reshape it according to his ideals. Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Why did so many people join You-Know-Who, Professor?”

Lupin sighed, rubbing his brow.

“Why indeed?” he echoed, eyes growing distant. “There’s no single reason. The Dark Lord was highly charismatic and a master of manipulation. He promised to restore the old glory of families and clans that

prided themselves on their storied magical lineage. Those slighted by the suppression of the Pureblood riots a few years earlier under Minister Jenkins.”

The professor paused, as if to let the words sink in. Surely enough, the classroom was deathly quiet, and every student was listening with rapt attention—something unseen in History of Magic before.

“When that wasn’t enough,” Lupin continued, “there were whispers about his unmatched power, on top of widespread fearmongering over being controlled by Muggles. And then, once they were convinced, they would be led to break the law, be it by a serious case of Muggle baiting, the use of the Unforgivables, or outright murder—and then, they would have no other choice but to continue following the Dark Lord or enjoy a hefty stay in Azkaban Prison. Of course, as Voldemort’s power and followers grew, so did his methods turn more tyrannical and forceful.”

“What about the creatures, Professor?” Neville Longbottom asked, face solemn. “Why did werewolves, dementors, giants, and the others follow the Dark Lord? It doesn’t make sense—creatures like that are universally disdained by the more traditional and darker families and distrusted by the more progressive factions in the Wizarding World.”

“It’s precisely that disdain and distrust, coupled with promises of power, respect, acknowledgement of rights, and fewer restrictions, that Voldemort used to lure them in,” was the grim response. “Now, I’m aware that most of you here have been raised on stories about the Dark Lord or the horrors of the war, and my job here is to shed some light on the whens, the whys, and the hows as objectively as possible—yes, Mr Fawley?”

The usually cocky Hufflepuff looked like a pufferfish trying to hold down his snort. Eventually, he succeeded and coughed lightly instead, but the doubt in his words was palpable. “How can we know what you’re teaching us is as objective as possible, Professor?”

“My job here is to teach you, not tell you what to think, Mr Fawley.” The Professor pinned the Hufflepuff with a flinty gaze, and the boy eventually shrank back in his seat. “After all, it’s hard to be manipulated or lured by lies if you’re aware of the truth, no matter how grim. I have made a selection of articles—both Muggle and magical, including those from the Continent, to show every angle of the war, its effects, and the consequences. As most of you should be aware, its victims were not merely Muggles or Muggleborns, and the consequences can be felt to this day.”

Ron was wide awake until the end of the class, and so was everyone else. If nothing else, Professor Lupin knew how to teach—not even for a moment did he feel drowsy. What chilled Ron the most was that it took over two years and more than fifteen hundred people disappearing before the Ministry started acting, and a small part of those missing persons had been magical. Even the wizards and witches first targeted had been Muggle-born and half-bloods of little renown.

Or that four-fifths of the squibs in Magical Britain had been slaughtered, and nobody talked about it because their absence was convenient.

Even the Ministry had done very little to protect them from the Death Eaters.

“Ugh, why did such a cool professor have to teach a boring subject like History?” Seamus complained after they finished class. “Just imagine if he had taught Defence instead of Perrywinkle. I swear to Merlin, that man could put bloody Peeves to sleep.”

“Well, History class certainly isn’t boring anymore,” Dean countered. “I like it!”

The rest of their classes remained unchanged, with the exception of McGonagall’s, the old Transfiguration Mistress looked even older than last year, as if she had aged for half a decade during the summer. Her wrinkles had doubled, and her silvery hair was turning white, but her sternness remained the same. There were three hours until dinner when his classes ended, so Ron busied himself brewing his newest batch of Protein Potions in a secluded, abandoned classroom on the fifth floor.

Thankfully, the ingredients were so cheap that Damien had not even blinked an eye when he offered to supply him because nobody had bothered his sister in Gryffindor thanks to Ron. That and the fact that Tori drank the thing like Pumpkin Juice and somehow turned even livelier. Astoria still looked a little drowsy at times, but it wasn’t as bad as before—probably the result of troubled sleep.

At times, Ron was tempted to sell the recipe for the Protein Potion to Damien, who generously promised a tenth of the sales in royalties. No matter how unpopular the potion would be due to the average wizard’s aversion to physical exertion, it would still sell to Quidditch players or something, giving Ron a steady stream of income. The only problem was that the actual creator of the Potion was the bloody Dark Lord, and his crazy followers were on the loose. What if they recognised the Protein Potion and went after Ron?

Thus, he could only brew it for himself, Astoria, and Luna. Perhaps once all the Azkaban escapees were captured, he could think about it again.

Ron finished the batch of Potions an hour later, put aside the silver cauldron (also borrowed from Damien), and prepared for his run. No matter how much jogging killed his gains, Ron still did it at least twice a week because he *needed* that stamina. He would have gone for a swim as well, but the last time he dove into the Black Lake, he had to wrestle a couple of monsters that he later learned were Grindylows.

He knew there were merpeople, but they didn’t bother him, though they didn’t help him either; at least the Giant Squid was friendly. Finding a place to swim in Hogwarts seemed far harder than he expected. Over the summer, he had regularly swum in the pond by the Burrow or the stream by Luna’s house. Miss Lovegood had even created an enchanted swimming pool for Ron, Luna, and Astoria by the end of August, but they scarcely had a week to enjoy it.

As he was stirring the cauldron, Luna and Astoria came to find him; the two of them had become a nearly inseparable pair. Ron had even found himself tutoring his new friends in Transfiguration and Charms when they struggled last year, which was somehow more useful than actually reviewing the material himself.

Today, his friends looked uncharacteristically excited; Luna practically skipped from happiness.

“So you two decided to go to that secret club, eh?” Ron asked cautiously. Two days ago, Juno Black invited Luna to a secret meeting, with explicit permission to invite Astoria and himself.

“Yes,” his friends chorused, then Astoria added, “You should come with us too.”

“Come on, Ron,” Luna urged, her silvery eyes pleading at him the way only she could. “It could be something interesting. Juno is harmless, I promise.”

“On a first-name basis with Bellatrix Lestrangle’s daughter?” Ron tutted. “I mean, I know Black isn’t her father or mother, but what does any of this have to do with me?”

“Juno Black has never invited anyone like this before,” Astoria explained patiently. “She requested a measure of secrecy, too. This can be an opportunity to have fun, you know?”

“Black might be many things, but fun? Pull the other one, Tori.”

“Yes, she is fun, she’s organising the whole meeting with Potter,” Luna said dreamily. “Our Merlin and Morgana come again.”

Astoria only squealed—she was Juno’s number one fan after the Black witch had climbed to first place in the duelling club in a few months last year.

“Those two are always busy doing their own thing, so they surely wouldn’t call us for nothing,” the youngest Greengrass sibling gushed. “Goodness, I still can’t believe she invited you in person! I heard Potter approached Granger at the library later, only to be rudely declined—and there are rumours the Boy-Who-Lived likes the Muggle-born girl!”

That didn’t sound likely, considering Ron had once caught Harry Potter glance at Granger with some sort of... not exactly nostalgia, but not exactly pity either. He was sure it wasn’t love or even infatuation, though.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to remember that Potter and Black are the same age as me,” Ron said, trying to ignore Astoria’s enthusiasm. “Eh, fine. I suppose going to check what they want once won’t hurt. So, where’s that meeting?”

“The abandoned wing on this floor,” Luna beamed at him. “It’s in twenty minutes.”

“Uh-uh. First, we have to get Ron presentable,” Astoria added, critically inspecting Ron’s robes.

“There’s nothing wrong with how I’m dressed,” Ron said defensively.

Then, Astoria drew her wand, tapping on an old bat spleen stain on his sleeve, and murmured, “Scourgify.”

The stubborn stain turned slightly paler as the blonde’s frustration grew as she poked at it again, all but yelling, “Scourgify!”

“Just leave it.” Ron pulled his still-stained sleeve away. “It’s barely noticeable on dark robes anyway.”

“You can’t just look like some vagabond, Ronald,” the frustrated reply only made him snort.

Regardless of Astoria's protests about proper appearances, the three friends hurried to the other side of the fifth floor, where a small hallway with a few broom closets and three abandoned classrooms could be found. It was a part of the castle that didn't lead to dormitories, classrooms, or offices, so students rarely ever visited unless they were exploring the castle.

At the entrance of the hallway, they met with the seventh-year Hufflepuff Prefect, who insisted her name was Tonks. No, the prefect badge was replaced by a shinier golden badge—Tonks was now Head Girl. She was a few inches taller than Ron, and smelled nice. Not only that, but she looked nice too—*all* of her.

As her gaze caught him staring, Ron felt his ears heat up. Her next words replaced his embarrassment with irritation.

"So you twerps got invited too, eh?" She tutted. "Damn, my cuz' is ambitious."

"We're not twerps!" Astoria indignantly protested.

"Your height suggests otherwise," Tonks countered, looking down on the two blondes from head to toe. "At least your boyfriend has some meat on him—looking more like a bull."

Ron felt numb. Luna nodded as if it were the most normal thing in the world, while Astoria gaped at the older girl. "He's not our b-b-boyfriend," she stuttered out, face red.

"But he's your friend and a boy, isn't he?" the older Hufflepuff drawled. "That would make him your *boy-friend*—"

"Stop teasing the young ones," an extremely familiar and annoying voice interrupted. "George, look at this older Puff trying to prey on our young lions—even our innocent little Ronniekins!"

"I see it, Fred, and I think that five against one is a fitting match for our esteemed Head Girl," his older twin brother agreed.

"Why are *you* here?" Ron forced out, turning to glare at his older brothers, as his hands were already balled into fists.

"Because we were invited, of course," George said, showing both his hands as if to show they were empty. At least they had learned not to mess with Ron, but he still struggled to trust them—they had only grown more unpredictable over the last year and subtler in their pranks, too.

"Oh, quite the crowd has started to gather already!"

The jovial voice belonged to Cedric Diggory, whose face was as punchable as ever. Ron didn't know why, but there was something in the smiling older boy that just made Ron itch to smack him in the nose. Accompanying him were the wary Susan Bones and the shy Hannah Abbot, who tried to hide behind her red-haired friend.

"Enough fighting," the monotone words broke the tension as the Carrow twins strolled over, walking in perfect synchrony with their expressionless faces, making Ron's skin crawl even after seeing it for two years. "Let's get inside. Harry and Juno are waiting."

The infamous twin shades of Slytherin led them towards the bottom of the hallway and opened the old, worn-out door.

The classroom inside was cleaner and brighter than any other they had seen, with five big round tables surrounded by posh-looking tapered chairs and a large desk at the podium, where Potter sat cross-legged on the floor, with his eyes closed. But he didn't seem to be sleeping, for the Boy-Who-Lived grasped his wand as a small stream of dull yellow flame slithered out of its tip, twisting into various animal shapes before fizzling out.

There were no incantations or wand-waving, but somehow Ron felt that Potter was even more dangerous than usual. And that was beside his physique, which was rapidly catching up to Ron's efforts. Juno Black stood by his side with a blank expression. Though the absolute monster of a black serpent that occupied all of the desk and basked under the attention of the witch's long, pale fingers looked like something Hagrid would raise.

Was this Harry Potter's infamous pet snake that nobody had seen since last year? The damned thing's torso was broader than Ron's shoulders, and it was at least ten meters long, though he had trouble saying where the serpent began and where it ended, as it twisted into one giant scaly tangle over the desk.

Luna cooed at the beast, and the snake wiggled happily and waved a pointy tail at the girl, as if to greet her back.

Only then did Ron turn to the others inside the classroom.

Anthony Goldstein, Diana Taylor, Padma Patil, and Morag MacDougal from Ravenclaw were clustered around one of the tables. On the next table sat Draco Malfoy, Damien and Daphne Greengrass—the former twin gave him a subtle nod, while the typically overproud Malfoy didn't even glance his way.

The last person was an older Slytherin girl with grey eyes, a face that reminded Ron of a vulture, and a prefect badge on her chest.

"Ralina Selwyn," he heard Fred murmur as he glared at her, only to earn himself a nasty smirk.

Ron counted five Gryffindors, four HufflePuffs, six Ravenclaws, and six Slytherins here—a total of twenty-one people that made the vast classroom half-full, and each group settled along an empty table, with those from the same house naturally clustering together. Ron felt his nerves stretched taut: out of the four houses here, the Gryffindors were the weakest.

They were more than the Hufflepuffs, but neither Astoria nor Luna were any good at duelling, let alone fighting. They were the only second-years here and had missed out on Professor Quirrell's valuable lessons, whose demise was lamented even to this day. In contrast, studying under Lockhart and Professor Perrywinkle was not nearly as effective or illuminating, unless you were interested in the very dry academic theory of Defence.

Fred and George had noticed the disparity, too, judging by their vigilant expressions.

Ron was content to remain quiet and observe for now.

"Some of you might be wondering why I've invited you here," Juno broke the silence as Potter stood up by her side, his wand nowhere to be seen. Merlin, his gaze was intense.

"We are," one of the twins—probably Fred, said dramatically. "It was very vague and mysterious."

"Indeed, indeed." The other one grinned. "How could we resist such a vaguely worded summons from our resident Dark Lady?"

A few chuckled—mostly the Puffs, but Ron felt sweat trickle down his back as Juno's lips curled with disdain. Fred and George had the right of it, though. The invitation was interesting, and Ron *needed something* interesting to break the monotony that had taken hold of his life in the last few months.

The pair of Potter and Black was not something that could be ignored. Whether it was power, looks, knowledge, or heritage, none was lacking even in the slightest, as Astoria would say.

"I shall be frank, then," the Ravenclaw witch began, her voice caressing his ears like velvet. "Whoever you are, and wherever you live, it has most certainly not escaped your attention that the Wizarding World is growing more and more dangerous by the year."

"It is plain to see," Tonks agreed loudly. "But we're just a bunch of children here, cousin, and we can hardly do anything about it. I am the oldest amongst us and might be of age, but that doesn't make me feel any safer once I graduate."

"Alone, it would be hard," Potter was the one to reply, his voice firm. "There's only so much a single witch or wizard can do, no matter how powerful. The reason you are here is that I believe together, we can make a difference."

"Hogwarts is safe as long as Dumbledore is here," Fred said loudly.

"Yes," Diggory agreed, nodding eagerly. "And nobody here wants to risk their lives and fight for some elusive ideal. No offence, Potter, you seem like a decent guy, but that's far from enough to get us to join a fighting cult with *unknown* goals."

Ron and the other Hufflepuffs found themselves nodding in agreement.

"Unlike what some of you are thinking, this is not a club aiming at fighting or world domination," Potter countered dryly. "But an advanced study group where we help each other."

"A subtle show of inter-house unity," Juno added. "A group where we help each other through those trying times. Meaningful collaboration in the name of real, substantive change for all of us here."

Astoria's nose wrinkled as she threw a disdainful glance towards the table where the Slytherins looked all thoughtful. "Cooperating with the likes of Malfoy? How'd you even get him to stand being in the same room as Taylor?"

"I have nothing against Diana Taylor, Greengrass," Malfoy rebutted righteously, patting his chest. "I am not someone as narrow-minded as to—er—discriminate against her just because she's born in the Muggle world."

Fred snorted. "I can scarcely believe that, George."

"I can hardly believe it, too, brother mine. After all, I do remember him picking on our little brother two years ago *because* he was a Weasley. How can we trust such a person to cooperate with us?"

"A bout of childish folly on my part," was the reluctant reply. "I have seen the error of my ways."

Surprisingly, Malfoy glanced at Ron and gave him an apologetic nod.

"More like his nose did all the seeing if the rumours are true," Astoria murmured loud enough only for Ron and Luna to hear. He managed to keep a straight face, but the blonde girl didn't even bother and started giggling.

That won her a few odd glances, but surprisingly, nobody said anything.

It was true, Ron had found that a good smack on the nose could set many straight and deter berks. It was almost as good as magic in that sense.

"There's much to be gained from working together." Black's melodic voice stifled any further argument. "Past grievances should be mended. Cooperation is our goal here, and if you're not willing to at least give it a try, I request that you vacate the room, for I have judged you wrongly, and this advanced study group is not for you."

Nobody moved a muscle. If anything, the Slytherins looked giddy at the opportunity, the Ravenclaws were amused, but it was the Hufflepuffs and the Gryffindors who were hesitant.

"Look, this is all well and good, but what exactly are we going to be doing?" Susan Bones asked forcefully, glancing at the Carrow twins and then at Ron's brothers with open distrust. "If this is a study group, why all the secrecy? We're not here to break laws or do dark magic."

Her wary gaze settled on the big snake lazily lounging on the desk.

"And nobody will force or suggest you do so," Potter said, giving an encouraging smile at Bones that made her redden on the spot. Ron ruthlessly suppressed the sudden pang of jealousy, while Astoria and Luna leaned forward, eager to catch his every word. "Of course, all cooperation must start somewhere. Juno and I are willing to host this advanced study club twice a week and tutor you in areas of your choosing."

"Sounds too good to be true," Ron voiced his suspicions, scratching his nose as over a dozen gazes settled on him. Trying to ignore them, he hastily continued, "I mean, I can see Potter helping people out of the goodness of his heart, but that would mean it gets in the way of his training time. What's in it for you, Black? Where's the catch?"

"Isn't it obvious, Weasley?" Ralina Selwyn was the one to reply, looking at him as if he were a total idiot.

“What Miss Selywn means to say is that Potter and Black will obviously help us in exchange for favours,” Damien explained, ignoring the glare from his older housemate as Daphne snickered by his side.

“Duelling training from Potter is something that no amount of gold can buy, for example, and his name carries weight even outside Magical Britain. Together with Juno, who stands to inherit the Black and Lestrangle fortunes and Wizengamot seats, there’s little the two of them can’t accomplish given sufficient time.”

“Then why do they need us?” Fred asked. “I mean, I would admit that the two of them are scarily talented and hardworking, but why us?”

“Because it’s easier to achieve your goals when you’re not alone,” Morag MacDougal said. “Perhaps you need to get it spelt out for you. You get access to more resources, connections, protection—even sponsorship, and just the name of Potter or Black is enough to open doors previously closed to you. In fact, even pursuing an apprenticeship under a Master is not out of the question if you put in the effort. Or a cushy, well-paying job waiting for you as soon as you graduate.”

But the more you gained, the more you would owe Potter and Black. Nobody voiced it, but Ron heard it anyway. This was clever, cunning, even. But neither the Slytherins nor the Ravenclaws seemed to mind. In fact, the snakes were all but salivating over the opportunity. The promise of Mastery was quite appealing—Ron had heard Bill and Charlie complain that no matter how much they studied, none of the masters were willing to take them in as apprentices.

“The Masters of Magic were all proud and prickly,” his father had said when Ron asked once. “Whether it was pedigree, wealth, talent, or hard work, they all have their requirements. Those Masters willing to ignore things like wealth and lineage demand absolute talent, and then some. Why else do you think Dumbledore never got himself an apprentice?”

“You only need to stand behind Juno and Harry and back them in turn,” one of the Carrows spoke dispassionately. “Such arrangements are far from novel, whether patronage, alliances, or tutoring. Didn’t you accept the priceless Transfiguration notes without saying anything when offered, Diggory? Abbot and Bones, haven’t you already received obscure Charms books that would take you years to find otherwise? And you, Fred and George—I did not see you declining the offer to get a direct line to an ingredients supplier. This is merely the tip of the iceberg.”

Susan Bones and Diggory looked thoughtful. His twin brothers scoffed. “You want to buy us, then?”

“A good deal is one where both sides are satisfied,” Juno countered. “I have some idea of your future aspirations, you know. If you find mine or Harry’s terms of patronage unfavourable in the future, you don’t have to agree. There is no point in forcing anyone to do things against their will.”

Fred and George no longer looked so mutinous.

Hannah Abbot raised her hand, earning herself some snickers, mostly from Daphne and Selwyn. The girl shrank under the attention, but her hand did not dip.

"This isn't a class, Hannah, and we're not professors," Harry smiled kindly. "Just ask if you have a question."

"Err, thanks, Harry," she said shyly. "But... how do we know that your goals are not... dark?"

A cold, harsh laughter tore from Potter's throat.

"My goals... are probably not what you think. Some of you might even find it funny," he said, eyes turning distant. "I want to survive. No, mere survival is not nearly enough. I want to thrive and live a long, fruitful life."

"Well, a bold claim for someone spending most of his waking hours training without end," Diggory pointed out.

"It's precisely because I want to thrive and live long that I train hard," Potter bit back harshly. "Do you think all those Death Eaters have forgotten the one who vanquished their master? Do you think the Ministry of Magic will help me any more than they helped my parents? Or perhaps no ambitious dark wizard won't think of slaying the one who defeated the Dark Lord to boost their fame? The world isn't so kind, and being the Boy-Who-Lived is more of a burden than you can ever imagine."

Potter didn't look burdened, Ron thought. Instead, he looked ready to fight ten rounds against anyone who attacked him and blast them into smithereens. '*I get you*,' Ron thought. He understood the need to survive, even if he hadn't gone through whatever Potter had.

Would he be on a similar path if Ron had to deal with some bloodthirsty dark wizards after his head instead of school bullies trying to make his life hard?

"That's terrible!" Astoria gasped, looking horrified. "But surely you are safe in Hogwarts?"

"Not always," Juno was the one to reply. "You only joined last year and weren't here for the troll attack or the murder. And I know what some of you are thinking. I will *not* follow in the footsteps of my mother or father. This is a *study group*, not a gathering of junior Death Eaters or dark wizards."

"I'm in!" Tonks's loud declaration stunned many of them, including her housemates. "What are you looking at me like that for? If my little cousin and Potter offer boons and terms that even the purebloods like Greengrass and Malfoy would salivate over so easily, why would I refuse?"

"Didn't Potter just say people are after him?" Bones questioned. "The Blacks might have been powerful and influential at times, but they're only reduced to a single witch, not even an adult, alone and unable to resist those who want to seek reprisal for past slights or aim to control the Black and the LeStrange fortune. I bet even her parents are looking for her. This study group promises much, probably *because* associating with you might put us in harm's way."

Juno Black's pale face turned frostier, but Ron noticed she didn't deny any of it. Even Tonks started to look hesitant.

"You would cower at the slightest risk?" Daphne Greengrass mocked. "Is this all that Hufflepuff amounts to these days?"

Susan's face reddened in anger, but before she could explode, Harry Potter spoke up.

"There is no need to goad each other. Bones isn't wrong—associating with Juno and me so closely is not without dangers," Harry Potter acknowledged. "This is one of the reasons why we insisted on secrecy. Our cooperation will remain hidden to avoid such scenarios."

"And how can you guarantee that?" Fred asked. "What stops someone from just tattling? Or even something far more mundane, like accidentally slipping a mention?"

"There's a reason no gossips or braggarts were invited, regardless of their connections," Astoria said, her pale face scrunched up in thought. "Or those too stubborn. I bet everyone here has shown a certain level of discretion to pass the requirements. Otherwise, they would have invited Fawley, Smith, Burke, Nott, McLaggen, or even Belby. Lady Black is aiming for a balanced gathering of wealth, talent, connections, and prudence here."

"You are quite right, Miss Greengrass," Juno acknowledged, smiling slightly. "That and the fact that I *will* know if someone has broken our secrecy." The cold words lingered in the air as a promise that such indiscretions would be punished one way or another. "This is why I allow you to walk away now. You can withdraw later, too, but there might be some strings attached concerning secrecy and silence."

"That doesn't address the problem of danger," Cedric Diggory mused. "You and Potter might be good with a wand, but you can hardly be everywhere at once."

"True, but that's why this is a secret study club, is it not?" Juno tilted her head, her blue eyes were alight with amusement. "Of course, there's another way of dispelling such doubts. An initiation, if you would. You can fight against Harry, right here, right now."

"I stand no chance," the older Hufflepuff instantly raised his hands in surrender.

"Oh, of course you don't. I meant *all* of you should fight Harry. *At the same time.*" The Black witch laughed as she stepped away, and the snake that was curled on the floor like a small mound of scales slithered to her side. "Or are you quick to concede even if there are nineteen of you and only one of him?"

Such a demeaning challenge lit a fire in Ron's belly. He was far from the only one; even the Slytherins and the Ravenclaws seemed to be irked by Juno's casual arrogance and the way Potter dismissively shrugged, as if fighting nineteen of them was nothing challenging.

"We'll fight," Cedric declared righteously. "Rules?"

"Knock out or disarm Harry and you win," was Juno's amused response. "Well, let's get to it. Draw your wands and avoid anything lethal or maiming. On my mark. Mark!"

It was sudden, and many of them still did not even look like they were ready to duel, but the moment Black finished, Harry Potter spun into motion and fired three spells before anyone could even react.

Looking at the targets, Ron knew they had already lost.

Ralina Selwyn, Nymphadora Tonks, and Cedric Diggory lost their balance, flailing their limbs and fell down, looking rattled by the pink spell that struck them. When they tried to stand up, they only fell back again. They were not stunned, merely blinking in confusion and looked like someone struck by a good hook on the chin—was this some sort of Chin-Rattling Hex?

The choice of the older years was deliberate—they knew silent casting and could possibly slow down Potter.

Ron had no further time to contemplate, as Harry Potter was like one of those Muggle machine guns he had heard his father speak about—releasing a barrage of spells at lightning speeds. His wand was a blur, and any curse or jinx that flew his way was unceremoniously batted back straight at their sender. Even his Ravenclaw friends were not spared, the jets of light crashing into them one after another as they tried to evade, shield, or retaliate. He was focusing on Fred and George, too, and his two brothers quickly fell despite everyone else trying to shower him with spells.

Potter was like a slippery eel, twisting and jerking out of the way of any spell he couldn't deflect back. For a moment, it looked like they would manage to overcome him, but he summoned one of the desks before him like one giant shield, and turned it to stone, as the spells splashed harmlessly against it. Even Ron's Knockback Jinx barely dented the thing.

Potter's head and shoulders were the only thing vulnerable—a far smaller and harder target to hit than his body. Worse, with the stone desk as cover, the Ravenclaw only pressed the offence, and even more started falling.

It felt like Potter had three sets of hands and five wands on him.

Ron barely dodged a Stinging Hex and managed to cry out, "Protego!" when another spell came his way. His well-practised shield was torn like paper, and the spell slammed into his wrist.

Wincing, Ron dropped his wand, unable to clench his fingers from the jolting pain. His wrist was already all swollen and red, as if it had been stung by a giant hornet instead of a Stinging Hex.

Within thirty seconds, nearly all of them were knocked out, disarmed, or stunned; only the Carrow twins barely withstood Potter's onslaught of spells, as one of them only defended using Transfiguration, and the other attacked, their spells chantless. Perhaps that's why they managed to resist, if barely. The Boy-Who-Lived was still faster than the two of them combined—they would lose; it was only a matter of time.

Ron clenched his left hand and charged at Potter while his attention was on the twin shades. After all, there were no rules against knocking out or disarming Potter without magic. A part of him was curious if the Boy-Who-Lived would just drop like a bag of rocks when socked in the face.

The distance was merely a dozen yards, but it was too long.

By the time Ron neared, the Carrow twins were already overwhelmed, and Potter was now facing him. Thick ropes exploded from the tip of his wand, and Ron found himself tightly bound and unable to move

as he tumbled onto the floor. It was a surprisingly soft fall, familiar with the way he had fallen during Quirrell's practice duels. When had Potter cast a Cushioning Charm on the floor?

One minute. There were nineteen of them against Harry Potter, and they had not lasted one minute. The Boy-Who-Lived was not in danger, not really. *He was the danger*, Ron realised as he stared at the wooden ceiling. Those who could possibly pose a threat to Potter had been knocked out before they could even resist, and the rest could hardly offer any meaningful fight, having to incant every single spell.

"You leveraged the element of surprise and our lack of teamwork to win," Tonks grouched as she stood up, her body wobbling uncertainly. "We weren't mentally prepared to fight!"

"Yes, Harry took all of the advantages he could. But does it make his victory any less impressive?" Juno asked knowingly as she walked around the fallen, dispelling any spells and healing mild injuries, including his swollen wrist with an "Episkey!"

"So, who is interested in signing up for our exclusive *study* group?" She brought out a luxurious grey piece of parchment and a golden quill, both of which looked more expensive than the Burrow. "Sign your name, but know this—if you speak of this group to others without permission, your name here will turn red, and I will know immediately. Let it be said that I warned you all."

The names of Harry James Potter and Juno Bellatrix Black were already written in decisive gold letters at the top. Above them glowed the words *Defence Association*, written stylishly in the same bronze colour Ravenclaw was known for.

Draco Malfoy, Luna, and Astoria were the first to sign their names without hesitation. Ron, feeling ashamed to be behind Malfoy and young witches in bravery, was the next to sign. By the end, everyone had signed, if some hesitated more than others, mostly the younger Hufflepuffs.

10th of September, Friday (4 days later)

Albus Dumbledore

He stared at the sea in indecision. He should have moved seven days ago, Albus knew.

A more rational part of his mind claimed that rushing blindly without research would be risky and alert and scare off his former student and the Death Eaters.

After arranging for one of his ICW contacts to conduct a subtle investigation into the matter, he meditated.

Two Hallows were in his grasp. He could feel the thrum of their power; both the Death Stick and the Resurrection Stone were in eerie harmony with each other. There was some other power to them, not merely magic, but only further enhanced by time, far easier to sense now that the two of them were together. Getting the Death's Cloak to complete the set would be child's play.

No matter how talented, Harry Potter was only thirteen and could never resist Dumbledore. There was no need to use force either; the young wizard could probably be convinced to borrow the cloak, no matter how suspicious he seemed.

He could do it. Albus Dumbledore could be the first wizard to unite the Deathly Hallows and conquer death. At that moment, Voldemort, morals, right, or wrong, none of it mattered.

'Do it,' the Death Stick urged, its whispers thrice as strong as before. 'Grasp the world with your hands and destroy all those who oppose you. Your weakness will be your undoing. Fight, kill them all!'

The Resurrection Stone was no less insidious. Each time he glanced at the dark stone, he would see Ariana's face, beckoning him, and his heart would fill with guilt and longing.

And thus, he spent the next seven days meditating, keeping his mind drained of all thoughts until the silence returned.

Albus stared at the sea in indecision, the Resurrection Stone feeling like a hot ember in his palm, threatening to burn through his flesh. It would be easy to pour his magic inside and activate it, bend the magic to his will.

The dead were not meant to linger in the world of the living after they had passed away. It was wrong, a vile sacrilege against the laws of magic and men. He could do it. He could tear through that last constraint.

But if there were a first time, who was to say there would not be a second? Or a third? What if he decided to give in to the Death Stick's allure, too?

Albus Dumbledore wanted to cast the Stone into the cold, dark depths of the North Sea. But the thought was like a stab through his mind, and his heart was unwilling. A little voice in his mind eerily similar to Gellert whispered that the Resurrection Stone wanted to be used and would find a new master regardless.

In the end, Albus cursed his weakness and Disapparated away.

It was night, and the graveyard of Godric's Hollow was empty, save for a single visitor lingering in front of Ariana Dumbledore's gravestone.

His brother spun and angrily stabbed a finger at Albus's chest. "You! You have no right to be here!"

In front of Ariana, Aberforth's old anger was rekindled, tearing the veneer of apathy.

"Yet here I am," Albus offered sadly. "Eaten away by guilt all those years. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"No," the reply was decisive, giving without an ounce of hesitation. "No amount of forgiveness will bring my sister back."

With a pop, Aberforth Disapparated, leaving Albus Dumbledore alone with the weight of his ghosts.

Here stood over the graves of James and Lily Potter, a monument in the stone to yet another of his failures. He could even feel Ignotus Peverell's resting place at the far corner, thrumming with a power similar to the Death Stick and the Resurrection Stone, if far more subdued. Even the wisest of the Three Brothers had failed to escape death in the end, but at least Ignotus Peverell had died on his own terms.

A surge of indignation spiced with anger erupted from his chest. How would he be any lesser than the third Peverell brother?!

Decisively squashing the temptation rising in his mind, Albus slashed the Wand of Destiny, casting the most powerful Anti-Scrying Charms he was capable of, channelling nearly all of his power in them, and

with another flick, the Resurrection Stone sank into Ariana's tombstone, disappearing in the worn-out marble, just beneath the engraving saying, '*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*'

"I have failed you in life," he whispered sorrowfully, dipping his head. "I shall not fail you in death just to assuage my own conscience. Let this thrice-cursed Hallow remain here as an eternal symbol of my regret."

With a thundering *crack*, Albus Dumbledore apparated away, as the Headmaster of Hogwarts finally returned to his castle.

Author's Endnote: DA lives again... but with a different purpose. Albus Dumbledore is back on track.