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12th of September, Saturday, 1992 (6 days later)

Divination Teacher's office

Harry

Phoenixes are solitary creatures, and only a scant few seem to tolerate the company of select wizards. While extraordinary in many ways, their unnatural strength and unmatched affinity for fire are often overlooked or ignored in favour of their nearly miraculous tears.

Phoenix tears are an extraordinary ingredient, more potent than the finest potions in their raw form. As with spells, they hold power because of their sincere intent, which means their effect will be significantly weaker should one somehow procure phoenix tears that are not meant for them.

It also makes capturing phoenixes for their tears and ashes an endeavour as worthless as it is dangerous, so a word of caution for all those driven by greed.

Even if one figured out a way to deal with their ability to teleport, the last record of a captured phoenix was three hundred years ago, and the bird had simply exploded into a fiery storm, incinerating three of her captors, and chose not to rebirth after a month in captivity.

The priceless liquid also loses potency and turns into mere water over the course of forty-nine hours. Many attempts and research have been made to preserve phoenix tears for longer, but none have succeeded.

The facts above make their tears incredibly rare and even more valuable.

Harry leaned back and slumped on his chair, helplessly running a hand through his hair.

As usual, his plans didn't exactly pan out. A part of him could appreciate his luck last time, but deep inside, Harry dreaded gathering phoenix tears. It also dashed his hopes of simply purchasing them. Even if anyone sold tears, Harry would consider it a scam after reading *On Phoenixes*, an old tome written by Wulfric Dumbledore two hundred years ago.

Harry shuddered to think of the consequences if he had gone with his previous harebrained plan: find some dodgy wizard in Knockturn Alley selling phoenix tears and buy some via an owl. It would have been the most pitiful end if he had ventured into the Chamber of Secrets, killed the basilisk, and then died from its poison because his antidote turned out to be a fake.

Fawkes was here, but getting tears from him was easier said than done, especially when the said phoenix did not respond to his summons.

Did Fawkes even know he existed now that he was using a wand without his tail feather? Sadly, Harry didn't have all day to figure out the answer and couldn't afford to slack off on his usual training.

At least the casual invitation early in the morning from Sirius brightened his mood. While the last two weeks had been hectic, they managed to get together and were duelling.

“Not bad,” Sirius said, returning his wand as they wrapped up for the day. “You’re one scary child, Harry.”

For once, his godfather’s breathing was laboured. Unlike at the start, where Harry was defeated in a matter of seconds, he could easily hold his own for over a minute under Sirius’ onslaught. Mastering silent shielding and battle transfiguration had helped him last longer, or even counterattack.

Harry wiped the sweat stinging his eyes. “I still have a long way to go.”

“At this rate, you’ll defeat me within a year or two.” Sirius clicked his tongue as he waved his wand, and the few fallen vases returned to their stands—his godfather had charmed them unbreakable beforehand. “Tricky little bugger, compensating for power with speed. I might step up my game soon, or I’ll fail my role as the cool godfather.”

After returning his wand to its holster, Harry gazed at his hands. They were small, pale, and calloused. Truth be told, as a Seventh-Year, or a former outlaw on the run, he thought he had become strong enough to defeat his then-dead godfather.

But this Sirius was not the same scrawny, desperate fugitive from his memory; he was *better*. Could freedom and peace of mind make so much difference, or was it merely how things were in this world?

Two years to overcome his previous level didn’t sound too terrible. While Harry had far more magical power as a seventeen-year-old, his skills and knowledge had been polished to near perfection since then. All the relentless, single-minded practice was beginning to pay off. Harry’s movements were quicker, shedding each excessive motion slowly but surely; his magic felt like a rapid current beneath his skin, eager to obey his will as most spells became as easy as breathing, and his sense of duelling, no, *fighting and casting*, had improved drastically.

Over a year fully devoted to bettering himself in every way he could have resulted in a comprehensive and qualitative improvement far superior to what Harry expected. Some mornings, he struggled to crack his eyes open, too tired from squeezing his magic repeatedly until one drop from exhaustion, yet the results spoke for themselves. But was it enough? Could he keep this pace?

It had to be. All that training made him appreciate the small things, like the rare chance to sit down with his friends or seeing his godfather, far more.

Shaking off his thoughts, he focused on the present.

Harry sat on a chair in Sirius’ office and took a sip from the steaming cup of tea courtesy of Naly, one of the House Elves Sirius had somehow managed to recruit from the kitchens. The room was sprawling yet surprisingly well-ordered, with shelves filled with dusty tomes. A few crystal balls were chucked on top of the small library, but nothing else suggested this was a Divination professor’s office.

“So.” Harry paused to enjoy the tea’s soothing warmth spreading down his throat and into his stomach. “How’s teaching Divination like?”

“Amusing. My students all expected some mysticism, seer training, and whatnot, rather than the good old theory of Divination magic. There’s far more to it than seers and finicky prophecies, you know?”

“How’d you even get to teach Divination without having the Sight?”

“Easily,” came the amused response. “Dumbledore needed a teacher, and I accepted when he approached me.”

Harry deadpanned at his godfather, who only chortled. “Jokes aside, the Sight is not something that can be taught, but the rest... the rest can be learned. There are quite a few helpful divination spells that obscure your location, prevent scrying, and obfuscate your intent, even things like weather forecasts. Basic divination greatly assists Aurors in their criminal investigations, and most importantly, there are many more things mighty useful for *mischief*.”

No wonder his godfather was so good at the subject.

Harry couldn’t help but wonder how studying Divination under Sirius would be, but the thought was quickly dismissed; he had no time for such frivolities and could directly ask his godfather to teach him the relevant spells and any theory he didn’t know.

“Anyway,” Sirius leaned in with a grin. “You look somewhat bored.”

Harry paused mid-sip, blinking in confusion.

“What?”

His godfather scratched his nose, looking somewhat awkward.

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but Flitwick and McGonagall complained that they can barely hold your attention in class, even with all the additional materials they give you. None of their tasks seems to challenge you or pique your interest, even some from the *fifth-year curriculum*.”

“Well, things aren’t that hard,” Harry said, grimacing inwardly.

After all, he could hardly explain that he had already studied all of it once until his mind grew numb.

Despite the difference in the nature of magic, most of the theory and spells were the same—he had checked last year. Hogwarts only provided him with a relatively safe, magically rich environment that aided his growth and teachers who could answer his more obscure queries. And his friends too; in a year, his rivalry with Juno pushed him further in duelling than Harry could have gotten on his own.

Attending classes was more of a respite from his usual training and self-study this year than anything educational, but he should have expected the professors to catch on sooner or later.

Hogwarts was not just a school, though. For Harry, it was home, even more so than that ruined piece of land hidden in Wales.

“If things aren’t that hard, I can sign you up for the O.W.L.s,” Sirius said slowly, his grey eyes glinting with something that made Harry’s spine crawl. “Though only if you truly are certain. You can take a subject in O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s only once.”

“Perhaps later in the school year.” He had more important things than exams right now. Finding Tom’s diary and killing the basilisk came first, and he had to increase his training pace, no matter how dull or exhausting it could get.

Some mornings, he just wanted to rest for the day or even skip the morning jog, but when he closed his eyes, he saw those infernal red eyes glaring at him with untold malice. It was hard to stay in bed after that.

"Perhaps you need a break." His godfather's tone turned playful. "Or something to put your mind off things."

"I nap during Defence," Harry said, chuckling. "It's very restful. Lockhart doesn't even seem to notice the Disillusionment Charm." It was far easier than attracting the professor's ire because even one as useless as Gilderoy Lockhart could make his life irritating. It further exposed the man's incompetence to all.

Much to their friends' chagrin, Juno followed his example, though without any charms for cover, content to utterly ignore the professor and study theory in his lessons for all to see.

"You might not get to enjoy that for much longer." His godfather's face grew solemn. "Lucius Malfoy came in person to invite poor old Gil to a course inspection with the Board of Governors last evening."

"Gil?"

"Yep." Sirius wiggled his fingers mockingly. "I remember him from my school days, you know? A small and squeaky Ravenclaw four years my junior with a big mouth but nothing to back his talk. I guess he's still like that even after nearly two decades. Anyway, I don't think we'll see poor Gil's fake smile again. The Daily Prophet didn't bother pulling punches with him last week, and if Lucius' smug face came over for a visit last evening, the DMLE wouldn't be too far behind, no matter how incompetent they are."

"I wouldn't complain if I never had to look at Lockhart again," Harry said, but then he remembered a certain squat witch in pink and shuddered. "Though you hardly gave the poor man a rest with your pranks."

"Pranks? I am a most *serious*, rule-abiding teacher and would never stoop to such childish things!" Harry laughed at the overly righteous statement, and a moment later, Sirius broke his stern face. "What gave me away?"

"Your saccharine smile," Harry drawled. "You looked a tad too happy when Lockhart's hair turned bright pink."

"Guilty as charged. Watching his dandy face squirm just warms my cold, dead heart. In my defence, I expected him to have grown far more competent than he was as a third year."

"Well, he's certainly more competent in bragging, smiling, and deception..." Harry's jaw tightened as he recalled the rumours about him that had spread through the school last week. Some called him Potter the Evil because of his black pet serpent, despite Nyx using her new abilities to remain unseen. Suspiciously, a few, just as nasty ones, seemed to spread about Juno, even if few paid it any heed.

Morag claimed it was Lockhart himself who was pouring oil on that fire.

"Not competent enough, it seems. Anyway, enough about Lockhart. I do have a solution to your boredom, and no, it isn't training or more duels." His godfather grew uncharacteristically solemn and leaned forward. "Did you read through my gift?"

"I did. A riveting read on youthful daring." Never in his wildest dreams would Harry even attempt something so dangerous, illegal, and life-threatening like becoming an Animagus without adult help...

Harry inwardly cringed, remembering all of his misadventures and just how much of a hypocrite it made him. "I didn't know becoming an Animagus was considered a ritual, though."

"In its olden, more primitive forms, perhaps. The accepted new way we found is technically one foot in the discipline, but not quite. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to write our findings down."

"Wait, what?"

The next words made his insides twist.

"Ritual magic *literally* resists being written down. Nobody seems to know why, but it doesn't change the fact. Even if you somehow manage to do it, the order of words can be shuffled in a very lethal way. The rewards are potentially great, but so are the dangers." Sirius frowned. "I remember your mother complaining about it: it's nearly impossible to learn unless you find a master who can pass down his knowledge verbally or experiment, whether with yourself or others. Magic itself scrambles the meaning as you try to note any specifics down. Oh, how your incorrigible father corrupted the prim-and-proper Lily into highly illegal research."

The last bit was said in a light, joking tone, earning a small smile from Harry. He suspected his parents weren't saints, but hearing more—even their flaws and bad sides made them more real, more human.

Then, his mind turned to Sirius' words.

What came to mind was the sinister diary he had purchased from Borgin and Burke's so long ago. Surely enough, the introduction he barely bothered to read was full of mentions of blood and sacrifice—*preferably that of others*. Still, he hadn't seen anything specific that wouldn't be considered an introduction.

"No wonder half the phrasing was so annoyingly vague and fragmented at places. You were trying to circumvent any trouble. So," Harry released a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

"Animagus. Am I not too young for it? Your notes explicitly stated that there can be lasting consequences when done before the onset of maturity."

"Consequences being that there's some chance to gain a couple of traits from your beastly half," came the dry response. "Adolescence is a period of growth and change, and the Animagus transformation would surely tap into that, as opposed to doing it as an adult wizard. The warning was because it could be a negative, like becoming nauseous from seawater or increased sensitivity to light, depending on your beast. Still, most gains are positive, such as an increased sense of smell, perhaps greater endurance, or better hearing. Personally, my sense of smell for meat got better, and I could read body language more easily after I became a grim. Your father said he got nothing, and now that I think of it, Wormtail became more cowardly."

Sirius's face darkened at the mention of the treacherous rat.

Harry was no longer angry at Pettigrew. He no longer thought of the man at all. The knowledge that the traitor was rotting in Azkaban with dementors for company was enough.

"And I suppose the younger I do this, the higher the chances?" he asked.

His godfather rubbed his stubble thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. Maybe, maybe not, but perhaps you'll get some fancy form that might be useful."

"It might end up being something trivial or annoying like a goldfish or even a fly," Harry said, remembering a certain annoying reporter that could turn into a beetle.

"Your inner beast is connected to your character," said Sirius. "Peter was already cautious and shy even before he turned into a rat. Though from my experience, all animal forms come with certain benefits. In the worst case, you can use yours to escape or do other nifty tricks. Even a fly can... well, fly."

Harry almost asked why everyone didn't become an Animagus for the numerous benefits, but he didn't. He knew the answer: Transfiguration was inherently complex, extremely difficult to perform, and dangerous even to try on your body. Doubly more so for things that would be permanent, and very few wizards and witches had the talent, the discipline, or the daring to go far in it or pour in the effort required.

"I've never heard of someone so young even attempting this," his godfather continued, more solemn this time. "When we researched, the youngest Animagi was some talented kid from Uagadou who completed the process at thirteen and seven months under the purview of their Animagus Master. Well, your Transfiguration skills are certainly on par, almost as good as James in his sixth year, I'd say. I am here to find the ingredients and guide you through every step of the process with the potion, though, but only if you want to; we can do this some other year or not at all."

Harry was well aware of the functionality of an Animagus form, even without any of the potential boons Sirius promised. After all, he had seen both Wormtail and Padfoot use it to great effect. Could he afford to pass on such an ace in his sleeve or the potential advantages, no matter how minor, when facing unreachable magical titans like Dumbledore and Voldemort?

"I'll do it," he declared with far more confidence than he felt. Harry would never admit it out loud, but the mere notion of becoming a beast, even a critter that anyone would easily overlook, was appealing. He'd finally be able to get some measure of freedom.

Real freedom.

"Good." Sirius beamed at him, slapping a verdant teardrop-shaped leaf on the table. "We can begin right away. Coincidentally, tonight is the full moon, and you must keep this Mandrake leaf stuck to the rooftop of your mouth without magic until the next full moon. I'll make a proper Marauder out of you yet, kid!"

13th of September, Sunday, 1992 (Next morning)

His tongue was numb. As was his whole mouth.

Carrying a Mandrake leaf in his mouth was far more troublesome than Sirius' notes suggested. *'Try not to swallow or spit it out, or you'll be forced to begin anew, my arse.'*

The difficulty of the endeavour was not noted by a mere 'easy-as-pie', doubtlessly another joke from the incorrigible Marauders. Harry also had to hide the fact from the other teachers and students by not opening his mouth too much, which was something far easier said than done.

If he were ever ousted or forced to register as an Animagus, Harry did not doubt that the whole of Wizarding Britain would know in mere days. Gag order on his person or not, he could already imagine the newspaper headlines, "Boy-Who-Transforms", or other such monickers. Thankfully, there

was an adhesive trick Sirius showed him that involved no magic, so Harry only had to speak very little, which would be easy since he was never one for being overly wordy.

"The swollen tongue and numbness in your mouth will go away in less than three days," his godfather had said.

"Are you fine?" Juno's concerned voice brought him back to the present. He had just finished the morning jog with Juno, Diana, and the Carrow twins. Their Muggle-born friend had also joined them a week ago, full of desire to catch Captain Slynt's eye in next week's Quidditch tryouts.

"Somewhat tired," he said slowly, forcing his numb tongue to move in a way that produced actual speech instead of garbled fuffling. "Didn't sleep too well." Courtesy of another nightmare featuring the dreadful pair of crimson eyes that were turning more and more vivid with each night.

"It's Sunday," Diana said breathlessly, her face still flushed from the run. The chilly September morning in the Scottish Highlands didn't help her much either. "You can always go back to the dormitories and take a nice nap after breakfast."

Perhaps he would, if only after his morning spell practice. A nap in Hogwarts was enough to restore his spent magic.

"Sometimes you push yourself too hard," Hestia said, and Flora nodded along, both pairs of heterochromatic eyes full of worry when they looked his way.

"I'll be fine. I've slept poorly before." And no matter how tempting, Calming Draughts or Dreamless Sleep were not a long-term solution to his problems. Not even Occlumency seemed to help, much to his chagrin.

As soon as they entered the castle proper, his cousins turned to the dungeons while Harry, Juno, and Diana made their way to one of the many staircases leading to the Seventh floor.

"You think Lockhart will show up for the Aurors?" Diana asked. As Sirius had predicted, the fraud hadn't shown his face in school yesterday, and even a squad of Aurors from DMLE had come to Hogwarts last evening, looking for him.

"Unlikely," Juno said, almost sounding disappointed. "If he's not a fool, he would be as far away from the DMLE as he can get in a day."

Harry suspected the same. In a mere week, Lockhart's undeserved fame went up in flames. The possibly hefty legal trouble that would see him in Azkaban for a long time, if not for life, was the cherry on the cake. The Daily Prophet had smeared Lockhart terribly, digging out so much dirt, including actual legal fraud, tax evasion, forgery, conspiracy, use of banned substances, contraband, identity theft, inciting adultery, sexual assault, and illegal use of regulated magic.

Sure, Harry didn't trust the newspapers too much, and some of it might be opportunistic slander jumping on the bandwagon. Still, the detailed reports leaked accounts of victims, accusations, and more, which were suspiciously consistent and well-documented. All of the students in the school seemed to believe the Daily Prophet, especially after seeing his frankly pathetic showing as a teacher.

How could a conman so terrible at magic keep up such a farce for so long?

"I just hope we get someone reasonable as a replacement," Harry said.

Diana frowned. "Not good, but reasonable?"

"Not all good teachers are reasonable," Juno said quietly. "Like Slughorn and his boundless greed for connections, but I do have a good idea of who the replacement will be. I've heard a... rumour, let's say, that the Board is in talks with the DMLE, likely searching for an experienced Auror or a retired veteran."

"Doesn't Dumbledore hire the teachers, though?" Diana asked.

"Technically, they are the ones who vet new teachers and sift through the initial applications, even if the headmaster has the final say. It's handy since Dumbledore can throw the blame on them should anything happen with a new hire, just like he did last year."

Some things never changed.

Harry was intimately familiar with this particular tactic: Dumbledore loved to sit back and let the others suffer the consequences of their mistakes, then swoop in easily for damage control. Yet a part of him acknowledged that the headmaster couldn't possibly do everything either.

They heard a faint commotion somewhere around the sixth floor by the junction leading towards the Ravenclaw tower, which was quite rare so early in the morning.

"...don't belong here!"

"A lost snakeling and a little loon!"

God, he was too tired to deal with a spat between Slytherins and Gryffindors. He knew how those ended—or never ended, to be precise. But the choice of whether to involve himself was taken from his hands.

Just as Harry and Juno shared a look, Diana angrily stormed towards the mocking without even an ounce of hesitation and soon disappeared around the corner.

"Bold and fearless," Juno tutted, though her lips twitched with amusement as she followed their friend's footsteps, wand drawn. "Moreso than most Gryffindors I know."

The commotion paused for a second as Diana announced her presence loudly. "Do you not have any shame?"

Harry let out an exasperated sigh as the pale yew wand eagerly leapt into his grasp.

"Tsk, this doesn't concern you, little eagle." It was an annoyingly familiar yet somewhat boyish voice. Harry noticed that a few portraits had been awoken by the commotion; some pretended to be asleep while others just went away, trying to ignore the whole thing.

It reminded Harry of his time in Muggle school when Dudley and his friends bullied him. Most people would rather avoid trouble, especially when it did not concern them. Not Diana, though.

"Go away... or else."

The threat didn't seem to faze Diana at all.

"Why don't you pick someone your own size?" she shot back.

"Like you?"

Harry finally stepped around the corner, only to discover he was mistaken in his earlier assumptions. Cormac McLaggen and three other third and fourth-years were crowding around Astoria Greengrass

and Luna Lovegood—this wasn't even the expected House rivalry, but something even sadder. Trouble inside Gryffindor.

And then there was Diana, angrily pointing a finger at McLaggen's nose without an ounce of fear, despite all the boys being a head taller than her, with shoulders nearly twice as wide as she was.

"Ashford, Nettleby, Snodgrass, and McLaggen," Juno said in her silky voice, making the older boys turn to her, faces pale. Despite being a second year, she was as tall as they were. "Quite the lineup for two first-year girls, I'd say. Little Greengrass and Lovegood must be fearsome to require so many of you to deal with."

Diana, looking somewhat abashed, hastily took a step back and hurriedly made her way between Harry and Juno, finally realising the power disparity.

"This is just a misunderstanding," one of the boys said, hastily stepping away from the two first-year witches as he glanced at Harry's glowing wand as if it were a poisonous viper about to lunge. They feared him for some reason, and his mind quickly caught up on why—his summer duelling jaunt.

"Of course." Juno nodded, though her tone sounded as if she was speaking to a small child, and Harry almost struggled to stifle his laughter. "A grave misunderstanding. Let it stay one, so I won't need to go to Professor McGonagall or... Oliver Wood."

McLaggen scoffed. "You wouldn't."

"You're welcome to test my patience." Her voice thickened with amusement. "Luna Lovegood is a dear friend of mine, and the little Greengrass is a relative, if distant. I'd be very *unhappy* if I found out something had happened to either of them. In the end, I'd be doing Gryffindor a favour. Having Wood search for a more competent Seeker might just improve your chances for the Quidditch Cup."

Their faces turned as white as chalk as her wand lit up, an ominous purple growing brighter at the tip.

"Whatever." The sandy-haired boy, who Harry vaguely recognised as Ashford, clicked his tongue and slinked away, the other three following in his wake.

Another one muttered, "Crazy bint," but it was just loud enough for them to hear it. Juno's jaw tightened as she lifted her wand even higher. But the curse did not leave her lips.

Harry looked at Luna's sad, silvery eyes and sighed. It was a different time, with different houses, but some things never seemed to change. There wasn't much he could do.

...Or was there?

"Perhaps we should have sent them to the Hospital Wing just this once," Harry said loudly, noticing the other boys stiffen as they walked away. "I always wanted to see what detention with Flitwick or McGonagall would be like anyway."

"You shouldn't give out threats you aren't willing to follow through on," Juno said evenly as soon as the boys disappeared up a staircase.

"I would do it if I had to, even if I wouldn't like it. I would do it if the teachers closed their eyes to this stuff. Some folks... when they don't understand reason and can't be persuaded with words, the only way to stop them is through violence."

Juno gave him a curt nod while Diana just grimaced.

Oh, how Harry wished he could convince the Death Eaters away from their course or even persuade Voldemort from his path of power and bloodshed, but it was a fool's dream, and foolishness only got you killed.

While he knew the older Gryffindor boys were not evil, only stupid, young, and immature, Harry loathed bullying with a burning passion. And he had a soft spot for Luna, even if this Luna was never his friend. A warning to them seemed more fitting, but Juno was right—he might have to follow up on his promise should his warning be ignored.

"Thank you, Miss Black, Miss Taylor, and Mr Potter," Luna said, her voice painfully childish but still somewhat ethereal. Yet she spoke differently, and the usual radish earring or butterbeer cork necklace Harry was so used to seeing on her was absent.

"I told you to call me Juno," the tall girl said, her tone filled with a surprising amount of warmth. Why did it not surprise him that Juno knew Luna? "And do come to me if there's any further trouble. By the Hogwarts Charter, the teachers won't act until after something happens, but there's no need to wait for a mishap."

"It's mostly talk." Astoria hesitantly trotted over, shyly tugging on her blonde locks. "We're used to the whispers."

Luna nodded vigorously. "It's not too bad. They don't make trouble when Professor McGonagall is watching, or Ron is around."

It didn't look like 'just talk' to Harry. A part of him wondered if some Gryffindors had always been pricks. But, he remembered his fourth and fifth years at Hogwarts when a small voice in his head that suspiciously sounded like his own said that few would bother the Quidditch Team's star seeker, and McLaggen had hardly been any better the last time around.

Perhaps nobody wanted to show their ugliness to their golden Boy-Who-Lived.

The young Greengrass awkwardly shifted her weight, looking so painfully small. Smaller than Diana, even.

"They don't make trouble because Ron doesn't hesitate to smack 'em in the nose, and he does have a mean hook. They don't even dare complain after getting their arse handed to them by a second year, and nobody dares to gang up on him because of some stunt last year." Astoria's face lit up, but then her enthusiasm quickly wilted. "Ron's been busy early in the morning the last few days, though. Something about his extra training and hitting early protein goals."

"You should ask him to train together," Diana said, wisely nodding to herself. "Some training never hurt anyone."

Astoria looked at the floor, suddenly finding it all too interesting. "This Muggle training Ron does seems hard and all too demanding, and my health has always been shaky."

Harry had to hide his grin.

It was nice to hear that Ron was doing great on his own and no longer without friends. Despite being a year younger than him, the two blonde girls seemed to look up to Ron, illustrating how his former-not-friend had already grown into a completely different person.

For good or bad, Hermione was also handling things just fine, looking far more mellow after the summer, from what little Harry could see.

"Oh, sorry." Diana grimaced, awkwardly scratching her neck. "Still, you can start light and only do as much as you can. Besides, you shouldn't wander outside so early on your own."

A visible tick appeared on Astoria's previously happy face while Luna giggled.

"We just wanted to explore the castle," the airy girl said. "It's magnificent."

Harry smiled despite itself. "That it is."

Giving them a jaunty wave, Luna dragged the still-grumbling Astoria away.

As the young pair of lions disappeared, Juno turned to face the shorter girl. "You should be careful when starting fights you cannot finish, Diana. Harry and I won't always be around to cover your back."

"I couldn't stand there and do nothing!"

"You could have tried going to Flitwick's office, which is three minutes down the hallway," Harry added dryly, and Diana's face turned as crimson as a ripe tomato.

"...I didn't think of it at the time."

"Alternatively, you can just train yourself in duelling, so you win all the fights you pick," Juno said with a devious lilt. Diana's ears turned beet red, but there was a stubborn determination to her steps that wasn't there before.

After an exhausting spell session and a quick shower followed by breakfast, Harry felt bone-tired but not sleepy, and he found himself absentmindedly wandering through the floors again, covered by his invisibility cloak. It helped ease his frayed nerves, and letting his feet lead him through the school's endless hallways had an oddly soothing effect like nothing else.

Surely enough, drowsiness began to seep into his mind, and he started making his way up the floors. Just as he passed through one of the usually empty side hallways on the seventh floor, Harry blinked and turned around, not believing his eyes. Atop the wall hung a painfully familiar tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy teaching—or, well, trying and spectacularly failing to teach trolls to dance ballet.

Harry rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off his sleepiness. After blinking a couple of times, he realised that, no, the sight before him was not a product of his imagination or tired mind.

'But I had passed through this hallway dozens of times before last year and saw nothing,' he complained in his mind.

Suppressing his trepidation, Harry shrugged off the invisibility cloak, and the tapestry remained there as the trolls lazily started whacking with their clubs at the foolish wizard.

Daring to believe but trying not to hope, Harry paced back and forth thrice, wishing for the best training room.

An ornate door bearing the intricate Ravenclaw sigil in gold appeared on the wall opposite the tapestry, and Harry grasped the golden handle. It opened with the smoothest click he had ever heard, and he stepped forth, suppressing his excitement.

He entered a vast, well-lit hall with an arched ceiling. The floor was covered with mats, and on the left side of the vast chamber, he spotted dozens of dummies in all shapes and sizes, some of them looking angry and dangerous, with what looked to be ominous glowing batons in their hands.

The other side of the room had long, fancy-looking tables and comfortable-looking chairs, and the walls were covered with shelves laden with dusty books.

"Congratulations!" The sudden voice made him jump, and Harry's wand was already drawn, but he paused as he saw the spectral face of Helena Ravenclaw, which looked halfway torn between sadness and mockery. "You've found my mother's greatest accomplishment. The Room of Requirement."

"I... never saw it before," Harry said, caught off-guard by the disdain in Helena's voice. "Yet I've passed through these hallways many times." It was incredibly rare to see the usually reticent daughter of the founder speak so many words at once. In fact, Harry struggled even to remember hearing her voice alone, whether in this life or the last.

But now that she spoke, her words were jarring and full of venom.

"Of course you haven't. After pouring over a decade of her life into designing and building this masterpiece, my mother declared that only the worthy can enjoy the lofty fruits of her labour."

Feeling confused, he scratched his head and echoed, "Someone worthy?"

"Are your ears failing you, boy?" she sneered. "Godric insisted that anyone in need should be able to use it, but Salazar was quick to point out a multitude of ways it could be abused. In the end, my mother proudly stated that her masterpiece was to be a reward enjoyed by those students who excelled above all others in their year."

Helena Ravenclaw's voice thickened with derision. "Despite what they have written down, Rowena was a crafty, whimsical, narcissistic, but very thorough witch. She spent the last few years of her life ensuring the *unworthy* couldn't even perceive this room's existence... even I could only see it in death."

Before Harry could ask anything further, the angry ghost disappeared through one of the walls, leaving him almost as confused as he was tired.

16th of September, Wednesday (3 days later)

Juno

As she had expected, Harry had indeed not lazed off during his summer. Without Professor Quirrell's constant duels, Juno struggled to see how much he had advanced, but she could *feel* it. Her friend was growing fast, and not just in height. A part of her dreaded that she would fail to catch up, even with the newly gained boost from the rituals that made everything somewhat easier.

The new Defence teacher was a long-retired Auror named Alfred Perrywinkle. He looked more like a shrivelled corpse than a man and religiously stuck to his textbook, focusing extensively on theory. His lessons were as interesting as he was (which was not at all), but he was willing to let her and Harry self-study without any trouble.

She nervously checked her pocket watch for what was probably the tenth time.

But today was special. Next was her first detention with Dumbledore. A strip of parchment had flamed into existence in front of her face as she exited the bathroom in the morning, calling her for her first detention.

As classes finished, she made her way to the headmaster's office, struggling to suppress her uncertainty. The headmaster's office was as she remembered, if far brighter, and the thoughtful-looking Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk.

"Welcome, Miss Black. I must congratulate you on your success in ousting my former student so quickly."

"I have hardly done anything," she said truthfully. It had all been her aunt.

"Yes, of course," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling behind his spectacles. "I have put much thought into your detentions. A part of me wanted to give you a brush and see you scrub cauldrons or the good old writing lines, but I doubt such a punishment would truly deter someone as stubborn as you, should you set your mind on something."

How insightful. He was right, of course, and Juno struggled to keep her face calm and not to preen under the praise.

"Then, what shall I be doing, Professor?"

Eyes focused with a scary intensity that made the air heavier, Dumbledore slowly raised a hand, an old, gnarly wand in his grasp. A swift spin and an ethereal light erupted from its tip. The spell formed into a screeching phoenix made from blinding moonlight, forcing her to shield her eyes.

The world grew brighter, warmer for it, and even she felt so light as if she could float away, with all of her worries fading. The real phoenix on the perch trilled along, making her mind nearly spin by the onslaught of emotion.

With another wave, the ethereal phoenix disappeared. Even when she closed her eyes, the image of the phoenix remained seared in her mind. When the warmth receded, it left a hole somewhere deep inside of her.

"Are you familiar with this spell, Miss Black?"

"The Patronus Charm," Juno said mechanically. "A powerful and difficult-to-master magic that can conjure an ethereal phantom to defeat corporeal forms of malice and darkness and all creatures that employ them."

The headmaster nodded with approval, his face turning solemn and dignified for once. He no longer looked like a grandfatherly old man but rather a proud teacher. "A better explanation than most. Take two points for Ravenclaw, Miss Black. Now, you must wonder why I showed you this piece of magic."

"Indeed, Professor."

"I have realised that the school curriculum cannot fully engage a brilliant mind such as yours. So here is my promise to you." The old warlock's smile turned sly. "You have until our detentions end by Christmas to master the Patronus Charm and produce a corporeal guardian. Should you succeed, I will teach you one piece of magic your heart desires. *Anything* that I know."

Juno could recognise the carrot dangling before her. It was obvious, done without any shame, and the Patronus was an infamously demanding spell for ordinary people to succeed in casting. But she could see the other, hidden test; her aunt Cassiopeia said it was impossible to master for those too twisted by dark magic, and most Blacks could never quite get it down, including herself.

While the carrot was in the open, the stick that followed was hidden. Failure here might mean the most powerful wizard would consider her a dark wizard in training... or worse. And Dumbledore knew of her desire for excellence and used it without shame to drag her into an open scheme.

"I'll do it," Juno declared. She had always been magically powerful for her age, so the hefty power requirement to cast the Patronus Charm would not stop her. Especially after the supposed growth boost the ritual provided.

It helped that the Patronus Charm was a useful spell to know as the sole counter to dementors—something she could finally be better than Harry when she succeeded. "Shall we start the practice now?"

"Practice?" Dumbledore's eyes twinkled again. "My dear girl, I'm afraid that's just the personal task my old bones have entrusted to a promising student as an incentive to flourish further. As for detention, I find myself in dire need of assistance in my experiments of recreating a certain something with Alchemy."

"Certain something?" Juno echoed, her mind already anticipating all the legendary Alchemical substances of yore that were considered lost to time, like the orichalcum statues now sitting at every entrance of the school, doubtlessly created by Dumbledore's hand.

"Indeed." With a grave face, the headmaster slowly motioned towards... the bowl of lemony-looking sweets on his desk with a blaringly bright Muggle wrapping. "I always wanted to make my own desserts with Alchemy."

2nd of October, Friday, 1992 (16 days later)

Juno wanted to roar with frustration after yet another detention. But she didn't because it wasn't ladylike. But despite all the exercises meant to make her a master of her emotions, she was starting to slip. A part of her sanity crumbled when faced with attempts to make something as laughably plain as creating sweets into an insurmountable challenge of alchemy.

"Dumbledore still tormenting you with his attempts to recreate lemon drops?" Diana asked, her eyes full of compassion as they gathered just before dinner in the Ravenclaw common room.

"Yes," she said, taking a deep breath and soothing her churning emotions. It wouldn't do if her eyes started glowing for half of Ravenclaw to see. "It's far more frustrating because I suspect he could probably do it, but he takes his sweet time trying to fail in a different way while whistling merrily. Worse, he doesn't even utter a word or explain anything."

It felt like torture to be so close to such a friendly Master of Alchemy yet unable to glean even the tiniest shred of knowledge from him, aside from a greater familiarity with lemons and Muggle sweets. Everything the headmaster did looked like nonsense until it wasn't.

Perhaps she lacked any talent in the field. It was a novel thing to lack talent, but Juno couldn't bring herself to care.

"They did say Dumbledore is barmy," Harry said quietly. As of late, the bags under his eyes had grown larger and darker, but he religiously stuck to his schedule without fail each day. "It's likely a facade, but one he loves using."

"I can see that now. Some days, I feel like Dumbledore is doing it on purpose, just to see how far he can rile me up before I explode." Juno paused, trying to ignore the new surge of irritation rearing in her gut. All that time, which could have been used to practice or duel, lost. "These... lemon drops he wants to recreate aren't even that good!"

Her disgruntlement eased as Mrs Norris made a beeline towards her and rubbed her silvery head at her feet. The show of affection was oddly soothing.

"Less than three months left," said Diana, looking all too chipper in her bulky training robes despite still heaving from her just-finished Quidditch practice. "At least you can enjoy extra sweets until Christmas." After the Quidditch tryouts, Diana had easily made it as a reserve seeker because of her top-of-the-line broom. Charlus Slynt had bluntly told her that her flying skills required plenty of polish before she was ready to represent Ravenclaw, but the Muggle-born did not seem to mind. Just flying and being part of the team seemed good enough for her.

"I don't even like sweets," Juno said, feeling defeated. Dumbledore's teasing aside, her attempts at the Patronus Charm had been wildly unsuccessful.

The spell was incredibly draining; she struggled to produce anything but a flimsy silvery vapour, which easily sapped her energy on its own. Juno would have been far more irritated if that didn't do wonders for her reserves, as she could make significantly more attempts each following week before flagging out.

It helped her in the duels against the Carrow Twins and her cousin Nymphadora; she could now match all three at once and not lose immediately, even more so after getting the hang of Transfiguration in fighting.

The sad part was that there was nobody to turn to for assistance or advice with her struggle. The Defence teacher couldn't cast a Patronus himself, nor could her aunt Cassiopeia. Juno had gone through the library, but it was a waste of time. None of the books on the subject was of help.

The incantation and the wand movement were plain and easy to master, but the last component—the supposed happiness and power—proved tricky. Juno could always turn to the headmaster or Professor Flitwick for advice, but that would feel like a defeat. It would prove those nasty rumours Lockhart had spread about her being a spoiled, talentless little bint relying on her wealth and connections for everything.

The damned fraud somehow narrowly escaped being apprehended by the French Ministry two days prior, and some say he fled to Africa. Still, the annoying man was gone from Wizarding Britain, but the rumours he left to tarnish her good name remained. The nasty feeling of frustration once again returned in full force, and Juno sighed, trying to centre her emotions while her eyes glazed over her surroundings.

The rest of their yearmates were spread out on the many tables in the common room, working on homework or additional reading. Nyx's enormous serpentine form was nowhere to be seen. Harry's companion had been elusive since his showing on the first day, no doubt to avoid too much unwanted scrutiny with its suspiciously large size.

Juno had examined the school charter carefully and knew that Flitwick shouldn't have allowed a mutated serpent with an unknown ability of this size as a registered pet. Still, the Charms Master had approved and did nothing else, even though a few more queasy students had complained about the scary snake. Cowardly fools, the lot of them. Blind, too. Nyx was adorable and majestic.

Harry leaned in and nudged her shoulder as Diana retreated to her room to change her robes.

“Do you still want that duel?” he whispered as Diana and the rest busied themselves. “It’s been over three weeks since you mentioned it, but it can definitely help you get your mind off things, at least for a while.”

A part of Juno wanted to say she wasn’t ready. But testing herself against Harry could provide a much-needed distraction, and she really, *really* needed to let off some steam. She *needed* to see how far she had come compared to him, and now that the thought had appeared in her mind, it turned into a burning desire that could not be suppressed.

A glance at her watch told her there was still nearly an hour before dinner. Juno steeled herself, trying to ignore the rising giddiness in her chest.

“The abandoned classroom by the western staircase on the sixth floor?”

“Sure,” Harry said, eagerly rising from his chair. “Let’s go.”

Author’s Endnote: This is a long chapter. I really wanted to do the duel between Juno and Harry in this one, but I realised that + the aftermath would take me at least half a chapter and easily 3k+ to do justice, so I shall leave you folks hanging. The current escalation seems like the perfect pace to start cranking things up.

Also, the fact that the RoR was freely accessible to any shmuck irked me, so I decided on an interesting alternative since it was already an AU.

Anyway, I’ve tied up everything I wanted to address with the year’s final opening, and with Lockhart out of the way, we see the good ole Dumbledore trolling; now it’s time to get to the even more fun stuff.