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7th of November, Thursday

“Enough theory for now,” Flitwick squeaked out, much to Diana’s relief. The endless stream of words about the difference between visualisation and will and how essential it was for casting had her feeling numb. Her wrist, too, after writing it down with a damned quill. At least she stopped blotching her ink all over the parchment. “Now, let us return to the levitation charm-”

Diana tuned out the diminutive Charms master and stared at the white feather on the desk before her - she had succeeded in casting it last Thursday, the first one to do so after Harry and Juno, but most new spells were covered in two or even three subsequent lessons.

Yet Harry had proven that there was more to spells than wand-waving. Even now, the green-eyed boy and Juno were to the side, practising advanced material.

It was a week after All Hallow's Eve, and Diana still felt conflicted. Her dreams were uneasy, filled with squelching, falling bodies and a heavy, suffocating stench. According to the rumours, Filch's funeral was also a sombre affair—but the unpleasant man was quickly forgotten after his coffin was buried in an unassuming cemetery in his hometown.

What irked her the most was that everyone acted as if nothing had happened. Well, not everyone. Harry was training with a fervour that would rival the religious zealots of yore and carried himself around with an intense focus and stoic determination. Diana could understand his motivation and why Juno's efforts had been redoubled. Their duels in DADA had gotten outright brutal this week, but neither uttered a word of complaint despite being bruised blue underneath the robes.

It was not all bad, though. Snape's arrest and conviction to life in prison for a plethora of vile crimes did not surprise her too much—it seamlessly fit the unpleasant image the man had presented. Diana did not miss the old Potions teacher one bit, but the fact that a terrorist was allowed to teach students like that had her spine crawling with ants.

Sure, Slughorn - a plump, walrus-like older man - was leagues better than Snape ever was. His Potions lesson was interesting, exciting, and far easier to understand, and that was just the first one on the basics. It was a little wonder, though - supposedly, Slughorn had been Head of House Slytherin and Potions Master here for half a century before retiring. Although Diana could do without the old professor gushing over Juno, Harry, and that git Fawley of all people, just because his uncle was the head of magical law enforcement or something…

Shaking her head, Diana focused on the feather before her. Normal magic would not cut it anymore.

After a moment of hesitation, she added her spare quill.

Swish and flick, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Unsurprisingly, only the feather she aimed at levitated, and Diana felt an odd mixture of excitement, annoyance, and disappointment.

Back in her muggle school, she had not only been the top of the class but the year - and with little effort at that. Being in third place would have stung far more if Harry and Juno had not poured ungodly effort. As her father always said, talent and hard work always beat *just* talent.

Alas, her efforts were for nought. Levitating a single feather was easy enough, but no matter how hard she tried, visualised, or willed it, the other remained on the desk as if glued to it.

There was so much more to magic than waving a wand and saying some words, of course, but now Diana was beginning to understand the depth of the statement.

By the time class ended, her frustration had mounted significantly.

“You look at that quill as if it kicked your owl,” Padma noted from the seat beside her as most students rushed towards the Great Hall for lunch.

“I don’t have an owl!” Diana snapped before wilting at her friend’s unamused look. “Sorry, I’m trying to levitate two at a time.”

“That requires advanced mastery of the spell and in-depth knowledge of theory.” Juno walked over with the barest hint of interest in her blue eyes. As usual, MacDougal trailed after her like a shadow. The Scottish girl was the most unassuming, with her silent presence, light-brown hair and chestnut eyes.

“Or greater proficiency of your intent and will,” Harry also joined, looking at Diana with something she couldn’t decipher. “There are many *facets* to magic.”

“Intent? I thought it was all about visualisation and willpower.”

“Well, willpower is a fancy way of saying your control. And control is honed over time with arduous practice,” Juno added in her silky voice. “Intent is… harder to explain. It's a mental focus for the spell similar to incantations and wand motions.”

Diana ran her hand through her dark auburn curls. “And let me guess, it's something that comes with practice too?” This would explain why Juno and Harry were so ridiculously good at magic—the more they did it, the easier it got.

“Indeed,” Harry gave her an encouraging nod. “When you fully master a spell, it will come as easy as breathing, and you will know where its limits are and how to overcome them. Ultimately, the levitation charm is designed with a single target in mind. Breaking that limit would strain your magic, body, and mind.”

“So, just like silent casting?” Diana asked. After seeing her friend do away with the incantation, she dug into the library, only to find out it was an almost dishearteningly advanced skill. And was it a bad thing?

“Yep,” Padma popped out with a smile. “There are no shortcuts in magic, but I heard from the upper years that you would get the chance to modify spells later. Maybe that would be similar to what you’re trying to do?”

Was that what Harry had done on Halloween? Did he modify simple spells unconsciously? Or was it on purpose? She would not be surprised if he had mastered the spell or his intent. Regardless, Diana still had no idea how exactly it was achieved. Magic was magnificent and grand, giving her a goal to strive for besides good grades. Oh, the possibilities… The desire to learn more, to be able to *do* more, to bend the very fabric of reality to her will with a flick of her wand roared within.

Yet levitating two things at the same time was too hard. Far harder than just being able to do the spell…

The road to bending reality to her will would be long indeed.

Shaking her head, Diana reluctantly got off her seat, grabbed her school bag, and joined her friends as they made their way to the Great Hall.

“Talent also matters,” MacDougal broke her silence. “Some struggle in one discipline, while others come as naturally as breathing. Over time, you’ll find maybe Charms, or even Transfiguration or other subjects easier than the rest.”

“How do I find out where my talent lies?” Diana asked. So far, none of the subjects were particularly difficult or easy. Things were not too challenging once she got used to quills and the jarring difference between the magical and muggle curriculum.

“I think inclination or affinity is more accurate than talent,” Padma coughed. “And, well, it usually runs in the family with the purebloods. For muggle-borns - you’ll probably have some idea by the end of the first year.”

They entered the Great Hall and were quickly drowned by the commotion of eating and chattering students and barely managed to find a place at the end of the Ravenclaw table. Harry received a few more errant glances and hushed whispers; his deed of slaying two trolls had gotten out, but her friend had remained tight-lipped about it, and the interest and attention had begun to dry out.

As Diana piled her plate with sausage rolls and mashed potatoes, she couldn’t help but overhear the fifth-year girls next to her gushing loudly about Slughorn. It wasn’t a great surprise; it felt as if she had learned far more in one lesson with Slughorn than in a whole month with Snape.

“Did you hear - Rowan’s been invited to the Slug Club!”

“Do you reckon we have a shot of joining?”

"What's a Slug Club?" Diana couldn't help but ask, and the two-fifth years turned to glower at her but halted. Harry had that effect on people; the famous short-boy had a mean, unrelenting, no-nonsense glare that just made people back off. If that didn't give them pause, his recent reputation as a 'troll-slayer' did. Juno's was not any less intense; her icy eyes could chill you no matter how warm or how many layers of clothing you had, and she was now staring at the pair of older years. Her two friends could look particularly mean, and nobody wanted to pick on Flitwick and Quirrell's favourites.

“A gathering hosted by Slughorn to network with his more prestigious students,” Juno was the one to answer with a tinge of amusement as the fifth-year witches looked away abashedly. “The old Potions master loves collecting talent and connections, but our headmaster has barred him from recruiting younger students, so you must be at least a third year to get invited.”

“He also loves bringing over his successful former students,” Harry added as soon as he swallowed a mouthful of roast beef, earning himself a curious look from Juno. Diana felt her friend didn't like the new Potions master much, but it was a mild feeling of distaste at most, or perhaps annoyed wariness. At least it's not that cold, silent loathing that he had reserved for Snape.

“I just hope the new caretaker will be at least better than Filch,” Padma groaned.

MacDougal snorted, only to choke on her pumpkin juice, and it took her a few moments of coughing to clear her throat. “That’s a low bar to clear.”

While Slughorn was here Monday morning, the caretaker had yet to be replaced, and all sorts of weird rumours swirled around the school. Some said Dumbledore would axe the position entirely or even employ an enchanted homunculus or a retired hit wizard from the continent.

There were also quite a few articles in Daily Prophet slamming the headmaster for his choice of staff and outright calling Filch *useless* or a *danger to the children*. If muggle-borns were frowned upon in Wizarding Britain, squibs seemed to be received with scorn and indifference.

“The Board of Governors is looking for a more capable man,” Juno shrugged. “Yet unless a serious amount of Galleons is forked out, I don’t see anyone of significant skill taking the post.”

“So, who is taking care of Filch’s duties now that he is gone?” Diana asked between bites of potatoes.

“Probably the house elves. Those buggers would love the extra work.” Harry shrugged, followed by knowing nods by the rest, making Diana blink in confusion... Elves? Like in the Hobbit? She shrugged, preferring to finish her meal. It didn’t matter much - if dragons, goblins and trolls were a thing, why not elves too?

Hopefully, there wouldn’t be orcs hiding around…or a dark lord bent on world conquest. Diana stifled a snort, causing her friends to stare at her weirdly. Did the wizards read books like Lord of the Rings? Was Tolkien a hidden squib to imagine such a vivid, vast world?

They continued lunch, chatting leisurely about other inane things when Harry finished first and stood up, probably to continue his relentless quest for training, both body and magic. Well, either that or exploring around Hogwarts. Though Diana wasn’t sure why he bothered exploring still, it felt like the green-eyed boy knew the castle better than everyone else.

She tugged on Harry’s sleeve before he could disappear to do his thing again; there was a free slot after lunch, during which the first-year Ravenclaws did their homework or leisurely strolled out on the grounds when it was warmer.

“Do you mind if I join you for morning jogs?” The memory of running for her life while out of breath was still too vivid. The idea came suddenly, but since Diana already had trouble sleeping, it wouldn't hurt to get out of bed early.

Someone, sounding suspiciously like Padma, muttered something that suspiciously sounded like ‘mental’.

“Sure,” he nodded amiably without asking any annoying questions. “See you girls in Herbology!”

Harry rarely asked questions, and his willingness to helpfully explain or aid when requested was endearing. With a wave, he walked away, causing the girls to stare at him with exasperation.

“Merlin, Potter never stops, does he?” MacDougal retorted with wonder.

“No,” Juno said, head tilted as her eyes were glued on Harry’s back until he disappeared behind the wooden doors. “There’s a reason he’s the undisputed top student in our year.” Diana couldn’t help but feel a sliver of challenge in the tall girl’s tone. But even that was said gracefully, just like most things about Juno.

“So,” Padma chimed in after finishing her curry soup. “Are you girls excited for the upcoming Quidditch match?”

9th of November, Saturday

Harry looked at Diana as she was still gasping heavily, letting out misty puffs in the chilly morning air with each laboured breath. Her reddish-brown hair, which reminded him of rust, was damp with sweat. While going through so many stairs daily was good for your stamina, it showed that it was the first significant physical exertion the muggle-born girl had done.

“Gets easier after the third day,” Harry encouraged. Today, he hadn't pushed himself too hard to conserve his strength for later. Also, their runs had started a tad later since Diana joined them, which was a welcome change. Half an hour more sleep was a welcome counterbalance to the strain he was putting his body through.

“It also does help plenty with your control,” Hestia Carrow added while eyeing Diana as if the girl were some exotic animal in the zoo. Still, the Slytherin twins were not impolite or arrogant with his muggle-born friend, making him feel relieved. “I’ve had far less trouble with Transfiguration since I joined Harry, and now getting an EE grade on the practicals is no longer a struggle.”

“Physical fitness would help you in duelling and Quidditch,” Juno said, elegantly smoothing her crumpled training robes as they made their way back to the castle. The tall girl had come a long way since she joined him in the morning runs half a month ago. Juno's dedication and drive impressed him, and her stubbornness alone easily rivalled Hermione's.

The mentions of the wizarding sport grabbed Diana's attention.

“Why is none of that ever mentioned?”

Harry couldn’t help but snort at the tired but angry huff that left the petite girl. “Well, it is if you know where to look for. And magic tends to make one lazy, especially since everything is at a wand-flick distance. If you keep this up and get a good broom, you have a good shot at joining the Quidditch team next year.”

Not that it was a considerable achievement. The Quidditch teams were not too picky, and unless you were a lazy, talentless hack with a third-hand outdated broom, it was not too hard to enter a house team as a reserve if you tried hard enough. However, during his six-year stint, he had never seen a girl on the Slytherin team. Judging by the excitement radiating from Diana, the thought of Quidditch gave her more resolve.

Just as they passed by the Forbidden Forest and Harry was lost in his plans for the day, something tugged on his right sleeve. As his companions were all to his left, he absentmindedly looked down, only to freeze. A pair of shining white eyes were gazing at him with undisguised curiosity, belonging to a pitch-black leathery draconic face. The young thestral nudged its snout against his arm again with some insistence. For a short moment, his mind was blank until realisation set in. With some trepidation, Harry slowly withdrew his wand and offered it to the skeletal foal.

“Harry? Why have you stop-”

“What the bloody hell is this?!” Juno’s question was interrupted by Diana, staring at the young thestral, eyes wide, and wand in hand.

The three other girls were now alert, wands out.

“There’s nothing there,” said Hestia, squinting at the darkness. Or not so dark as the faint light from the east illuminated half the sky now, heralding the arrival of dawn.

“Don't you see it?” Diana pointed warily at the foal, whose snout carefully inspected his wand. “It's a winged horse, all dark, skin and bones, with the oddest face like a lizard.”

“A thestral?” Flora choked and looked like she wanted to cry. “They are omens of death.” Harry would definitely not mention the other handful of adult thestrals watching placidly from the treeline.

"And completely harmless," he murmured while carefully running his free hand over the majestic dark mane, making the foal lean into his hand. Diana watched with worry while the other three stared sceptically at his hand, which seemed like it purposelessly ran through the empty air. He patted the silky mane one last time as the young thestral seemed to have lost interest in his wand. "Go, run along back to your parents now."

With a happy shriek that made Flora jump, the foal galloped away, disappearing into the treeline with the rest of the herd.

“It’s gone, right?” Hestia inquired, her gaze skittishly roaming around as if someone would leap out of the darkness to attack her.

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Harry reassured her. “Thestrals are very smart and docile when trained well, and you have nothing to fear unless you attack them.”

“It looked creepy,” Diana huffed breathlessly, “why couldn’t the rest see them?”

“Well, thestrals are invisible unless you have witnessed death. A human death, not something as trivial as a fly. It's probably what gives them the infamy.” The skeletal horses could be lethally vicious, not that he'd tell that to a bunch of scared girls. Harry would not be surprised if some fool provoked a herd and paid dearly for it. “I heard the Hogwarts herd pulls the Hogsmeade carriages for the older years, and there has not been a single incident.”

And that seemed to make the Carrow twins look squeamish instead of reassured, and he inwardly cursed himself for the slip of the tongue.

“Who did you see die, Diana? If you don't mind me asking.” Juno's eyes narrowed with undisguised curiosity at their shortest friend. Harry goggled at the blatant lack of subtlety, but perhaps that was a sign of the girls' deepening friendship? He would not deny that his curiosity was piqued and turned to Diana.

“...My family was visiting a charity of my dad’s firm in Kent. It was two years ago, and there was a bombing by the IRA… too many limbs.” The girl’s amber eyes lost their usual brightness as she recalled the memory.

For once, Juno’s face softened considerably, and she gently squeezed Diana’s shoulder. The muggle-born girl shook her head as she regained her composure and smiled, albeit with less cheer than before. “Forgive me, that was inconsiderate.”

“It's fine. My parents took me to a shrink, and I don't mind it much anymore. At least those thestrals looked wicked cool.” The petite girl glanced at the murky forest, where the thestral foal circled the herd before they walked further in.

“What’s a *shrink*?” Hestia asked, mismatched eyes staring with confusion.

Harry stared into the distance, his gaze glazing to a few flying shadows over the forest. With a sigh, he started walking and joined his companions. The rest of the journey to the castle was spent in relative silence as Diana explained about the psychotherapists and the faces of the Carrow twins were filled with child-like fascination. Hary fondly listened with half an ear as his eyes wandered at the horizon where the sun shyly peeked from the misty treeline from the east.

It looked majestic.

“Well, this is new,” Juno muttered as they reached the front lawn. The gate was flanked by two enormous gryffins made entirely from some shiny metal with a dull golden tint. No, not exactly gryffins, as they seemed to have scales and far too many spikes instead of feathers and looked like a mixture of a dragon and some scaly feline instead of an eagle and lion. Despite their long, jagged claws, the limbs seemed strangely humanoid. Harry scratched his head in confusion, unsure if the new additions had been here when they left the castle in the dark.

Whoever made the statues had put a lot of effort into them, as the detail was incredibly lifelike down to the last spike. They looked both lethally dangerous and beautifully mesmerising.

“I haven’t seen that one in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,” Diana said, face filled with awe.

“I don't think it's real.” Harry shook his head. “At least I haven't read any mention of such a thing.” Although knowing certain people, such a monster could be created in the flesh through cross-breeding…

“It's all made of pure Orichalcum.” Hestia approached the right statue and inspected it with zeal.

Diana yawned, tiredly outstretching her hands upwards. “I thought that was a myth?”

“In the muggle world, maybe.” Juno hummed, but even her eyes glimmered with interest at the new statues. “It’s a mythical alloy of gold and copper that only master alchemists can create.”

They gawked a few minutes more at the magnificent statues, but the chilly morning air eventually chased them away to the castle's warm confines.

All of them retreated to the common room, and after a warm shower and a change of clothing, they reconvened in the Great Hall just before breakfast began.

The tables were quick to fill, as today was the first Quidditch match of the school year, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, and the air was already buzzing with anticipation. To his surprise, most Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs seemed to have equipped themselves with silver and green scarves in overwhelming support of Salazar's house. While the Puffs and the Claws were mostly neutral when the other two rival houses played, Harry remembered most of them supporting the Gryffindors.

“Why’s everyone supporting Slytherin?”

“Longbottom,” Padma whispered, making him blink in confusion.

What did Neville have to do with… oh. The Indian girl pointedly looked at Juno, who was gracefully devouring a few pieces of roast chicken without a care. Harry had almost forgotten the utterly stupid fight had caused the Gryffindors to stubbornly back Neville out of house pride but had earned the ire of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs in the process. It wasn't that they wanted to support Slytherin as much as they cheered against Gryffindor.

Although Wood had somehow picked McLaggen for a seeker of all people, Harry doubted his former house could clinch a victory with this talentless hack on the team.

“Attention, please,” Dumbledore stood up, and the chattering quickly quieted. “Today, I want to welcome our newest member of the staff - Grigori Petrov, who has graciously agreed to join as the Hogwarts caretaker!”

Harry slowly joined the polite but hesitant applause that echoed through the hall. The headmaster motioned to a middle-aged, balding man who had appeared nearly unnoticed and joined the edge of the staff table. Tall and bulky, dressed in an interesting leather coat, and with a wicked scar running up his neck towards his jaw, the new caretaker looked far more formidable than Filch, reminding Harry of Moody.

“Damn,” Padma was staring at the man with some admiration and interest. “He definitely looks like something.”

“He ought to,” Juno said, tone heavy with surprise. “Grigori Petrov is an infamous monster hunter in Eastern Europe.”

“A monster hunter?” Diana asked the question swirling in Harry’s mind. This profession was not something he had heard of in his previous world.

Juno swallowed the last piece of her chicken fillet and carefully wiped away the errant grease from her lips. “It’s a rare calling fraught with danger. Trolls, werewolves, vampires, banshees - monster hunters specialise in dealing with all sorts of creatures and magical beasts. But most don’t live long or are just glorified wands for hire.”

Clearly, Petrov did not lack skill - Harry had seen less-dangerous-looking death eaters.

“How is he infamous?” Padma prodded curiously.

“Well, he was said to have cleared out a vampire den alone and almost singlehandedly hunted down trolls in Bulgaria to near extinction.” Which was a sizeable feat of brutal, dogged persistence, considering the dumb brutes bred like rabbits and were better at surviving than cockroaches.

While admittedly an interesting new addition to the staff, Harry’s mind was elsewhere.

Tuning out the rest of the conversation, he focused on his meal while his thoughts drifted to his plans. By the time Harry was finished, enthusiastic students started streaming out of the Great Hall in droves, headed for the Quidditch Stadium.

“Harry, wait for us to finish,” Diana huffed in exasperation, still having a sizeable portion of her breakfast uneaten.

“I think I might just nap instead,” he lied with a yawn.

Padma shook her head with amusement. “Well, nobody makes you get up at six every morning.”

“But… this is the first Quidditch match of the year!” For the first time, Diana seemed stubbornly determined not to let go.

“Watching others play isn’t particularly exciting,” Juno came to his defence, but that statement seemed to earn her a few scoffs from the older years who were walking by on their way out.

“I’d rather write my Transfiguration essay instead,” MacDougal also chimed in. “McGonagall gives too much homework, and it’s due on Monday.”

“Besides, it isn't Ravenclaw playing.” Diana deflated, and Harry couldn't help but feel bad. His friend had been so enthusiastic about it… yet his plan was too important, and today was the perfect day.

With a nod, Harry turned away and headed out, but a smile appeared on his face as he heard Juno promising to accompany the muggle-born girl and Padma. One positive thing had happened after the unlucky Samhain - a welcome camaraderie formed between the two girls, which had turned them from uneasy acquaintances to friends.

His way to his room was interrupted by the eagle-shaped bronze knocker with its annoyingly soft voice again. *"At night, they come without being fetched. By day, they are lost without being stolen. What are they?"*

Some days, Harry *really* hated the thing as it delayed him a great time, and getting stuck in the front of the common room for minutes was shamefully mortifying. So he had owl-ordered Ridley's Riddle Compendium from Flourish and Blots, as it had most of the classical riddles and puzzles and their answers.

At least this one was easy enough. "The stars."

With an approving chime, the door to the Ravenclaw room swung open.

An errant glance around his room told him Nyx had left on one of her excursions again, and Harry carefully unpacked the Marauder's map on his desk - or at least the part with the Seventh floor and the Gryffindor Tower.

House pride was a great thing, especially for the hotheaded Lions. Slowly but surely, the few footsteps in the tower left for the lower floors on their way to the Quidditch Pitch. A grin found its way to his face - only a single smudged name remained unmoving on the premises.

Peter Pettigrew.

Thankfully, Percy had not taken old, sleepy Scabbers to spectate the match; otherwise, Harry would have had few options aside from approaching Percy for the rat directly or going to the staff with the map in hand, things he wanted to avoid if he could help it. This was the perfect opportunity that drove him hard for the last week.

Yet his eyes couldn't help but slowly comb the map once more. No trace of Tom Riddle or Voldemort could be seen on the school grounds, no matter how he looked. Even Quirinus Quirrell, the only person Harry suspected, was sitting by Sybill Trelawney in the middle of the stadium, surrounded by an enormous cluster of names.

"Mischief managed." Pushing down his trepidation, Harry tapped the map, folded it and returned it to his robe's inner pocket.

His preparations for this day were numerous - from bringing a rat cage charmed unbreakable to waiting around the corner of the Seventh floor for the last few evenings to spy the Gryffindor password.

Thankfully, very few students had remained in the castle, most on the lower floors or the library. His way to the corridor with the Fat Lady remained smooth without any surprise encounters, allowing him to charm his school tie to the familiar gold and red and change the colour of his hair to dirty blonde with a splotch of ink splashed on his face, hopefully making him unrecognisable to the portraits.

“I haven’t seen you before,” the plump witch dressed in pink stared at him from the frame.

“Fortuna,” he muttered hoarsely.

The Fat Lady inspected him for a long, nerve-wracking moment, and just as he started getting jittery, the portrait creaked open, revealing the stairway to the Gryffindor common room.

Harry sighed with relief and quickly made his way up. The room was painfully familiar, but the cosiness that used to comfort him now felt unwelcoming.

His heart raced like a drum as he sneaked to the fifth-year boys' dormitory. Thankfully, there were no traps or obstructions along the way. Even the door was unlocked with a simple Alohomora.

The room was surprisingly clean and ordered, but there was a tiny problem. Harry could see no rat here, no matter how hard he looked.

Suppressing the apprehension, he quickly unfurled the map again and desperately searched for the two footsteps denoting Peter Pettigrew. Hunting down a rat would be impossible if Harry couldn’t get the drop on the slippery bastard. He had hoped that the traitor would have been napping - something Scabbers almost always did, but it seemed that his luck only got so far. It didn’t help that his current arsenal of spells was sorely lacking.

After a few tense minutes, Harry found the rat down one of the hallways on the Seventh floor, moving in an oddly slow and leisurely manner.

Cursing in annoyance, he quickly left the Gryffindor tower and silently approached the rat's location. Just around the corner, he cautiously slowed down; his palm felt sweaty while holding the pale wand.

“Stupid feathers, I found him first!”

Just around the corner, the familiar pitch-black snake was on the floor with a knocked-out rat, missing a finger, dangling from her mouth. Nyx was rearing in a challenge against his snowy owl on the window's outer sill.

Harry stared with stunned disbelief at the surreal scene. Hedwig was barking and hooting at the snake as they fought over the rat, and he was sure they could see him.

At that moment, Harry only managed to hide his face in his hands with an exasperated sigh.

He counted his lucky stars for his companions’ assistance. While Harry managed to hide his plans from his classmates, it seemed he had failed to do the same for his pets, who thought this was a hunting game. It was hilarious and sobering because it only made him aware of how many assumptions his plan relied upon, not to mention the dozens of glaring holes.

Still, any lingering doubts about Nyx's hunting capabilities were quickly dismissed; the snake effortlessly knocked out the rat before Pettigrew could even consider turning to his human form or escaping.

It was not that great of a surprise in hindsight since snakes and owls were far better at hunting rats than humans. However, it also made him feel foolish for not even considering asking his companions for help. Was his stubborn desire to do everything alone getting in the way?

“Mr Potter,” Flitwick greeted him with his usual excitement. “How may I help you?”

“Professor,” he nodded hesitantly and brought out the unbreakable cage, where the rat lay still under a full-body bind, but his beady little eyes moved around furiously. “Nyx found this rat saying he smelled human, and her senses are impossibly sharp.”

Both of those things were true. Nyx, almost too big to remain coiled on his forearm unnoticed, slithered out of his sleeve at the mention of her name and proudly bobbed her head in confirmation.

The Charms master instantly grew solemn, and his delicate wand was already in his hand.

“You did well bringing this to me, Mr Potter. I see you are wisely keeping the animal in a full-body bind. Step back from the cage.”

Harry did so, and the Charms master gently flicked his wand, making the rat glow blue. This must have been some sort of animagus-revealing charm because Flitwick’s face turned grave.

With a sharp stab of his wand, the cage was opened, and the rat was ejected onto the floor. Scabbers shuddered, and his transformation was reversed, revealing the familiar small, hunchback stature with the hateful ratty face, capped by his unkempt colourless hair.

While the full-body bind turned its target completely rigid, it left it conscious, and Pettigrew's small, watery eyes were fearfully bouncing between him and the diminutive professor. Harry would have stunned the rat, but the fourth-year spell was still elusive to manage, so he settled on the good old *Petrificus Totalus*.

Flitwick, however, seemed to have no such problems. “*Stupefy*!”

The red bolt slammed into the immobilised Pettigrew, turning him still. The Charms master leaned closer to inspect the knocked-out man. “As I live and breathe, Peter Pettigrew!”

“Wasn’t he supposed to be… killed by Sirius Black?” Harry played along as his head of house removed his spectacles and carefully wiped them clean before inspecting the man on the floor again.

"Very much so, Mr Potter. Oh, my former apprentice is going to love this!" Flitwick's surprise turned into glee, and Harry's apprehension quickly faded. Felix Fawley, the current head of DMLE, was precisely why

he had come to the head of his house. "I hope you do not mind if I keep your name away from this mess, Mr Potter, lest you want to invite unwanted scrutiny on Nyx and your abilities?"

The serpent perked up at hearing her name.

“It would be for the better,” Harry agreed softly while running his fingers over Nyx’s inky scales; he had no desire to deal with the Ministry or the press if he could avoid it.

At least Fawley was capable. The man had managed to throw even Snape into Azkaban, so hopefully, Pettigrew would not pose much of a challenge.

Author’s Endnote:

I had so many plans for Pettigrew, but they all were scrapped by the time I reached the scene.

Lots of stuff happened, and this chapter turned out far longer than I planned.