

# **The path of knowledge**

cloud9stories

# The path of knowledge

by *cloud9stories*

OOC Ron Weasley, that causes an obvious AU the more we go on with the story. Mythology will influence heavily Ron (the MC) I'll try to focus on my character's development. In any case magic will make sense, and there won't be OP characters. The story will probably grow darker as it goes on, the spiritual tag I added to this ff refers to the questioning morality of some characters

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# 1. ch1: The first step

***This is an OOC Ronald Weasley fanfiction, with the magic based on 'magical cores'. Ravenclaw Ron. Slow growth of characters, starts before Hogwarts, ends after Voldemort's death.***

***I OWN NOTHING***

***BETAED BY StarsandSunkissed, who has my thanks.***

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*1990-13 July*

Ronald Weasley was a lonely child. It wasn't easy to notice, but being the second youngest of seven made it easy to fade in the background. He used to prefer his older brothers over the other siblings since they weren't mean to him. He loved them, he truly did, even if he would never admit it out loud.

When he was younger Bill hung out with Charlie, but Ron was too young to play with them, even if Charlie taught him how to fly a broom. He had the time of his life until Mum took notice and started screaming. Bill even taught him how to read and write. So Ron gave it his all: it was nice having the attention of his sibling only for himself.

Bill was a Curse-Breaker now, so he was never at home, and Charlie worked at the dragon reserve in Romania.

That left Percy, who didn't have time to waste on him since he always had to study.

There were also the twins, who preferred their own company and made him drink or eat stuff that hurt in one way or another. That had been before they turned his teddy bear into a spider. Ron never

played with Fred and George again. Ever. It had been more than a month and he kept having nightmares.

There was Ginny, pampered Ginny, the favorite of everyone. Ginny, who was almost territorial when it came to her friend Luna, who was strange in her own right. Ron wasn't bothered much by her Lovegood-ness, since he knew her parents, who were also a bit barmy, but whenever he tried to befriend Luna, Ginny made a scene and Mum would come to her rescue.

That left Mum, who was busy with keeping the house in 'proper condition', running after the twins, and fussing over Ginny.

Dad was either at work or in his shed, where his children weren't allowed.

But two years before grandfather taught him how to play chess. He died six months later, and Ron cried more than his siblings, who teased him. It wasn't his fault if they weren't friends with their grandfather. But at the funeral dad had spent more time reassuring him, so it hadn't been that bad. But soon after Ron faded once more into the background, and so here he was, under a peach tree in the orchard, playing chess against himself.

It wasn't very fun, but he didn't have much to do. He finished his chores in the morning and had the whole afternoon to relax. Even if he would have preferred to do something with his family, it wasn't an option. Usually, he lazed during the whole day, so that the chores would last more and keep him from getting even more bored.

The nightmares, however, left him with a short temper and he didn't have the patience to slow down his work.

Ron rubbed his bloodshot eyes, unleashing a tired sigh. Maybe he could nap a bit, the July sun made resting under the shade of the peach tree an interesting option. But if the twins found him asleep they would pull one of their pranks, and if he fell asleep now, it would be harder later tonight. The spider-related nightmares weren't going

away, and he woke up tired early every morning. At least he could use the bathroom before anyone. His parents had their own personal bathroom while the twins and Ginny hogged the other three. It wasn't fun having to wait.

He could write a letter to Charlie or Bill, but they wrote from time to time to the family already, and he did not want to look clingy. He yawned, castling with the white pieces. But as he thought about how to move the black ones, he already knew what plans he had made for the white rook and countered it with barely a thought. Obviously he also knew what he was planning with the black pieces too, and with a frustrated sigh, removed the pieces from the board. It was boring and almost annoying playing chess alone, but he always won on the few occasions one of the others sat down to play. So it didn't really matter. At least when he played with the others he could use the wizard chess pieces. He looked at the Muggle pieces he had been playing with, letting his fingers trail over the old wood. Grandfather had told him that Muggle chess was better than the wizard one even if it was less flashy. However having your bishop contest your orders because it thought it knew better was fun, at least in Ron's opinion.

He surrendered, admitting to himself that he was just too tired to go on. He picked up the board and walked back into the house, being careful to not be seen by his mother, who would only give him more chores once he found him lazing around.

The Burrow, in his opinion, was a beautiful place to live in. Sure, when all the Weasleys were home it became a tiny bit overcrowded, but that didn't happen often, so it was okay.

The living room had mismatched couches and armchairs arranged around the fireplace from which the Weasleys Flooed around, but it was cozy. On the left there was the big kitchen, that was Mum's kingdom and the twins were forbidden to enter it.

The small, creaking staircase led to the first floor. On it was Ginny's room, the biggest after their parents'— which had a great view over

the orchard—the first bathroom and Charlie's old room. On the second floor was Bill's old room and their parents' bedroom (which had its own bathroom). On the third, the twins shared a room, along with the second bathroom.

The fourth floor hosted both his and Percy's rooms along with the final bathroom. Over that was the attic, abode of the harmless family ghoul.

Ron reached his room and put down the board, before going outside again. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in sight. He would have liked to sleep so much. But the fear of nightmares pushed him forward, he pressed tiredly his palms onto his eyes, then he started walking on the edge of the swampy cornfield that surrounded the south side of the house. He found himself at the beginning of the lane that led to the Muggle village of Ottery St Catchpole.

Ron had been there once or twice, following Dad while he looked for new Muggle things to tinker with. Ron looked at himself, noticing that he was dressed in a way that could resemble a Muggle. He knew he obviously wasn't allowed to just leave the Burrow. He looked behind, taking notice of the shouts he could hear. It wasn't like anyone would notice if he were to disappear until dinner. So he turned once again, and started walking down the lane.

Muggles were bloody strange, the fact that dad was almost obsessed with them was easy to explain though. Ottery St Catchpole was a little village, nothing more, but Ron could see their traffic lights and moving cars. The smell made him wrinkle his nose, the air itself was different from the one he breathed at the Burrow. He walked around slowly, taking in the strangeness of the place. Even the roads were strange, the asphalt was so different from the gravel-covered paths he was used to, even Diagon Alley had stone and pebbles encased on the ground.

Ron walked around very carefully, crossing roads only when he saw the other Muggles do the same, and soon he noticed that they were waiting for the traffic light to turn green. He was amazed when he

realized that the green light for the cars came with a red light for the people walking. *Maybe Dad's right. Muggles are interesting*, he thought, looking with interest at a little music store.

He kept walking around, taking in the sight of Muggles in their natural environment. He followed a group of three kids that entered in what he suddenly recognized as a library. *Hogwarts has a library too!* Wondering if they were the same, he decided to explore it, so he could compare it to the one he would end up finding once he started attending school.

The Burrow didn't have many books, the ones he had nicked from time to time from his brothers were used for school, and were way over his head. He would try again coming September, once the twins went back to Hogwarts. *Maybe I could even owl Bill for his old notes.*

"Since I'm already here, I could read up if Muggles have a machine of some kind to take away nightmares."

After half an hour of looking around, he came to the conclusion that there wasn't a section on dreams, which was stupid, in his opinion. He ended up reading about MRI scans, and how the brain was made. Ron, being ten, didn't understand many of the terms in the books. But the images of the human brain, while a bit spooking, were undoubtedly fascinating. He had never thought that a different area of the mind acted on different aspects of his life.

He kept reading an article that really captured his attention, and was mostly understandable.

*Dreams are understood to be recent autobiographical episodes that become woven with past memories to create a new memory that can be referenced later, but nightmares are simply dreams that cause a strong but unpleasant emotional response. Dreams are part of the brain's default network—a system of interconnected regions, which includes the thalamus, medial prefrontal cortex, and posterior cingulate cortex—that remains active during comparatively quiet periods.*



*REM sleep is one example of a quiet period. It is a stage of sleep that is characterized by rapid eye movement, irregular heartbeat, and increased rates of respiration. REM sleep is discontinuous, chunked into four or five periods that together make up about 20 percent of our slumber. It is during these REM episodes that brain structures in the default network exert influence, and it is during REM sleep that vividly recalled dreams occur most often.*

*Nightmares tend to happen during the period of sleep when REM intervals lengthen; these usually occur halfway through slumber. As we prepare to awaken, memories begin to integrate and consolidate. We dream as we emerge from REM sleep. Because we tend to dream on the sleep-wake cusp, images imagined while dreaming, including the vivid, often terrifying images produced during nightmares, are remembered.*

*A possible pre-emptive way to deal with nightmares, besides the use of chemical products that guarantee a dreamless sleep, can set up the place where the subject sleeps so it can make the patient feel safe and relaxed at the same time. The use of said chemical products however, it usually quickly evolves in abuse, and as such, should be kept as a last resource, and made use of only sporadically.*

*Reading before falling asleep is another routine that can help, but the answer to it is subjective. Fantastical or mythological novels that force the mind to imagine stories far away from the everyday life of the subject are known to help.*

"I'd like to know what is this REM thing, but it still does not help me with nightmares." He commented once he had finished reading. He tiredly rubbed his eyes again before glancing at the clock on the wall. *It's 16:15 already!* He had less than an hour before he had to return home or he'd be found out.

He put back the books on the shelves from which he took them, using a chair to reach the top shelf.

"Who would ever have thought that I would end up being grateful to Percy for explaining to me how the library worked?" he muttered to himself.

*It looks like the fantasy stories of Muggles talk about us, so they can hardly help me,* he thought, skimming the first book in the fantasy section. Thinking about dragons would hardly challenge his mind to imagine something different from his everyday life.

He took up a small book with the simple title *The Allfather*. "Brilliant," he grinned, letting his eyes roam on the shelves in front of him. This was about Norse Mythology, so it would do.

Ron made his way to an empty table, where he started reading, carefully keeping an eye on the clock.

*Odin (pronounced "OH-din"; Old Norse Óðinn, Old English and Old Saxon Woden, Old High German Wuotan, Wotan, or Wodan, Proto-Germanic Woðanaz, ("Master of Ecstasy") is one of the most complex and enigmatic characters in Norse mythology, and perhaps in all of world literature.*

Ron beamed, it looked like an interesting introduction. And while the book was not one of the stories he was searching for, picturing a character that promised to be so complex was exactly what the book *Brain and Sleep* he found suggested. He continued.

*He's the ruler of the Aesir tribe of deities, yet he often ventures far from their kingdom, Asgard, on long, solitary wanderings throughout the cosmos on purely self-interested quests. He's a relentless seeker after and giver of wisdom, but he has little regard for communal values such as justice, fairness, or respect for law and convention. He's the divine patron of rulers, and also of outlaws. He's a war-god, but also a poetry-god, and he has prominent "effeminate" qualities that would have brought unspeakable shame to any historical Viking warrior. He's worshipped by those in search of prestige, honour, and nobility, yet he's often cursed for being a fickle trickster. What kind of literary figure – let alone a god whose historical worship spanned*

*much of a continent and several centuries – could possibly embody all of these qualities at once, with their apparently glaring contradictions?*

*As mentioned above, Odin's name can be translated as "Master of Ecstasy." His Old Norse name, Óðinn, is formed from two parts: first, the noun óðr, "ecstasy, fury, inspiration," and the suffix-inn, the masculine definite article, which, when added to the end of another word like this, means something like "the master of" or "a perfect example of." The eleventh-century historian Adam of Bremen confirms this when he translates "Odin" as "The Furious." Óðr can take countless different forms. As one saga describes Odin, "when he sat with his friends, he gladdened the spirits of all of them, but when he was at war, his demeanour was terrifyingly grim."*

*This ecstasy that Odin embodies and imparts is the unifying factor behind the myriad areas of life with which he is especially associated: war, sovereignty, wisdom, magic, shamanism, poetry, and the dead.*

*In modern popular culture, Odin is often portrayed as being an eminently honorable ruler and battlefield commander (not to mention impossibly muscular), but to the ancient Norse, he was nothing of the sort. In contrast to more straightforwardly noble war gods such as Tyr or Thor, Odin incites otherwise peaceful people to strife with what, to modern tastes, is a downright sinister glee. His attitude is not far from Nietzsche's dictum, "You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause."*

Ron had no idea who this Nietzsche was, but he could find out another day.

*In keeping with his associations with sovereignty, Odin doesn't generally concern himself with average warriors, preferring instead to lavish his blessings only on those whom he deems to be worthy of them. Many of the greatest Germanic heroes, such as Starkaðr and the Volsung family, have enjoyed Odin's patronage.*

*He maintains particularly close affiliations with the berserkers and other "warrior-shamans" whose fighting techniques and associated spiritual practices centre around achieving a state of ecstatic unification with certain ferocious totem animals, usually wolves or bears, and, by extension, with Odin himself, the master of such beasts.*

*Thus, as a war-god, Odin is principally concerned not with the reasons behind any given conflict or even its outcome, but rather with the raw, chaotic battle-frenzy (one of the primary manifestations of óðr) that permeates any such struggle.*

"Warrior shamans?" Ron muttered to himself, picturing a feral, muscular and powerful self going to battle against whatever. Or better yet, an enemy worthy of all his dedication.

*Odin's preference for the elite extends to all realms of society. As the chief of the Aesir gods, he's the divine archetype of a ruler. He's the legendary founder of numerous royal lines and kings are as likely as shamanistic warriors to claim him as their beneficiary.*

*The Germanic peoples, like other Indo-European peoples, originally had at three-tiered social/political hierarchy: the first tier consisted of rulers, the second of warriors, and the third of farmers and others occupied with production and fecundity. The gods and goddesses can be profitably mapped onto this schema, and Odin, along with Tyr, corresponds to the first tier, the crucial difference between Tyr and Odin in this regard, however, is that Tyr has much more to do with rule by law and justice, whereas Odin has much more to do with rule by magic and cunning. Tyr is the sober and virtuous ruler; Odin is the devious, inscrutable, and inspired ruler.*

Ron scrunched his nose when he read about cunning. He sounded like a Slytherin.

*Paradoxically, Odin is often the favorite god and helper of outlaws, those who had been banished from society for some especially heinous crime, as well. Like Odin, many such men were*

*exceptionally strong-willed warrior-poets who were apathetic to established societal norms – Egill Skallagrímsson (Egil's Saga) and Grettir Ásmundarson (The Saga of Grettir the Strong) are two examples. The late twelfth/early thirteenth-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus even relates a tale of Odin being outlawed from Asgard for ten years so that the other gods and goddesses wouldn't be tarnished by the vile reputation he had acquired amongst many humans.*

*Whatever their social stature, the men and women favored by Odin are distinguished by their intelligence, creativity, and competence in the proverbial "war of all against all." Whether such people become kings or criminals is mostly a matter of luck.*

Ron was engrossed in the book. While the cunning aspects did not sit well with him, it looked like Odin was one that minded his own business, and said to hell with everything else.

*One of the greatest differences between monotheistic theologies and polytheistic theologies is that, in the former, God is generally all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, etc. Polytheistic gods are none of these things; like any human, tree, or hawk, they are limited by their particularity. For Odin, any kind of limitation is something to be overcome by any means necessary, and his actions are carried out within the context of a relentless and ruthless quest for more wisdom, more knowledge, and more power, usually of a magical sort.*

Ron grew subdued. He seemed like a Dark Lord now. He wasn't sure if he wanted to keep reading, but he had another thirty minutes before he had to leave, so he didn't really have the time to properly begin another book. He went on.

*One of the most striking attributes of his appearance is his single, piercing eye. His other eye socket is empty – the eye it once held was sacrificed for wisdom.*

*On another occasion, Odin "sacrificed himself to himself" by hanging on the world-tree Yggdrasil for nine days and nights, receiving no form of nourishment from his companions. At the end of this ordeal, he perceived the runes, the magically-charged ancient Germanic alphabet that was held to contain many of the greatest secrets of existence. He is depicted as having subsequently boasted:*

*Then I was fertilized and grew wise;*

*From a word to a word I was led to a word,*

*From a work to a work I was led to a work.*

*Odin's competitive side once drove him to challenge the wisest of the giants to a contest to see who was more knowledgeable and learned. The prize was the head of the loser, and Odin won by asking his opponent something that only he himself could know. Odin then claimed his prize and returned to Asgard.*

*Along with Freya, he's one of the two greatest practitioners of shamanism amongst the gods.*

*His shamanic spirit-journeys are well-documented. The Ynglinga Saga records that he often "travels to distant lands on his own errands or those of others" while he appears to others to be asleep or dead. Another instance is recorded in the Eddic poem "Baldr's Dreams," where Odin rode Sleipnir, an eight-legged horse typical of northern Eurasian shamanism to the underworld to consult a dead seeress on behalf of his son.*

"He had also a familial love of some kind," observed Ron, thinking of himself. He felt abandoned by his family, but he loved them fiercely nonetheless. So he could relate.

*Odin, like shamans all over the world, is accompanied by many familiar spirits, most notably the ravens Hugin and Munin, the wolves Geri and Freki, and the valkyries.*

*The shaman must typically undergo a ritual death and rebirth in order to acquire his or her powers and Odin underwent exactly such an ordeal when he discovered the runes.*

*We've already, albeit briefly, discussed the berserkers and other distinguished "warrior-shamans" under Odin's patronage. This was the form of Germanic shamanism that was the most socially acceptable for men to practice.*

*The other main form of Germanic shamanism is contained within the magical tradition known as seidr, of which Odin and Freya are the foremost divine practitioners. In traditional Germanic society, for a man to engage in seidr was effectively to forsake the male gender role, which brought considerable scorn upon any male who chose to take up this path. As the sagas show, this didn't stop some men from practicing seidr anyway. However, even Odin wasn't exempt from such charges of "unmanliness," and was taunted for adopting the feminine traits and tasks that form part of the backbone of seidr. Saxo, in the passage on Odin's exile, alluded to above, relates that "by his stage-tricks and his assumption of a woman's work he had brought the foulest scandal on the name of the gods." Note also the reference to being "fertilized" in the verse quoted above – while this is certainly a metaphor, it's a metaphor loaded with sexual implications that would have been immediately recognizable to any Viking Age or medieval reader or hearer of the poem.*

Ron blushed reading this latter part, but he kept going.

*A fuller discussion of the relationship between Germanic shamanism and gender roles can be found in later chapters. For our present purposes, it's sufficient to point out that, in the eyes of the pre-Christian northern Europeans, Odin's practice of seidr made him a rather "unmanly" being incapable of fulfilling the expectations placed upon an honorable man.*

*But we've already noted Odin's scant concern for honour. He isn't one to refuse any ecstatic practice, even those that bring him ill repute.*

Ron scrunched his nose. At home, he and his siblings took turns doing all the chores, even if Mum was the only one to work in the kitchen.

*Odin speaks only in poems and the ability to compose poetry is a gift he grants at his pleasure. He stole the mead of poetry, the primeval source of the ability to speak and write beautifully and persuasively, from the giants. Ever since, he has dispensed it to certain gods, humans, and other beings whom he deems worthy of it. The mead's Old Norse name is Óðrœrir, "The Stirrer of Óðr," and, as we have seen, óðr("ecstasy, fury, inspiration") is the root of Odin's name as well. This intoxicating drink, along with the power it grants, is yet another manifestation of his overflowing ecstasy.*

Ron snorted. *Seriously? Talking in rhyme?*

*When Roman writers spoke of the gods and goddesses of other peoples, they generally tried to identify them with deities from their own religion. When they mentioned Odin, they glossed him as Mercury, the Roman psychopomp (the divine figure who guides those who have just died from the realm of the living to that of the dead, and, in due time, back to the land of the living again). This is significant because it shows that Odin's associations with death were seen as being even more significant than his associations with war, or else he would have been glossed as Mars. (This designation usually fell to Tyr or Thor instead.)*

*Odin presides over Valhalla, the most prestigious of the dwelling-places of the dead. After every battle, he and his helping-spirits, the valkyries ("choosers of the fallen"), comb the field and take their pick of half of the slain warriors to carry back to Valhalla. (Freya then claims the remaining half.)*

*He was a frequent recipient of human sacrifice, especially of royalty, nobles, and enemy armies. This was generally accomplished by means of a spear, a noose, or both – the same manner in which Odin "sacrificed himself to himself" (Old Norsegefinn Óðni, sjálfr sjálfum mér) in order to acquire knowledge of the runes. A common*



*– and chilling – way of securing his favour in battle was to throw a spear over one's foes, sacrificing them to the god with the cry, "Odin owns ye all!" (Old Norse = Óðinn á yör alla).*

*His mastery of necromancy, the magical art of communicating with and raising the dead, is frequently noted.*

"I was starting to like you," Ron grumbled.

*While there are several reasons Odin maintains this commerce with the dead, including his desire to learn what knowledge and wisdom they possess, the most significant reason is his dread-driven desire to have as many of the best warriors as possible on his side when he must face the wolf Fenrir during Ragnarok– even though he knows that he's doomed to die in the battle.*

*One of Odin's countless names is "Allfather" (Old Norse Alfaðir), "because," according to Snorri Sturluson, "he is the father of all of the gods." And, as we've already noted, Odin is listed as the divine ancestor of countless families from all over northern Europe. He's simultaneously an Aesir god, a Vanir god (the Vanir god Odris only an extension or transposition of Odin), and a giant (his mother is Bestla, one of the first frost-giants). One Old Norse poem even identifies him withönd, the breath of life.*

Ron almost whistled, he picked a cool myth to get started with.

*What can we discern in all of this regarding Odin's identity? In the same way that Thor is the divine force whose presence the Vikings felt in the thunder, Odin is the divine force whose presence the Vikings felt inóðr. To them, this inspiration/fury/ecstasy was not a profane phenomenon, but a sacred and even divine one that lay at the heart of countless different undertakings, including many that were both especially rarefied and especially decisive in the Vikings' lives. This is perhaps why Odin is the chieftain of the gods – the realms of life over which he presided were to the other aspects of life what a ruler is to the common people.*

*The Norse saw their gods as vital forces that held the cosmos together. As the "Allfather," Odin was the vital force of vital forces – the "breath of life," or something almost akin to Nietzsche's "Will to Power." It's surely no accident that Odin played a greater role than any other god in the creation of the world. Without his vivifying ecstasy, and the enchantment, insight, and clarity that it brings, life – and in particular a life worth living – would be impossible.*

Ron glanced once more to the clock, he had to go. He put away the book, memorizing the number of the page he had reached, before heading to the exit. He answered the goodbye of the adult who stood at the reception of the library and quickly started his twenty-minute walk toward home. *Maybe I should run. The sooner I arrive, the better I can pretend I was around way before dinner.* As soon as he left the outskirts of the village, he started running toward the Burrow.

In the meantime he memorized the name Nietzsche, it could be an interesting read for tomorrow. He would also keep reading about the brain, he was still astonished that the Muggles managed to learn so much. Maybe he could become a Healer? Bill Curse-Breaker, Charlie dragon tamer, Percy a high-ranked Ministry worker, the twins doing whatever with their jokes. He would be someone, not simply another Weasley. Even if the idea was mimicking some of Odin's accomplishments, like exploring the world, battling enemies sounded exciting. He would obviously battle dark wizards, but Aurors and Hit Wizards worked for the Ministry, like Percy. That was a big no-no in his books.

He crept back from the lane onto the property, careful to not be seen. He could hear the twins playing quidditch behind the house, Ginny was probably still at the Rookery, Dad was still at work, Mum was likely in the kitchen, and Percy without a doubt was in his room, studying or doing whatever. He walked in without nobody being the wiser.

Later, they all had the usual loud dinner, and Ron hid his nervousness keeping his mouth always full. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but nobody called him on his absence.

That night, he slept peacefully, dreaming of the one-eyed traveler he read about during the afternoon.

## 2. ch2: 01-September

*1991-01 september*

Ron slid open the door to the compartment which held only one occupant. He had no intention of asking for permission, he was the same kid that asked mum how to access the platform. *He doesn't have friends here that are about to flood here.* He reasoned. *Probably a muggleborn.*

He nodded to the spectacled boy before putting his trunk in place and flopping on the seat, pulling out his battered copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*, the first book in The Standard Book of Spells series, written by Miranda Goshawk.

The notes on it were a godsend, there were tips written only by Bill and Charlie, since Percy would never disrespect a book writing in it, and the twins probably never opened it. *Ha!* Ron smirked at the thought.

He had already read it, months before, along with the other textbooks he was sure wouldn't change once he started attending school. He would have loved practicing, but his parents didn't give him his wand until today. *Charlie's wand.* He corrected himself. It was very battered-looking, chipped in places and the unicorn hair nearly poked out from one end.

With a frown, Ron banished the thought of his second hand wand from his mind, going over what he already knew.

Charms differed from Transfiguring Spells in the following manner: a charm adds certain properties to an object or creature, whereas a transfiguring spell will change it into something utterly different.

The lesser charms are not very difficult to break and many of those that he was going to learn during his first years of education would

start wearing off in a matter of days or even hours after he had casted them.

Dark charms were known as jinxes, hexes and curses, even if that book did not deal with such spells. Some charms would be ineffective on large creatures such as trolls, whose hides repel all but the more powerful spells.

The book listed the Wand-Lighting Charm, Softening Charm, Severing Charm, Fire-Making Spell, Unlocking Charm, Levitation Charm, Locking Spell and Mending Charm.

For each charm, the *Standard Book of Spells Grade 1* explained incantation and wand movement, along with his history. Ron had diligently practiced all the motions and pronuntiations, using a stick as instead of a wand. He had also found himself interested in the history of each spell however.

For example, the mending charm was invented by Orabella Nuttley, an employee of the Improper Use of Magic Office in the British Ministry of Magic, in or before 1754. She used her charm to repair the Colosseum after it had been accidentally destroyed.

And Ron knew not only what the Colosseum was, but also what it looked like!

Since that brilliant day in July, Ron completed his chores in the mornings and spent almost every afternoon in the Ottery St. Catchpole's library. Books on mythology never ended, so he kept reading those, along with a few snippets here and there on the human mind. And a random topic from time to time. Even if those books were not easy to understand, the glossary had helped a lot. Along his reading of myths, Ron poured himself over History. It quickly became a fascinating subject, and he had red from the origin of the hunan race (as the muggle knew it) until 1990. *Gotta love that encyclopedia*. Some parts of it had been dry, but learning about samurais of japan and the atzec people of the Americas had been breathtaking. Ron had also read some of Curchill' speeches, along

with a biography of Gandhi himself. From Nietzsche to Pitagora and Aristotele, Ronald read about a lot of phylosophers. Well, he mostly skimmed until he found something interesting.

For example The Phaedrus. It was presumably composed around 370 BC, about the same time as Plato's Republica and Symposium. Although ostensibly about the topic of love, the discussion in the dialogue revolved around the art of rhetoric and how it should be practiced, and dwelled on subjects as diverse as metempsychosis (the Greek tradition of reincarnation) and erotic love. He found himself bored halfway through the first page, and had forced himself to finish it out of spite. Phylosophy really wasn't a tune he could always follow.

He never imagined that books could be so *freeing*. Ron had devoured *White Fang*, *The Time Machine*, *The Jungle Book*, *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Dune*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. He hadn't understood all of the speeches of the last ones, but they had been a thrill to read nonetheless. He smiled wistfully, thinking of the library he left home. But he was obviously excited to start Hogwarts.

After a while he noticed that the other kid kept glancing at him, it was annoying but he could hardly blame him, if Ronald was a muggleborn he would be curious too. He sighed, closing his battered book.

"I'm Ron Weasley." he introduced himself extending his hand.

The other kid stammered for an instant, before grabbing his hand: "Harry, Harry Potter."

Ron blinked, with his eyebrows climbing on his forehead. *Unlikely*. He thought. Upon a closer inspection however he realized that The Boy Who Lived hid the scar under a fringe!

"Wow." he muttered. "You're super famous." explained lamely.

"Yeah, but I didn't know it until a couple of weeks ago!"

From there on they talked a bit of their lives, and once the awkwardness faded they chatted a bit more loosely. Ron talked a bit of the world he grew up in, also explaining about all the four houses. He wanted to know how it was like to live as a muggle, the things he saw in Ottery St. Chaphole had been mindblowing, and all the random things he read about in the small library often left him with more questions than answers, exchanging information looked like a good way to spend the time. And he couldn't focus properly with another one stealing glances at him.

"Well my whole family is in Gryffindor, they value bravery and righteousness above all else, Slytherin is the house of the ambitious and cunning, Hufflepuff is for loyalty, and Ravenclaw for the pursuit of knowledge. I grew up being told that the only house I could end up in was Gryffindor, since Ravenclaw only has bookworms, Slytherin produces dark wizards and Hufflepuff is for the ones that do not fit into the others. But then I read *Hogwarts: a history*. I don't know how much is true, I mean, the houses have been there for a millenium, surely they would have removed Slytherin if it kept producing only evil guys?"

Harry Potter was staring at him with wide eyes, thinking about what he had just been told.

"It makes sense, I think." replied the spectacled wizard.

"However the biggest chunk of Death Eaters came from Slytherin, everyone knows that, and their children will probably be sorted there."

Harry frowned heavily at that. "I still don't understand how this House thing works."

"Well the twins tried to make be believe that we had to fight a troll to be sorted, but that is their idea of a prank. But the idea is that you are sorted with people 'like' you. It's easier to make friends this way I think."

He was starting to nod when a curly haired girl barged in the compartment without knocking: "Did one of you see a toad? A kid lost it and I was helping looking for it."

Almost startled by the interruption, they both shook their heads in a negative answer. The girl seemed to take it as a request of an explanation, because she immediately started talking.

"I was trying to help but I don't know enough magic to do it with a spell, so I am doing it with the old fashioned way, you see. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard, I've learnt all our set books off by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough, I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said all this very fast.

"I'm Ron Weasley" Ron introduced himself, a bit dazed.

"Harry Potter" said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course, I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

"Am I?" said Harry, a bewildered look on his face.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me." said Hermione. "Do either of you know what House you'll be in? I've been asking around and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best, I hear Dumbledore himself was one, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad ... Anyway, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon." Hermione said before leaving the compartment.



Ronald pinched his nose's bridge. "Nobody ever managed to give me a headache that fast before." he complained. They quietly exchanged in the school's uniform before sitting again.

Trying to get the conversation going once more, and hoping to find out how exactly muggles lived ( the visits at Ottery St. Chaphole often left him confused about a thing or another, and he could hardly research *everything* in the small village's library), Ron spoke once more.

"Is it true that you grew up with muggles? What are they like?"

"Horrible. Well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I'd had three wizard brothers."

"Five." said Ron, unknowingly slipping into a gloomy tone. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left: Bill was Head Boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a Prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand and Scabbers is Percy's old rat. I don't know why I brought him with me..." Ron stopped himself, recognizing that he was whining, and that was something that he promised himself he wouldn't do. Like he had read in Ottery St. Chaphole's library 'to change the outside one must change the self'. "You met my sister, Ginny, at the platform, she once stole Fred's wand to throw a jinx at George. So I already know she's good at magic." He added, changing topic.

After a while, Harry was explaining to him how buses and trains worked when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered and Harry had a look of recognition on his face when his eyes met with the pale kid in the middle. He was looking at

Harry with an interested gleam in his eyes that annoyed Ron immediately.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes." said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing either side of the pale boy they looked like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle" said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have sounded a lot like 'death eater'. Draco Malfoy looked at him, clearly mistaking his warning to Harry for a laugh.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles and more children than they can afford."

"And each one of us has more talent for magic in his pinky than the rest of your family put together, and yes, I am counting also the members that are currently enjoying their vacation in Azkaban." Replied quickly Ron, unruffled.

Malfoy turned slightly red at the answer, and his speechlessness was covered by the two gorillas on his sides crackng their knuckles. The pale kid choose to ignore Ron and looked once more to The Boy Who Lived.

"You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it. "I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks." he said coolly.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riff-raff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up. Harry was sporting an heavy frown, while the Weasley ears started taking a red tinge.

"Say that again" Harry challenged.

"Or you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now." threatened Harry, his frown deeper than before.

Malfoy grinned like Christmas came earlier: "But we don't feel like leaving, do we, boys?"

"Last chance." Ron interrupted them, his battered wand raised in front of him.

Malfoy scoffed, and was about to call his bluff when Ron kept talking. "Very well, but you asked for it. **Pulsus.**"

For an instant, the air in front of Ron looked like it was somehow bending, and suddenly the three invasors were thrown out of the compartment. Without a word, Harry slid the door closed just in time for Ron to cast: "**Colloportus**" and with a squelching noise, the Locking Spell was in place. "Pull the curtains Harry, please." he instructed his bespectacled companion.

Once they were out of sight, Ron let himself fall heavily on the seats, taking deep breaths and trying to regain some aspect of composure.

"Good teamwork." He panted.

Harry looked at him with wide eyes and an even wider smile. "That was awesome!" His expression became concerned. "Are you alright?" he asked, noticing the fatigue that had hit Ron.

"Yes, yes." He panted "I never tried spells before, I only practiced with a stick, you know? So I'm not used to it. I only need a minute. But for today I think I'm done with magic."

"Oh, well I can't wait to learn that." Harry insisted. "I was wondering... can I ask you something?"

"Mate, together, we just kicked Malfoy and his goons out, we're past the point in which we seek permission to ask questions." Ron laughed.

"Today you nominated the Death Eaters twice, were they Voldemort's..."

Ron gasped. Flailing his arms in front of his face.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Don't say his name!" Ron shouted, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people..." he continued with a tired sigh.

"I'm not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name." said Harry. "I just never knew you shouldn't. I've got loads to learn, and not only magic it seems." he added, voicing something that had been worrying him. "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough." Ron reassured him. "I learned **pulsus** from a book that Charlie bought years ago, it's *Curses and Counter-Curses* by Vindictus Viridian." he explained. "And yes, Death Eaters were You-Know-Who's lackeys. It's not exactly a polite topic for a friendly conversation."

"Oh ok. Thank you. Hey, I remember I saw that book in Diagon Alley! Hagrid dragged me away from it."

From there on they kept talking friendly until, finally, they reached their destination. The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way towards the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students and Ron heard a booming voice: "Firs'-years! Firs'-years over here! All right there, Harry?" Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads in the direction of the green eyed wizard. "C'mon, follow me – any more firs'-years? Mind yer step, now! Firs'-years follow me!" Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice. "Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec." Hagrid called over his shoulder, 'jus' round this bend here." There was a loud "Ooooooh!".

The narrow path had opened suddenly on to the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione.

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself, "Right then. Forward!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood. "Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy which hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out on to rocks and pebbles.

"Oy, you there! Is this your toad?" asked Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

"Trevor!" cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last on to smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle. They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door. "Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?" Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there.

"The first-years, Professor McGonagall." said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The Entrance Hall was so big you could fitted easily at least half of the Burrow in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches, the ceiling was too high to make out enchanted to resemble the sky, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right, and Professor McGonagall showed the first-years into a small empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously. Ron bumped his elbow against a redhead girl, and mouthed a 'sorry' while his ears turned pink. The witch smiled, shaking her head. It wasn't a problem.

"Welcome to Hogwarts" said Professor McGonagall. "The start of term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes

with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room. The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours. The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting. I shall return when we are ready for you." explained Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber.

Suddenly something happened which made him jump about a foot in the air, several people around screamed.

"What the –?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to each other and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance."

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost. I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first-years. Nobody answered. "New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them.

"About to be sorted, I suppose?" A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now." said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line. Professor McGonagall told the first-years "and follow me."

They all walked out of the chamber, back across the hall and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall. It was beautiful and magnificent: it was lit by thousands and thousands of candles which were floating in mid-air over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the Hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first-years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first-years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and looked extremely dirty. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched.

A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat began to sing:

*Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,*

*But don't judge on what you see,*

*I'll eat myself if you can find*

*A smarter hat than me.*



*You can keep your bowlers black,  
Your top hats sleek and tall,  
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat  
And I can cap them all.*

*There's nothing hidden in your head  
The Sorting Hat can't see,  
So try me on and I will tell you  
Where you ought to be.*

*You might belong in Gryffindor,  
Where dwell the brave at heart,  
Their daring, nerve and chivalry  
Set Gryffindors apart;*

*You might belong in Hufflepuff  
Where they are just and loyal,  
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true  
And unafraid of toil;*

*Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,  
If you've a ready mind,  
Where those of wit and learning,  
Will always find their kind;*

*Or perhaps in Slytherin*

*You'll make your real friends,*

*Those cunning folk use any means*

*To achieve their ends.*

*So put me on! Don't be afraid!*

*And don't get in a flap!*

*You're in safe hands (though I have none)*

*For I'm a Thinking Cap!*

The whole Hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again. Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted." she said. "Abbott, Hannah!" A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down.

"Hufflepuff!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!" "Hufflepuff!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!" "Ravenclaw!" The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them. "Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor and the table on

the far left exploded with cheers, the twins were catcalling. "Bulstrode, Millicent" then became a Slytherin. "Finch-Fletchley, Justin!" "Hufflepuff!" Sometimes the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus" the sandy-haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!" Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head. "Gryffindor!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned: "Let's hope we finish somewhere else, eh Harry?"

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool. The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted "Gryffindor!", Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to "MacDougal, Morag".

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed: "Slytherin!"

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

There weren't many people left now.

"Moon" ... "Nott" ... "Parkinson"... then a pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil." "Perks, Sally-Anne"

"Potter, Harry! "As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?" "The Harry Potter?"

Ron watched him walk up to the stool and placing the hat over his head. It took at least three whole minutes, and then the hat exclaimed: "Slytherin!"

A wave of whispers swiped the Great Hall, and Ron noticed the lips of Professor McGonagall thinning in a straight line. It wasn't disapproval, but Ron knew that everybody expected Harry to be sorted in Gryffindor.

McGonagall lifted the hat from Harry's head, and Ron looked his eyes with him. He was pale, and looked almost scared. Ron took a deep breath, forced a smile on his face and started clapping, nodding to his friend. He seemed to take a deep breath, before walking to the Slytherin table. After the first couple of seconds, the applause grew, even if it was somewhat subdued if compared to the previous ones.

Soon after that awkward situation, it came Ron's turn. He walked to the stool, sat, and let Professor McGonagall put the Hat over his head.

When the brim of the Hat covered his eyes, he found out that he could no longer hear anything from the outside. But soon a voice started whispering in his head.

"Oh, another Weasley, eh? So similar and yet so different. Curious indeed. Unwavering loyalty, and the wish to be recognized. Aah, but that was true only until recently. Mmmh, I never sorted a Weasley quite like you... You found yourself swallowed by that little muggle library, uh? Just wait to see our Library then, you're in for a treat. Yes, I have decided, you'll be in... "Ravenclaw!" the last word was shouted for all to hear, and he received a warm welcome at his House table. Even if he had spotted his brothers pull strange faces. Well, the twins were mimicking being stabbed in the heart, while Percy was actually very surprised. He shrugged, not that he really cared.

He looked over the Slytherin table to see that Harry was already talking with another first year, and he took a deep, relieved breath. He had feared that they would hate Harry out of spite. Oh, someone did, he was sure. But at least he wasn't left to himself.

Ron started introducing himself with the other first years, only to notice that Albus Dumbledore had got to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!" He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Ron had heard tales of the Headmaster's crazyness, he would never doubt them again.

After the dinner, the Headmaster sent them to their respective dormitories, with a bunch of warnings that everyone seemed to think were absolutely normal. "An entire wing of the third floor forbidden? With death penalty?" Ron asked bewildered. "Maybe we could research it!" Padma Patil quipped in.

"Let's first find away to do it without dying ok?" added Terry Boot.

"Well said, I started thinking I was the only one who really liked to stay alive." Ron answered. And Mandy added: "Let's focus on our subjects first, ok? At least we can die with good grades." They all laughed. *Ravenclaw will do just fine, I think.*

### 3. ch3: First year, part one

*1991-01 september (after dinner)*

Penelope Clearwater led the first years to the Ravenclaw Tower making sure nobody was left behind.

"This is the entrance to our common room." she explained once they had reached the door with the stone raven head that was looking at them with keen interest.

"You cannot tell anyone from the other houses how to reach this place or how it works." Once she had said that, she turned her back on the first years and looked at the stone raven, that opened its beak and *spoke?*

Ron wanted to laugh at the surprising situation, but kept quiet and stretched his ears, eager to understand what was happening.

"I have mountains, but no trees.

I have seas, but not of water,

I have rivers, and they never waver.

What am I?"

"To enter one must guess correctly the answer to the riddle, they are always changing, and if you can't get it right you have to wait for someone to do so. Now who has the answer?" said Penelope.

Ron looked around, finding people with deep frowns and closed eyes, they were obviously trying to answer the riddle. Ron went over the riddle, if not for last part, it could have been Mars, at least from what he knew. The last verse didn't really make sense. *Maybe it refers to golden veins or something similar?* he thought.

"Is it Mars?" he said.

The raven clicked its beak twice, looking... frustrated? "Explain!" it croaked.

"This happens when the answer you give is a lot different from what the raven expects." Penelope encouraged him, while the others were either still trying to solve the riddle or looking at him, waiting for the explanation.

"Well, there are no plants of any kind on Mars, and it has deserts, which are seas made of sand, and there are mineral veins deep into the ground, so 'rivers that never waver'." Ron said.

"Very knowledgable!" answered the raven. Then the door opened.

While Penelopeled them inside, Padma tugged his sleeve: "How did you know that stuff about Mars?" she whispered.

"The first successful fly-by of Mars was on July 1965, by NASA's Mariner 4. And in '71, I think, Mariner 9 became the first space probe to orbit another planet when it entered into orbit around Mars. There are a lot of theories upon the planet, but I read that it doesn't have a very dense atmosphere, so no liquid water. And that means deserts of some kind. Absolutely no plants. I bluffed on the mineral veins." He whispered back.

Terry snorted. "Ron, I think she whanted to know where you learned that stuff." he suggested.

Noticing that Padma and Mandy were both giggling, Ron felt a blush taking over his face. "Oh." He stammered. "There is a muggle library near where I live, and I've read random topics, some things stuck."

He didn't think it was a problem telling them that he went into a muggle library, his mother would hardly find out. *Besides, from the next summer foward I can probably tell mum that I'm studying in a*

*library, it's not something that would enrage her... I hope.* He was still somehow coming to terms with his sorting.

He had never considered the idea of being sorted differently from the rest of his family. And yet, there he was. He didn't find the company of the others boring, nor he felt any of them deserved the title of bookworm. But maybe it was still too soon to tell, during dinner he talked with the others without mentioning books or studies. Introducing himself had included talking about chess, obviously, but Mandy, for example, played the guitar, which was something somewhat uncommon in the Wizarding world, since there were simple charms that played instruments in your stead. They also talked about what they expected to learn, and he even found out that McGonagall was a cat animagus! So the image of bookworms he had really did not fit the bill. His housemates were interesting! Not like Percy at all. Then Ron reasoned that maybe he was a bookworm himself, and that was why he found himself so at ease among the others. That thought brought a frown on his face, that was quickly erased when he realized that he didn't really care. He liked learning, even if it was something that began as an escape from the loneliness he felt at the Burrow. That was it. He was surrounded by likely minded people, and that was just the icing on top of the cake. He felt warm at the thought of making friends.

He left that train of thought when they were all in the common room, it was an airy space. Circular, with seven tall windows at regular intervals, there were two big fireplaces surrounded by armchairs and couches. The ceiling stood comfortably at a height of five meters, and was enchanted to mimick the outside sky. Exactly like the Great Hall, but without the candles. There were several mahogany tables, with lamps and benches on the sides. To his delight, there were also several coffee tables with a chessboard placed on them, ready to be used. Between a window and the next, there were tall bookshelves filled to the brim and alcoves. Maybe all the topics they would need for assignments were already there! That would save them time, he would check as soon as possible.



"This as you can see is our common room, a lot of us study and do their homework here, but you can talk, no worries, even if you should keep an eye on the volume of your voice. The alcoves are mostly reserved for the fifth and seventh years, they apply a silencing charm on the edge of them so they can study without being disturbed. Behind you there are two archways, each leads to a turret, the first one the boys dorm, the second is for the girls. This year your rooms will be on the third floor of the turrets, you will share a room with the same classmate for the whole seven years, unless you ask for a change. You are all encouraged to enchant your room, once you will be deemed capable enough, so not before your fourth year. The lessons begin at 9:00 am, and tomorrow morning our head of House, the Professor Flitwick, will have some words with the whole house and will give us our timetables, at 8:00 am, so that you'll still have time to eat breakfast in the Great Hall." Penelope explained.

Ron let himself fall on the blue covers of his bed with a groan that expressed his exhaustion. He ended up sharing a room with Terry Boot, who was, in his opinion, an ok bloke. The room was at the third floor, like Penelope had promised, there were two big windows that let natural light shine over two desks of modest dimensions, each with a chair. There were two bookshelves, and, just after the bedrests (each with an alarm clock), two little wardrobes. Probably they were big enough just for the standard clothing that was suggested by the Hogwarts Letter. With a last effort, Ron divested himself from the school's robes and opened his trunk, finding his pajamas and quickly donning it. He would transfer the clothes in the wardrobe on the next day. He cursed when his bare feet touched the cold stone floor and jumped again into the bed. He closed the curtains around his bed before wishing 'good night' to Terry, who answered in kind. And soon he drifted into sleep, tired from the day's events.

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The following morning came way too fast in Ron's opinion. However at 8:00 am he found himself with his whole House in the common room, listening to Professor Filius Flitwick. With a twitch of his wand,

a flurry of timetables stormed the room, and suddenly Ron found himself holding his own. The control showcased with that seemingly insignificant spell had shut up everyone, quieting the mutterings and the whispers of those still not fully awake. After that everyone but the first years left for their own rooms, to grab the books needed for the day, before going to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I'll steal you only a few minutes." the half goblin said. "First let me clear a few misconceptions. I do not require any of you to keep an average of Outstanding in all of your subjects. Some topics will result easier to one, more complex to another, and that is without considering the natural attitude someone has toward a certain field of magic. So while I encourage each of you to study hard and give your all to complete your homework, grades are not something that determines in any way your value in my eyes. The Hat choose to put you in Ravenclaw, and it has always had his reasons for doing so."

Some of the first years relaxed a tiny bit after hearing that. To be honest, Ron too was feeling some pressure born from the high standards everyone held Ravenclaws to.

Their Head of House shot them a knowing grin before going on: "Hogwarts prides itself with one of the most extensive libraries of the world. So while you are researching something for your assignments, if you find another topic that strikes your fancy, enjoy it without worries. Just remember to keep track of your surroundings, and complete your assignments *before* you start research something else. Remember however, that while books are a wonderful tool to learn, many things can be understood only through experience. Don't lock yourselves behind a thick wall of dusty tomes, the world is yours, but only if you choose to live in it."

He gave them a warm smile to digest his wise counsel, before wrapping it up: "The door to my office is always open: if you find yourself not understanding a particular topic, you're welcome. If you wish to talk about something, and that includes how you feel about Hogwarts, you're welcome. If you wish to play chess or gobstones, you're welcome to join the respective clubs." he concluded with a

merry laugh that stole a few, grateful smiles from the still tense first years.

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After the first three weeks, the first years Ravensclaws had counted one hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. Obviously the people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and it would have been rude interrupting their conversations to ask for indications. That removed them as possible landmarks, and Ron was sure the coats of armour could walk. The ghosts didn't help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open. Peeves the poltergeist was a right menace in Ron's opinion, and he even suspected that the twins sicked him on their Ravenclaw brother because of his 'betrayal' toward his family. He had no material proof, obviously, but the grins and laughs Fred and George exchanged with each other every time they saw him soaking wet from a water balloon assault were enough to him. Such attacks often ended up reaping casualties among his housemates, who were anything but amused.

In short, between the literal labyrinth of moving staircases, trick doors, and unending pranks, Ron and his classmates became quickly very knowledgeable about how to navigate the school.

The lessons themselves however were pure awesomeness. Well, all but DADA and History of Magic.

He shared the first with Hufflepuffs, and usually spent it either reading ahead or studying something that had absolutely nothing in common with Defence Against the Dark Arts. He had been outraged by how Professor Binns, who was a bloody ghost by the way,

managed to turn a subject so wonderful into something so deadly boring. In those lessons he, along with the other Ravenclaws, took turns in taking notes. While one unlucky sod was forced to pay attention, the others were free to spend the period doing whatever they wanted.

Herbology soon grew to bore him. He didn't really care about plants, magical or otherwise. Even if some of the more nighmarish plants managed to gain a spark of interest from him, they were more Mandy's field than his. Having already read *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phillida Spore allowed him to keep his Exceed Expectation without too much grief.

Astronomy often left him breathless, but only because he started observing celestial bodies he read about in the muggle library near home. He was often reprimanded for his lack of focus. The subject itself was not something that managed to interest him for now, but they were only mapping the Moon face, so there was hope still.

Potions was demanding, but only because it required one's complete attention for the entire duration of the process. That was because, like one of the handwritten notes scribbled on the side pages of *Magical Drafts and Potions* explained, the magic of the wizard or the witch *poured* itself into the concoction with a *passive* process. Ron had no idea what *passive* meant, at least not in that context, but the answer to that question was probably somewhere in the library.

Like he had showcased on the train, Ron seemed to have an aptitude for charms. After all, they required only the correct incantation, the wand movement and a big load of power behind them. He already knew all the wand movements they would be learning during the first year, that left him practicing his pronunciation and almost reaching magical exhaustion every evening before falling asleep. That came with an heavy dose of headaches, but he could see the benefits already. The first time he levitated a shoe, he could only keep it afloat for a minute, give or take, but after two weeks of grueling work, the 'hovering time' had reached one minute and half. Soon he could start with levitating two objects at once. Then he

would learn how to direct them. And one day he would be able to manage Professor Flitwick's feat with the levitation charm. And he would impress him once they got started on it in class, since they were still working on **lumos**. Changing the intensity or the color of the light had not been an impossible challenge for him, even if certain colors resulted, for some reason, impossible to him, and he still wasn't able to switch on and off quickly enough.

Transfiguration was beautiful. Simply as that. It required, above everything else, imagination. You had to picture the end result, and even how it *felt*. Sure, incantation and wand movement were important, but without the proper mindset, nothing seemed to work. Ronald guessed the importance of the *feel* that the end result would give off when he turned his matchstick into a thin ice needle. He had got himself distracted and was thinking about the Ice Giants of Norse mythology. McGonagall understood immediately why his spell went awry and gave him a detention with Filch, for 'fooling around with transfiguration'. He was still glad that his imagination had been honed enough during the year spent in the muggle library that he could bring forth such a change when his fellow first years were still trying to turn the matchstick pointy.

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On a Friday afternoon, Ron went to the library alone. He wanted to complete all of his assignments for the following week so that he could spend the whole weekend practicing charms. He was in for several hours of hard work. Snape's essays were murder, and nobody could make him think otherwise.

He was looking for a free table, when he spotted a familiar mop of unruly black hair. A smile blossomed on Ron's face, the first weeks had been hectic, so he had not been able to interact with Harry beyond a casual 'hello' or an exchanged nod.

He sat down and started whispering: "Hey mate, how have you been?"

Harry snapped his head up from the book he was reading, and surprisingly Ron found himself facing the tip of the holly wand. Recognizing him, Harry lowered his arm, and sported a sheepish smile. "Sorry." he mouthed.

"Blimey, Slytherin made you a bit jumpy!" answered Ron.

Harry simply shrugged, and from there on it was like they were still on the train, easily finding again the camaraderie they had developed while throwing around Malfoy and his goons.

"Slytherin is not that bad, even if they're big on tradition and stuff like that. I had to shut up Malfoy a few times, when nobody was looking, obviously. And I am trading help with defence for customs lessons with Zabini. But I have to learn ahead so I have something to trade, you know."

*Opportunistic twats.* Thought Ron, but instead he said: "I'm doing the assignments for the next week this afternoon, we can do them together, and this weekend we can practice together, we can use..."

"This?" Harry interrupted him, showing the library's copy of *Curses and Counter-Curses (Bewitch your Friends and Befuddle your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and much, much more)* by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

Ron snorted. "Yeah, that's the one. My copy has Bill, Charlie and the twins' notes all over it. So we can learn all sort of tricks, besides to learn this kind of thing one has to practice, we'll need an empty classroom."

Harry thought about it for a few seconds, before nodding. "Sounds like a plan. Are you any good at transfiguration? I manage somewhat with the practical, but every time I think I've got the theory, it... *slips*. I don't know how to say it."

"Yeah, I'm good at the theoretic side of transfiguration. How do you feel about potions? I don't know how to complete the last

assignment." Ron answered.

"Potions is not a strength of mine, however I completed the homework with a Gryffindor yesterday, he knew how to properly grind fangs from a fanged lily and I managed to squeeze in two whole inches on the assignment. You can have a look at it, if you want."

"Cool, I'm already set for herbology and history. And I am halfway done with astronomy." concluded Ron.

And so they studied together for the whole afternoon. Helping each other pointing out respective errors or suggesting things that the other didn't know. In Ron's opinion, beyond the effectiveness of working together, it was a new kind of fun, a strange cross between deeply satisfying and empowering.

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On the following day, Ron and Harry met in an empty classroom on the fourth floor, and immediately the bespectacled wizard opened Ron's copy of *Curses and Counter-Curses (Bewitch your Friends and Befuddle your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and much, much more)*, eager to learn.

"**Langlock** seems a useful spell to know, if you manage to nail your opponent with it he can't use incantations." He pointed out.

"I agree, but before we start hexing each other, maybe we should make sure that we are able to reverse the effects." answered Ron.

"Look in the counter curses section of the book, there is the all purposes counter spell '**finite**'. If I remember correctly, you just need to jab your wand at whatever you're trying to undo and say the incantation."

Harry eagerly flipped forward in the book, soon finding what they had been looking for, and started reading: "**Finite** is cast tapping with the tip of your wand the subject you want to free from the effects of the jinx you want to undo. Blah Blah Blah... Yeah you were mostly right Ron. Oh wait this is interesting, an important variation of this counter

course, is the **Finite Incantatem**. Blah Blah Blah... focusing on what you want to accomplish (undoing the effects of a jinx or hex), you need to jab your wand toward the subject you wish to uncurse."

Harry paused and took out a spare parchment, where he started jotting down notes about what he had just read. At that point Ron poked his head over his shoulder, squinting his eyes to decipher the scribblings of his siblings on the side of the pages. "This looks like Bill's handwriting, listen. *Undoing your own curse is easy, because your magic acts as a... key in a keyhole? Otherwise you have to overpower the spell in place.* A key in a keyhole? Why did he think about that? No wonder he ended up becoming a cursebreaker. And here there is the twins scribble: *finite incantatem on shields, finite on spells.* Ok shields are fifth year material, so we'll put a pin on that."

"How do we practice the finite?" asked Harry "I mean, I'd prefer casting it on something instead of each other, so if it goes awry we are still safe."

"Well I could levitate a sock, and you cast both finite and finite incantatem on it until it drops. But I don't know, since **Wingardium Leviosa** is something that I have to keep active, so I don't really know how it would work." Proposed Ron.

"Uh, I don't know the levitation charm yet." muttered Harry. "What about transfiguration? We can turn a little splinter from one of the desks into a needle, and undoing each other's one. You know the cutting charm, don't you? Is in the *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1.*"

Ron assumed a pensieve stance. "I know only the theory, I never tried it. Wait a moment, you want me to cut up the desks? If the professors find out..."

"Only enough to use a little splinter, besides, there is also the mending charm in our texbook." Harry explained his reasoning.



Ron threw him an unimpressed glance: "Another spell I've never tried, I don't know if I can make it work."

"Well, we have the whole day, and I can try to learn it too." Harry proposed.

"And here I had thought it would be easy." the Ravenclaw wizard whined, "Luckily I've brought my *Book of Spells* here today. Ok, let me read again the chapter on the cutting charm, and we'll go from there. You can practice the stinging hex in the meantime." and when he saw a grin blossoming on his friend face, he added "Not on me." Harry put up a 'fake innocent' impression that made them both laugh.

It took Ron half an hour before he managed to synch intent, incantation and wand movement in a smooth and single gesture. Only then, he slashed his arm toward the side of a desk, shouting: "**Diffindo!**"

He obtained a very uneven looking deep scratch on the before smooth wood. He pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes, erasing the feelings of disappointment from his head, leaving behind only his purpose.

Then he went at it again. "**Diffindo!**" from the tip of his wand, a thin almost transparent looking line shot forward like the edge of a blade.

The spell didn't reach the edge of the desk, but dissipated itself after a meter give or take.

"Uff!" Ron panted. He lost focus because he had been admiring the result of his spell. It was a stupid error to make.

Careful to keep his focus, he slashed his wand, shouting the incantation. This time, the thin, translucent line hit the desk, cutting it. However, the spell landed in the middle of the wooden board.

There was a loud *crack*, and the desk snapped along a line that crossed its center.

"Well it worked." commented Harry. Ron shot him a glare, before grabbing a splinter and throwing it to Harry. "I don't think I will be able to learn something beyond **finite** today." he said, swiping his own forehead with his robe's sleeve, removing the thin layer of sweat that he had worked up.

"The cutting charm took a lot out of me, in the afternoon I'll keep practicing it. Along with **finite**. Tomorrow I'll come back here and try to learn the mending charm, I don't think anyone but us will come here in the meantime." Ron reasoned.

Harry was already handing over a transfigured needle, even if it was a couple of palms long. "We should also soon start transfiguring different shapes, or a somewhat ornated needle." the Ravenclaw added. "It was an exercise for bettering the control, I think Charlie scribbled it on the transfiguration textbook."

## 4. ch4: Plotting interlude

*1991-21 december*

The professors meeting was something that was held three times each year. In Severus opinion, they were three times too many. And why would they need to spend the equinox or the solstice talking about their students? He could be attending a potion that could be brewed only on that day of the year, but no, Albus insisted that those dates were the perfect moments to discuss everything Severus did not care about.

He could only be grateful that his Slytherins didn't cause problems outside of the common room, otherwise he would need to address them with the other professors too. Thinking about it, he was also grateful because none of his House students was raising any kind of concern regarding their marks. Well, none but Flint, Crabbe and Goyle. But those three had a pea sized brain, so no kind of discussion about them could properly address their shortcomings.

His blank expression did very little to hide his boredom, since the rare times he was addressed in regards to... well, *everything*, he answered with a single word, two at most. His drawl was an effective deterrent against everyone of his colleagues, everyone but Albus, Minerva and Filius, obviously. After hours of unsufferable, pointless and tedious commentary about every single student, the meeting finally came to an end.

"Severus, join me in my office please." Albus added when he was almost bolting to the door. He suppressed the groan of disappointment that threatened to escape his lips and shadowed the Headmaster to his incredibly ugly gargoyle.

"Acid Pops!" The ancient wizard said. His passion, or better yet, obsession with sweets had made him choose treats of a sugary kind as a password since Severus attended Hogwarts as a student.

The gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator, and after they stepped on it, the wall behind them thud itself closed. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, they reached a corridor. And at its end stood the gleaming oak door which had a brassknocker in the shape of a griffin.

His office was, like always, an eyesore. It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of annoying little noises that scratched the hearing and bright colors that assaulted the eyes. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindlelegged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. He distractedly recognized a few, before letting his eyes roam the walls, which were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. The fireplace was ornated with runes coated in gold, and was big enough that Severus could enter it without having to lower his head. There was also the enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, the Sorting Hat. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Severus stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making a gagging noise.

"Go ahead and burn, unsufferable bird, spare us your pity party" Severus snapped. While the phoenix squawked outraged, Dumbledore let loose a relieved chuckle.

"Old friend, while Severus could do with a bit more sugar in his life, his counsel is often spot on. Don't let our worries hold you back." Albus said. Tilting slowly his head, the bird let out a mournful cry and bursted into flames.

"Finally." muttered Severus, sitting down in an armchair near the fireplace. He was soon joined by the powerful warlock, who adoperated himself putting a teapot on the embers that shone on the outskirts of the blazing fire. Severus didn't interrupt him, nor tried to speed up the process with magic.

"I know that the meetings bore you, and that waiting for this old man to make tea must look like another waste of time." he said, "Please forgive me, and bear with my quirks."

Severus arched an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Sometimes it feels like the last ten years have been one of your quirks." he muttered, stealing another chuckle from the headmaster.

"Perhaps you're right." he answered "I had expected an interaction of some kind already. But nothing, they walked very close to each other without crossing paths."

"Crossing paths..?" wondered Severus "You expected the boy to be involved with the troll on Hallow's Eve?"

"I expected that something on the 31st of October, and that young Harry would be involved, yes. I hope you're not suggesting that I would let a first year face a mountain troll, talented or not." answered the older wizard.

"I won't even pretend to believe by your mocking feeling hurt at my accusation." Severus cut drily.

"Prophecies are curious things, Harry and Tom are tied together, they're like magnets, in that sense. I've witnessed to the completion of another, many years ago. And based on that experience, I can tell you that the events will conspire to unite the two of them. The more we try to separate them, the more violently the prophecy will react, causing endless grief to all of us." said the headmaster.

"You talk about that blasted prophecy like it's alive." grumbled the potion master.

Albus smiled, and his eyes shone of the satisfaction only a teacher can feel when one pupil makes a particular insightful observation. "More like they react to the happenings of the world. Prophecies are dynamic things, and they always come true in the end."

Severus shook his head "I don't follow."

Dumbledore looked at him with something akin to pity: "It's hardly your fault. We should have had this talk months ago, at the latest. You're the only one I can talk about this freely after all."

Severus sat straighter in his armchair, his attention now brought fully on the headmaster. It was more than rare that he would explain things plainly, and beyond the wildest dreams that he would so openly talk about the workings of the prophecy.

"Are you about to die?" he asked suddenly, and at Dumbledore's arched eyebrow, the potion master elaborated "It would explain why the sudden change in your strategy of keeping all the cards close to your chest."

The headmaster gave a deep belly laugh at the explanation. It was so uncharacteristical of him that Snape could only stare. "Forgive me Severus, sometimes I forget that you truly do not listen to a single word of what is said in the trimestral meetings. But I can see where you come from, I've never been the most forthcoming person when it comes to planning." He wiped a tear of mirth from his eye before assuming a more serious expression, regaining his usual benevolent and serene behaviour.

"Young Harry has made friends inside and outside of Slytherin. And since november he has been part of a study group composed by the youngest Weasley, the one so unexpectedly sorted in Ravenclaw" Severus nodded, identifying quickly the one he was talking about. His sorting had been the second most discussed, after Potter's, obviously. "Harry, and Ron got it started, collecting the muggleborn Hermione Granger, who has quickly placed herself as the best in all of her classes. These three are the most promising students of this year, I hadn't seen such brilliance and dedication in a long time." the old wizard sounded... proud? "The study group had grown quickly, and it now counts among its members Neville Longbottom, The Patil twins, Terry Boot, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass, Millicent Bulstrode, Theodore Nott and Blaise

Zabini. There hasn't been a study group with all four houses in it since when I was teaching Transfiguration, Severus, and never one so big."

The potion master stared blankly at his employer, waiting for an explanation.

"Besides their wonderful academic results, young Harry, Ronald, and one day I hope Hermione, are thick as thieves, and practice ahead of their syllabus on Sundays. In great secret, obviously. I believe that they are almost finished with the Charms and DADA first year program." the headmaster went on.

"Are you trying to tell me that a bunch of brats working together inspired you so much that you choose to change your ways?" Severus asked.

"Partly I have been reminded of the simple fact that 'two heads work better than one'. I won't deny it." answered kindly the old wizard.

"You will forgive me, but the first time I planned something with another it led to disaster, and on the other, admittedly few, occasions, the other people only slowed me down."

He took a breath, like he was preparing himself to sprint. "In this case, it's the fact that Harry and the troll hadn't interacted at all that made me think. I already told you that the more one opposes a prophecy, the more violently it realizes itself. One of them will kill the other, on that there is no room for doubt. That will result in a confrontation, you see, a prophecy is like lightning held within the clouds, waiting to discharge itself on the ground. Every time Harry and Tom come close to each other, physically or through other means, the lightning tries to strike."

"You are saying that every thing they do is an extension of themselves, and so the troll, which had been a red herring organized on behalf of the Dark Lord, should have found his way toward Potter?" asked Severus.

Albus' blue eyes twinkled merrily while he clapped. "You prove the sharpness of your mind once again, Severus, I would give Slytherin points, but I hear they're doing quite well for themselves." this was the professor who enjoyed teaching. "And now you must be asking yourself why didn't the troll find young Harry. The answer, I'm afraid, it's somewhat haunting. And to understand it, you will need to listen to the whole prophecy."

"Albus I don't think..." the potion master started to object.

"Severus, we both know the strength of your resolve and the extraordinary occlumency you're capable of, don't waste our time playing humble, it's beneath you." the headmaster interrupted him.

Humbled by the weight of the trust placed upon his shoulders, the black haired wizard jumped when the teapot started whistling. The headmaster grabbed it with his hand wrapped in his too long sleeve and poured them two cups of hot water, before offering a small paper bag full of herbs. "I believe this mixture would go well with just a tiny bit of cognac." The ancient wizard raised his arm, and a bottle rose from behind a shelf, before floating gently into his hand. He then added a generous amount of the liquor to their cups. They drank in a companionable silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

"No." Severus said after a while.

"No?" asked perplexed the headmaster.

"I understand where you are coming from, and I thank you for the trust you placed in me with your offer. But it's still tactically unwise to give me the exact wording of the prophecy. If you must, tell me the bare bones of what you think I must know. But nothing more, for the sake of everything we've worked on." The potion master explained.

Dumbledore gave him a surprised glance, before going over his request. "Very well, Severus, we'll do it your way. The prophecy designs Harry as Tom's equal. And this is what I find interesting."



Albus stroked his beard absent mindedly for a few seconds, before talking again.

"You see, when Tom attended Hogwarts, he surrounded himself with a loyal group of 'friends', each of them held one of three things: wealth, friends in the higher tiers of society, or crude magical power. All of them were purebloods, and he knew even others at the Slug Club. These friends of his became the Knight of Walpurgis at first, before becoming more known as death eaters in the following generation. Abraxas, Lucius' father, was one that belonged to that circle, Orion Black was another, only three years Tom's junior. Young Mr. Riddle came to Hogwarts alone, without friends. He grew up in an orphanage and was sorted into Slytherin. At the time I was still teaching transfiguration and had just become vice headmaster. That, along with my duties as the Head of Gryffindor, didn't leave me time to check on young Tom. His being muggle raised in Slytherin, with no idea of who his parents were, along with his natural tendencies, made him isolate himself. His talent and drive however let him become the 'bigger fish' in Slytherin very fast."

The headmaster sat quietly for a minute, staring into the fire. "I failed him. I thought a good scare was all that was needed to show him the wrongness of stealing, but I fear that he felt it like I was bullying him into submission. And so, in the same very first day in which he learned he was a wizard, he also learned that our world was made of those who held power, and those who didn't. Worse, I showed him that the latter were to serve the first. That tossed him onto a path that led to loneliness, and lonely people can become terrifying beings."

Severus had no idea of what he was talking about, but he was too familiar with remorse to not recognize it. He reached over, placing a hand on Albus' shoulder and giving it a comforting squeeze.

"Hindsight is twenty twenty, they say." he told to the old wizard.

Dumbledore shot him a smile that was a cross between grateful and wistful, before focusing once more on what was the purpose of their

conversation.

"Forgive me, old minds tend to wander when left unchecked. Tom and Harry both came to Hogwarts alone, grown up unhappily among muggles, were sorted into Slytherin, and built around them a circle of friends. My reasoning is as follows: the more similar choices Harry makes, the more quiescent the prophecy stays. Now obviously we do not wish young Harry to become the next Dark Lord. But there is one fundamental difference that already steered us clear of that path." the headmaster said.

"If you tell me it's love.." started grumbling the grumpy potion master exactly in the same instant that Albus said "Love."

The Head of Slytherin House groaned before putting down his now empty cup and pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"It will never cease to amaze me how skeptical you are when love it's mentioned. After all, it's the reason we are where we are." the headmaster replied, he was greatly amused by Severus' frustration.

"His study group is where Harry is currently looking for friends, and he already has Ronald and Hermione among them, and Mr. Zabini is another that he cares deeply about. The difference between him and Lord Voldemort" at the mention of the name the ex-death eater stiffened, "it's always been and always will be love. Simply as that. Young Mr. Potter didn't find himself alone, and that is enough. The similarities between Tom and Mr. Potter give us time, but there will come a moment in which Harry Potter will need to choose his path. I have no doubts that he will choose his friends over power, again and again. He will become like a reflection in a mirror, equal, but opposite. And then the prophecy will explode in our hands. Dragging us around like leaves into a whirlwind."

"This, this sounds like a good thing doesn't it? More time?" asked the potion master, who still trying to come to terms with what he had just been told.

"It simply is Severus." answered Dumbledore, "One one hand, more time means that Harry and his generation can grow up into people that will be able to withstand the storm on their own feet, he has already started breaking the divide among Houses, even if nobody but me has noticed. That means that many will have a choice, when the time comes, between him and the Dark Lord, which is better than no choice at all. Maybe Theodore Nott will choose Harry over his father. On the other hand, his evergrowing circle of friends will be exposed to the pure blood propaganda, and when the prophecy will start actively dragging us around, they will be adults, and I won't be able to shield them. I will also be older, and age is an enemy that I can't and won't battle."

The Head of Slytherin House rubbed his temples: "Are you pulling youreself out of the war?"

The headmaster shook his head gravely: "Not at all. But I recognize that my value on the board dims with my growing age, I can almost feel Time knocking at my door, ten years from now I will no longer be a match for Tom. But I think that together, maybe, those three can."

"You would bet everything on them? And to hell with the rest of us?" asked Snape, visibly shocked.

Dumbledore gave him a reassuring wink. "I am still here, I thought that I would be able to lead this game, even if not to its end, but I now see that I can merely set the board, and prepare the next queens and bishops, rooks and knights, so that they can choose their pawns with the utmost care, and they can keep the king safe."

Severus rose from his armchair, shaking his head to his defeated tone. "To me it sounds like you are giving up!" he reprimanded the ancient warlock.

Dumbledore's experrSION became grim, while his eyes flashed of the blue belonging to the ocean's dephts and his voice assumed a rythm worthy of a funeral speech: "I am old, child. You still can't understand what it means to live a life this long, I was born in 1881, you are 31.

I've had my share of love, pain, grief, honor, wrath, envy, guilt and war. I've been told I am a genius, and I remember each agonizing second of my battle against Gellert, each shade of my empty pain when I saw my sister die, the distinct crack of my nose breaking under my brother's fist, the pride of learning under Nicholas Flamel. I saw the first cars, the ships that sailed to whaling. You have no idea how heavy on the heart is seeing Charlus Potter's chin on his grandson, or recognizing your great grandmother cheekbones on your face. I saw the last Malfoy display Durella Rosier's ears. I've seen them all come and go, and in the meantime I've been showered with important jobs that nobody can do half as well as me, by people that are both terrified and longing for me to *rule* them as a king. And every twenty years I hope to see a generation that does not need to learn the lessons I've got carved on my skin and soul. I look back, and I only see a wasteland, of all the people I knew and loved, Abeforth and Elphias are the only ones that I remember being young with. The first still hates me, and the second is often too lost into his own mind to talk like we used to. And I am old enough to have seen many like you accusing me of not doing enough, while I am balancing the magical world on the tip of my crooked nose." The ancient warlock stared down the young potion master. Who sat down once more, sorry for his outburst.

The silence hung heavily in the air for what felt like hours, "I'm sorry, Albus. You didn't deserve it, it's just... too much."

"I know how it feels like to be overwhelmed. One tends to lash out. There is nothing to forgive, my boy. And I'm not giving up, I will spend the years I still have tricking the game so that you'll start with a leg up." answered Albus, once again with a calm tone.

Severus sighed, thinking about all the things that had been said, and applying occlumency to center himself. "On the short term, what does it mean? What do we do with Quirrel?"

Dumbledore rose from his armchair and wandered through his office until he reached Fawkes perch, where he started running a finger over the newborn phoenix, that let out an appreciative gargle. "On

the short term it means that I should find a way to delay the Triwizard, that it's too soon to pressure the death eaters still at large with the law Arthur Weasley is preparing for the next year, and that we should hire a proper history professor. It means that my plans will be *our* plans, and that we will discuss them together, starting tomorrow evening. It means that near the end of the year I'll corner Quirrel, in the meantime, keep an eye on him, but from a distance. Capturing Voldemort has always been an ambitious project. You could consider taking a more active role in Harry's education, and start training yourself like there's going to be a gruesome war in less than ten years, because it will probably be so."

Severus Snape rose from his armchair, once again going over their heavy conversation. He stopped just before leaving his office.

"I have no idea what this business with the Triwizard is, but I guess we will go over it tomorrow." at the headmaster's assent, the potion master went on: " Why a proper History teacher? I mean, why now?"

"Because a proper understanding of the society we live in is built upon our knowledge of its History. With a capable teacher the awareness of the muggleborns mistreatment at the hands of the Ministry will explode, and when, after the war against Voldemort, it will be necessary pull through the pain and build a new government, the informed muggleborns will be there. In this way we use the unavoidable war against Tom to revolutionize our country. It will be our French Revolution of 1789, but without Government of Terror and pointless bloodshed." explained Dumbledore.

Snape just blinked, unwilling to believe that the man in front of him had a mind capable of pulling out a plan of that magnitude in the five short steps that brought him from his armchair to the firebird's perch. "We will need a competent minister." was all he was able to suggest.

The headmaster nodded, like it was exactly what he was focusing on, and for all Severus knew, it was exactly like that.

"I was thinking about Amelia Bones, Scrimgeour could take her place at the DMLE." He answered kindly, then noticing the vacant eyes of the potion master, he smiled. "You're tired, my friend, go to sleep. We'll plot tomorrow"

With a trembling nod, Severus Snape left the headmaster office, already feeling older after the long talk.

## 5. ch5: First Year, Part Two

1992-04 january

Ron was sitting alone in the library, in a little alcove he found under an high window. He was irked, and reading through a thick tome entitled *Enchanted Mirrors and Why Mistrusting Them is Wise*. It had been written in 1847 by a certain Eris Riflessa, and the young ravenclaw didn't understand if a wizard or a witch that published something had to be named in a way that ironically directed toward the topic they treated.

The italian witch knew her enchanted mirrors, that Ron could not deny, even if her english was somewhat poor. From time to time he jotted down notes into a spare piece of parchment, and while many of the ideas considered in the book were fascinating, the realization of the simplest of them was way over his head.

The part that truly annoyed him however, was the total absence of any mention of mirrors that showed you things that didn't exist. Mirrors that talked, mirrors that showed you another place, mirrors to comunicate (he wrote down everything about that chapter for future use) It was just sad that you needed a bunch of silver to fill the runes carvings needed for the last one to work properly, and even then, the sound transmitted through twins mirrors was easy to intercept. There were even ways to enchant mirrors to hold small objects, however the items would be destroyed if the surface of the mirror was ever to crack, even a tiny bit. The whole second half of the thick tome contained speculations about how to turn a mirror into a 'door' to another mirror. Eris Riflessa seemed to suggest that it could work in a way similar to the twins mirrors. But after a few pages she contradicted herself sustaining that the twins mirrors communicated through 'resonance' and a 'transfiguration of light carried over by a protean charm'. He added *transfiguring light* and *protean charm* on another parchment that contained future topics of research.

"Tracey wrote me that you've been thrown out of the Chess Club" a voice suddenly whispered.

Ron jumped from his seated position straight as a rod, before recognizing the voice and cursing under his breath. "What the fuck Harry! This joke wasn't funny the first time, and sure as hell it's not getting better with practice!" He hissed to the empty air, which shimmered, revealing a grinning Potter holding his invisibility cloak in his right hand and a big leather bound book in the other.

"Uh, hanging around Davies coloured your vocabulary Ron." Noticed the amused Slytherin, "And I beg to differ, it was funny the first time, and it's getting more and more refined each time I practice it. It's like you with your fire making charm, really."

"What? I'm.."

"..slowly building up to greater things." Harry completed what he was about to say before him. "Yes, yes, I know, I think I found something interesting, give it a look."

It was heavy, a thick leather cover around what looked like more than a thousand of thin pages. *So parchment, not vellum.* Ron noted. The title was sewn with silver thread: *The Mind Arts* by Vega Black.

"Black? Harry how deep in the Forbidden Section have you gone?" whined Ron. At the uncaring shrug of his Slytherin friend, he sighed. "Well the title is straightfoward at least. You think the mirror you found reads our minds?"

"Well it makes sense in a way, the images it shows sure aren't coming out of nowhere." Harry replied, while grabbing *Enchanted Mirrors and Why Mistrusting Them is Wise*. "I'm going to put this one back, ok? We can lie and say that one book had been misplaced, but if we get caught with two tomes from the Restricted Section..."

Even with a passing glance, Ron could tell that the tome was important. A book that introduced a whole branch of magic that he



never heard of before? He must sneak it up in his room.

Ron was shook out of his reverie when Harry poked him: "Oh? Oh yes, I agree. I still don't know why you're the one sneaking around hidden and I'm the one that risks being found out breaking the rules."

"Well, I'm better at sneaking, for one thing. I'm not that good with learning from books, I'm more a hands down type of learner, you know that, and you read faster than me." Harry answered.

Ron shook his head at the blatant attempt at manipulating. "Bloody Slytherins." he whispered.

"And proud to be!" answered the now invisible form in front of the Ravenclaw, before walking away silently.

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That night was the eighth one in which they found themselves in the Mirror's room.

Harry was staring into it longingly, and there were his mother and father smiling at him again, with Ronald and Hermione hugging him from time to time, or giving him reassuring pats on his back.

"Harry, stop looking into it." whispered Ron.

The Slytherin sat down on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

"Mate, I'm here, not in there." insisted the voice. Harry shook his head, focusing on the blindfolded Ravenclaw. "Harry, they're not real, and we were right it has something to do with the eyes, now let's grab the invisibility cloak and..."

An ancient voice interrupted him.

"So back again, you two?"

The two first years felt as though their insides had turned to ice. Harry looked behind himself, while Ron quickly did the same, untying his blindfold.. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. They must have walked straight past him, so determined to get to the mirror that they hadn't noticed him.

"We... We didn't see you, sir." Ron stammered.

"Strange how short sighted being invisible can make you, don't you agree?" said Dumbledore, and the firsties were relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry and Ron "You, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised. And from the books you've been reading, I expect you've realised by now not only what it does, but also have tried to figure out the how?"

"Well it shows us whatever we want..." said Harry, and Ron nodded before adding "We thought he read our minds through the eyes..." The ancient wizard slowly clapped.

"Yes and no, to both of your answers." said Dumbledore quietly. "It does not however, read your minds. It reads much deeper, to the core. Its enchantment, or curse, is triggered when someone gazes into it. But that is only because its a mirror. And enchantments cannot completely ignore the nature of the object they are woven into." He explained.

"As for what it does, it shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. Forgive me, for the invasion on your privacy, but neither of you should have been around after curfew, so take it as a lesson. You Harry, who have never known your family, see them standing around you, along with the new family you found at Hogwarts. I'm talking obviously, of your ravenclaw companion. And Ronald, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, and ignored by his family, sees himself standing proud, as someone worthy of being acknowledged.

As someone capable of being the next Centennial Wizard. With his family and friends' admiration and your companionship."

The two first year students glanced at each other, somewhat embarrassed by having their deepest desire so easily revealed. Dumbledore went on with his kind voice, ignoring their reactions.

"I have never seen a friendship so deep grow so fast, and it truly warms my old heart. If I got this right, if you were to look at it again in a few months, miss Granger would join your reflection. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible. Now I will warn you, the Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, and I neither of you will go looking for it again. If you ever do run across similar illusions out to ensnare your minds, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, Harry, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed? I'll walk Ronald back to his common room, we need to talk about his chess performance."

Harry and Ronald both stood up, exchanging a nod with each other. Harry quickly donned his cloak whispering 'goodnight', and almost bolted from the room.

Dumbledore walked over the young Ravenclaw, "Let's walk together, shall we?"

Slowly they made their way out of the room, Ron kept his eyes downcast, almost ashamed of what had just been revealed. But mostly annoyed by the Headmaster's nosiness. Not only he shouldn't have spied on them (and for more than one night too!) but most certainly he should not have spoke about what they saw in the Mirror so casually. "It was extremely callous of me, bringing up your hearts desires with seemingly so little care." the ancient wizard said.

Ron was brought up short by his words, but sure as hell they didn't sound as an apology, not that he would forgive his nosiness anytime

soon, Great Sorcerer or not. He spotted them breaking the rules, fine, he should have taken house points, give them detention and send them on their merry way. Dumbledore kept looking forward, not even casting a single glance to the annoyed Ravenclaw. "But as I said, take it as a lesson. Alastor, an old friend of mine, would be appalled by your lack of constant vigilance. And insight on our own true character, is a gift we rarely receive. Knowing your heart's deepest desire can be a good point from which you can start the never-ending journey of introspection. After all, while the mirror never shows reality, it doesn't lie with the meanings of what he shows. I thought it better clearing the air immediately between Mr. Potter and you. After all, three things can't be hidden for long, Sun, Moon..."

"... and Truth." Ronald interrupted him, completing the Buddhist quote. Dumbledore turned his twinkling eyes on him at that point, sporting a delighted smile: "You're a surprisingly well-read young man. I would award Ravenclaw some points, but, considering that you have, in fact, broke curfew several nights in a row, I think we'll just call it even. I would even commend your dedication, not many eleven-year-olds could pull through so many nights with little to no sleep, Mirror of Erised or not."

"Uh, thank you sir, and... I didn't, I mean I've slept in the afternoon so I could stay awake at night." Ron answered meekly, his mind working on all the 'would' that the headmaster had just used. If he didn't know better, it did sound almost as if he was complimenting him.

Dumbledore nodded once, before looking forward again. They started walking up one of the many stairs they would need before reaching the Ravenclaw's Common Room. "A well-thought-out plan indeed." the old wizard commented. "I have found that the more I age, the less sleep I seem to need. So I am familiar with night-time strolls, They haven't always been able to ease me into a mindset that helped drifting into sleep, but a hot cup of tea, with a spoon or three of honey, helped a lot." he glanced at Ron, an almost sheepish look on his face "I have a bit of a sweet tooth, you see."

The ravenclaw fought hard to not picture an Albus Dumbledore sneaking around the grounds at night in a fluffy pijamas, with a hot cup of tea and a honey jar. He really fought hard to keep that imagine from taking shape in his head, alas, some battles can't be won, and the weasley had to suppress a snort. Failing on that front too, he masked the sound with a very fake cough, that made Dumbledore chuckle along. "Another friend of mine has my same problem. The sleepless night, not the sweet tooth. And I would appreciate if you were to keep it to youreself, I don't need Poppy reprimanding me for giving bad example to our students. As I was saying, this friend of mine had my same problem, and we found out that sleeping came easier after a well played match of chess."

Ron perked up at that, his hazel eyes almost gleaming in the night. Dumbledore would hardly bring out this topic, unless he was offering to play a night game of chess with him. Him! *Why would he?* Ron asked himself, he could be ignorant of many things, even naive, but he most certainly he wasn't a mindless fool. "Are you... why? I mean, are you offering to play a game? with me? I mean, why?" he stammered. And he also hated turning into that stuttering mess when talking with *the* Albus Dumbledore.

"As I have said, it had been horribly callous of me, parading what you saw in the Mirror. Harry didn't seem to mind that much, but it got to you, and I'd prefer if one of my students wouldn't start holding a, forgive me, petty grudge over a stumble that I made without ill intentions." answered the headmaster.

Ronald frowned heavily at that, he wouldn't have called what he was feeling the start of a grudge, and most certainly he didn't think it would be petty! The old man was snooping around needlessly! Gathering himself, he answered to the powerful mage: "Are your apologies always this awkward?"

The old wizard arched an eyebrow, his eyes twinkling merrily: "Apologies? Oh, I see why you would see it like that, no, I fear that apologies are not what I'm talking about. However, we can talk about what happened, and go from there. Don't you agree?"

Ron wasn't a mindless fool, so he knew that the question wasn't something that could be answered with anything but an assent, and so nodded, recognizing that maybe he had crossed a line. Just a tiny bit.

"It's a very curious thing that the Mirror's Room was so far away from the Ravenclaw Common Room, and that the path that we are taking is so tortuous and void of prefects or professors patrolling. It looks like we'll have all the time necessary to cover in a satisfactory way all our topics." Dumbledore started, and Ron tried to believe that the headmaster had *not* been planning this conversation, but who was he kidding? He was *the* Albus Dumbledore, hailed as a prodigy since a young age, he shaped the last century of the Magical World. On the purely 'magic' aspect, he pushed the boundaries of alchemy with Flamel and he revolutionized how everyone approached Transfiguration. The less said of the seven hours long duel against Grindelwald, the better. Politically, he had been a titan since 1945. Ron had only heard stories about how he was as a person, and those came from rare comments made by his parents, mostly from his dad when he got a bit tipsy, so he never saw Dumbledore as the greatest thing since sliced bread. But now the words 'greatest wizard alive' assumed a whole new meaning. Ron was smart, not Hermione-smart, which was impossible and should be illegal by the way, nor the twins-smart. But he was still one of the sharpest tools in the shed, as the muggles would say. Talking with Dumbledore was... humbling. And only then Ronald realized that anything short of a new Dark Lord, nothing would ever qualify over the 'squabble' mark in the headmaster's mind.

"Let's start with the outraged demands that some of your peers made: why would they wish to expel from the Chess Club a first year that lost a single match after weeks of victories?"

Ron cringed at the memory: "I lost on purpose the last match to... ehm... win some galleons from the betting pool."

Dumbledore simply blinked at him, giving an encouraging nod.

"Uh... so, I joined the club back in september, and I've never lost, so after the first month it has been imposible to make any money from the betting pool, I had to start playing without a rook, or sometimes without a bishop and a knight, only to even the game, and even then people just stopped betting on my games, since everyone betted on me. But I had already won *two galleons*. And I needed to reach seven, so ... a friend... helped me." Ronald started looking anywhere *but* at Dumbledore, feinging that the esitation just before he choose to not give the name of the person that helped him never happened. The headmasters eyes were twinkling at full tilt then, not only because it was obvious that this friend had been nobody but Harry Potter himself, but also because his name had appeared on the expulsion request Albus received, listing him as an accomplice.

"Loyalty is an admirable trait to possess, but you should work on your... ah, dissimulating ability. It is, forgive me, how do you young people say it in these days.. oh yes, *Lame*. But please, go on." Commented Dumbledore, amused.

"Ok so... this person, asked to join the club, but that wanted to be sure to not waste his... time. Or hers, this person could be a she after all. So he... or she, played around a bit losing almost every time, then this person started betting and lost a total of three galleons, and then she... or he, went against me, asking me to use all my pieces because he didn't want to be coddled. And betted to galleons on himself, or herself, to win. By that point everyone had some pocket change to spare, but I placed my own two galleons on myself. So... I don't know how it ended up there, but in the end there were a total of fifteen galleons on me winning. And the only one to bet against me had been my adversary, so... I kinda of... lost on purpose? Then we split the money evenly. This person lost three galleons and went away with seven and I ended up having eight galleons." Ron explained.

At this point Albus was sure that Harry was truly flourishing in Slytherin, Severus would get a kick out of it, he couldn't wait to tell him. Even James would have been proud. He turned his attention on

the young ravenclaw, that at that point was almost ranting: "But I still say that they can't *prove* that I've rigged the match, I mean, everyone can have a bad day."

"Betting is frowned upon, but ultimately, not against the rules. You can't bet what you do not rightfully possess, and as long as underage wizards and witches bet between themselves, it rarely raises concerns. If there were an adult betting, now that person could be tried for attempting to trick children, debts are powerful things after all." Dumbledore said. "Betting is a very dangerous thing, and as such, very frowned upon. But I am, at the end of the line, a teacher, and I think this episode taught everyone a lesson. So while I reprimand you and Mr. Potter for tricking your fellow students, I can't punish you for that. Now, I believe that the older students lost most of their pocket change, and that in a fit of rage they wrote me demanding your expulsion from the club."

Ron managed to wait for almost thirty seconds of silence before blurting out: "So am I being thrown out from the Chess Club?"

Dumbledore nodded gravely: "No I don't believe so. But the real question is, do you wish to go back there? It hardly sounds like something you would enjoy. Not very challenging I'd say."

Ron mulled over it for a while. "I don't really care, to be honest, but I still don't like the idea that they can just throw me out for losing a bet."

The headmaster gave him a knowing look, before talking again: "It's more the fact that you tricked them, than their losing money, I think. And probably your showing off playing without some of your pieces looked like disrespect after the first week. After all, at chess, and in similar competitions, mercy is an insult towards your opponent. And your actions have been seen as patronizing, rigging the bet has only been the excuse they've used."

After a while, the Headmaster broke the silence they had fallen into. "To sum it up, I won't expel you from the Chess Club, but you are



kindly suggested to not go back there. Now, on a completely unrelated topic. The mind arts are a dangerous branch of magic, and if I were to know that one of my students was in possess of a way to learn said topic, I would be required to inform the DMLE. For the safety of said student, of course." the irony poured in the last sentence made clear that the real reason was another.

"But if... I mean, why would the book be in the Restricted Section if..." Ron was silenced by the stern glare the headmaster threw at him.

"Which book are you talking about?" he asked, and something in the pose the ancient wizard assumed told the ravenclaw that Dumbledore placed the book where Harry would find it.

*Crafty old goat!* realized Ron.

"Indeed." commented Albus.

The ravenclaw noticed that such a comment was far too in line with his thoughts, almost as if...

Ron shot the old warlock an outraged look, immediately looking everywhere *but* in those twinkling eyes. Like he read in the chapter that described the use of legimency, eye contact was the easiest way to 'test the surface'.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Well, aren't you a paranoid young wizard. Now, Alastor would like that."

"Alastor... As in Alastor Moody, sir? The Auror?" asked the ravenclaw, choosing to change topic. Whatever that mention of the mind arts meant, he would find out with the due calm, another day. The eccentric wizard clearly didn't want him to mention said book.

The headmaster smiled at him. "I've already said before, however, that at the very core, I am a teacher. And if a students was careful, and worked without ill intent, I would let him explore freely his limits.

Knowledge is power, you know that, it's true even for muggles. For wizards however, it's a tangible thing. True knowledge, for those of us that not merely *practice with*, but *are* their own magic, is born from understanding. But while it's our will that directs our magic, it's our mind that shapes it. The Mind Arts, occlumency in particular, are a path that leads to knowledge of the self. And self understanding is one of the most intriguing, difficult, maddening quest one can set himself upon." By then they had reached the stone raven head that marked the entrance to Ravenclaw's common room. Like always, the bird came to life and asked:

"To rise and fall,

I'm the slowest of all.

My head scratches the sky,

clouds pat me on the shoulder when they pass by.

My roots run deep and are never ending,

while ice and water my skin keep scarring.

Who am I?"

Ronald glanced at Dumbledore who was staring at him, clearly waiting for him to give the answer. So he thought about it for a minute or two, it wasn't a very difficult one. "A mountain."

The door opened and let them in. Dumbledore walked over a comfy armchair near one of the fireplaces, before pointing his finger toward the cooling embers. Immediately, a warm fire blossomed out of nowhere, with merrily dancing flames casting changing shadows in the previously dim lit room. "Fetch us a board, will you?" the ancient wizard asked.

Ron was gobsmacked by the casual display of something that he had only heard stories about. Wandless magic was not something

wizards or witches should be capable of. Period.

He obeyed, almost running to cross the room to set the chessboard. He was so out of it that the headmaster had to cough discretely twice, to gain his attention: he raised toward the ravenclaw his two closed hands, Ron tapped the left one, white. Dumbledore opened his right hand, showing that he was holding a black pawn in it. It wouldn't do having the student accusing the ancient wizard of rigging the game after all.

There is not a kind way to describe what followed. Ronald was truned.

He could say that his head wasn't really in the game, or that Dumbledore was a scary opponent, or that he was tired. There where a lot of excuses he could use. But the point was that he had played... awfully. His plans to capture his pieces were half assed and bad thought, his fear to lose the queen had cost him two rooks. Really, no excuse could justify that. Not to his eyes, he knew his worth at chess, and that match had been ... pityful. Dumbledore stayed true to his word, showing that he honestly believed mercy on the board to be an insult.

"I... I'm sorry sir, usually I'm much better than this." Ron started, only to be interrupted by the headmaster with a kind gesture.

"You lost when you saw me lit the fireplace wandlessly. I would have been surprised if you had managed to keep your cool. But yes, this has not been a good game."

Ron stared at the much older wizard. "You did that on purpose!" he almost shouted. Controlling himself only because he remembered it was night, and the fifth and seventh years that stayed at Hogwarts during the holidays to study would have murdered him for waking them. Dumbledore stared right back at him, clearly unruffled by his outraged expression. "Why would I do that?" the ancient wizard asked, almost sardonic with his twinkling eyes.

Ron almost started ranting right there when he suddenly stopped. Frowning, he closed his mouth with an audible clack of teeth.

*Okay, why would he mock me? Oh, I'm missing something. Let's see what I know: he somehow probably planned this whole night. And that is scary. He is the Albus Dumbledore. And that is... well that's scary too. But tonight he's been...* Then it hit him. Teaching. He also had said that, at his core he was a teacher.

"I'm guessing that there's a lesson hidden somewhere in what happened just now, isn't there?" Asked tiredly the ravenclaw.

Dumbledore's answer was setting the board. After a good half an hour, Ronald knew that he was going to lose. But like hell he would topple his own king.

So they played, and at the turning of the hour, Ron recognized that he would lose the game in five moves, and finally gave up.

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Now, this, this has been a good game. Even if you still play using only your pieces."

Ron groaned, too tired to divine a deeper meaning in the headmaster words. He started sliding lower in his armchair. "But I still lost." he whined.

The headmaster gave an amused chuckle at that reaction. "My boy, the point has never been winning. The point is playing a good game." raising from the armchair he added: "Why would I wish to win anything but a good game?"

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The day after Ron was a bit sluggish from his messed up awake-asleep cycle. But he only had to soldier on, and once he reached evening, he could sleep for twelve hours straight and find again some kind of balance between day and night.

Terry went home for the holidays, so he had the room all for himself. As soon as he rose from his bed, he organized the chessboard he kept on his desk, moving the pieces until the game was a perfect copy of the critical point of the second match between Dumbledore and himself.

He knew that he had messed up somewhere. But for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. And 'you still play using only your pieces' was an oblique suggestion if he ever heard one. The ancient wizard's planning ability was scary. And not only at chess: during the last night, not a single Ravenclaw Prefect had patrol duties, so nobody interrupted the chess match between him and Dumbledore. The young Ravenclaw had no doubt that it hadn't been so by chance.

He glanced at the tome he nicked, apparently with Dumbledore's blessing, from the Restricted Section.

*No, That Dumbledore found a way for Harry to take.* Ron corrected himself.

Harry's cloak of invisibility was the coolest thing he'd ever seen, well after the Mirror of the Erised. And Dumbledore wandlessly summoning fire. Ok the Cloak was among the top three. But McGonagall turning into a cat and back to human was awesome too...

*Ok the Cloak is among the coolest things I've ever seen.* He decided, making his way down the Ravenclaw tower.

He reached the Great Hall and joined Harry, that was sitting on the end of the only table that was laden with food. With so few students left, it seemed a waste to use more than one table. At Christmas they even ate together with the professors!

"Hey mate." the Ravenclaw greeted the bespectacled wizard.

"Ron! I'm sorry, I didn't want to put you in trouble. What happened after I left?" fretted Harry, dropping the toast he was about to bite.

"Uh, it's okay mate, I'm not in trouble... We... ehm. He talked a bit, and then we played chess." The ravenclaw explained, busy filling his plate.

Harry looked at him flabbergasted:" You... what? How?"

Ron snorted into his plate, throwing crumbs everywhere. "I have no idea, myself."

"No way, now you have to tell me!" Harry exclaimed.

Ron looked around, there were few students scattered along the table, nobody near enough to overhear. "Well, we just walked to ravenclaw tower, and the book on the mind arts is super secret. So, don't tell anybody, and I mean it. I'm not expelled from the Chess Club, but I won't go back there, since I'm unwelcome. But that's alright, since I actually was bored there. And we played a game, he trounced me. But listen, he lit the fire in the common room *wandlessly!*"

Harry blinked a couple of times, digesting the flow of informations. "Oh, ok, so everything turned out... wait a minute isn't wandless thing supposed to be impossible? Oh and I wanted to ask, what is a Centennial Wizard?"

"Yes! I mean, no. It's about familiarity, but it requires years to learn a single spell, and it's not something anyone can do. I think Bill manages to make a coin drop on a face he chooses, he used the trick to win some random bets. But I'm not sure it's *actually* wandless magic. And a centennial wizard is... well the wizard that defined a century, politically and magically." answered Ron.

"Well it makes sense, even if it is difficult, he's Dumbledore. Hey! What if we learn how to do wandless magic?"

"Harry, that's not really the same as learning how to fly..." objected the ravenclaw.

The slytherin's eyes gleamed, and Ron knew he had made a mistake. "Well since it's impossible, we have nothing else to research, and our homework is done, we can explore the castle!"

The redhead let his forehead slam against the table, not caring about the crumble nestling in his hair. "Fine." he groaned "But we'll stay away from the bloody cerberus. I've had nightmares for days."

"We will see where our path leads us!" retorted flippantly the raven haired kid.

"How are you a Slytherin?" asked Ron for what it felt like the thousandth time.

Harry simply laughed, enjoying the dismay of his friend.

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*1992-15 april*

Ron stormed in his room, he was almost furious. No he was frustrated, irked, annoyed. Even Hateful.

After the first chapter of *The Mind Arts*, he had been tempted to burn the horrible tome just for existing and taunting him for his own stupidity. It had been ridiculously complex, and he had understood almost nothing from the text. Only morbid curiosity had tempted him that night into giving the next chapter a chance. It had been equally bad, and he had regretted ever opening the book when, literally on the last page of the second chapter, he had felt something take root in the back of his head. The chapter had been an introduction into the relation between magic and mind. Ron hadn't understood what Vega Black, the tome's author, had wanted to tell her readers. Why even include a chapter about something like that?

Smart wizards and witches were more capable. There. One sentence, and everything that mattered and was true, right? Even if Dumbledore had hinted at 'understanding' during their talk, back in january.

Well, no, apparently not. Instead, she had written extensively about P-lines and J-peaks, Lyra-intersections and Ron actually believed that she had made up the last one only to give something the name of the constellation which Vega belonged to. And why would she need to do that? Utter crap, the whole book.

Ron liked the human brain, he was deeply fascinated by how it worked. It had been so since he had first read about nightmares. In which felt like another life.

Mind magic meant brain. Or, magic that worked in the brain, directed by the brain. Or better yet, directed by one's will, and shaped by his mind, like Dumbledore said. Even if there wasn't a single mention of spells of any kind, at least nothing that Ron managed to see while skimming through it.

At some point, he couldn't tell exactly when, a strange feeling had risen in him while reading the last page. There had been... something important buried within all these paragraphs. Vega Black had written about categorizing magical people according to the outlined characteristics. Those outlined characteristics sounded like they were the interpretation of P-lines and J-peaks, Lyra-intersections. These confusing terms, if Ron were to guess, were details of graphs one could probably draw after casting specific diagnostic charms. Why couldn't wizards wake up and find a way to replicate the muggles' MRI?

Ron could not cast those charms for several reasons, not only he didn't know them, but he wouldn't cast anything on his own brain, no matter the possible gain.

Without an actual understanding of the... p-stuff, j-thing and Vega-whatever, it was impossible to follow her complex theories, but he still had the impression that there had been fundamental aspect of the Mind Arts, or perhaps magic as a whole, hidden within the elaborated explanations.



Each mind is unique, Ron already knew it, since, well... every single human is different. People grow and learn. But they do not grow in the same way, nor do they learn the same lessons. It was obvious, not mind shattering... and yet, maybe there was something... more.

So different minds had different intersections and peaks and loops and lines, dots, angles and whatnot?

Suddenly, as if hit by a punch, he had made the connection, had grasped the meaning of Vega Black's explanations. He had understood what she had meant with the peaks and lines and all of those stupid names. Why hadn't he seen it before? He hadn't had a clear understanding of the implications.

But it then clicked. Different brain, meant different mind. And the trick was, that a different mind meant a different way to *think* magic. So a different way through which someone *made* magic too.

And if he were to believe what Dumbledore had said, each individual was different. The headmaster had said it clearly: 'True knowledge, for those us that not merely *practice with*, but *are* their own magic, is born from understanding. But while it's our will that directs our magic, it's our mind that shapes it.'

It made perfect sense, now that he thought about it. He had his breakthrough. All came down to personalities, he realized, his mind still slightly sluggish. Why should he care what others called it? Lines and dots, peaks and squares, it didn't matter. Magic and the mind, or the personality, to be precise, were linked. Of course they were, hadn't he wondered why Harry would learn the spells so fast once Ronald explained them, and became almost incompetent when it came to learning from books? Why Hermione preferred to read about a spell in silence, and seemed unable to explain it in her own words?

If the character of a witch or wizard made them more or less adapt at learning in a certain way, maybe it made people more talented towards certain kinds of magic.

After all, Flitwick was a dueling and charms master, and probably, despite being so clearly extraordinary in his chosen fields, he probably knew less stuff about transfiguration than McGonagall.

That explained perfectly why Vega Black had wasted four chapters on it, if the character influenced the magic of someone, said influence might just be stronger when applied to the mind arts. Then of course the first step in learning them had to be the classification of the student's mind. That explained why there were so many different approaches listed in the book. Even if for some unknown reason, Ron didn't seem able to recall them.

He let out a sigh, satisfied. His head was pounding from the sheer weight of the sudden revelation.

"She could have made it easier. Every mind is different, so everyone uses magic in a more or less different way, and occlumency has to be unique for each individual, even if the characteristics that identify each mind, qualify it under a limited number of categories." grumbled, letting his head sink in the soft pillow. "There. Less than fifty words."

The book seemed to have a set of questions to help someone understand which kind of mind he had, and there were paths to learn occlumency suited for each category. Before he could ask himself if he should get started on it, he fell asleep, still in his school robes.

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"Hey Ron." Harry greeted him.

The ravenclaw kept resolutely his nose buried in the library's copy of *Tales from the Stars*, a collection of myths born from the constellations. The muggles were surprisingly on par with the knowledge of mythology. But then, the stories were born before the Statute, so it made sense. He had known each of the legends already, but it was useful, since he was busy translating those from the Ancient Greek they were written into.

*It's a pity there aren't spells to teach someone a new language.* He thought tiredly. But then, while challenging, learning new languages was something that appeased his analytical mind.

*It's like a chess conundrum.* He decided. The way each word just clicked with its context gave him the same feeling of realization he received from a well played exchange on the chessboard.

"I'm not smuggling any dragon from the castle." he answered curtly. "I have already put you in contact with Charlie. It's no longer my business." He added when his Slytherin friend was about to insist.

"And no, I'm not going close to the Cerberus either. In the Greek mythology a Cerberus guards the *infern*, or afterlife. So I'm not interested in whatever there is under the trapdoor.

"You're no fun!" desisted Harry. "But what if there is something important?" he asked.

"Then Dumbledore will do something about it. Or even more likely, the headmaster has everything under control. Since he was the one to place both the giant dog and whatever else on the Third Floor Corridor." continued Ron in a flat tone. "Why don't you take Zabini with you? Or Hermione for what matters. The first is crazy enough the second... Well she's worse, but at least she has a brain."

Harry gasped, in a mocking outraged fashion: "Why would I change my Adventures Mate so close to the end of the year? And Blaise has a brain!"

"I resent that title. And because the last time we got caught Snape had me scrub cauldrons for a month, without you, I might add. Sorry about Zabini, I meant having a brain and using it." the Ravenclaw replied, keeping an even tone.

"Eh, Slytherins cover for each other. But Snape gave me a proper scolding in the common room, I already told you that. Stop bringing up the past. Live in the present!"

"Whom did this come from? No, don't tell me. Davies." Ron finally rose from his book, when Harry got started, it was impossible to focus. However, he managed to distract him from the 'smuggling dragons project' and so he was happy to stop learning greek to banter. Banter with Harry was fun, and most of the time managed to distract him.

*Bantering is likely the only normal interaction he had with others in Slytherin. Thought Ron, Only, he has to look less enthusiast about... everything, in there.* While Ron shivered at the thought of being sorted in the House of emerald and silver. He may no longer think Slytherin only produced dark wizards, but while he had grown to appreciate 'being left alone when you want' quality of Ravenclaw, from what Harry told him, there was some sort of hierarchy in the bespectacled wizard's House.

"C'mon, help us with the dragon."

*Shit! he remembered.* Ron realized with a groan.

"Fine." he was already regretting it. But saying no to your best mate was difficult at best and impossible otherwise.

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Ron would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say goodbye to Norbert if he hadn't almost lost two fingers when the baby dragon choose him as new chew toy. "Fucking dragons." He half grumbled, half whispered. A disgusted gasp made him cringe: Hermione heard him.

"Ron! Language!" the witch hissed.

Harry helpfully snorted, and the ravenclaw mouthed a half hearted apology.

It was a very dark, cloudy night and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their

way in the Entrance Hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall.

Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate. "He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely." From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded as though teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as the ravenclaw, slytherin, and griffindor first years covered the crate with the Invisibility Cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mummy will never forget you!" Hagrid cried.

"You all do realize that our feet are clearly visible yes?" Ron complained.

"It's dark, nobody will notice our feet." Harry whispered, "Let's just focus on keeping the levitation charm up ok? I'm not eager to lift that crate with my bare hands."

"And I've cast a notice-me-not on them as well. It's not perfect, but it should help, and it's not like we have another option." Hermione added.

"Two things. One, you're scary brilliant." answered Ron. In the dark, the light blush that covered the witch's cheeks went unnoticed.

"And two, can you teach us?" completed Harry.

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall and along the dark corridors. Up another staircase, then another, even one of Harry's short cuts didn't make the work much easier.

"How come you two know this area the castle better than me?" Hermione asked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other under the cloak, before not committedly replying "Exploring." If the chorused answer made the witch suspicious, she didn't voice it.

"We should be fine, unless the professors know everything and are waiting to ambush us along with the someone from the Ministry on the top of the tower, so they can catch both Charlie's friends and us." Ron thoughtfully pointed out.

"It's a possibility, but... why should they know anything?" Hermione reasoned.

"Well, Harry do you have by any chance left around the letters in which you organized this smuggling?" Ron asked.

The slytherin snorted. "What am I? A gryffindor?"

"Hey!" Hermione hissed.

"Sorry Hermione." Harry said, while Ron held back a laugh.

"I thought slytherins were the paranoid ones. What made you think about..." but the ravenclaw put hands on their mouths, forcing them to shut up and straining to keep up the levitation charm on the crate.

A sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop both the notice-me-not and the levitation charm. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A wand flared into an unmistakable **lumos**.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan dressing gown and a hairnet, had Malfoy by the ear.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you..."

"You don't understand, Professor, Harry Potter's coming! He's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come. I shall see Professor Snape about you, Mr. Malfoy!"

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they'd stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the Cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate.

"Whatever they do to punish him, it'll be nothing against what the rest of the House will do." Harry gleefully told them.

Ron nodded thoughtfully, but at the confused face Hermione pulled, the Slytherin explained. "Nobody likes a tattletale, Hermione. But in Slytherin it's like... the golden rule. Another is 'don't get caught'. Malfoy made a mess of both. But it also means that he searched my things, and that, more than everything, is a mistake he won't repeat."

About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed the students the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then the three students shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

"You must be Ron! Charlie didn't tell me you were a Ravenclaw! I thought you would be a Gryffindor like your brothers!"

At that Ron's smile became somewhat fixed on his face. Harry, noticing the sudden tension in his friend, took over, saying the appropriate thanks and goodbyes.

At last, Norbert was going... going... gone. They slipped the cloak back on, and walked down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them.

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, they almost ran straight into Filch, but thankfully he passed them without stopping. Muttering sweet things to his cat.

They first walked Hermione back to the Gryffindor Common room, well near it, since the witch refused to show them the way. "Uh, I forgot it was a secret." commented Ron, while Harry assured her that this time he wouldn't keep following her to the entrance.

They walked towards the ravenclaw tower, dead on their feet.

"Are you sure you can make it back?" Ron asked him. Ravenclaw is the highest tower, and the dungeons are pretty far from there." Ron whispered.

"It's okay. After all it was my idea." replied the slytherin, and they kept walking in a tired, but companionable silence.

"Hey Ron" said Harry after a while "Does your family now you're a Ravenclaw?"

The minute tensing and slowing down of his friend were a clear answer.

"I don't want to talk about it." Ron replied. "The twins and Percy know. Probably My perfect prefect brother wrote it to my parents, I wouldn't know. My Christmas jumper was dark brown with a golden R, so I couldn't tell, they've always been my colors, even if I hate them." He closed his mouth with a snap, realizing that he had, in fact, started talking about it.

Harry respected his clear wish for silence, and kept walking silently along his friend until they parted ways.

It had been a long night, but the topic they stumbled upon with the careless comment of the dragon handler had filled Ron with a nervous energy. And his mind was not in the right state for studying.



"Latin it is." he decided. Hoping that the logic of the dead tongue could help him focus on something else.

The raven door sounded a bit miffed by being woken up so late in the night, but provided the riddle without fail:

"What do you hold,

but never keep?

If you take your last,

make it deep."

Ron thought about it for a while. He had always had to answer riddles in the form of 'what am I?' and this was clearly a difference. Maybe the door made peculiar riddles at peculiar times? But it wasn't like he never snuck around after curfew before.

"Breath?" he tentatively answered. And the door swung open. He quickly and silently reached his bedroom. Where he sat at his desk and summoned a golden light to hover over him. It was a nice and handy tweak of **lumos**. "At least Harry agreed that the cerberus is to be left alone." he whispered to himself.

He glanced at the closed curtains around Terry's bed, grateful for their existence. They were the only reason sneaking in and out of the room was so easy. He was glad that the library had a whole section dedicated to speeches. Even if he would have liked being able to read more recent works from time to time.

He soon found himself pouring over a speech written by Cicero, trying to forget his problems about his family in the concise and effective rethoric.

## 6. ch6: The second Step

*1992-19 august*

"Are we all here? Good, remember to go straight to Gringotts, we don't need to crowd Tom's pub, the poor man has his hands full in this month already." Molly Weasley fussed over his family once more. Ron rolled his eyes and went first, unwilling to explain that waiting until the last week of August to make their Hogwarts shopping was, like always, a stupid plan.

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames. With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose high, Ron then stepped right into it, shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and vanished in the blaze.

It felt as though he was being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spun very fast, the fire roaring in his ears was deafening. He dutifully kept his eyes open, looking through the stream of fireplaces snatching glimpses of the rooms beyond, as soon as he recognized the gloomy looking inside of the Leaky Cauldron, he stepped out, quickly clearing the way for the next one who would soon floo through. He had always wondered how exactly flooing worked. What if two people wanted to go to the same place at the same time?

It still made sense that shouting 'Diagon Alley' one would floo through all the open fireplaces of the Alley, after all, many shops had their fireplace ready for customers. But wouldn't it be better finding a way to floo directly into the place you wanted? It couldn't be so difficult could it? Maybe he could research floo powder and systems once he was back at Hogwarts.

Ron walked into Diagon Alley looking around for Harry and Hermione. Hedwig had been kind enough to deliver his mail to both his friends during her return trips to Privet Drive. He could have

used Errol, but then it would have to let his parents know who he was exchanging letters with, and really it wasn't worth the hassle. However they agreed on meeting, so that they could spend some time together before school.

Ron obviously had told nothing of his friends to his family, nor had his parents asked. Not only dad would probably insist to ask his muggleborn friend about her everyday life, but his mum would go into a fit if she were to know that he was writing to a Slytherin, Boy Who Lived or not. That is without even considering the Harry Potter #1 fangirl Ginevra Weasley. He thought with a smirk: *Maybe I should introduce them. Oh, that would be a sight to see.*

Well, the twins probably knew about his friendships, they had hardly been discrete at Hogwarts, but if there was one thing that George and Fred both appreciated, was keeping secrets from their mother. So all was well.

He saw both his friends sitting on Gringotts steps. The marble steps were extremely large, so, while their seating arrangements certainly rose more than a few eyebrows, they weren't in any way disturbing the flow of people coming from and going to the bank. Not that the goblins would have allowed it otherwise.

He quickly ran over, knowing that his family would soon join him. "Hello guys!" and before they could answer, he went on "My family is still flooing over, and for whatever reason we all must go together at the vault. Can we meet right after? We usually have an hour or two of free time before meeting up somewhere."

"Well, hello to you too, Ronald." Sniffed Hermione. "And I'll have you know, my parents liked the idea of meeting your family."

Harry simply shrugged, he didn't care one way or another. But from what Ron had been able to grasp, he knew something about not wanting your family around. That was strange, but it was somewhat a taboo topic among them, along with the Mirror of Erised.

Noticing that Hermione was miffed by the ravenclaw's request, Harry took the situation in hand.

"Well, I know that Fortesque makes the most extraordinary ice cream in the world, and I wanted to grab a cone. Come on Hermione, I'll treat you. We'll see you there Ron. Let's go warn your parents 'Mione." And rose from his seated position

"How did you call me? How dare you!" Incensed, the gryffindor completely forgot about Ron, choosing to chase her slytherin friend, who had quickly gone back into Gringotts. Probably for a tongue lashing of some kind.

"Thanks mate." the ravenclaw told to himself. "How the hell did he think about "Mione? It's hilarious." he chuckled.

Soon after all the Weasleys were once again together, and they marched into Gringotts. Walking through the Main Hall, Ron spotted Harry walking away from a couple of muggles, Hermione hot on his heels. He smirked, the slytheriness of his friend came in handy from time to time.

The Weasleys were led to their underground vaults by a Gringotts goblin. The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along miniature train tracks through the bank's underground tunnels. Ron tried to enjoy the breakneck journey down to their vault. It was like playing quidditch but without the control that made it an enjoyable experience.

Not a moment too soon they had reached their vault. There was a very small pile of silver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon, and his mother felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy muttered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Ron's mother and Ginny were going to a second hand robe shop.

"We'll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in two hours to buy your schoolbooks," said Molly, setting off with Ginny. "And not one step down Knockturn Alley!" she shouted at the twins' retreating backs.

Ron strolled off along the winding, cobbled street, looking for the ice cream stand Harry had talked about.

He found them both sitting in the bright sunshine outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, and Harry raised his head from his sundae to smile at his ravenclaw friend.

Ron sat down with an happy grin next to Hermione, who had been too focused on her ice cream to notice him until that moment.

Immediately, her eyes narrowed. But surprisingly, her sudden frown slowly disappeared, and after a glance to Harry, her shoulders seemed to lose some of their stiffness.

"Do I want to know what Harry told you?" he asked with a sigh, taking in the sight of the bright coloured umbrellas floating above their heads.

"Unlikely." Harry replied quickly. "So, I was just telling to Hermione about my brilliant holidays. You see, I told my uncle that if I managed to finish homework soon enough, I could leave two whole weeks before, and that if I played my cards right, I could leave their house as soon as I turn seventeen. So I spent the last weeks at the Leaky Cauldron and roaming Diagon Alley! It's been wonderful!"

Hermione lips formed a thin line at that. She was probably conflicted between being proud about his drive in completing homework, horrified at the thought of having to lie to be able to do it, and saddened by the prospect of preferring to be alone instead that with your family.

Ron congratulated his friend. "I imagine that they didn't know that we become of age at seventeen." the ravenclaw grinned.

The slytherin tilted the sundae in his direction, mocking a toast of salute.

"It's been... freedom. I've been able to get up whenever I wanted or eat whatever I fancied. I even ventured into muggle London, but I prefer it on this side. People watching is wonderful here! Funny little witches from the country, up for a day's shopping; venerable-looking wizards arguing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and three times a week, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woolen balaclava. Tom knows his way around food, let me tell you, so breakfasts and dinners there, while I spent the days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafes, where people were showing one another their purchases. What is a lunascope, by the way? Oh, and a moke? I've asked Hagrid, but I'm still waiting for his letter. Oh, and I've been able to sit in the bright sunshine outside, right here for example, to complete my remaining homework, I even bought a couple of books, and yes Hermione I'll lend them to you, but one is about quidditch, the other was more like a thick brochure about jobs in the wizarding world."

It was rare to see Harry so outspoken. Well, he was more or less vomiting words over words, but he looked awed by the magic around them, joyful, and deeply relaxed. Ron could only be happy for him.

Hermione had perked hearing about jobs: "Jobs! Oh that's interesting! Did you know that we need to choose our electives for our third year in June? Did the brochure name what is needed for each job?" She quickly asked.

"Well" Ron spoke, grabbing the attention of both "You don't have to memorize everything now, Hermione, besides we all know that you'll be taking twelve OWLs."

Noticing her pleading face, the Ravenclaw exchanged an exasperated look with Harry, giving up. "Well... I can tell you a bit about works in the magic world, stuff that more or less everyone

knows? So Harry can finish his sundae in peace." He owed him for dragging away their gryffindor friend from Gringotts anyway. And seeing the witch nodding happily, he sighed.

"Well, Curse-Breaking is a job in which a witch or a wizard removes, counters or breaks curses placed on objects or places for a living. Whilst Curse-Breakers could work for the Ministry of Magic, removing curses, hexes and jinxes from illegally bewitched objects, Bill, my eldest brother is one, and works for Gringotts. He's exploring ruins in Egypt. It's for the adventurous, O.W.L.s in Arithmancy and Runes is required, and N.E.W.T.s Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Transfiguration, and Charms would be necessary." Seeing that Hermione was sitting on the edge of her chair, and Harry looked like he was enjoying just relaxing and looking at him like he was expecting the lesson to continue, he rolled his eyes and went on.

"Charlie works with dragons, as you remember. So NEWT in Care of Magical Creatures is a must. From what I understand they give you a different role based on your skill. There are Dragon Feeders, Dragon Tamers, even if they don't tame anybody, they just keep the dragons in the reserves. Well, if you're good at wards you can look over the ones that keep hidden the dragon reserves. But those usually work on separate contracts." Noticing the confused frown on his friend's face, Ron chose to elaborate: "I mean that a Ward Master can be contracted separately, as well as an Enchanter, since you need special chains to keep dragon in places. Rune Masters as well. But this last three jobs are... how do I explain it? Well people that do their own thing and jump from contract to request, they work independently."

"Like they're freelance?" asked Hermione.

"Well, no, they don't work for free, how does it make any sense?" Ron replied, confused. Both of his friends actually snorted at that: "It's the muggle expression for those who work independently." explained Harry.

"Oh, that's strange. Well, anyway, in the same way you can work as an Alchemist, a Potion Master, or an Arithmancer. Publishing your works obviously helps getting word of your skill around. There are also artists that produce enchanted portraits, so you can leave behind something to counsel the future generations once you're dead. Broom Maker, and it's like being an Enchanter, only that you work for a company. Wand makers, obviously, but you need to get apprenticed to one, and they usually keep the secrets of their craft into the family, you know. You can take up professional dueling. Obviously you can work for the Daily Prophet, or Hogwarts, or the Ministry, or the ICW. I mean, there are loads of different jobs in every government, from testing hopefuls for their apparition license to secretary. Or you can work as executioner for dangerous magical creatures, or even a breeder. There you need only a NEWT in Care of Magical Creatures. But in our ministry is really about knowing someone if you want to climb high."

Hermione interrupted him, outraged: "What do you mean 'knowing someone'? Does it mean that I can't work there because I'm a muggleborn!?"

Ron shook his head, his eyebrows rising into his forehead, and Harry frowned at Hermione spot on question.

"No, no... well, maybe? I mean, if you are the head of the DMLE results are what counts, but you are not going to entrust an high profile job to someone you do not trust. And to trust someone you, and the whole ministry, need either to see your commitment or someone who has shown such a commitment to vouch for you. That is what 'knowing someone means'." Ron explained, "Well, that is also how so many death eaters are out of Azkaban."

At the horrified expressions on their faces he choose to elaborate, once again.

"Our world was in pieces after the war, so the ministry had to choose between rebuilding fast or keep being ruthless and unyielding. So when the repentant death eaters claimed that they were under the...



imperious, or coerced into service, and dropped a river of galleons into the ministry's coffers."

His tone had lowered, and by the end of his speech he was whispering. It wasn't exact a polite topic of conversation.

"How can you be ruthless while pursuing death eaters?" asked Harry pointedly.

Ron shifted, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Well, I don't know the details, but Crouch passed a law that authorized aurors to use unforgivables. But things... kinda got out of hand, and you only needed to be suspected of being a death eater to be hunted down, and Crouch authorized several blitz of the hit wizards without the proper procedures... Long story short, a lot of people died, on both sides, and the ministry went overboard."

"I haven't read anything about this anywhere. Not in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century* ..." Hermione frowned heavily.

Harry had finished his sundae and his smile and all of air had been forgotten. He was sitting forward, his hands crossed in front of his chin, and his eyes were shining with a focus Ron had never seen before.

"It's not something that anyone likes to talk or even think about. It's stuff that everyone knows, the version I gave you has a lot of speculation in it, but is likely the more realistic one."

"How do you know about it then? If it's not on books or you don't talk about it." Hermione logically pointed out. Harry's gaze did not leave room for evasion.

"How did you learn to walk on your feet instead of your hands? I picked it up. Comments and snippets, old articles read in a new perspective... It's a lot of stuff. And *really, really*, not something to

talk about. A lot of people died on both sides. Harry, your parents. My mother lost both her brothers, the Bones are left down to two, the Blacks only have the infamous Sirius left, and he's in Azkaban, the Lestranges are all there, Crouch is the last of his family, the Rosier are gone from Britain. *Please* let's change topic."

"Is this a stupid thing like saying the name Voldemort out loud?" Harry asked, unrelenting.

Ron flinched at the name, and even Hermione looked uncomfortable. The ravenclaw pressed his palms into his orbits. "It's not your fault, you didn't grow up here. But, calling stupid something we've been taught for our whole life, to our faces, is not something that will make you any friends."

Harry blushed, but didn't move away his eyes, while Hermione started biting her lower lip.

"It's just another of the things nobody writes, talks or likes to think about isn't it?" the gryffindor tried to mediate between the two.

Ron shot her a grateful smile, before looking once more to Harry: "You have to understand. During the war, nobody knew who was fighting for whom, or something like that. The people who used that name openly were either immediately murdered on the streets or went back home only to find the dark mark over it and all their loved ones dead inside. Every time you say that name, you bring up the same feeling of fear. Our generation picked it up from our parents, in the same way we learned to not eat snot or piss in the sink of the kitchen. It's just not done."

The talk died down after that, and they sat quietly for a while, the mood stayed gloom. And everybody was thinking about what had jyst been said.

After a while, Herry seemed to nod to himself. "Sorry Ron, I wasn't calling you stupid or anything... it's just, difficult, you know? Nobody explain stuff like this to me or Hermione."

Said witch reached over and squeezed the ravenclaw shoulder. She was uncharacteristically silent.

"Like judas of old,  
you lie and decieve.

A world war can be won,  
you want me to believe."

The young witch half whispered half sung, mostly to herself.

Ron smiled a bit, the tension that had conquered his shoulders leaving for a bit.

"But I see through your eyes,  
and I see through your brain  
like I see through the water,  
that runs down my drain."

Ron completed the lyrics.

At her surprised expression, he explained: "Near Ottery's library there's a little music store, vinyl only, and you can listen to the disks to check if they are scratched. I read about Carter's case, from there to Hurricane and the rest of Dylan the step had been short, besides, Mandy's plays the guitar and once she had talked about it."

Ron stopped looking into Hermione's brown eyes to gaze into the deep green of Harry's. "Nothing to apologize for, you're right, nobody will tell you about these things. But you should know, even if it's not really... comfortable. Just... enough for today, ok?"

They both nodded and all together rose from their seats, unanimously choosing to spend the free time they still had left

roaming through Diagon Alley.

Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door, Harry showed them a few sights here and there, telling them stuff that he had seen happening during his holiday.

In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called Prefects Who Gained Power. Ron steered his two friends clear of his siblings in both cases.

They headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his autobiography

MAGICAL ME

today 12:30 P.m. to 4:30 P.m.

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"

"And doesn't it sound a tiny bit suspicious? I mean, McGonagall is bloody good, but we don't have to buy five books for her each year do we?" Ron questioned, only to be ignored by the gryffindor witch, but gaining an appreciative snort from Harry.

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Molly's age. An harrassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying: "Calmly,

please, ladies ... Don't push, there ... mind the books, now..."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. Ron and Hermione each grabbed a copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2, since Harry had done his shopping a week before, and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

Arthur had strung up a conversation with Hermione's parents on his own. Ron was relieved that he didn't have to play any part in the presentation or whatever.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley, spotting the last members of her family. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute ..."

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with very blinding flash.

Ron tugged Harry and Hermione sleeves, and when they glanced at him questioningly, he quickly whispered: "I need to do something outside, can you cover me?" the urgent tone made both his friends nod immediately, even if the ravenclaw knew that he would have to tell them everything as soon as possible. Hermione disliked secrets she wasn't a part of. Well, she disliked not knowing stuff of any kind, so it made sense.

Ron quickly made his way out from the shop, it wasn't like he had saved up all those galleons only to buy some books. He crossed the road and walked for a couple of minutes.

The shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window. A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as he stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a feel of importance that Ron couldn't really grasp. The ravenclaw felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions which had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in there seemed to tingle with some secret magic. He felt almost like he was underwater, but not quite, like he had corked ears due to the shift in pressure, but it wasn't it. He raised his hand expecting to feel some kind of resistance but it moved normally through the air.

"Good afternoon." said a soft voice, and Ron jumped in fright.

An old man was standing before him, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello" said Ron awkwardly.

"Ah yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I had wondered, when I didn't see you the last summer. After all, I've provided your whole family with a wand. Which is your wand arm?"

"Uh, I learned to write with my right, but then I learned to use my left hand too, and I started doing origami this summer since having nimble fingers can help in a lot of careers, so I don't know how to answer, sir." said Ron.

"Hold out your left arm, then. Closer to the heart. That's it." He measured the Weasley from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said: "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Weasley. I use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers and the heartstrings of dragons, even if I have in store several wands crafted by members of my family, some of those with

more... esoteric cores. I remember Charlie Weasley's wand. I am sure you have great difficulties in transfiguring, don't you? No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

He took a breath, starting to rummaging among the dusty shelves "However it's clear, that no witch or wizard chooses it's wand, but it's the wand, that chooses it's first wielder instead."

Then Ron started trying wands, first with his left, then with his right.

"Pine, with a very old ukrainian ironbelly heartstring, exactly 13 inches, stiff."

He slowly raised it with his left, feeling a tingle from his wrist to the elbow, encouraged, he waved it toward my left: boom, and gone was the vase in the corner.

The flowers inside were dead anyway. Ron thought, even if startled by the violent reaction. But even while thinking that, he put down the wand feeling a bit guilty.

"Whistlethorn, with a snidget tail feather, ten and a quarter inches, rather bendy." he felt a zap stopping at his fingers, and waving it again towards the vase' shards, he caused them to embedd themselves into the wooden wall.

"Eleven inches of mahogany, with a single nundu's wishker, very springy."

That one burned his fingers before he could do anything with it.

Ollivander went on giving him sticks to wave around for more than fifteen minutes with varying degrees of success, before humming some more. Ron suddenly realised that the tape measure was still measuring between his nostrils. Mr. Ollivander was roaming around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"Obviously, is not the core, mr. Weasley, the important part, oh no. Because each branch of each single tree is unique too. Who is to say how this or that plant opposed the winds? Or how the rain has pelted on the leaves that it had sprouted with so much difficulties? A wand, mr. Weasley, is an identity, born from the merging of both wood and core." Ollivander went on, clearly loving the topic and willing to explain the gist of it, so that this Weasley could truly appreciate what a wand was, and the respect it deserved.

"That will do." the wandmaker said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, let's go on, Mr Weasley. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Ron took the wand and waved it around a bit, but Mr Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try..."

Ron tried, but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr Ollivander.

"No, no. Here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

At that point in time, Ron had defeated his nervousness and dared ask: "Does the wood have any particular meaning?"

Ollivander's eyes gleamed, finally he had found someone with the correct amount of awe and interest regarding wands.

"Oh, curious are we?" he chuckled. "Very well, as I said already, each branch is unique, just as each of your fingers is different from the others. A scar here, a bruise there, a callus. All signs that life leaves on the hand. And the same is for the branches. Now, the trees, the trees of the same kind are similar to each other in the same way you are similar to your brothers and sisters, Mr Weasley. But obviously they had very different lives, and as such, different..."



personalities. Some woods have a disposition, yes. And oh, the things I could tell you."

The wandmaker kept handing over wands that failed in a way or another, and after taking a deep breath, he resumed his ramblings about woods.

"For example, Oak trees are a symbol of courage and power, and some even call it the most powerful tree. They're famous because of their strength and resilience, as well as their unique growth pattern, expansive canopy, and gorgeous leaves. Oak trees can last for hundreds of years. Because of their longevity and size, some other special meanings include wisdom and honor, as well as strength of character. In ancient European cultures, oak trees were regarded as the king of the forest, due to their strength and steadiness. They are also considered to be very spiritual, which is where the term "Holy Oak" comes from. The trees are believed to be like spiritual guardians that can provide comfort and solace. And sometimes, they are. Many places of worship are surrounded by oak trees. They can also symbolize health, luck, resistance, morale, and survival. Oaks are also believed to be a healing tree, for the heart and soul, as well as the body in general. Native Americans would use bark from oak trees to treat frostbite, and there are a lot of remedies that involve using the bark for headaches." Noticing that Ron was staring at him with wide eyes, Ollivander slowed down, and soon he found himself talking to the much younger wizard, who looked like he was about to dance a jig, happy for the knowledge he was being gifted.

"Each kind of tree tends to develop certain attributes, more or less in line with the others from its family. Cherry trees symbolize good fortune and luck when they bloom, and they also mean love, adoration, and romance. The lush cherry blossoms bloom once a year and are only around for a short time. Because of this, some see the tree's bloom as a reminder that life is short and that people should live every day to the fullest. While they grow in many places, they're very much tied to Japanese culture. Japan has an annual festival, Hanami, to celebrate the cherry blossoms. In Native

American symbolism, they represent compassion and strong expression. Cherry trees can also symbolize happiness, mindfulness, awakenings, and rebirth. Some of the special meanings are perhaps because of the different health benefits that cherries themselves have."

Ollivander began once more giving out wands, but it was clear that his heart was not in it, and even Ron, anxious to have his wand, seemed to completely forget about it, enthralled by the words of the wandmaker.

"Because of their year-round beauty, birch trees symbolize hope and new beginnings. Even after its soft green leaves fall off, the spare shape and slender trunk, with its peeling, shiny white bark, is still a lovely sight. They are one of the first trees to grow back leaves, so they are connected to the start of spring. In Chinese culture, the trees symbolize protection and rejuvenation. Other special meanings of these trees include protection, purification, and love. In Native American culture, their meaning includes truth and the cleansing of the past for a new beginning. The bark of these trees was very important to Native Americans, who used it in many different ways, including baskets, shoes, and artwork. Also, because of all the special meanings behind the birch tree, the wood is often used in cribs for babies. Maple trees symbolize balance, offering, practical magic, promise, longevity, generosity, and intelligence. One reason behind these meanings is that maple trees have the ability to adapt to many different soil types and climates. The maple syrup produced from these trees was an important food source for Native Americans and has come to represent success and abundance. A specific type of maple tree, the striking Japanese maple, symbolizes grace, great blessing, serenity of the elements, and peaceful retreat. It's especially beloved because of its beauty and star-shaped leaves. In Japan, this maple tree is sometimes referred to as momiji, which means either "baby's hands" or "becomes crimson leaves." It's also a ritual in Japan to visit the mountains every fall to see that the maple leaves have turned to that crimson color, symbols of the arrival of fall. Dogwood trees are one of the most popular landscape

trees in the country. Their special meanings include loyalty, safety, kindness, fertility, stability, determination, wishes, and protection. While their flowers appear gentle and small, they're actually strong enough to endure harsh conditions. This is why these trees are a symbol of durability. Because of their beauty, Wisteria trees represent romance. Redwood symbolizes forever, the elm inner strength and love, and pine trees humility. Fir trees represent springtime, fortitude, and immortality. Poplars abundance, independence, and resilience. Willows symbolize inner wisdom, dreams, harmony, and freedom. Because willow trees can regrow a new tree by putting a healthy branch into the moist soil in late winter or spring, these trees also symbolize renewal, growth, and immortality. Yew trees are for death and rebirth, cypressus for mourning and sacrifice, holly for the values of family, whistlethorn is for those a tiny bit mad and dangerous, while blackthorn tends to favour warriors."

By the end of that speech, Ron had tried a lot of wands. He had no idea what Mr Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

Once he had finished his speech, the wandmaker's eyes seemed to regain their focus, and he stared at the young wizard, that realized he had been away for more than an hour already.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere. Here, another unusual combination, maple and chimaera heartstring, 13 and half inches, uncharacteristically unyielding."

Ron took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers.

He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of silver and blue sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the

walls, along with a brief flashes of light that swepted the shop, raising the temperature in the room for a few seconds.

"I cannot pay you enough for this master Ollivander." Ron whispered. He was still looking at the wand. It felt right. He had grown used to the dull feel of Charlie's one, but that... it simply clicked. The handle was welcoming, and the warmth the young wizard felt made him want to laugh. Running a finger over it, the ravenclaw was already loving the smooth sensation.

"As everybody knows, my wands cost 7 galleons, Mr. Weasley Nothing more, nothing less." Ollivander dismissed me. "However, maybe I can interest you with a proper wand maintenance kit, or a wand holster?"

"No, thank you." Ron answered, counting the galleons that he was giving over. "But I wanted to ask, why Charlie stopped using his wand? I can't imagine ever leaving mine."

Ollivander swept away the money before assuming a thoughtful expression: "In many ways, wands are like people, sometimes we take different paths, that lead us away from our loved ones. I couldn't say why your brother parted ways with his partner, after all, I expected them to grow together. I only know that at the time of his choosing, your brother was the perfect match for that wand."

Ron left the shop with a satisfied smile, going back to the book store, where he reached Hermione and Harry, that shot him questioning glances. Before they could start asking however, he spoke: "I'll tell you on the train."

Harry snorted, enjoying the outraged expression on Hermione's face. She really hated not knowing things. She half closed her eyes in suspicion: "If you went to buy secretly joke items to prank us on the train I swear, Ronald Weasley, that I'll learn every single prank spell in the Hogwarts Library and I'll drown you in them." she threatened. Harry laughed.

"You've spent too much time with the twins Hermione." Ron answered, his smile dimming a bit at being compared to any of his siblings.

With the two galleons he still had, gained from his winnings at school and a lifetime of savings, Ron wandered into the bookstore, looking for something that could help him understand how his mind worked. The Mind Arts by Vega Black was still waiting for him hidden in his room at Hogwarts, he had to transfigure and charm a safe under his wardrobe, but it was the only solution that came to mind.

Granted, Ron called it a safe, but it was little more than a squared hole in the stone with a few charms to repel the dust. He couldn't steal a book from Hogwarts, hide it was a different kettle of fish.

The Mind Arts by Vega Black was the most tiring tome he had ever read, in June, he had managed to understand which kind of mind he possessed. And as such, which kind of personality he had.

He was the emotional-introverted-detached, logic-driven, strong-willed, creative type. Naturally he was, what else had he expected? It was surprising how predictable that had been. Perhaps, deep down, he had known beforehand. How could he not?

He still had no idea about what having a mind that fell under that 'type' entailed, but it was something he would work on during the following year.

He already knew that he wasn't prone to great manifestations of his emotions, not like Hermione, that would throw bone crushing hugs from time to time.

He already knew that he was a logic minded person, not like Harry that would just 'feel like' doing something.

Strong willed? He supposed it made sense, hadn't Ron chosen to carve his own path? Hadn't Ron chosen to find his own solution to his nightmare problems? And from there hadn't he chosen to refuse

the prejudices he grew up with? About slytherins, if nothing else. Even if he could freely admit that it probably was mostly Harry's merit.

And obviously he was creative. Hadn't he started imagining whole new worlds since the first time he went to the muggle library?

He had the whole summer to think about it, and he soon had realized that there was nothing to like or dislike, it was simply how his mind worked.

He knew that the first step towards occlumency was knowing how your mind worked, the following series of exercises included a lot of meditation. He wasn't exactly eager to get started on that, since he imagined it would feel a little mind numbing, but he would soldier on.

Leaving his musings about his future plans, Ron finished roaming among the shelves dedicated to healing. In the end, he choose to save his two galleons. He would look into the Hogwarts library first, and maybe even ask Pince. Then during the following summer he could purchase a book he wouldn't have access to otherwise.

The late afternoon soon turned into evening, and, too fast for his tastes, the day with his friends came to an end.

## 7. ch7: Second Year, Part One

*1992-04 november*

When Ron entered the common room, he noticed that the fireplace was lit. *Strange*. Ron thought. That late in the night usually there were only embers.

The mystery was soon explained: Dumbledore was sitting in an armchair that he clearly had conjured for himself. Bright orange and forest green were hardly ravenclaw colors. The old headmaster was looking at him with his twinkling eyes and a fake surprised expression on his face.

"You must be the most restless ravenclaw to ever roam these halls." The old wizard greeted him "Even if I have to admit that young miss. Lovegood seems quite on the same track."

Ron resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Good night to you too professor. And yes, I'll keep an eye on her." He replied, correctly understanding what the comment about Luna had really been about.

"Professor McGonagall was overjoyed by your newfound ability in her class." the headmaster praised him while setting the board.

Ron sat down with a thin but proud smile, blushing a bit. "It's my new wand, it feels like I've always been painting with my fingers, and now I have the finest brush in my hands. And it's less tiring too."

"A new wand?" the headmaster wondered while tapping one of the closed fists of the young ravenclaw. White pawn, so the old warlock would play white. "For a while I feared that you would swarm the castle with joke products, I am glad to see that your... endeavours with the chess club have been fruitful."

A few minutes in the game, Dumbledore had already gained control over the centre of the board. "With an appropriate wand you waste

less magic, you could try to make your wand movements as little and precise as possible, it will probably help."

Ron nodded, thankful for the suggestion. "Why do we use wands movements, sir? I mean, why a swish and flick for the levitation charm and three taps for **feraverto**?"

The headmaster looked at the curious student, smiling lightly: "I assume you've ready read *Magical Theory*, as it's one of the textbooks we have made you purchase for your first year."

At the nodded assent of the young ravenclaw, he went on.

"Then you know that wizards and witches are born with a magical core. It's not an organ in the sense that it does not have a 'place' in our bodies, not like our lungs or heart. And yet it behaves somewhat as a muscle, in the sense that it grows with exercise, and it naturally grows until you hit 17. After that, I fear that the only way to make it grow is through daily, heavy use of magic. But the growth is... infinitesimal, in most cases. It's like a living being itself, and the more you manage to work in synch with it, the more you *become* your magic and the less you *use* it."

"You're talking about the 'capacity' of our magical core" Ron understood, immediately recalling the correct chapter of the textbook.

"Indeed." smiled the headmaster. "Now, wand movements help directing the magic. A upturned twirl, for example, works well for lifting a vast mass of water, and it is one of the many evolutions of the swish and flick of the levitation charm. In the same way the 'tap' works well for little transfigurations, such as a matchstick into a needle, and the 'one, two three **feraverto**' is it's natural evolution. You must remember however, that it's your intent that truly gives meaning to your actions. After all, in september you used the same incantation with a single tap to turn a button into a beetle. The wand movements merely help in shaping the magic, forming a steady link between your intent and what you wish your magic to do."



Ron frowned in confusion: "You mean it's not really... real? That is only in our heads?"

"You should know by now that if something is in our heads then it's very real. Sometimes even more tangible than what you are used to call reality." The headmaster corrected his assumption.

After a while, the ravenclaw found himself once more focusing exclusively on the board.

"You are playing differently, sir." Ron accused him, noticing how he had been using his knights to great effect.

"I thought that with your newfound skill in transfiguration you could do with a new kind of opposition." the headmaster explained, like always without really explaining.

Ron blinked, not even trying to pretend that he had understood the wizard's reasoning. "It's much more interesting now that I can actually apply what I understand of it, even if... can I ask you a question, sir, about transfiguration, from living to living, and maybe conjuring?"

"You already did, but don't let that stop you. Even if I must say that running so far ahead in the syllabus is acceptable only with the theory of the topics." the headmaster merrily answered, giving him an amused glance.

The message was clear: *Do not get caught*. Ron gulped, castling before venturing his ideas: "Let's say you wanted to transfigure a rabbit into a raven. Having an exact knowledge of the rabbit's anatomy doesn't really help, since you have to picture the *change* while it's happening. And it's far more useful... understanding? having a clear idea of the raven, right?"

The ancient warlock started an exchange of pieces on the board. He gave up his bishop to eat his knight, but now Ron's defense was mostly broken.

"I'm waiting for a proper question, Minerva would scold me for weeks if she caught me teaching advanced topics of her subject."

The ravenclaw collected his thoughts, trying to formulate them in an orderly manner: "The transfiguration process isn't the combined change of a lot of minor, little transfigurations. Even if a lot of changes do happen. I don't actually change a mouth into a beak, paws into talons. Shouldn't it be easier turning a rabbit into a flying raven if you cast your spell mid-jump?"

The old warlock beamed. "That would depend, on which aspect of the raven you're using as a focus." he prodded the student.

"So... the understanding of the raven, which is the end result, is more important than understanding the rabbit?" Ron asked.

The headmaster let himself rest against the back of the armchair, the game had been decided ten minutes before anyway. "The feeling of the feathers, the playfulness of the flight without worries and the sharpness of the beak. Those are some of the defining aspects of the raven, at least in my head." the headmaster went on.

"Knowing how the bones are disposed perhaps helps building the image in your head, but it's ultimately less important than the result you wish to see. So, for example, it would be easier to transfigure a snake out of a gust of wind than out of thin air. Conjuring stone is very difficult because you bring out the stone-ish side of the air. The unyielding property of an unrelenting gale."

Ron sank into the armchair, with a satisfied smile on his face: "So I was right? Ah ha! Why is it not explained this way anywhere? It's a lot less complex than the others ways to explain it."

"Because, and forgive me if I sound a little smug, I am a very talented teacher, and I have rephrased what is written in your books so that it would more easily suit to your thought pattern."

Ron blinked, recalling his discovery from the year before. "The character of a witch or wizard make them more or less adapt at learning in a certain way." he said.

The headmaster started setting a new game, nodding with a proud smile, it was such a delight teaching, he had forgotten how beautiful it was seeing a student grasp a new idea.

"Character is a little limited. Let's just say that everyone is uniquely suited to learn or not learn in a certain way." the old warlock corrected him.

"Is this why most of our assignments require us to do research in the library? So that we can think through the why and how?" Ron asked.

Dumbledore let out a delighted laugh at that: "Indeed, it is very acute observation, if I say so myself, well done."

The ravenclaw blushed at the praise but tried to keep his focus on the board. "Before, you said that our magical core is *alive*. What did you mean, sir?"

The headmaster was uncharacteristically giving way to the assault on the board, his pieces either retreating or dying in equal exchanges. This obviously made Ron suspicious, as the headmaster was clearly a chess player belonging to a whole different league.

"Perhaps I should rephrase that." the old warlock said "What I meant is that our magic is alive, in a sense. Tied to us, but separated. At least at the beginning. But this is highly advanced magical theory, and I suggest you to focus more on the present, even if it's perhaps too late, it's checkmate in six moves."

Ron snapped his eyes from the twinkling blue orbs of the amused warlock to the board. Only then he noticed the unavoidable consequences of trying so desperately to promote his pawn into a queen. Dumbledore, who lost his queen in an even exchange before, would be able to corner the ravenclaw's king using knights and

pawn, before bringing the checkmate with a seemingly forgotten bishop.

"You tricked me." Ron half grumbled half whined. He wasn't being fair, he knew it. Chess was so beautiful only because both the players knew that the other only wished to win, and on the board, everything was set to accomplish that goal.

"Sometimes, you need to lose, in order to win." The headmaster said. "After all, aren't you losing our matches and winning valuable knowledge at the same time?"

Having said that, the old wizard rose from his seat and followed his routine of leaving the scene with a cryptic statement. Ron distractedly wondered if it was something that all old wizards did, or if Dumbledore had developed his own branch of madness only to fuck with the brains of his students.

The ravenclaw left his seat as well, letting go of the focus he so desperately clung to during the nightly confrontation. He had the feeling that the headmaster treated every single conversation like a chessboard. It was unnerving, and if he were to ask him the why and how, the only answer he would get would be '*I am a teacher*'. Which was true, Ron would readily admit that the old wizard had thought him loads.

Not only Dumbledore explained the more basic topics of magic with an insight and simplicity that inspired Ron to climb to the same heights where the older wizard soared. Not only the chess match would guarantee almost always a swift departure into Morpheus' land, but Ron had the feeling that the cryptic parting words of the headmaster were not about chess. That brought up the question: 'why would the greatest wizard of our time spend his time giving life lesson to a single student?'. The headmaster would obviously answer 'because I am a teacher', which was his elegant way to not answer at all.

He lit his wand while climbing the stairs that led to his shared room. He entered silently and changed into his pajamas. Pointing his wand to his table, he muttered an **incendio**, lighting up a candle. Turning toward his bed, he whispered a **diffindo** and trailed his wand over the edge of the curtains, cutting them off. He folded the cloth into a multi layered square and placed it on the cold stone floor.

"I guess the wand movements are really not necessary when you have enough familiarity..." he noted to himself.

He sat down cross legged and a whispered **wingardium leviosa**, along with only a swish of his wand, he levitated the lit candle in front of himself. He moved it slowly, careful to not snuff out the little flame with a sudden movement.

It was an exercise he got used to during the year before, to refine his control over the spell. He was soon ready, he put down his maple wand, put his hands on his knees and stared into the little flame.

He started regulating his own breath to not disrupt the fire that shone brightly into the otherwise dark room. The night outside of the castle was pitch black, dark clouds hiding moon and stars from view. The silence in the dorm was heavy and thick, along with the coldness of the room, it made for a slightly uncomfortable environment.

Ron breathed slowly, erasing the presence of the goosebumps on his skin, the light rustling of his clothes against his chest moving, the almost unaudible breathing of Terry, asleep behind his own curtains.

The only sounds that registered on Ron perception were only the very rare flicker of the candle and his own blood rushing through his body. Soon, even those disappeared.

He had felt cold in the beginning, but slowly, his body stopped worrying about cold and hot, there was only the flame.

Even more slowly, his thoughts about his day faded into the background of his mind, Dumbledore, chess, charms, magic no

longer existed. Along with those, time stopped having any significance.

When his entire being was focused on the flame, he focused on the heat the flame held. At first he couldn't feel it. *The candle is too far.*

Quickly as it had appeared, even that thought disappeared into nothingness.

He *reached* forward, not with his hand, magic or intent, since none of the parts that made Ronald Weasley existed on its own. He simply *was*, and with his whole being, he reached until he could feel the heat of the candle. Heat that started being magnified and dispersed through the ravenclaw's body. The goosebumps he had forgotten about soon disappeared and he let out a sigh.

That relief broke him out of his meditative state, and he suddenly found himself again. The candle had burned through half of its length, that meant that he managed to keep meditating for almost an hour.

He sighed contentedly. "Now that is what I like to call a good progress."

With a few movements of his maple wand and a couple of whispered incantations, the curtains were once more attached to his bed and the candle had found its way onto his desk. He lighted his wand before blowing off the little flame and entering his own bed, where he soon found himself asleep, his wand still in hand.

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*1992-21 december*

The professors stared at the now empty fireplace.

"I've been saying that Gilderoy was absolutely incompetent since he tried to teach me how to properly take care of my mandrakes. Merlin and Morgana know he survived them only because they're still

young." Professor Sprout commented, with an enraged expression on her plump face.

Severus kept his smirk carefully hidden. *Finally*, he thought, *A professor meeting worth my time*. The potion master disliked many things, and despised even more, however, few people had ever managed to gain such a level of loathing as Gilderoy Lockhart.

He glanced around the room, noticing the amused expression on Albus, who probably had given the job to that fool only to unmask him.

Minerva was outraged, and Filus was keeping a carefully blank expression, probably he caught up on Dumbledore's plan, nobody could say that the half goblin wasn't sharp.

The other professors exchanged surprised and thoughtful looks among themselves.

"I'm guessing you gave him the job with the purpose of revealing his true colors, headmaster." Ted Tonks thrown in.

*Even the new History professor is more acute than he looks like.* Severus noted, mentally placing him in the list of 'be careful while being around'.

The first ever muggleborn teacher at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was a lawyer, who, because of his blood status, couldn't land a role in the more important, and as such remunerative, cases in the magical world. One of the few to ever gain a NEWT in History of Magic, he looked bland and spineless, but Severus had heard how he had managed to breath new life into his subject. He couldn't say if he really was a competent teacher, but he managed to pass on his love for the subject, and for History, that was more than enough.

The muggleborn wizard pressed on, taking the surprised silence of the room as a confirmation of his suspects: "Does this means we will

soon have a new colleague, headmaster?"

The ancient warlock blinked only once, not giving away his surprise at being called on his plan. "Ah Ted, you do Hogwarts proud with your keen insight. I had my suspicions about Gilderoy since a certain witch I was corresponding with suddenly forgot what we had been discussing, and a month later *Break with a Banshee* was published. I had at first thought that she sold her story with a non disclosure agreement as part of her contract. But then I read his books, and there were some... inconsistencies here and there. So I went and we talked face to face. I recognize an obliation when I see one, even as well disguised as the ones Gilderoy looks so talented with. His incompetence, under such a heavy scrutiny as the one Hogwarts' professors are kept, unmasked him. So I was able to inform the DMLE based on solid clues, such as the Longbottom heir being lifted by his ears and hung by his robes to a chandelier."

This admission unleashed mutterings of every kind among the staff, and Severus observed with faint amusement the outraged expression on Minerva's face.

"Albus! You can't just throw out of the window the students' education to unmask a fraud!" she roared.

"Indeed I cannot." he quietly replied, and his calm, more than his words, quieted down the whole room. Severus was once more astonished by the command on their surroundings Dumbledore and the Dark Lord both held. Obviously the latter had gained it through pain and fear, while the first had conquered every ounce of respect he was given, but the similarities were there. The Dark Lord speeches often reminded the hopefuls how Dumbledore, even as foolish as he was, had his own inner circle. It was curious, in the potion master's opinion, that the headmaster commanded the staff with the same use of his voice that he adopted during the most incensed Order's meetings.

"I will take up the DADA lessons, I dare say I've picked up a thing or two over the years, and maybe I'll hold some extra lessons for



NEWT students." the headmaster said.

That rose more than one eyebrow, it happened already that a professor covered another one's lesson, mostly for the students of lower years, since every member of the staff knew enough about charms to keep an eye on brats performing a levitation charm, but it was an event more unique than rare.

"It wasn't a coincidence that during the summer the Board approved of the headmaster teaching a subject in case of emergency for two thirds of the school year, was it?" Ted Tonks butted in before anyone could raise questions.

Everyone but Snape and Dumbledore snapped their heads toward the History professor, before looking at the smiling ancient warlock. "If you were still my student I would award Hufflepuff points, Ted." he said. "I will announce the changes of the staff tomorrow at breakfast, as well as the refunding for Gilderoy's books."

"Does this means we will also be able to revive the Duelling Club?" Flitwick hopefully asked.

"I am afraid that the Board still doesn't see your point, Filius." the headmaster answered in a sad tone. "Now to recap: Gilderoy was arrested for a number of crimes, I'll take over his duties. Young miss. Lovegood stopped getting lost most of the time and the ones that find themselves more overwhelmed by their classes are misters Crabbe, Goyle and Flint from Slytherin, while mr. Longbottom has difficulties only on the practical parts of Charms and Transfiguration, along with a worrying 'cauldron melting' touch. Do we still agree that Percy Weasley and Penelope Clearwater are the best candidates for Head Boy and Girl for the next year?" at the several muttered assents and silent nods, the ancient warlock rose, and the professors' meeting came to an end.

Severus kept his routine almost bolting through the door, leaving that blasted room. However he walked straight to the headmaster tower instead of his own quarters, gave the password to the gargoyle and

after a quick climb on the slowly rotating spiral staircase he slipped past the oak door.

He didn't deign either the portraits or the phoenix of a glance, and strode to the fireplace. With a few quick movements of his wand, the teapot was brought to the right temperature, and deveral minutes later, when the headmaster finally arrived, he was already sipping his tea.

The old wizard strode foward with a stern expression on his face. He frownef, seeing the smirk on the Potion Master's face. "After the last time I had ordered the elves to not make tea in my office." he noted.

"Did you?" asked Snape, raising an eyebrow.

Dumbledore's expression brightened: "You made tea! Well done Severus!" he sat down before pouring himself a cup. He added four generous spoons of honey and twirled the spoon in the tea, letting the honey do its work.

He took a careful sip and grimaced. "You used magic to warm the water." he accused the Potion Master, who smirked.

"How, Severus, am I supposed to taste the blend if there's magic everywhere?" the headmaster calmly asked.

"How are you supposed to taste the honey, you mean?" the Potion Master anked in return. "Maybe you could eat it directly from the jar, I won't judge you."

The old wizard gave him an heratfelt glare and put down his cup, crossing his fingers over his beard choosing to stare in the fire.

They shared a fewvmoments of silence, the the Potion Master spoke: "Tonks is sharper than he lets on."

After a few contemplative seconds, the other answered: "He has to be, don't you remember that he married Andromeda Black?"

Severus nodded, remembering also their daughter: "Miss Tonks is the klutz metamorphomagus, is she not?"

The headmaster lips twitched: "Envy is beneath you, Severus. All metamorphomagi have difficulties with being coordinated, their bodies change constantly, you'd be surprised to feel how much half an inch on your feet can mess up your balance. In fact, I could transfigure your feet a little bit, just to give you a taste."

The Potion Master was not amused. "I believe she is one of the last under Alastor's care in the Auror training program." Dumbledore added.

"My heart weeps for her." Snape drily replied. "Why don't you allow the Duelling Club? You managed to strongarm the Board into giving the job to a muggleborn, surely you could have made them accept the idea of students capable of defending themselves."

"Because my first choice of a teacher had been Andromeda Tonks herself. You see, the Tonks couple was born in the NEWT History's class. The Board had been horrified at the idea, she's been cast out if her family, it would set a bad precedent, Merlin knows how bad her influence on the students could be. Ted, even as a muggleborn, was a tame choice in comparison." Dumbledore explained.

Snape frowned, it wasn't the answer to the objection he had raised... unless: "You didn't want the Duelling Club." he accused the old warlock, who smiled.

"Indeed I did not. Not that the Board knows it, you see, I agreed to drop the topic of Duelling if they allowed me to hire Ted instead of Andromeda, and since they didn't like the choice, they forced me to promise that I would teach personally in case a professor was deemed unworthy."

"While you were ready to kick out Lockhart." Severus completed the reasoning.

"But what if they allowed a Duelling Club? And why don't you want the students to learn duelling?" the Potion Master asked.

"If they allowed my request of a Duelling Club, the natural choice to lead it would have been the DADA teacher. Gilderoy, with or without my aid, would have jumped to the opportunity of teaching his marvelous skills to the Boy Who Lived, you could have... assisted him, and the Duelling Club would have turned out a disaster of epic proportions, giving me additional proof of Gilderoy incompetence. And I would have closed the Club for the students safety." the headmaster said.

"As to why I do not wish for a Duelling Club to get started..." he sighed, choosing his words carefully. "Mr. Weasley and miss Granger make a terrifying reasearch force, while mr. Potter has an instinctual grasp of all the spells that have a direct use in a fight. As you know, they've been practicing together. Mr. Potter is also a gifted teacher. He understands spells with his gut, as you youngsters would say, Since april, mr. Potter has been teaching to their study group some of the skills he built with miss Granger and mr Weasley. He complements nicely the style of Filius and Minerva both."

Snape stared at the old warlock for a while. "You don't want the Dark Lord to be able to recruit people that have experience in Duelling, while with his lessons Potter strenghtens the bonds with those of his study group and they train themselves at the same time."

Dumbledore slowly clapped, beaming at the Head of Slytherin House.

"How very... cunning of you, headmaster." he commented.

"Oh Severus, I have no doubt that if people were sorted at 70 instead that at 11, they would all wear green and silver." The old wizard laughed, "Why, if we had waited until now to sort Ronald Weasley he could have joined Harry in your House."

That reminded Snape of a topic he had wanted to approach: "Was it really wise? Giving your book to the boy?"

"Wise or not, it seems to be having a good impact on him. From what I've been able to observe, he has bastardized the meditation to include a form of wandless magic. He truly has a creative mind." the headmaster added.

"Where in the world did he find out how to learn wandless magic?" Snape asked, surprised.

"I think that he made it up." Dumbledore answered with a wide smile.

"He made it up." the much younger wizard repeated flatly.  
"Nevermind that. Why did you gift your work to him? And why disguising it as a Vega Black's book?" The Potion Master asked.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow: "I did not 'gift' anyone anything, Severus. I merely made an addition to the Restricted Section, as it's my right as headmaster. The Ministry's Law would require any of my original works to be subjected to the scrutiny of the Unspeakables, while old books are already circulating, and as such are exempt from that law."

"But why Vega Black?"

"Because she had already published a tome on the mind arts, even if it was about psychological torture, and because Ronald was still wary about some families, while we need him with an open mind." The headmaster explained. "And I did not simply leave it in one of the boys' dorm because they need to learn how to recognize and grasp an opportunity when it presents itself. And even if I would have preferred it if they made some background check before using it, they took a risk, and in this case it paid off."

"Is this another reason why you didn't train Potter personally? Or kept him with you?" Snape asked.

"How can he choose to fight Voldemort if he doesn't know what he is protecting? And yes, Severus, revenge is not a good enough motivation, too many have sought out justice only to freely dispense death." the headmaster said.

He took a slow breath, his expression darkening. "I did make plans at first. I could have started teaching him runes when he was seven, and preparing him to alchemy and potions since he was nine. I could have raised him with rituals and elixirs, crafting a terrifying weapon for my hands, a killer among shadows. Following that schedule, in five years he would have become something that only Voldemort and I could safely face one on one." He sighed, a defeated look on his face.

"However I realized that there was no way to give Harry, talented boy or not, a preparation that could outclass the decades of studies Tom has on him. He may very well be a madman, but has a talent for magic that rivals my own, if only in its more violent and dark applications." Dumbledore went on explaining.

"Then I remembered an old truth that I learned while working with Nicolas: the greatest forces in our universe can not be directly manipulated through magic or other means. And that there were a lot of wonderful, still vastly unexplored branches of magic and life that could one day help." Then he smiled looking at the Potion Master like he was expecting him to understand what the headmaster was implying.

Snape frowned, shaking his head. It clearly was not obvious to him.

"I'll give you a hint then. In the Department of Mysteries, there is a section that produces time turners. A room full of planets, which is dedicated to the study of our universe. A room that contains a manifestation of the Veil between life and death. A room that studies intelligence itself." Dumbledore rose from his chair, walking slowly toward the firebird's perch.

"There is also room that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there."

Recognizing the tone of the headmaster's speech, Snape held back a groan.

"This has better not be about..."

"Love, Severus." Dumbledore interrupted him "Love."

Turning his back to the phoenix, the headmaster stared at the much younger wizard. "We already had this conversation Severus," he chuckled "and your skepticism never ceases to amaze and worry me at the same time."

The old warlock strode over, looking unblinkingly in the dark eyes of the Potion Master: "How can you not see it? Lack of love cast Tom on the path that ultimately made him become Voldemort. Lack of Love sent you among his ranks, and Love brought you back. Love saved Harry that night and destroyed Voldemort, who, alone and brittle as he was, could not hope to face such an unrelenting and unyielding defence! You must see it for what it is, Severus."

He grabbed the left shoulder of Snape with a surprising strength for a man that looked older than the Pyramids, and leaned forward: "If you really do not believe in what I've just told you, believe in Lily, because it's plain to see that she knew what she was doing when she tied her intent to the Sowilō rune on her son's forehead."

Snape looked startled at that, but then he frowned heavily, that last revelation had taken him by surprise. "You know how she did it!?" he asked.

For an instant, Dumbledore looked surprised by the question, but he quickly recovered. "Alas, I don't." he answered regretfully.

"However, I made speculations, and as you know, they tend to be spot on. As you know, Lily was gifted in Charms in the same way you are gifted in Potions. We also know that at their core, wards are Charms, with the long lasting ones tied in place by runes." He made a pause, waiting for the Potion Master to nod, indicating that he was following the basic explanation.

"We know that Lily, along with her husband, defied Voldemort three times. Arithmancy should help us here, three represents stability, resilience, and protection. From what I could examine of their wands, neither James nor Lily fought Voldemort that night." he went on.

"You think she performed a ritual?" Snape asked.

Uncharacteristically, Dumbledore shrugged: "I think that a lot of factors were at work that night. Lily was not the first mother to die to protect her child."

After a second, he went on: "At its core, magic is intent. I believe, that in the instant Lily was struck by the killing curse, her intent was so absolute, that her magic wove a ward. Unknowingly, she based it on ritual preparation. Three times the Potters defied him. And of three Potters, three did not fight in the end, two for choice, one because innocence is above violence. The universe works in patterns, even if often beyond our understanding."

"What about the Sowilō Rune?" asked Snape.

"Because Sowilō is the rune of the extreme strength, embodying and channelling the power of the sun. It symbolizes the energy and the light. Literally, this rune is the vital principle of the solar light. Symbol of the Sun, Sowilo also represents the Illumination, the understanding of the Mysteries and the full awareness. It is the direct and devastating power which no obstacle can stop. Sowilo resists the forces of death and destruction, proclaiming the triumph of the Light over the Darkness. This rune illuminates the objectives that the man wants to reach. Sowilo allows someone to realize his objectives



but it is necessary to possess a clear idea of these and to keep them clearly in mind." the old teacher answered kindly.

"Magic is intent." Snape repeated. "Is that it?"

"Not even remotely, but we have more pressing matters to discuss." Dumbledore answered with a chuckle.

"But I think a walk on the grounds would be more... conducive, for a talk about our plans, than my office."

Having said that, he turned his back to the warm fireplace and left his office. After a second that Snape used to collect himself, the Potion Master briskly walked behind the retreating figure of the headmaster.

While crossing the corridors and climbing the staircases to reach the Great Hall and from there the grounds, Dumbledore spoke: "Can I burden you with some wards to avoid wayward students to overhear us? And maybe a warming charm once we're outside?"

Snape barely arched an eyebrow, he was way past the point of questioning unexpected little requests like those. With a few movements of his wrist the magic was woven in the correct way and layered upon them. **Muffliato** could have done it, but the discussions Severus shared with the headmaster must not be heard, so increased security was welcome.

"May I enquire, Severus, about your wand?" Dumbledore asked.

The Potion Master glanced at it, for the first time noticing how many scratches there were on his once immaculate wand. He suddenly felt old, and the natural resistance he would have felt about sharing something so deeply personal evaporated. With his mind he went back, to when he and his wand met for the first time.

"Eleven inches and one third. Elm, with a Runespoor heartstring. Stiff." He whispered.

The headmaster hummed thoughtfully. "Why did you ask?"

"A wand tells many things about his wielder, to those among us that studied a bit of wandlore at least." Dumbledore answered.

"However, I wanted to keep you in the loop, as you young people say. I managed to delay the Triwizard, but only of one year. I have little doubt that, since both Durmstrang and Beuxbaton fully agreed on the previous dates, Olympe and Igor will counsel their brightest students to fail their last examinations, so that they will be able to compete in the Triwizard." The old warlock completely changed the topic.

"Cornelius will be caught red handed right after the Tournament, so that Amelia will be able to take his place. I'll need to talk to her too." The headmaster remembered to the younger wizard.

"Your non sequitur aren't really non sequitur, are they?" the Potion Master asked.

That caused the much older wizard to chuckle: "Indeed, I fear they're not. Challenging prophecy is madness, I'll explain why another time, for now, bear with me. Our final aim is to kill Lord Voldemort, period. Everything else is set to minimize the damage our world will have to pay."

He waited for the Potion Master to nod his assent before going on: "For him to die, he must first return to life. So we not only to be prepared for it, but to find a way to indirectly manipulate, or at least keep an eye on, his resurrection proper."

The highly trained mind of the Occlumens linked the dots with ease. "It's not a coincidence that you talked about the number three in relationship to 'some ritual' you believe Lily has performed, is it?" Snape asked, a feel of dread creeping up his spine.

"It's not." the ancient wizard simply answered. "Before we reach that point however, we must first know how he survived the night of the

31st of October 1981. So that we can undo it if we must."

By then, they had reached the grounds, and Snape kept following the much older wizard over the inches thick snow.

"What do you know about how Hogwarts' Grounds work?"  
Dumbledore asked.

Snape shook his head, not even bothering trying to follow the ancient warlock mind in its reasonings. "I wasn't aware that there was something that could 'work' on the Grounds. Beyond the wards and Hagrid that is."

Dumbledore shot him a reproachful look at hearing Hagrid being referred to as a 'thing', but he let it slide.

"Like many places where magic has been heavily used over more than seven hundred years, the space enlargement spells tied to both the Forest and the Grounds have taken up a life of their own. However, Hogwarts was built to be a fortress capable to protect its students, and as such, the Grounds *answer* to the Headmaster." they kept walking beyond the Whomping Willow and down from the following hill.

Dumbledore stopped, and unsheathed his wand, and tapped an unmarked spot over the snow. A faint golden line unraveled from there and ran a circle with a diameter of fifty meters around the ancient wizard, who turned to face the Potion Master.

"I think it's time I assume once again a role as your teacher, Severus. A year ago, I asked you to train yourself as there was a war coming. I will be able to spare a night every couple of months, during which you will try your best to kill me. When I'll deem you ready, perhaps you could start dueling Filius, not only to get used to a style I cannot replicate, but also to unlearn the patterns you will take up against me. I don't want you to be able only to kill in a duel, so working with both of us will nip that in the bud."

Without further explanations, a bright white light left Dumbledore's wand and sped toward the Potion Master, who scrambled to erect a defense. When his first shield shattered, he didn't stop. He rolled on his shoulder raising a thick wall of snow that he turned into unbreakable ice with the same movement.

It melted immediately and Snape found himself wheezing on his back.

"Sloppy." the headmaster drily commented.

When the Potion Master managed to regain his senses and stood up, the headmaster shot him an unimpressed look. "Shall we begin then?"

And all hell broke loose.

## 8. ch8: Second Year, part two

1993-03 may

Ron entered his Head of House office when the wooden door opened by itself. Before he could properly register anything, he found himself staring at a Solar System's model floating under the high ceiling.

He didn't immediately realize exactly *what* was catching his attention, but soon he could point it out: the Sun was a perfect fireball. The flames always lick upwards, it was basic physics, cool air travels from low to high because of her intrinsic density and the flame followed that movement. Not that fireball, the flames flickered radially on the Sun's surface. It was beautiful, and held a complexity that showed Ro how long the road he was travelling on was. He managed to write words with a controlled **incendio**, even to make a little figure dance. But his fireballs reached the size of a quaffle before collapsing, and the fire behaved normally.

*Maybe that it's not an incendio.* He thought, observing the rest of the Solar System. Each planet had all of its moons in the correct position, he had looked at Jupiter's moons a few days before during Astronomy, so the memory was fresh. He noticed that Mercury moved faster than Jupiter in its elliptical path, and after Mars there was a belt of sand and.. *ice crystals?* Ron wondered.

All those perfect details made him think that even if his fellow wizards didn't know about the Apollos missions, they were not exactly hopeless regarding the mysteries of outer space.

On his left there were shelves full of books that formed aisles impossibly deep. At the end of said aisles, tall windows showed mismatched sights: the first looked on the Black Lake like it was on the first floor, the second showed trees' tops gently waving in the wind.

On his right there was a two meters high mirror that didn't reflect the room. Remembering the Mirror of Erised from the year before, Ron moved nervously out of the way, only to almost crash into a pyramid of dueling trophies and awards of various kind, before almost planting his face into a floating piece of parchment where ink was moving and apparently making calculations of some kind.

On the back of the room, the wall was transparent, offering a wonderful sight over the Grounds and the Forbidden Forest.

A light cough took the young Ravenclaw away from his musings and when he looked towards the source of that sound he completely ignored the amused professor in order to stare at the fire that rolled, twirled and danced in the copper brazier engraved with runes.

Ron couldn't resist. "That's Gubraithian Fire." He blurted out.

"Indeed." laughed Flitwick "And how can you tell?"

"White and blue flame, no heat, no smoke." Ron explained analytically. "And there is no way in hell a normal magic fire laughs in synch with you, sir." he added, noticing the 'hopping' quality of the flames.

"Aptly put, Mr Weasley. However 5 points from Ravenclaw for inappropriate language." replied merrily the Charms' master.

"And what else do you know about Gubraithian Fire?" he then asked.

"The Eternal Flame is the expression of both absolute mastery over fire and perfect control of one's own magic." Ron spoke quickly. "It's not about casting an everburning fire, since that can be put on whichever piece of wood. That stage of the Flame it's basically the representation of your own magic. It's self sustaining and will die only when the caster does."

"Five points to Ravenclaw." Flitwick smiled wolfishly. "Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Weasley?"

"Sorry if I got distracted, sir." Ron hastily apologized, it was hardly polite after all, asking a meeting with your head of house only to ignore him to gawk at his stuff. "It's undetstandable. You're not the first that, pardon the pun, is charmed by my enchantments.

Ron nodded, and went on: "Well sir, we'll need to choose our electives the next month and I had a few questions, I wondered if I could ask you?"

"Questions that the library can't answer? I am pretty sure that there are introductory books to every subject, and you are hardly someone new to research." Flitwick replied with a surprised look on his face, even if his tone was almost reproachful. Wasting the time of the professors only to satisfy one's own laziness was hardly appropriate.

"Well yes, I read them but..." Ron muttered, unsure if going on. He trailed off into silence, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

After a couple of seconds, Filius was obvious that the boy was somewhat and somehow scared into silence, and that was far from his intent. "Do you remember what I first told you and your classmates, on your very first morning in the Common Room? You can talk to me."

Ron nodded, a bit reassured, and sighed into his armchair, he had asked for that meeting, better make the most out of it.

"It's that... I thought that..." He started twice only to trail off into silence.

Once more, he took a deep breath before talking again. He used one of the mind clearing exercises that Vega Black's book had explained to him. He rooted himself in the moment, letting his emotions fall into the background. He finally started to understand the speec about fear he had read in *Dune*.

*Imust not fear.*

*Fear is the mind-killer.*

*Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.*

*I will face my fear.*

*I will permit it to pass over me and through me.*

*And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.*

*Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.*

*Only I will remain.*

"I think I'd like to become a Healer, sir, and I don't want to take up electives that would be useless, even if I know that I already like Ancient Runes. But I didn't want to take up something that I would abandon after the OWLs."

Flitwick leaned back in his chair, with a surprised expression on his face. "Not many think that the choice of electives holds such an impact on their lives." he quietly commented.

"Usually we have the career talk with the students during their fifth year, do you know why?" the Charms professor asked.

When Ron shook his head in a mute 'no', the half goblin answered his own question: "It's done only then for three reasons: one, the students can spend their first five years at Hogwarts with the possibility of freely roam one of the most vast libraries in Magical Britain. In this way they can learn what they do or do not like, about magic and life more in general. Two: with enough OWLs, one can stop attending Hogwarts and use his wand even if underage, subjected to heavy restrictions and scrutiny by the Ministry in this case. We expect that since you come of age at 17, at 15 you start thinking properly about your future. And three: you are deemed too young to burden yourself with long term plans about your life, you should try to simply enjoy your school life."



The diminutive professor' shiny black eyes bored into Ron's blue ones. "But I always thought that, while without being mandatory, such a talk should be held at the end of the second year. I find that a clear objective helps the students focus, and even better let us know soon if tge path he has chosen is ill suited for him. Or if he simply dislikes it."

He clapped his ands once and leaned foward with an interested spark behind his eyes. "So, mr. Weasley, you'd like to become a Healer? This can explain why you are unsure on your choice. I presume you have a preference in the specialization? Venom, Curses, Mundane Wounds?" the half goblin spoke.

The young Ravenclaw sighed in relief, it had been a risk, blurting out so casually what he struggled to admit to himself, now the road was easier.

"Well... I like the brain sir, how it works why it works. And I'd like to learn more on its relationship with magic, like how the way we think influences our spells and stuff like that."

The eyebrows of the half goblin climbed higher on his forehead. "That's very specific. Mind Healer will no doubt help you in this endeavour, however you will branch into higly theor magical theory. May I ask how you came to consider it?"

Ron shrugged, unsure if sharing, but with another sigh, like he was defeated he answered: "I used to have nightnares, but then I read about them and the brain and managed to... get through, and sleep soundly. And I'd like to help people."

He esitated, remembering that his studies on the Mind Arts were a secret, and he wanted to jeep his meetings with Dumbledore to himself as long as possible.

As soon as he had managed to properly learn Occlumency he intended to shsre the book and his understanding to Harry and Hermione, who were the only ones that knew about his encounters

with Dumbledore. Well, all they knew was that they played chess, but still. And Luna, who had the inopportune habit of hopping out of nowhere at the strangest moments.

"And I don't know. I just kinda... want to know how magic and us work?" He added, hoping that the professor wouldn't enquire further.

The half goblin let out a chuckle. "Is that all?" he asked. "You only want to explore two of most mysterious and complex topic wizards and witches have tried to unravel since the dawn of time?" His smile grew wide. "Good for you!"

"Healing is one of the most demanding careers, I personally don't see it as something you cannot achieve. The mandatory NEWTs you'll need are Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Arithmancy, which you'll need to calculate either dosages or timing for properly regrow bones. Care of Magical Creatures will give you a solid base, you never know what can bite your future patient. Same reasoning goes for Herbology. And knowing your ingredients will only help prepare better potions, in my opinion. Having said that, almost every single subject has snippets here and there that can be applied to Healing, for example Runes allow the crafting of the more complex diagnostics. You see, a charm can be as complex as you can imagine it, with Runes you can build very specific wards. Basically trap wires that are triggered by very specific condition, like blood pressure. Astronomy can work in giving you an understanding of healing rituals. Many mothers wish for their children to be born under the influence of a specific star or constellation. In your seventh year of DADA you'll go over counter curses, that can prepare you to learning how to limit the damage inflicted by Dark Magic."

Ron stared at the professor dumbfounded: "Are you telling me that every Healer has 9 NEWTs, sir? Doesn't anyone take 4 or 5?"

"True, but you don't want to be just any Healer, you want to research the connection between mind and magic, a very woolly subject, if I say so myself. And the more vast is your base, the more different approaches you can attempt." The half goblin replied.

Ron started thinking about it, and after a few seconds he had what in his opinion was a brilliant idea: "Could I sit any of my OWLs earlier, sir?"

The professor nodded, understanding where he came from: "You cannot. A couple of centuries ago, a thirteen year old witch had been granted such a permission, and at fifteen she graduated with... I believe 8 NEWTs? 7? Anyway, she was allowed to perform magic like she was of age. And in some kind of accident she almost broke the Statute of Secrecy. So the Wizengamot followed its tradition of fixing problems on the wrong end, forbidding students from attending OWLs earlier."

At Ron's disbelieving expression, the diminutive professor added: "You can check in the library."

Clapping once, he smiled kindly: "Back to our original topic. In your fifth, sixth, and seventh year, you can sit the OWLs you sign up for. Hogwarts require you to attend lessons only on your core subjects. That will involve a great deal of self study, which implies determination. Having said that, if you manage to impress a professor, you can sit his subject's NEWT in your sixth year, again, it's a lot of work, and not something easy. And these things are said in a speech I give to my fifth years, seeing your interest, perhaps it's opportune I anticipate it."

Ron nodded thoughtfully. The idea of taking a NEWT a year before was intriguing, even if keeping studying herbology and astronomy was really disheartening.

"So, shall I take Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes?" He summed it up.

"You can take what you want, even if I suggest sitting in the lessons of Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, some topics are a bit tricky, and I highly recommend facing them with the help of a professor. While Care of Magical Creatures can be mostly studied on your own. After

all, for your career, it's enough a theoretical understanding of the subject." The professor kindly corrected him.

*I could ask Hagrid for some tips.* Ron thought. Then an image of Hermione and Ottery's library flashed into his mind. *I bet I could even attempt an OWL in Muggle Studies.* He suddenly realized. A thrilled determination settled in his mind. *Bill and Percy got twelve OWLs didn't they? I'll do that too.* He decided, his old wish to be recognized by his family raising his head in his heart.

Taking notice of his rising emotions, Ron once again used a breathing exercise taken from *The Mind Arts* to calm himself.

"That's twice that you've openly used meditation in front of me, mr. Weasley." the diminutive professor spoke. "I don't know how or why you picked it up, while I know that one of his applications is used in a rather... frowned upon, branch of magic. If I were to know for certain that you were studying it, I'd have to report it. I have no interest in stopping your... extracurricular studies, after all I often try to encourage my students to broaden their topics of research. However, I must suggest caution."

Ron blinked, schooling his expression, he was used to oblique statements thanks to his talks with Dumbledore, so he could hardly miss the intended message. *Do not openly use Occlumency tricks in front of the professors.*

He nodded gratefully to his Head of House and rose from his seat. "Thank you for your time, professor." Ron smiled.

The Charms Master smiled in kind and flicked his wand, opening the door silently.

"Was that a non verbal summoning charm professor?" The young student asked.

"Reading ahead are we, mr. Weasley?" The half goblin chuckled. "Well, not quite, I did not think the incantation **accio**, nor I gave a

name to the spell. It was more intent driven magic." and before Ronald could start asking questions the professor went on speaking: "Something that it's far to advanced until your sixth year at the earliest, mr. Weasley. You may go, now."

Recognizing a dismissal, Ron hastily nodded and left the wonderful office. It had been a fruitful meeting. He had chosen the electives that he would be attending, he had decided that he would try and gain twelve OWLs, he had been given an important advice about keeping hidden his Occlumency tricks, and he found a new thing to research.

He walked along a corridor until a secret passage that was open only on odd days and walked down three separate flight of stairs, before ducking in into an alcove that was actually the beginning of a narrow corridor. At the end of it he turned on himself and walked up a flight of stairs that wasn't there a second before, and opened the third door on the right counting from the tall window that signalled the north of the circular room where the shy flight of stairs had led him to. "If nothing else, Hogwarts trains your memory." he told to himself.

The room he had entered was an unused classroom, and given the complex path one had to take to reach it, it was understandable.

The desks had been put together to form a massive table, and bunches of chairs had been roughly transfigured into benches, on which had been placed some kind of paddin ( that was actually transfigured curtains) where several people were already sitting.

"Hey Ron!" Terry noticed him first and waved him over the spot that he had left for his meeting with Flitwick, while the others greeted him.

Well, the others exeption made for Hermione, who had her nose deep into a big, old looking tome.

"How did it go?" asked Harry.

Ron shrugged "Well enough I guess. Hey, did you know that if you 'manage to impress the professor' you can take his NEWT in the june of your sixth year?"

At their speechless expressions (even Hermione had returned from her deep dive into her book), the first Weasley in Ravenclaw (of the last three generations at the very least), summed up his chat with Flitwick.

They remained silent for a while when Ron finished talking, each one going over his or her plans and thinking them again under the light of new information.

Padma started jotting down something, probably weighting good and bad things of her various possible choiches, while her sister simply shrugged and stayed firm on her choice of Divination and Care of Magical Creatures.

"Ron can we look over this? I'm not sure." Harry asked.

Recognizing a shady request to talk privately when he heard one, Ronald moved around the table until he flopped down between Harry and Hermione, who had scooted over to make him some space.

"What do you really want?" He asked to his Slytherin friend, who smiled sheepishly at having his plot immediately found out.

"He wanted to know what you'll take, obviously." Hermione sniffed, rolling her eyes at the attempted subterfuge.

Harry looked at her and shot a mock wistful smile, grabbing his heart in a false fainting scene.

He turned toward Ron and whined: "Oh, it seems it was only yesterday she couldn't recognize a lie if it punched her in the face, and look at her now. Did I get sloppy, or did I corrupt Her Gryffindorishness with my sly Slytherin ways? Tell me, oh wise Ravenclaw!"

He then assumed a desperate face that melted into a quiet laugh, and Ron joined him with a snort.

"I don't know, she would have learned on her own I think. In ten years, maybe twenty, but she w..." the ravenclaw stopped when hermione jokingly slapped him on the back of his head.

"Prats." She aptly put it.

"I'll sit in the lessons of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy." Ron whispered. And before his two friends could ask anything he went on: "But I'll try all the OWLs."

Harry's eyebrows rised higher on his forehead and Hermione's mouth opened in a little 'o' of surprise.

"Bill and Percy made it, so why can't I?" continued the Ravenclaw.

Hermione frowned deeply while Harry esitantly put a hand on his friend shoulder and exchanged a worried glance with the Gryffindor. "You don't have to do it just because your brothers did, you know?"

Ron shrugged: "It's not that." he denied. "I've spent a lot of time in Ottery, and the stuff muggles came up with is awesome, I've read loads about their history so I don't start from exactly zero. And besides, it's the place you two come from, you get to know this world, it's only right I can do the same."

That last statement killed every possible objection.

"What about Divination?" asked Hermione.

Ron grinned. "In for a penny... And that subject is a joke."

"Bullshit." Tracey Davis butted in, startling the trio.

But only for a second, Harry quickly recovered and pinched the bridge of his nose in an exasperated fashion muttering something

about sneaking up on people, Hermione squealed "Language!" outraged, and Ron dumbly asked: "What?"

The eccentric Slytherin shot up from her seat and pointed her finger at the Ravenclaw, before answering: "Always call a shit, 'shit'. That subject isn't a joke, it's bullshit!"

She ignored the offended sounds the Patil twins let out and their stiff defense of the wonders of Divination to turn towards Harry. She shrugged in an uncaring way: "I am of a sneaky slytherin sort." she said, shutting down his previous comment.

She finally whirled on Hermione: "And you! I'll curse with all the motherfucking bad words I can fucking think of!"

The Gryffindor witch was speechless and assumed an hilarious horrified expression, Daphne Greengrass kept studying her book, her face blank, Terry was almost crying from the laughs, while the others were in a state between distaste, like Sunsan Bones and Hannah Abbot' scrunched noses showed, and appreciation, like Mandy's grin indicated.

Ron turned toward Harry, choosing to simply go with the flow: "Since it is a joke," he said, poitedly looking at Tracey, "I'll try to bullshit my way through it." he concluded, turning to lock his gaze with Hermione's one.

After the following collective laugh (even Hermione's lips had twitched upwards, which counted as a win in Tracey's book), the cursing Slytherin hopped on an empty bench and started walking over it like some kind of gymnast, and asked: "How come you want to take twelwe OWLs?"

The others turned with surprised expressions toward the redhead Ravenclaw, and Harry quipped in: "If you must overhear stuff not meant for you, Tracey, at least keep it secret."



"At least until you can use it for blackmail." Daphne added, with a predatory smile on her usually blank face.

Tracey snapped her fingers, liking the idea: "So, that's how it works!" she exclaimed.

"Ron, do my Astronomy essay or I'll tell everyone that you'll try for twelve OWLs!" She threatened.

Ron theatrically face palmed: "Oh, no! Woe me!" He turned serious: "You just told everyone, Tracey. And I already let you blatantly copy my Astronomy homework."

"Well, shit. There goes my fucking brilliant plan." she replied with a defeated tone, and hopped down from the bench, staring sadly to her abandoned transfiguration essay.

Hermione rolled her eyes in an exasperated way and huffed. "I'll help you with transfiguration."

Tracey immediately lost her sad expression and raised both her arms into the sky: "That's fucking aweso..."

"**Silencio!**" Hermione jabbed her wand toward Tracey, that shrugged off the charm and kept going: "...me! Thank you so fu..." she was stopped by a hand placed on her mouth.

Hermione could be fast when she wanted, "I'll help you. *If* you stop cussing, it's horrible." she pleaded.

Perhaps wisely, Tracey locked her own mouth and made the gesture as to toss away the key.

Ron shook his own head tiredly but joined the general laughing before turning towards Harry. "So have you chosen your electives?"

He nodded, still smiling from the typical exchange between Hermione and Tracey. "Yeah, I'm going with Care of Magical

Creatures and Ancient Runes, they seem kind of cool. Besides you have to admit that the cerberus and the Norbert were awesome."

Ron snorted. "It was a Norwegian Ridgeback, not a 'Norbert'." he repeated for what he felt was the thousandth time.

"I've never heard of a Ridgeback that has a teddy bear and recognizes 'Mummy', do you?" the spectacled wizard asked.

The Ravenclaw wisely choose to stop the old argument while he still remembered that it was Harry's strange way to rile him up.

"Listen, can you clarify the difference between Auror and Hit Wizard?" the Slytherin asked him out of the blue.

Before answering, Ron thought about the 'why' of the question. Since april, he had been trying to see most of his conversations as a game of chess. Not to win anything out of it, but as he had read in Ottery's library, one starts learning through imitation, and he was determined to be the next Dumbledore.

He grinned with a conspiratory flair: "I'm not the only one with a secret idea about his career, uh?"

Whispering would have been an amateur's mistake, since the sudden lowering of a voice only grabbed attention. So Ron kept his carefree tone and usual volume, even if a bit dimmed, but that had meant that Daphne had been able to overhear him, and had shot them an intrigued glance.

Thankfully the others were busy discussing the merits of Divination and if it was really bullshit or not. *Thank you Tracey.* Ron thought.

Harry smiled sheepishly, Ron had talked about his possible career a few nights before, only to him and Hermione, shyly, quietly. Like he was afraid that speaking of such a vague idea too loudly would have made it disappear. Their Gryffindor friend still had no idea about

what she wanted to do, but both the boys agreed that with a brain like hers, she could basically do whatever she wanted.

Even if she was still incensed with the 'knowing someone' process of the Ministry, and Ron feared that she would end up fighting it.

Harry had been vague like he was when he was trying to hide something, and his friends had let him be.

"Well Aurors are the equivalent of Muggle' policeman. But there are lot of different kind of works that you could be required to do, and following your talents you could end up like a proper investigator, *a la* Sherlock Holmes." Ron explained, remembering a book he read in Ottery's library.

"Or inspections, or patrolling, or training new recruits, or performing arrests. It's very... variegated." the Ravenclaw said.

"Hit Wizards have... higher profile targets, I guess they would be our soldiers. They guard Azkaban and if there was a dark wizard that locked himself into a fortress of some kind they would be the ones deployed to deal with it. Or a power hungry coven of some kind. Or a Blood Lord, or a new Goblin Insurrection, or a war against another country. Even if with the ICW that should not be possible. Or a rampaging Shadow of Lethifolds. But that's not something that can realistically happen."

Noticing the dumbfounded expression of his friend, he cringed.

"What among what I said was too alien-tongue?"

Harry started counting the things that had not made sense on his fingers, humming thoughtfully: "Let's see. A shadow of what? What's a Blood Lord? The ICW? And a coven?"

Daphne, who had been discreetly eavesdropping the whole time raised her head and looked at him with a blank face. Harry noticed the movement, and also noticed that it wasn't the normal 'blank', oh no. It was the unimpressed expression she assumed when she saw

something extremely stupid. Arguably she used it equally often as her usual blank face, but Harry knew that it was mostly because in the Slytherin Common Room one could hardly not notice Crabbe or Goyle.

"What is the ICW?" she repeated with a drawl that was mesmerizing in its resemblance to Snape's one.

Having the blind, blue eyed witch channeling her inner Snape so perfectly sent Ron into a fit of giggles.

She then proceeded with a quiet voice in informing Harry, quietly but with unrelenting determination, about how deep his ignorance was, how he had probably a Crabbe as a distant ancestor, and concluded the magnificent tirade with: "And if you thought with a brain instead of the snitch you have between your ears, and about something different from quidditch, maybe you would have heard about the International Confederation of Wizards, after two whole years in the magical world."

Harry stared at her unblinking for the whole speech, and after her flamboyant conclusion he tilted his head. "I'm curious, have you been preparing this speech for a generic occasion and tailored it on the fly or have you been eavesdropping my conversation for the last month only for this... memorable... tongue lashing?" he asked with the same Snape copyrighted drawl.

That was too much for Ron, who almost fell from the bench, laughing out loud.

After a while he managed to calm down, and the others had been pestering the two Slytherins about what happened to have Ron rolling on the floor, but the two had hid behind a thick curtain of dignified silence.

When the attention of everyone was once again dedicated to their own homework, and Ron managed to stop laughing, Daphne rolled her eyes and closed the textbook she was using to complete her

assignment. She was always the first to complete her homework, after Hermione obviously.

"A Blood Lord is a very old, very powerful vampire, usually at the head of a coven. We spoke of a witches coven in History of Magic, not my fault you couldn't be bothered to listen. And there are schools of fishes, parliaments of owls, and shadows of lethifolds. Which are the ugly version of dementors I guess." she said.

And before Harry could ask she added: "Dementors are those guarding Azkaban." her cold voice made clear that she disliked the topic, and Harry bullheaded through her displeasure, probably in revenge for the previous tongue lashing. "What's a dementor?"

At which she snapped: "Find a book! Weasley, don't tell him!"

Ron mock bowed to the blonde slytherin, humbly accepting her order.

Harry, recognizing a lost battle when he saw one, shrugged and went back to the original topic.

"So the Hit Wizards are stronger than the Aurors?" he asked.

Ron and Daphne exchanged a confused glance, then the blond witch sighed, tiredly drawing little circles on her temples with her fingers: "Morgana and Circe save me from muggle raised stupidity." she muttered.

"Hey!" Harry protested.

"Sorry mate," Ron butted in, "But she's kind of right. Your question doesn't make one lick of sense." In the head of the ravenclaw, *Magic is unique for each one* was a lesson he had spent months to understand.

"They simply work differently, the Aurors often have a lighter touch, and deal with less lethal situations, but Moody is an Auror and can

toss around like ragdolls two Hit Wizards at any time." Ron explained.

And on that note, Mandy made everyone take notice of the time, and Ron quickly grabbed his stuff before joining his House mates that were leaving the room.

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*1993-04 june* Ron left his bed in the middle of the night. He couldn't sleep. Actually, he could, but he kept waking up, apparently, lucid dreams were still beyond his grasp. Or maybe it was the fact that he felt that he had been on the verge of a world shattering revelation for a whole week already. And he couldn't afford to think about it during his end of year exams, do he was stressed because he wanted to understand it immediately, and he wanted it so badly that he couldn't stay asleep.

He thought about it some more. There was usually a connection between the incantation and the result. **Lumos** produced light, **Point Me** somehow turned your wand into a compass' needle, so in something sensible to the natural magnetic field of the planet. But that didn't sound quite right, in places heavily saturated with magic a muggle compass would simply go crazy. And an highly skilled user could use **Point Me** to find even objects if he knew them well enough and they were close.

Magicals didn't run around screaming nonsense. Well, usually. In fact, magic seemed had rules. Arithmancy was apparently about studying the patterns that magic created in the tangible world.

And both Runes and Potions, from what Ron had learned in the library, only worked because certain rules were followed. Magic had some logic behind it. Why shouldn't the same be true for spells? Perhaps there was some rule about incantations having to be stupid or punny. So either a god with a strange sense of humor made it so, or there was something Ron was missing. Who or what decided the incantations to have them match the intended effect so well? The most likely candidate was the Ministry. Perhaps there was a

Department dedicated to registering all the spells in the world? But what about new ones, created in secret? The twins had boasted about inventing spells as well. So, no, a Department to document all magic and link it to their incantations didn't sound right. Perhaps the inventor did it. He decided the results, put the spell down in writing, and by doing so, he created a piece of magic? Ron found no answer, so he moved on to the next question: What did they do? They were important, obviously, but why?

Incantations were important, Ron and everyone knew it, then he remembered a snippet from his one of his talks with Dumbledore. "If something is in our heads then it's very real. Sometimes even more tangible than what you are used to call reality." he repeated to himself.

Waving or pointing the wand and saying something produced the result. Maybe they were orders, he mused. But if so, who had to follow them? Instructions for magic to do, Lumos equalling the order to light the tip of the wand? Unless magic could read minds (which, now that he thought about it, was actually very likely) it couldn't be meant for something outside of the caster's head, otherwise nonverbal magic shouldn't work.

What about deaf wizards or witches? Ron bet that they could still learn magic. What about non verbal magic? Or the raw intent driven magic Flitwick had used on his door at the beginning of the year?

It went back to intent, Ron decided. *Magic is intent*. He thought, with the same determination he thought about the unique quality of everyone's magic. He felt that another piece had fell into place, like when he was translating from latin, and suddenly the period *flowed*.

Maybe the incantation helped create the magic? Something like a form, a container to fill with the caster's magic? That way, the incantation and wand movements would define the shape of the spell. That sounded nice, but very much like something Luna would say.

Orders, then. It made sense, or about as much as magic usually did. Someone had decided on a specific incantation as the order for a specific spell leading to a specific result. It fit. But not really. An Egyptian wizard would hardly use **Expelliarmus** as the incantation for a disarm charm.

Ron picked up his wand once more.

"**Lumos**," he said. The expected light appeared. "**Nox**."

"**Wingardium Leviosa**," he said, making a pillow fly around before cancelling the spell.

"Light!" he instructed next, and as expected, nothing happened. "Fly!" But the pillow stayed where it was.

He pointed the wand at his own shoes and chanted "**Nodo**." The laces followed his command and tied themselves. "Light up! Come to me! Come! Pull!" But nothing happened. As he waved his wand around, he tried whatever he could think of without effect. "Blast! Push! Shove!"

Nothing happened. Maybe he had to try something he was more familiar with, his mind went naturally to the fire-making charm.

Ron used occlumency to root himself in the moment, and like he had done every night he pointed his wand to the candle on his desk, ignoring wand movements, he focused and ordered: "**Burn!**" pouring all of himself into the spell.

Suddenly, Ron felt his wand jerk, and the candle went up in a blaze of fire that rose higher than Ron's head.

For a moment, Harry gazed at the fire that had suddenly sprung up only to die half a second later. Then, his mind started working again. He had done it! Against all odds and everything he had been taught, he had cast a spell with a wrong incantation!



He stilled. "Bloody hell." he muttered, "I broke Magic."