

Towards the end of April, a new face joined the Hogwarts staff. A Centaur named Firenze took over some of the classes of Professor Trelawney to the vocal displeasure of said Divination professor. While Professor Trelawney became upset, Firenze was a rave among the students, especially the girls. Not a day goes by without Lavender and Parvati 'secretly' discussing the advantages of having Firenze as their Divination professor and his 'enlightened' ways of approaching the subject.

The rumour was that Dumbledore picked Firenze to replace Trelawney the next year, but Harry knew that would not happen. Professor Trelawney, despite her faults, holds a valuable piece of information somewhere in her head about the prophecy. If she were to leave the protection of Hogwarts, she'd find herself as an esteemed guest of Voldemort. Most likely, the Dark Lord would leave her comatose or straight-up kill her after extracting the prophecy from her mind. It could be argued that the prophecy would remain hidden deep in her soul and shielded from Legilimency, but he was not certain. Prophetic dreams tend to be unpredictable, and he was not certain whether prophecies could be retrieved from the seer after delivery.

'I suppose that's why Dumbledore keeps Professor Trelawney in Hogwarts.' Harry thought.

Not that it bothered Harry. Trelawney and Firenze had nothing to do with him. At least, he thought the two fortune tellers were someone else's headache until he got a request from Firenze for a meeting. Though initially surprised, Harry was happy enough to meet the famed rebel Centaur, who got expelled from the rest of the Centaur clan and overnight became the focus of gossip in Hogwarts. Besides, he distinctly remembered Firenze was the Centaur that gave Harry a ride out of the Forbidden Forest four years back.

Harry arrived at classroom eleven on the ground floor as requested by Firenze. The door was left wide open, and Harry saw the floor was slightly mossy, and trees were growing out of it. Magical plants of many varieties were thriving inside the room, robbing the previously unused classroom of its dusty aroma. Instead, the room smelled like the Forbidden Forest without all the doom and gloom.

But just as he was about to step into the classroom, he got a sense that he was being watched. Harry paused at the doorway and expanded his senses out of the confines of his body.

"Hmm." Harry let out a thoughtful hum as his magic returned with interesting results.

Harry carefully stepped into the classroom seeing Firenze leaning against a tree, whispering something against its bark in a language that sounded gibberish to his ears.

"Harry Potter," the rebel Centaur looked up from whatever he was doing to stare at Harry. "We meet again as it was foretold."

'He has all the mysterious vibe going on with his seer talk. He'll fit in without an issue.' Harry thought.

"Hi. Welcome to Hogwarts. I hope you had no trouble fitting in." Harry greeted politely while holding out his hand.

"Thank you. Professor Dumbledore was very accommodating." said Firenze, shaking Harry's hand while looking at him with his crystal blue eyes.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something." Harry went straight to the matter after the pleasantries were out of the way.

"Indeed." Firenze inclined his white-blond head. "There is a matter of some importance that you need to convey to your friend Hagrid. He is your friend, is he not?"

"Yes, he is my friend. What did he do?" Harry asked curiously, wondering what sort of trouble Hagrid got himself entangled in this time.

"Just give him a warning Harry Potter. His attempt is not working. It'd be better to abandon it."

"What're you talking about?" Harry asked, looking blankly at Firenze.

"I would have warned Hagrid myself, but my interference might exacerbate the problem. My banishment has created tensions in the Forbidden Forest now – Hagrid has enough trouble without a Centaurs' battle."

"So, Hagrid is trying to do something to reverse your banishment?" Harry asked curiously.

"No. That's beyond even Hagrid." Firenze shook his head.

"Then what is he doing that warrants you asking for my help stopping Hagrid?" Harry asked.

Firenze stared at Harry impassively for a minute before sighing.

"I gave Hagrid my word that I'd never tell another soul what he is doing. I shall not betray his trust. All you need to know is that you need to convince Hagrid of the folly of his current actions. The attempt is not working. Tell him, Harry Potter."

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It took Harry a lot of internal searching, but he remembered Hagrid was supposed to have brought his Giant half-brother to the Forbidden Forest. He had all but forgotten about that particular can of worms. Interestingly though, he had yet to run into the Giant on his many trysts in the Forbidden Forest for training with his animagus form.

He suspected Dumbledore must've somehow shielded Hagrid's half-brother from the four senses of all creatures. That was the only reason he could come up with for a Giant going unnoticed when he was in his animagus form.

Harry didn't immediately spring the discovery on Hagrid as he was a bit engaged with schoolwork and the many sessions of the Knights. While the pressure of the Quidditch Cup was now off his shoulders, the pressure of exams came like a ton of bricks. Not to mention, Harry had to juggle his attention between schoolwork, the classes of the Knights, and somehow keeping it together every day to face off against Voldemort's mental intrusions.

Of all the most exhausting activities, the lion's share of stress came from the training he was giving to the Knight. Of late, Neville had requested more advanced training that was geared to employ defence and offensive magic. Once Harry decided to give those extra lessons, he thought to expand beyond Neville. He ended up roping in the Weasley twins, Hermione, Tracey, Daphne, Luna, Ginny, Ron and Katie, into what he called the Accelerated Knightly Course, which focused solely on offensive magic. There was, however, an advantage in giving special lessons to a select

group. He could delegate a lesson to Neville, Hermione, Katie or the Weasley twins, while Harry could take a day off.

But ever since March began, he let the offensive magic some rest and instead focused on teaching the Patronus charm to the group. While he saw no immediate use for the group in learning the Patronus charm, he knew the strategic advantage of sending quick messages was quite useful.

In the worst-case scenario, his friends could call in help using the charm.

"I still don't understand why you insist on asking us to focus on the modified Patronus charm. I mean, won't it be more useful if we learned to use the Patronus charm to chase away the Dementors?" asked Hermione.

Harry had to admit Hermione had mad skills when it came to mastering magical spells. Therefore, it was no surprise to see Hermione managing to conjure a corporeal Patronus before anyone else.

"Because communications is a vital part of warfare. It doesn't matter how powerful an army is because defeat is certain when its lines of communication are compromised," said Harry, watching the ethereal otter Hermione created dance around the room. "The only way to confirm that you can create a Patronus in the presence of a Dementor is to try and create one in the presence of that creature. Since we don't have a Dementor lying around to test your skill, I suggest you run away rather than confront a Dementor."

"Running away does not sound like the bravest thing to do." Neville complained, a look of concentration on his face as he tried to make a corporeal form out of the silver vapour that was coming out of the tip of his wand.

"In a war, the focus must be on winning the war, not the battles. That's why Dumbledore and the Ministry failed the last time. They obsessed over each battle and nearly lost the war. I'll not make the same mistake." said Harry.

"Winning battles is important, Harry." said Ginny, looking slightly out of breath.

"Important, yes. But not necessary for winning the war. On the other hand, strategic retreats allow you to recoup losses, strategise, make the enemy overextend, and set traps – the possibilities are endless."

"Still, what's the point of learning the Patronus charm if we are not going to use it against the Dementors?" Ron complained, looking grouchy and sweating as only small wisps of silver vapour came out of his wand despite his best efforts.

Harry hadn't really wanted to include Ron in the group, but he was present, thanks to Hermione. Hermione had come to terms with Ron and tried to rekindle their friendship. But Harry didn't take in Ron solely because of that. The Weasley family was already a target for Voldemort. Therefore, he thought it'd be better for the Weasleys if Ron had more combat training.

"What's the point of throwing your life away meaninglessly for the sake of pride?" Daphne asked tacitly, and that made everyone fall silent.

"Self-confidence is necessary for war, but overconfidence is fatal. The Death Eaters fight for personal glory because that elevates them in the eyes of Voldemort. Our strategy should be to use that against them. Use teamwork to take out the Death Eaters rather than fight for pride or glory. That's why communication and retreats are important. If you can't work as a team, I can't tell you about the plan to expose Voldemort."

"What exactly are you planning, Harry?" Hermione asked, dismissing the Patronus charm to look at him curiously.

"I'll tell you when I think you're ready. For now, the plan remains a secret between a select few," said Harry, his eyes finding George and Fred, who were snickering at Hermione's annoyed look.

The Weasley twins laughed at something they muttered amongst themselves, and together, they cast the Patronus charm. Two magpies formed from silver vapour galloped out of the twins' wands, catching everyone's attention.

"Well done, Fred, George." Harry clapped.

"The trick is to think of a happy memory and allow joy to permeate every inch of your body." Harry reminded everyone.

"I don't think I can do it, Harry." Neville said, dropping his shoulders as his attempt to cast the spell failed for the umpteenth time.

"It is no easy spell to perform. Most grown wizards are unable to perform the spell. Trust me; the spell does not require great magical power to perform. It depends on your ability to be happy."

"But happiness cannot be created on a whim." Neville argued, frustration evident on his face.

Harry felt some pity for his friend. He understood Neville was tackling everything with brute force because of his singular focus on the Lestrage brothers and Bellatrix. Neville's motivation to train stemmed from his desire to kill or punish the Lestrages for what they did to his parents. Harry walked towards Neville and took him to a corner of the room.

"Vengeance is a powerful motivator, Neville. But not all magic can be learned because of your burning hatred for Bellatrix and the Lestrage brothers." Harry whispered.

"You know?" Neville asked, his eyes widening slightly as Harry nodded.

"I know enough." said Harry, patting his friend on the shoulder. "I also know there is more than just vengeance in your mind, Neville. If I can perform the Patronus charm, then you can definitely perform it with ease. You just need to find the right memory buried deep in your..."

Harry trailed off as an idea came to him.

"Do you trust me?" Harry asked Neville.

"Of course I do."

"Do you trust me enough to let me inside your mind?" Harry asked.

Neville took a moment to think before nodding.

"All right. This might make you feel a little uncomfortable but keep looking into my eyes." said Harry before diving into Neville's mind using Legilimency.

Harry was initially bombarded with many memories that reeked of strong negative feelings. He could feel rage as he saw Neville reading the Prophet about the escape of the Death Eaters from Azkaban. The image of a witch sporting a deranged look assaulted him. Harry had to forcibly push away all the negativity he was being bombarded with inside Neville's mind, and instead, he began actively searching for memories with a more positive vibe. Harry searched for what seemed forever until he stumbled upon a piece of memory buried deep in Neville's mind.

'This is it.' Harry thought, tugging the memory out so that Neville could feel it and see in his mind.

It was the memory of a young Neville visiting his parents in St. Mungo's hospital on his birthday. Despite their mental impairment, Alice and Frank Longbottom had somehow managed to make a hat in the image of a dragon for Neville's birthday. Neville had been so happy that day as he thought his parents were slowly recovering.

Harry pulled out of Neville's mind, and he saw his friend with tears running down his eyes.

"That was on my seventh birthday. I had forgotten about that day." said Neville.

"It's the curse of human existence to place despair before hope. But all hope is not lost. If magic caused your parents to suffer, magic can heal them." said Harry.

"It has been so long, Harry. Everyone says it's impossible." Neville shook his head, rubbing the tears from the corner of his eyes lest someone else saw him.

"Everyone thought the Killing curse could not be stopped. My mother stopped it and made it so that the curse bounced back on the Dark Lord when he tried to kill me. Magic is the art of mastering impossibilities."

"Are you saying, my father and mother..."

"Yes, they can be cured one day. I think I might know someone who can help us better than the healers of St Mungo's hospital." said Harry, squeezing Neville's shoulder.

"You're not just saying that to... you know... are you?" Neville breathed out slowly, overcome with emotion.

"If death can be defended, then anything is possible with magic." Harry said confidently, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Trust me. Now, try the spell again with the essence of the memory in your mind."

Neville closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Slowly he raised his wand after taking a moment.

*"Expecto Patronum."*

A brilliant white light exploded from Neville's wand, making Harry smile.

"Okay. Now, that's a start." Harry muttered.

When the lesson finally ended, Harry was in a good mood and fired up. While he had ended up possibly shouldering one more herculean task on his shoulders, he was pretty much happy to

pursue this one with zealotry. Neville was a good friend, and the Longbottoms were some of the bravest people he knew. He thought they deserved better, and he was pretty sure he was already close to coming into possession of an object that could heal the Longbottoms and even the blood curse afflicting the Greengrass family. Not to mention, he had access to an ancient alchemist. Surely, Perenelle Flamel could be of some use in healing the Longbottoms.

The good mood that he was in also made Harry decide to approach Hagrid.

So, the moment everyone safely returned to their dorms, Harry used the Marauders' map to chart a safe path towards Hagrid's hut. But when he reached the hut, Hagrid was nowhere to be found. This led Harry to track Hagrid using his sensory abilities.

However, it was taking too much time. Therefore, he took off into the air changing his body into sparkling grey mist. He knew Hagrid wouldn't leave a Giant in the Centaur or Acromantula territory. That would cause a war in the Forbidden Forest, inevitably ending in Hagrid's brother's death. So, Harry went straight for the portion of the Forbidden Forest that was relatively 'neutral' territory. And that's when Harry came across a few uprooted trees.

He immediately knew he was getting closer, so Harry climbed down a few notches from his position. His search finally yielded a result when Harry came across the prone form of a giant. Harry immediately dropped down a few meters from the sleeping giant. To his relief, he also found Hagrid not far from the sleeping giant.

"So, this is the big secret you've been hiding." Harry said, walking into the small clearing where Hagrid had lit a small fire to keep himself warm.

"Wha..? Harry! How?" Hagrid spluttered.

"Firenze asked me to pass on a message to you, 'The attempt is not working'. He was quite insistent on being cryptic but knowing you, I guessed it had something to do with a magical creature." said Harry, waving his wand, transfiguring a pebble into a chair which he used to sit down close to the fire Hagrid made.

"His name is Grawp. He is ma' brother. He was bein' bullied by the others. I couldn't leave 'im with those giants..." Hagrid trailed off.

"I understand. He is family – your brother." Harry nodded.

"Yeah... Grawp is family. Ol' mum didn't like him much more'n she like me. Giantesses want good big kids, and Grawp, he's a runt compared to other Giants – only sixteen foot..." Hagrid trailed off miserably, shooting a pitying look at his snoring brother.

"Have you tried to find him a home somewhere else, Hagrid? The Forbidden Forest is home to many other magical races. Won't they object to his presence? If the Ministry gets wind of a giant so close to Hogwarts, you can imagine what they'll do to him." said Harry.

"I know. With that woman searching fer' summat' to blame Dumbledore, Grawp is in danger. But I don't know where ter' move him, Harry." Hagrid said helplessly.

"Don't worry, Hagrid. We'll figure something out." Harry said.

"Do you want ter' meet him? I've been trying ter' teach him a bit of English, but – it's been difficult, you see."

"Perhaps another day, Hagrid. I don't want to disturb Gwarp in his sleep." Harry said immediately before Hagrid poked at a sleeping Giant.

"Oh! All right then. Let's go back, and you need ter' get back ter' yer' bed, Harry." said Hagrid, shouldered his crossbow and led Harry out of the Forbidden Forest on foot.

"How did yeh' even find me?" Hagrid asked as they struggled to walk through a sea of thick knotgrass on the forest floor.

"You're not the only one who knows their way around in the Forbidden Forest." said Harry.

"Wait!" Hagrid suddenly said, pausing midway while taking out his crossbow.

Harry armed himself with his wand as his ears also picked up on movements in the darkness of the forest.

"I thought we made it clear you are not welcome in our lands, Hagrid." said a deep male voice from the darkness of the night.

Harry saw a man's naked torso coming from behind a pine tree. The chestnut body of the horse attached to the man's torso exited the shade of the tree, making Harry frown as he searched for the rest of the Centaur clan. The Centaur had high cheekbones and flowing black hair that swayed in the wind.

'If Parvati and Lavender were here, they'd swoon over the Centaur.' Harry thought amusedly.

"How are yeh, Magorian?" Hagrid asked warily, his eyes looking searchingly at the edges of the line of trees behind the Centaur.

The bushes around Harry and Hagrid rustled as more Centaurs surrounded them. Harry eyed each of the faces, some familiar to him. However, the only one he knew was Bane, the black-bearded mean-looking Centaur who sported a cruel look on his face.

"I hope you remember what we agreed to do if this human set foot on our grounds again?" Bane asked gleefully, looking at Magorian.

"All I did was stop yeh' lot from killing a friend." Hagrid growled at Bane.

"Then you should have made better friends than consorting with traitors, Hagrid. Our ways and laws are ours to uphold and defend. Firenze betrayed our ways and dishonoured us." said Magorian.

"I dunno how yeh' worked that out, Magorian," Hagrid growled. "He's done nothing wrong except help Albus Dumbledore..."

"Ha! Firenze swore to be a servant of humans. There is no greater betrayal, no greater shame." a grey-haired Centaur said.

"Servitude!" Hagrid said angrily, affronted at the very notion. "He's doin' Dumbledore a favour..."

"He's selling out our knowledge and secrets to unworthy humans in that school of yours. There is no greater crime than this." Magorian said gravely.

"If that's your problem, I could arrange for the knowledge of wizards to be transferred to the Centaurs living in the Forbidden Forest." Harry offered.

"Do not speak in our presence, boy!" Bane snarled, moving a few steps forward threateningly with a bow in hand. "You have probably profited from our knowledge..."

Harry transformed into his lion form and roared with full might, surging forward. With a swift swipe of his paw, he disarmed Bane. The dark bow in Bane's hand smashed against the bark of a tree, and Harry growled threateningly at the Centaur, making Bane stumble back in fear.

Harry swiftly changed back into his human form as he took note that bows were being trained on him. Harry flicked his wand, and a bubble of protective shield converged around Hagrid and himself.

"Speak to me like that again, and your friends will be making funeral arrangements for you, Bane." Harry said in a deceptively cold tone, directing his intent through his flaring magical power.

"We do not harm the young. Stand down." Magorian said forcefully.

The Centaurs lowered their bows and took a few steps back, and Harry followed suit by cancelling the shield.

"I also have a policy of not spilling the blood of magical creatures if possible. But I'm contemplating whether I can exclude morons from that policy."

"You human..." Bane growled.

"Bane!" Magorian warned.

"Come on, Harry. We've seen enough of these stubborn ol' mules." Hagrid growled, moving away from the Centaurs with Harry closely trailing behind.

"We know your secret, Hagrid. This is no place for that thing." Magorian shouted at them, as the Centaurs slowly withdrew from the forest. "Our patience grows thin every day."

"Yeh'll learn to tolerate 'im." Hagrid yelled back.

"Bunch of stubborn ol' mules." Hagrid growled under his breath before turning on Harry with a proud look.

"Yeh learned ter' become an animagus like..."

"Yeah." Harry nodded with a grin. "Keep that a secret, though. I have not registered with the Ministry yet."

"Just like James and Sirius, then. Yer secret is safe with me, Harry." Hagrid promised jovially.

"Unless, of course, someone offers you a dragon egg." Harry teased, making Hagrid laugh.

"Hey, Hagrid. I think we should use a code word when we are talking about Grawp." Harry suddenly said.



"Code word?" Hagrid looked in askance at Harry.

"Yes. Something that'd make others think we are not talking about your brother."

"Oh! I suppose that's smart with that woman breathing down our necks." Hagrid nodded in understanding. "So, what word are we going to use?"

"We can use Bane. It'll be the perfect cover. Even if someone overhears our conversation, they'll find out we were talking about the Centaur Bane rather than Grawp." Harry suggested with a secretive smile on his lips that Hagrid totally missed.

"That's brilliant, Harry." Hagrid beamed.

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Weeks passed in a blur, and the OWLs and NEWTs exams arrived with the advent of June. Most students were running around like headless chickens as they took on the exams, but one particular student was under Dolores Umbridge's keen observation.

It was none other than Harry Potter.

The Potter boy had once again become the talk of the castle with his supposedly stellar performance of magic. The examiners from the Ministry were all praises for the boy's skill in magic, especially Madam Marchbanks. The old stooped witch looked a few decades younger after overseeing Harry Potter's practical tests in DADA, Charms, Transfiguration and Ancient Runes. Dolores had to endure hours of praise heaped on the Potter boy from the examiners. The Hogwarts staff were only too happy to pitch in, exalting the boy as if he was Merlin reincarnate.

But Dolores was the only one who knew what the boy was planning. No amount of praise and smokescreen could keep her eyes from finding out the truth. Her patience had borne fruit, and just like she predicted, Harry Potter had slipped up with the OWLs exam. She had been secretly following Harry Potter for months and keeping watch on every move the boy was making.

It was by luck that she chanced upon the boy's conversation with his friends about a 'Bane'. She knew something dangerous was happening, and her instincts were later proven correct. Dolores had secretly followed Potter and found out he was having regular meetings with Firenze and Hagrid. Once she learned that, she had Filch keep tabs on the activities of Hagrid and Firenze.

That was how she learned to suspect Potter was somehow building up an army of Centaurs to overthrow the Ministry. Filch had reported to her about a Centaur named 'Bane' living in the Forbidden Forest who was antagonistic towards wizards. From the many conversations she had overheard between Potter and Hagrid, this 'Bane' sounded dangerous. They often talked about Bane being too strong and angry at not being allowed to attack someone. She had a feeling it was the Ministry they were talking about. She suspected Dumbledore was building an army with Potter's help to overthrow the Ministry. She came to that conclusion when she overheard Potter talking about secretly moving 'Bane' to a location under the Ministry's nose.

But she didn't act immediately. She still needed to catch Potter in the act to prove the boy's criminal activities to the Ministry. Therefore, she waited patiently for the right moment, and when she got word from Filch that the Potter boy was again on the move right after the OWLs were finished, she thought this was the time to act. Dumbledore and the rest of the staff were busy seeing off the Ministry delegation while she made her move to catch Potter.

She secretly followed Potter under an invisibility cloak as he entered the Forbidden Forest. It was challenging to keep track of the boy, but she somehow managed to move through the forest floor undetected despite the impediments along the way. She didn't know how much time had passed, but finally, Potter stopped near an uprooted tree. Dolores moved closer to see what made Potter stop, but her breath hitched when she saw a Giant.

'Potter is planning on unleashing the Giants against the Ministry?' Dolores thought incredulously.

She suddenly remembered reading a story about a clan of Giants getting wiped out in the Prophet.

'That must have been a hoax orchestrated by Dumbledore and Potter. They have transported the Giants secretly to the Forbidden Forest to launch an assault on the Ministry. The Centaurs must also be their allies, and they might be helping Potter and Dumbledore to move the Giants undetected to and from the forest.' Dolores reasoned.

"Your plans won't work, Potter. Everything ends now." Dolores muttered under her breath as she took careful aim with her wand.

With glee, Dolores released the spell aiming for Harry Potter's back.

*"Stupefy."*

However, her glee fell apart, giving way to confusion as the red bolt of magic passed harmlessly through Potter's body. Suddenly, her whole perception changed as the Harry Potter standing before her eyes vanished, and so did the trees and the Giant.

"I've always believed that misdirection is a basic concept of magic." a voice whispered succinctly behind her. "Too bad Hogwarts never bothers to teach that concept to its students. I've found it to be extremely effective and rewarding."

Her wand was wrenched away from her hands, and she found herself hung upside down by her ankles. The invisibility cloak draped around her body vanished, and she looked fearfully into the twin glowing orbs that were Potter's eyes.

"Potter you..."

With a flick of Potter's wand, Dolores found herself unable to utter a single syllable.

"I think I've heard enough from you, Dolores Umbridge. All your life, you've been nothing but a waste and pain to society at large. Tonight, you are going to be extremely useful for Wizarding Britain. Take comfort in that because you will be in a world of pain." Harry Potter said before darkness claimed her whole.