

Chapter 34:

– Amara Black –

Breakfast should have ended there.

Honestly, after surviving magical poisoning, eating enough bacon to make up for the calories my body had burned repairing my throat, and publicly admitting I had just fucked the Head Girl in the prefects' bathroom, I felt like Hogwarts had already provided enough emotional whiplash for one morning.

Naturally, the universe disagreed.

I was halfway through another piece of toast when two boys wandered over from farther down the Gryffindor table.

One of them was tall and lanky, with sandy-brown hair that kept falling into his eyes and a tired sort of wariness that made him look older than eighteen. Remus Lupin. He had the same quiet intelligence I remembered from stories and canon, though he lacked most of the scars that would mark him later. There were a few faint lines already, pale scratches near his jaw and one close to his hairline, but nothing like the deeply weathered man from the future.

The other boy was shorter and softer around the edges, with round cheeks, watery eyes, and nervous hands that kept fidgeting with the hem of his sleeve. Peter Pettigrew.

That was... strange.

In my mind, Peter Pettigrew existed as a fat, sniveling coward. A traitor. A rat. Literally and metaphorically.

But this Peter was eighteen. A little chubby, yes. A little short, yes. Nervous enough that he looked like a startled rabbit who had wandered into a room full of foxes, absolutely. But he was also just a boy. Awkward. Shy. Almost endearing in a way I deeply resented.

Sirius had barely ever talked about him.

That probably said enough.

Still, seeing him like this was uncomfortable. Not because I liked him. But he had not betrayed anyone yet. *Maybe*.

Time travel—no, parallel universe nonsense—made morality so fucking inconvenient.

Remus and Peter stopped beside Sirius, both of them giving Lily, Marlene, and Alice quick greetings.

"Morning, Lily," Remus said, smiling politely.

"Evans," Peter mumbled, bobbing his head.

"Morning, Remus," Lily replied, still sitting close enough to me that her thigh pressed against mine beneath the table. "Peter."

Marlene gave them a lazy wave. "Boys."

Alice just arched an eyebrow at them over her goblet. "You two look like you're approaching a sleeping dragon."

Peter's eyes flicked to me and then away.

Remus managed slightly better, though not by much. His gaze met mine for half a second before sliding off toward Sirius with obvious curiosity.

Oh. *Their shyness is cute.* That was deeply unfair.

I smiled at them slowly and winked.

Peter went red immediately.

Remus blinked, then flushed across the cheekbones in a way that made him look even more unfairly attractive. He had that rugged handsome thing starting already, beneath the bookish exhaustion and the careful posture. The kind of face that suggested he apologized after biting but would absolutely bite again under the right circumstances.

My body, the traitorous thing that it was, noticed. Of course it noticed. I had evolved into something called a Death-Touched Succubus Queen less than 5 hours ago, and apparently that came with the delightful bonus of noticing everyone's nervous little reactions in edible detail. *Fantastic.*

Sirius grinned broadly, apparently oblivious to the fact that both his friends had just been lightly murdered by a wink.

"Right," he said, slinging an arm over the back of the bench like he owned it. "Amara, these are two of my best mates. Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. Remus, Peter, this is Amara Black. My cousin."

Both boys froze.

Remus looked from me to Sirius. "...Your cousin?"

Peter's eyes widened. "Black?"

I lifted my fingers in a little wave. “Unfortunately...” I said playfully. In my head, though, I was just happy getting to see a version of him alive again.

Sirius clutched his chest dramatically. “Unfortunately? You wound me, *cousin*.”

“You’ll survive...” I let out a dramatic sigh.

Remus shook his head with his lips twitching. “How many freaking cousins do you have, Sirius?”

Sirius sighed with the bone-deep exhaustion of a man burdened by a ridiculous family tree. “Far too many.”

“Explains a lot,” Marlene muttered.

Sirius ignored her with the elegance of long practice. “But Amara is one of the good ones.”

That made something inside my chest ache. It was stupid. It was nothing. He barely knew me. This Sirius was not my Sirius. He was not the man who had found me in that miserable orphanage and dragged me into the magical world with wild hair, haunted eyes, and a kind of desperate love he did not know what to do with.

He was eighteen. He was alive. He was calling me one of the good ones.

I swallowed and forced my face to stay relaxed. “High praise,” I said lightly.

“Extremely high,” Sirius said. “My standards are famously impeccable!”

Lily snorted.

Sirius glanced down the table, and the humor on his face dimmed slightly.

I followed his gaze.

James Potter sat alone near the other end of the Gryffindor table. He was staring at me. No, not staring. *Glaring*. His face was tight, jaw clenched, hazel eyes sharp with something ugly and possessive. The expression hit me like a slap because I had seen its older version. I had seen that same jaw on the lawn of Potter Manor. I had watched that same hatred twist a grown man’s face as he raised his wand and fired the Killing Curse at his own daughter.

My hand twitched toward my wand. I breathed through my nose and reminded myself again. *Not my James. Not yet. Maybe never.*

Sirius frowned. “Is James coming over, or is he going to sit there brooding like a rejected portrait?”

Remus grimaced and slid onto the bench beside Sirius. Peter sat down next to him, still glancing nervously at me.

"I don't think that's happening," Remus said carefully. "You know how he gets when it comes to Lily."

Lily made a strangled noise beside me. "He should not get like anything," she said, voice rising with each word, "because James Potter and I are not together. We have never been together. We are not secretly together, nearly together, spiritually together, destined together, or whatever rubbish he's been telling people this week."

Marlene applauded slowly. "Beautifully said."

Alice nodded. "Very thorough."

Sirius held up both hands. "No one here is defending Prongs' romantic strategy."

"Does he have one?" I asked.

Remus coughed into his hand.

Peter made a small squeaking sound that might have been a laugh.

Lily leaned closer to me, shoulder pressing into mine. "No. He does *not*." The possessive edge in her voice made heat curl low in my stomach.

Oh, that was new. *No, not new. Intensified.* Everything was intensified now. Her thigh against mine. Her fingers still loosely tangled with my hand beneath the table. The faint scent of soap and Lily's skin from the prefects' bath. The memory of her blush, her mouth, her hands in my hair.

I shifted slightly, clenching my thighs together under the table. Bad idea. The pressure sent a sharp little pulse of sensation through me, and I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid making a sound.

For fuck's sake. I had barely survived breakfast after having sex with Lily. I should not already have been getting wet again because two shy boys blushed and Lily got territorial. But there it was. My body hummed.

I glanced at Remus and Peter again, and another strange instinct unfolded in my senses.

They smelled different from everyone else. Not just soap, parchment, wool, breakfast, and teenage nerves. There was something beneath that. A kind of untouched sweetness. Unspent magic wrapped in uncertainty and awkward want.

My eyes narrowed. *Could I smell **virginity** now? Oh, fuck me sideways.*

That absolutely had to be a Succubus Queen thing.

I took a long drink of pumpkin juice, remembered someone had very recently poisoned my last goblet, and immediately regretted not checking this one first.

Nothing burned. No black magic tried to murder my throat. *Wonderful. I could continue suffering normally.*

"I'd like to get to know you better," I said to Sirius, because focusing on emotional damage was safer than focusing on my body's increasingly inconvenient instincts. "If I can."

Sirius blinked, surprised by the sincerity. Then his expression softened. "Yeah," he said. "Course."

I looked at Remus and Peter. "And your friends too."

Remus's blush returned instantly.

Peter looked like I had personally invited him to tea with a dragon.

Cute. Suspiciously cute. Damn it.

Sirius brightened. "We've got classes today, but we can all hang out later if you want. Show you the good parts of the castle."

"The good parts?" I asked.

"The parts professors don't like students knowing about."

"We will be included in that," Lily announced. Her tone was casual. Her body language was not. She shifted closer until her arm pressed firmly against mine, and beneath the table her fingers tightened around my hand.

I glanced sideways at her. Lily Evans, Head Girl, proud Muggleborn, terrifyingly competent witch, and apparently very capable of staking a claim after one bath.

Marlene's grin turned wicked. "Oh, will we?"

"Yes," Lily said with her chin lifting higher.

Alice hid a smile behind her cup. "How generous of you to volunteer us for your plans tonight."

"You wanted gossip," Lily said primly. "This will undoubtedly provide some."

Marlene's eyes flicked between Lily and me. "That it will."

Sirius looked delighted. Remus looked amused and nervous. Peter looked overwhelmed by the idea of spending time with several pretty witches at once.

James Potter, from the far end of the table, looked like he wanted to murder someone. Possibly me. Probably me. I smiled into my goblet. Let him glare. One jealous teenage James Potter was not even in the top twenty threats currently competing for my attention.

...Breakfast ended not long after that.

The Great Hall shifted into the particular sort of chaos that only a school full of witches and wizards could produce. Benches scraped back. Goblets vanished and refilled themselves for students trying to steal one last drink before class. Owls swooped overhead. Students argued over schedules, groaned about essays, and shoved rolls into their pockets like they expected to starve between now and lunch.

Lily stood beside me, gathering her books with all the brisk efficiency of someone who had spent years pretending she was not constantly surrounded by idiots.

It was adorable.

Unfortunately for her dignity, I was in a mood.

As she turned to leave, I caught her wrist.

Lily barely had time to blink before I tugged her back down toward me and kissed her and it was not a sweet little goodbye peck for the sake of appearances.

It was a slow, heated, deliberate kiss.

Her surprised little inhale brushed against my lips, and then she melted. That was the only word for it. One second Lily Evans was standing there in full Head Girl composure. The next, her free hand had landed against my shoulder, her knees had gone just a little weak, and her mouth had opened beneath mine with a soft, helpless sound that went straight through me.

Around us, Hogwarts reacted.

Someone dropped a fork.

Someone else made a strangled noise.

Two male students walking past the Gryffindor table quite literally tripped over each other. One stumbled into the other, the second boy yelped, and both of them crashed awkwardly into the bench across from us while staring with wide, glassy eyes.

Remus coughed into his fist so hard I thought he might choke. Peter sputtered something incomprehensible and turned a shade of red that made him look dangerously close to matching Lily's hair. Sirius stared for half a second, then broke into a grin so delighted it bordered on maniacal. Marlene looked like Christmas had arrived early. Alice covered her mouth with both hands, but her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

When I finally let Lily breathe, she remained frozen inches from my face, eyes wide and lips slightly parted.

Her blush was spectacular. It spread from her cheeks down her throat and disappeared beneath the collar of her robes, and my newly sharpened instincts immediately wanted to follow that color with my mouth.

I did not. "Have a good day, Lily," I murmured.

Lily opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Marlene made a delighted sound. "Oh, she broke her."

"I did not break," Lily managed, though the words came out faintly strangled.

Alice took her by one arm. Marlene grabbed the other.

"Yes, you did," Alice told me brightly. "We'll return her when she remembers how language works."

"I know how language works," Lily protested as they dragged her backward.

"Do you?" Marlene asked. "Because you've been staring at Amara's mouth for the last ten seconds."

"I have not!"

"That was hot," Sirius said cheerfully.

Lily pointed at him with the air of a woman trying very hard to recover authority while being physically hauled away by her friends. "Do not start with me, Sirius Black."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"You are literally dreaming of it right now."

"Possibly."

I smiled and wiggled my fingers at her.

Lily's glare failed completely because she was still blushing.

Marlene and Alice dragged her toward the doors, both of them already whispering rapid-fire questions while Lily hissed back mortified answers that only made them more excited.

I watched them go for a moment longer than necessary. Then I turned back toward the boys. Remus was suddenly very interested in the grain of the table. Peter looked like he had just

witnessed advanced magic beyond his comprehension. Sirius looked like he might start applauding.

“See you later, boys,” I said and I started standing.

Peter made another strangled sound.

Remus managed a polite nod. “L—Later, Amara.”

Sirius’s grin got a bit wider. “Looking forward to it, *cousin*.”

I rolled my eyes at him and stepped away from the bench.

Most of the students were streaming toward the doors now, joining the morning current toward classrooms, staircases, and whatever academic suffering awaited them. Maybe I should have followed? I was wearing Gryffindor robes, after all.

Robes that did absolutely nothing useful for my figure. They strained across my breasts, pulled tight at my hips, and did their level best to cling to my ass in a way that made the uniform look less like school attire and more like a failed containment spell. Whoever had selected these for me had clearly not accounted for my sinful proportions.

Then again, I was not actually a student. I was a displaced interdimensional disaster wearing borrowed school colors.

So instead of joining the crowd, I turned toward the staff table.

The noise around me shifted as I walked. A few students slowed. A few heads turned. Several gazes dropped and then snapped back up like their owners were pretending very hard not to have looked.

I ignored them all and headed straight for the professors.

Professor McGonagall noticed me first. She had the kind of posture that suggested she could detect rule-breaking by changes in air pressure alone. Her eyes flicked from my face, to the path Lily had vanished down, then back to me. “Miss Black,” she said crisply.

I stopped in front of the staff table and gave her my best innocent expression.

It had never worked on Morgana. It had never worked on Batman. It probably would not work on Minerva McGonagall either, but I respected the classics.

“Professor.”

Her lips thinned. “While I understand that students may form... attachments during their time at Hogwarts, I would ask that public displays of affection remain within reasonable bounds.”

A few professors nearby suddenly found their plates fascinating.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with a level of amusement that would have made me suspicious if I had not already decided this version of him was far less punchable than mine.

I clasped my hands behind my back. "My apologies, Professor," I said. "I'll try to keep such displays behind closed doors in the future."

McGonagall's eyebrow climbed.

Dumbledore made a very quiet sound that might have been a cough and might have been laughter.

Professor Flitwick choked on his tea.

McGonagall looked as though she had just realized I had technically apologized while also making the sentence worse. "See that you do," she said, her voice dangerously controlled.

"Of course."

I turned to Dumbledore before she could decide whether deducting points from a fake transfer student was worth the paperwork.

"Professor Dumbledore," I said. "Could you spare some time for me right now?"

He blinked once. "What did you have in mind, Miss Black?"

I smiled. "I want to invite you on an adventure."

That earned me a longer pause.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, blue eyes bright behind his half-moon spectacles. Then, slowly, a smile spread beneath his silver beard. "An adventure?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"How intriguing." He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I must confess, it has been a few decades since I was invited on a proper adventure before ten o'clock in the morning."

"Then you're overdue."

His smile widened. "So it would seem."

McGonagall turned her sharp gaze on him. "Albus..."

He looked at her with an expression of pure, elderly innocence. "Minerva?"

"That tone means you are considering it."

“My dear Professor, I am doing far more than considering it.”

“Of course you are,” she said, sounding deeply resigned.

Dumbledore rose from his seat with surprising spryness for a man old enough to have taught people who were now portraits. “I would be delighted to accompany you, Miss Black.”

Before I could answer, something warm and feathery shifted between my breasts. A tiny black head poked out from beneath the front of my robes. Nyx blinked at the world with eyes like absolute night, then gave a happy little chirp.

Every professor at the table froze.

I immediately melted. “Oh, hello, my tiny prince,” I cooed, cupping one hand protectively beneath him. “Did you want to come too?”

Nyx chirped again, louder this time, as if offended by the implication that I might have dared to go adventuring without him.

I scratched gently beneath his beak. “Yes, yes, of course you’re coming. I would never abandon my bravest little shadow.”

He puffed up proudly.

McGonagall stared at the tiny dark phoenix emerging from my cleavage with the expression of a woman who had just added twelve new questions to a list she already hated.

Dumbledore, however, looked utterly enchanted. “How extraordinary,” he breathed.

Nyx tilted his head at him.

Dumbledore leaned slightly closer, eyes shining with wonder rather than calculation. “Another phoenix at Hogwarts. Remarkable.”

“Another?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

As if summoned by the word, a flash of red and gold appeared near the headmaster’s shoulder. Fawkes materialized in a burst of warm flame, landing elegantly beside Dumbledore. The phoenix folded his wings and fixed his bright, intelligent eyes on Nyx.

Nyx stared back.

For a long second, neither bird moved.

Then Nyx chirped.

Fawkes trilled softly in response.

Something in my chest eased at the sound. It was gentle. Welcoming, maybe. Or at least curious.

Dumbledore smiled. "I must admit, I have never seen a phoenix quite like yours. I did not know they could be all black."

"He's a dark phoenix," I said, stroking Nyx's tiny head with one finger. "Very rare. Very spoiled obviously."

Nyx pecked my finger indignantly.

I gasped. "Excuse you."

Fawkes gave another musical trill. I had the distinct impression he was laughing.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled harder. "He seems a spirited companion."

"He's perfect," I said automatically.

Nyx tucked himself more firmly against me, half-hidden again, but kept his tiny head out so he could watch Fawkes.

Dumbledore glanced between us, his expression soft with something I did not quite know how to categorize. This Dumbledore looked like an old man witnessing something beautiful and rare, and simply being happy it existed.

That made it harder to hate his face.

"Well then," he said, stepping down from the platform. "Shall we?"

I glanced toward the doors where the last few students were disappearing into the corridors. I smiled at Dumbledore. "Let's go have an adventure."

The halls were strangely peaceful once the students were gone.

That was my first real thought as Dumbledore and I walked side by side through Hogwarts.

During breakfast, the castle had felt alive in the loudest way possible. Hundreds of teenagers, clattering dishes, owls, gossip, laughter, arguments, floating candles, and enough hormones in the air to make my newly upgraded instincts feel like they were being hit with a buffet menu.

But now? Now the corridors were quiet. Not dead quiet. Hogwarts never felt dead. The portraits still whispered to each other as we passed. Armor creaked. Stairs groaned somewhere distant. A draft carried the smell of old stone, parchment, candlewax, and magic so old it had seeped into every brick.

I loved it. That was annoying.

Dumbledore glanced at me from the corner of his eye, his long robes swishing faintly against the stone floor. "How are you finding Hogwarts, Miss Black?"

I looked at him. "Honestly?"

"I find honesty often saves time, though it has been known to create trouble."

"Hogwarts is amazing," I admitted.

His smile softened.

I looked away before he could see too much. "Lily showed me around yesterday. Well, some of it. I doubt anyone could actually show me around this entire place in one afternoon without needing a map, a rescue party, and possibly divine intervention."

"An accurate assessment."

"She was sweet about it," I said, then immediately hated how soft my voice had gone. "And I'm supposed to hang out with Sirius and his friends later. I assume they'll show me more of the castle."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I imagine they will show you rather different parts of it than Miss Evans did."

"Secret passages?"

"Most likely."

"Places professors don't know students can reach?"

"Almost certainly."

"Places professors absolutely do know students can reach but pretend not to because it would be exhausting to stop them every time?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "You have grasped the spirit of Hogwarts remarkably quickly."

I smiled despite myself.

He clasped his hands behind his back as we walked, looking very much like a harmless old academic out for a morning stroll. It was almost convincing. "Those boys," he said, "certainly manage to sneak around in ways that baffle even me from time to time."

"Sirius was always good at getting into places he shouldn't," I murmured. The words came out before I could stop them.

Dumbledore noticed. For a moment, we walked in silence beneath an archway carved with vines and tiny sleeping dragons. Then he spoke more gently. "May I ask a somewhat delicate question?"

"You're going to ask anyway."

"That is fair." His gaze moved ahead, thoughtful now rather than amused. "Is spending time with Sirius Black a good idea?"

I stiffened.

Dumbledore lifted one hand slightly, palm open. "I do not mean to suggest you should avoid him. Only that if he is, in some sense, *your father*... would befriending him here not risk interfering with the future?"

I stared at him.

Nyx shifted between my breasts, then gave a tiny sleepy chirp like he was contributing to the conversation.

I patted him absently. "I don't think I'm from this world's future."

Dumbledore's expression changed from worried to more curious. "Indeed?"

"I might be from the future," I said, choosing my words carefully, "but not this future. Or not this past. Whatever. Time travel gives me a headache. The point is, I don't think anything I do here is going to rewrite my reality."

After a moment, he nodded slowly. "That may explain a great deal." His voice lost some of its cheer. "There have been attempts to travel further back than the limits safely permitted by Time-Turners. Six hours is dangerous enough when mishandled. More than that..." He sighed softly. "There were those who tried to push beyond it. Days. Weeks. Months."

"What happened to them?"

"They vanished." The word settled coldly between us. Dumbledore continued. "They were simply gone."

I looked at him.

He looked back at me with quiet pity. "It is possible," he said, "that rather than traveling backward along their own timeline, they slipped sideways into parallel worlds. Similar histories. Similar people. Similar castles, perhaps. But trapped with no known way to return."

For a few seconds, I said nothing. The old fear tried to leak into my thoughts again. That deep, ugly terror that Trigon had won. That I would never see Raven's violet eyes again. Never feel Morgana's arms around me. Never hear Kara's nervous laugh or Dick's stupid heroic speeches

or Kori loudly announce something wildly inappropriate with complete sincerity. Never get to claim Daphne and Astoria Greengrass as mine.

Never go home.

Nyx pressed warmer against me.

I exhaled. “No,” I said firmly in my own thoughts.

Dumbledore tilted his head. “No?”

“I’m not trapped here.”

“Miss Black—”

“I’m not,” I said again, firmer this time. “I already have a plan.”

His brows rose. “A plan? To cross realities safely and return to your own world?”

“Yes.”

“After less than a day?”

“I work well under pressure.”

Dumbledore stared at me for a long moment. Then, to my surprise, he smiled. “Remarkable.”

“You don’t know the plan yet. It might be stupid.”

“I have found many remarkable plans are.”

“Good point.”

“And may I ask what this possibly stupid, certainly remarkable plan involves?”

I gave him my best innocent smile.

He did not look fooled.

I leaned slightly closer anyway. “There’s a massive reservoir of ancient magic sitting below Hogwarts Castle,” I said. “All that power just sitting there, waiting for someone to properly use it.”

Dumbledore stopped walking. I continued three steps before realizing he was no longer beside me. When I turned back, he was staring at me with an expression that was almost worth getting stranded in this universe to see. His mouth had parted slightly. His eyes were not twinkling now. His entire face had gone still in that particular way powerful people went still when someone casually mentioned a secret they absolutely should not know.

Then he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course," he murmured. "Of course you know about that."

"That sounded very judgmental."

"It was meant to."

"Rude."

He opened his eyes again, exasperation mixing with concern. "Ancient magic is an exceptionally dangerous force, Miss Black..."

"I figured."

"It is not merely old magic. Nor is it simply powerful magic. It behaves according to rules even the greatest scholars barely understand. It answers to intent, symbolism, sacrifice, bloodlines, places, pain, memory, and on occasion things far stranger."

"That sounds useful."

"That sounds catastrophic when handled without caution."

"I didn't say I was going to handle it without caution."

"You implied you intended to use it as a dimensional bridge after being in this world for less than twenty-four hours."

I considered that. "Fine. That sounds a little reckless when you say it like that."

Dumbledore gave me a very dry look. I liked this Dumbledore's dry looks. They were much less murderable than my Dumbledore's grandfatherly manipulation face. "I am not certain," he said slowly, "that I should show it to you."

"That's the whole point of this adventure," I told him.

That seemed to throw him off. He gave me a confused look. "To convince me to reveal a secret reservoir of volatile ancient magic?"

I corrected him. "To show you how competent I am!"

"Ah." He folded his hands over his stomach. "A demonstration, then. And what sort of demonstration did you have in mind?"

I gave him a cheeky grin.

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if some ancient survival instinct had just warned him that I was about to be a problem.

Smart man. “Well,” I said brightly, “what do you want to do first?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We have options.”

“That is rarely a comforting phrase.”

I counted them off on my fingers. “Option one: we go kill the thousand-year-old basilisk sleeping underneath the castle first.”

Dumbledore’s face went blank.

“Option two,” I continued, because apparently I had chosen violence as a communication style today, “we go destroy one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes, which is also hidden inside the castle first.”

Dumbledore swayed.

For one horrifying second, I genuinely thought I had broken him. “Professor?”

He reached blindly for the wall.

I lunged forward and caught his arm, steadying him before the great Albus Dumbledore could collapse in the middle of a Hogwarts corridor because a nineteen-year-old succubus witch had given him too many plot spoilers before lunch.

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “Sorry. That was too cheeky. I’m being serious, though. Completely serious.”

Dumbledore took a slow breath. Then another. “That,” he said quietly, “is what I was afraid of.”

I let go of his arm once I was sure he would stay upright.

Nyx poked his head out again and chirped at Dumbledore, sounding almost concerned.

Dumbledore looked down at him. A tired smile flickered across his face. “Thank you, little one. I am not quite dead yet.”

Nyx chirped approvingly, as though granting him permission to continue.

Dumbledore straightened his robes, then looked at me again. “A basilisk beneath the school?”

“Yes.”

“A Horcrux hidden within Hogwarts.”

“Also yes.”

“Belonging to Lord Voldemort?”

“Also yes.”

“And you know where both are?” Dumbledore’s expression darkened. Dumbledore’s face had gone grim. “...Let us take care of the Horcrux first,” he said at last.

I blinked. “Really? I thought you’d pick the giant snake.”

Dumbledore, it turned out, had pretty good cardio.

We made it up four flights of moving staircases, crossed three corridors, waited for one particularly dramatic landing to finish rotating, and climbed another set of stairs before reaching the fifth floor. Dumbledore did not look winded at all.

Not even a little.

Yes, magical people had naturally better stamina and endurance than non-magical people. Sirius had once told me that even the laziest wizard could usually outlast a muggle in physical recovery if magic was flowing properly through their body. Magic strengthened everything. Bones, muscles, nerves, lungs. It was why witches and wizards could survive bludgers to the skull, questionable potions, and being thrown into walls during school duels without immediately requiring ambulances.

But Dumbledore was still old.

In this time period, he had to be in his nineties at least. Maybe early hundreds. It was genuinely hard to tell with wizards, because apparently magical old age worked on different rules from normal biology and stubbornness counted as a medical supplement.

Either way, the man climbed stairs better than half the people I had watched wheeze their way through Gotham alleyways while trying to mug me.

I was almost impressed.

We turned the corner onto the fifth-floor corridor, and I immediately spotted someone who looked suspicious in the exact way only a greasy-haired teenager skulking around Hogwarts during class hours could look suspicious.

He had long black hair that hung around his face in lank curtains, pale skin, a long hooked nose that entered the corridor a full second before the rest of him, and narrow dark eyes that snapped toward us the moment we appeared.

Then those eyes landed on me. And widened. Not subtly either. He looked shocked.

For some reason, seeing me had genuinely startled him. *Interesting.*

Dumbledore's cheerful walking pace slowed. "Mr. Snape."

Ah. So this was Severus Snape. I looked him up and down. Greasy hair. Beady eyes. Nose like a hooked blade. Robes slightly too long and frayed at the cuffs. The general aura of someone who had not discovered shampoo, sunlight, or emotional stability.

This was one of the men my father hated more than almost anyone.

My Sirius had rarely spoken about Peter Pettigrew, but he had spoken about Snape with venom. Not often, because even saying the name seemed to foul his mood, but enough for me to understand there had been real hatred there. Old hatred. Schoolboy hatred that had fermented into adult loathing.

And this Sirius hated him too. That much had been obvious at breakfast.

Dumbledore's voice remained mild. "Why are you not in class with everyone else?"

Snape's eyes flicked from Dumbledore to me. Still staring. Still shocked. Then he seemed to catch himself and straightened, his shoulders drawing back in a thin attempt at dignity. "Professor Slughorn gave me the period off," he said. His voice was low and careful, but there was something unpleasant beneath it. Something oily. "I am ahead in my lessons."

Potions prodigy. Death Eater in training. Lily Evans' obsessive ex-friend.

Possibly my breakfast poisoner. *What a charming little résumé.*

"Ah," Dumbledore said, as if this explained everything. "Carry on then, my boy. Do not mind Miss Black and me. We have something to take care of on the seventh floor."

Snape went very still at my name. As my last name offended him even more than he thought possible before.

Dumbledore continued walking.

I followed, passing Snape close enough that I caught the sour smell of potion smoke clinging to his robes, along with ink, old parchment, and something bitterly herbal.

I did not look back immediately. That would have been too obvious. Instead, I waited until we were three steps past him, then let my senses stretch. The raw hatred coming off him hit me like heat from an open furnace.

It was focused. Vicious. Personal. Directed at me.

My fingers twitched. My anger stirred, not exploding, but simmering in that familiar deep way it always did when I contemplated murder.

Yep. I had never spoken to this greasy little git before in my life, and now I was almost completely sure he was the one who had tried to kill me with poison at breakfast.

Maybe he had seen Lily touch my hand yesterday. Maybe he had followed her. Maybe he had watched us in the courtyard. Maybe he had slipped something into my goblet because his creepy, entitled little heart could not handle Lily smiling at someone else?

I did not know yet. But I would.

I said nothing to Dumbledore. I did not want Dumbledore interfering before I decided what to do with him. Snape was a problem I could handle on my own later. Besides, there was nothing he could do to me. Poison had failed. Magic would fail. If he tried anything more direct, I would make him regret every greasy breath he had ever taken.

Dumbledore and I continued upward.

By the time we reached the seventh floor, Snape's hatred had faded behind us, but not from my thoughts.

I filed it away neatly beside "Voldemort blood feud," "basilisk under the school," "ancient magic dimensional exit strategy," and "try not to fuck Lily again before dinner unless absolutely necessary."

I might fail that last one...

Dumbledore slowed as we approached a familiar stretch of corridor.

My eyes landed on the painting across from us, and recognition sparked through me. Barnabas the Barmy. There he was, trying to teach trolls ballet. I had seen this painting in movies. I had read about it. I had pictured it a dozen different ways in fanfiction. But standing in front of it in person was something else. The tapestry was ridiculous, obviously. The trolls looked deeply offended by choreography. Barnabas looked committed to the worst teaching position in magical history.

And across from it was blank stone.

Dumbledore watched me with open curiosity. "Is this our destination?"

"Almost."

He glanced at the wall. "I confess, Miss Black, unless the Horcrux is disguised as a particularly unassuming stretch of masonry, I am not certain what you are looking for."

"Patience, Professor."

"I shall endeavor to locate some."

I stepped in front of the blank wall and began to pace. Once. I need the room where everything lost is hidden. Twice. I need the place Hogwarts uses to store what students misplace, abandon, or desperately hide. Three times. I need the Room of Hidden Things.

Magic shifted. It was subtle at first. A ripple beneath the stone. A hush in the air. The castle noticing. Listening. Considering.

Then the wall changed. A door formed where there had been nothing.

Dumbledore stared. His eyebrows climbed toward his hairline.

I looked over my shoulder and smiled. "Welcome to the Room of Requirement, Professor."

He blinked once. Then twice. "I beg your pardon?"

"Room of Requirement," I repeated. "Also known in this form as Hogwarts' lost and found."

Dumbledore approached the door slowly, studying it with the fascinated horror of a headmaster realizing his castle had been keeping secrets from him for decades. "You are telling me," he said carefully, "that Hogwarts contains a hidden room which appears when needed?"

"Yes." I grinned and opened the door.

The smell hit first. Dust. Old wood. mildew. Metal. Ink. Ancient fabric. Forgotten magic. A few hundred years of student panic, secrecy, and clutter packed into one impossible space.

The room beyond was massive.

It stretched hundreds of meters in multiple directions, far bigger than the corridor should have allowed, stacked dozens of feet high with mountains of junk. Shelves towered over us like narrow city streets. Broken furniture leaned against cracked wardrobes. Rusted cauldrons sat in piles beside chipped statues and old birdcages. Books spilled from boxes. Banners hung in tatters from high places. Stained carpets, dented armor, portraits with their canvases turned backward, cracked mirrors, empty bottles, abandoned trunks, cursed-looking cabinets, and enough forgotten objects to make a dragon feel underdecorated.

Dumbledore stepped inside after me. I let him have the moment.

"This," I said, "is where the house-elves dump things students misplace when nobody bothers claiming them. Or things students hide. Or things professors probably wish had stayed hidden."

Dumbledore's gaze moved slowly over the endless labyrinth of junk.

"No one has cleaned it in hundreds of years," I added.

"That much," he said faintly, "is apparent..."

Nyx poked his head out and chirped, sounding deeply unimpressed by the housekeeping.

“Agreed,” I told him. “Very poor standards.”

The door closed quietly behind us.

...For a few seconds, neither of us moved. Dumbledore stared at the endless towers of forgotten junk with the expression of a man who had just discovered that his very ancient, very magical school had a hoarding problem.

I would have felt bad for him, but honestly, it was extremely funny. “We’re looking for Rowena Ravenclaw’s lost diadem,” I said.

That snapped his attention back to me. “The lost diadem of Ravenclaw?” he repeated slowly. “Used as a Horcrux?” Dumbledore closed his eyes. He glanced around the impossible room, his expression sharpening into something more focused. “I take it you know what it looks like?”

“Sort of. Silver tiara. Blue sapphire. Probably looks old, expensive, and evil.” I looked over the mountains of clutter. “Yeah. Splitting up might be faster.”

We split up.

Dumbledore took the path to the left, moving between leaning cabinets and towers of broken desks with surprising dexterity for a man in embroidered robes. I went right, stepping over a cracked suit of armor, around a stack of moldy cushions, and beneath a suspended chandelier that looked one insult away from collapsing.

The Room of Hidden Things was ridiculous. Every shelf sagged beneath the weight of objects nobody had bothered to reclaim. There were cauldrons crusted with ancient potions, birdcages with no doors, cracked crystal balls, tarnished goblets, portraits that whispered when I passed, and books that twitched like they wanted to bite.

I kept my senses stretched, searching for that cold, rotten pulse of soul magic.

At the same time, I was not above browsing.

I found a little silver box tucked behind a chipped marble bust. It was covered in tiny emeralds and shaped like a sleeping fox. Pretty. Probably cursed. I checked it with a quick pulse of magic, found nothing immediately murderous, and stored it in my inventory.

Thank fuck I still had that. The System was gone now. Fused into me. Integrated, Didi had said. No more screens. No more sarcastic notifications. No more little lists of perks and drawbacks telling me what I was becoming.

But my inventory space remained.

I could still feel it tucked somewhere adjacent to my soul, like a private pocket in reality that belonged only to me. It was strange without the System interface organizing it. More instinctive. Like reaching into a shadow and knowing exactly where everything was.

Health potion. Weapons. Treasures. Clothes. Black family gold. Random stolen valuables. The Potter Family Invisibility Cloak no longer physically existed, of course, because it had melted into me.

I found a handful of loose gems in a cracked velvet pouch and stored those too. A gold bracelet with tiny runes carved along the inside. A silver dagger with a moonstone pommel. Three rings that smelled faintly of enchantment but not curse. A little bronze raven that flapped its wings when I touched it.

All of them vanished into my inventory. Was it theft? *Probably*. Was anyone going to claim them after they had been sitting in Hogwarts' trash dimension-room for potentially centuries? *Also probably not*.

Besides, I had lovers and friends to spoil when I got home.

Raven might like the moonstone dagger if it turned out to have shadow affinity. Kara would probably pretend jewelry was too much and then blush while wearing it. Kori would accept anything shiny with the enthusiasm of a woman being handed a religious artifact. Daphne and Astoria would absolutely appreciate gems. Morgana would either praise my taste or mock the craftsmanship for being inferior to something she had looted from a dead king twelve hundred years ago.

I turned a corner between two leaning shelves full of cracked mirrors and stopped dead.

My breath caught.

For half a second, my heart did something stupid and hopeful.

Morgana stood in front of me. She looked exactly as she should have. My face, almost. The perfect raven hair. The flawless skin. The green eyes that could look amused, cruel, brilliant, and tender all at once. Her posture was regal even standing in a room full of junk, chin slightly lifted, shoulders relaxed, every inch of her radiating command.

"Morgana?" I gasped. "What are you doing here!?"

Her beautiful face changed. The usual warmth she saved only for me never came. Her lips curled into a sneer. "I am disappointed..."

Cold slid down my spine. The words hit harder than any curse. I froze completely.

Morgana's eyes dragged over me with contempt so precise it felt like being flayed. "I expected much better from you, apprentice. To get trapped in another world. To get tricked by Trigon so easily..."

My mouth went dry. "I—"

"You are a waste of time," she said.

I could not breathe.

The room narrowed around her. Junk shelves vanished into blur. The air thinned. Every part of me locked onto her face, her voice, the utter disgust in her eyes.

"You were a waste to teach," Morgana continued. "A waste in the bedroom. A waste of power, blood, affection, and patience."

No.

NO, NO, NO!

"You are nothing I could not replace," she said. "I do not want you in my sight anymore."

Something inside me cracked. For one awful second, I was not a queen. Not powerful. Not dangerous. I was Heather again. Ugly. Unwanted. Left behind. Thrown away. Sirius dead. James raising his wand. Dumbledore stealing my life. Morgana turning her back.

No!

My fingers trembled. Then the anger came.

It did not explode wildly this time. It gathered. The simmering fury I had carried from meeting Snape, twisted all at once and pointed itself at **the thing** in front of me.

Because that was not Morgana!

It took me a few seconds too long to understand. Shamefully long. Painfully long. But then I felt it. Not Morgana's magic. Not ancient, elegant, abyssal dark power wrapped in genius and grief. This was something smaller. Hungrier. A shapeshifting fear wrapped in dust and old shadows.

A boggart. The disgusting little creature had dug into my head and found the worst fear it could wear to taunt me. Being abandoned by the most important woman in my life.

My face went cold.

The false Morgana tilted her head, still wearing that hateful sneer. "Run along, Amara. I am finished with you."

I smiled. It was not a happy expression. "Fuck you."

The boggart blinked.

My soul-bound wand appeared in my hand, black and perfect, the silver-black ankh along my forearm burning beneath my sleeve as magic answered faster than thought. "Disgusting creature!" Pitch-black flames erupted from the tip. This was cursed fire. Death fire. Fire that hated what it touched.

The flames swallowed the fake Morgana whole.

The boggart *screamed*. It tried to change. For one flickering instant, Morgana's face warped into Lily's. Then Sirius. Then Raven. Then my own old Heather face with tears in its eyes.

The fire did not care. It burned through every shape. The screams rose, shrill and horrible, echoing between the endless shelves. The creature thrashed, its borrowed forms melting into blackened ribbons of fear and smoke.

Then the flames snapped inward. The boggart vanished. Snuffed out and erased from the room like a bad thought finally killed properly.

I stood there breathing hard, my wand still raised, my pulse pounding in my ears.

A few rows away, Dumbledore called, "MISS BLACK?"

I closed my eyes. Inhale. Exhale. *Do not think about Morgana saying those words. Do not think about how easily the boggart had found that fear. Do not think about what would happen if she ever did look at me that way.*

"...Amara?" Dumbledore called again, closer now. "Are you all right?"

I swallowed and lowered my wand. "I'm fine," I called back. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "It was just a boggart."

A pause. Then, very carefully, Dumbledore said, "I see."

No, you don't, I thought. And because he was not an idiot, he did not press. *Good*.

I continued searching.

For the next half hour, I focused on breathing, walking, and looting Hogwarts' forgotten junk pile like the emotionally damaged little treasure goblin I apparently was.

It helped. Not enough to erase the echo of Morgana's voice, but enough to pack it away somewhere private it could eventually be forgotten.

I found a delicate silver hair comb set with tiny opals. That might suit Daphne. A pair of enchanted earrings shaped like little golden suns. Kara, maybe, if she ever let me give her jewelry without making that adorable overwhelmed face. A jeweled hairpin with a tiny starburst charm that changed colors when turned. Kori would probably love that.

I found an old dueling manual with handwritten notes in the margins, a silver flask that refilled with water, and a little music box that played a haunting tune when I opened it. The song reminded me of Gotham rain and Didi's smile, so I snapped it shut and stored it quickly.

Gift hunting was apparently excellent emotional regulation. The boggart could rot in hell.

I kept moving.

The room seemed to shift as I walked, junk corridors bending slightly, towers leaning away, paths narrowing and widening according to some logic I could not see. The pulse of the Horcrux grew stronger with every step. Cold and Wrong and Familiar. By the time I reached what felt like the middle of the massive room, the sensation was almost impossible to miss.

A corrupted soul fragment. It had the same diseased texture as the piece I had swallowed from the Resurrection Stone. Tom Riddle's soul carried a very particular flavor of arrogance, rot, hunger, and fear of death. Even split apart and hidden inside an object, it radiated ego like a corpse wearing perfume.

My lips curled. There it was, ahead of me, perched on the head of an old stone bust wearing a dusty wig, sat a tarnished diadem. A sapphire gleamed faintly at its center.

Ravenclaw's lost diadem. Voldemort's Horcrux. The fragment inside it stirred as I approached.

I could feel it noticing me and I could feel the tiny piece of Tom Marvolo Riddle recoil.

A vicious grin spread across my lips. I licked my lips slowly, savoring the way the thing inside the diadem shuddered. "Well now," I murmured, stepping closer. "I suppose I could use another **snack.**"

...A couple of minutes later, I had a very big smile on my face.

The boggart? Forgotten.

Morgana's false voice? Packed away somewhere dark and inconvenient to be emotionally processed never.

My hands still trembled a little if I looked too closely, and my chest still felt bruised in the place where the creature had shoved its claws into my worst fear, but honestly? Slurping down another piece of Voldemort's foul, rotten, arrogant little soul had improved my mood dramatically.

That was probably bad. That was probably a sign of some terrifying moral and spiritual decline I should have been concerned about.

Unfortunately, it had also been **delicious**.

The first Horcrux had been shocking. Sudden. A screaming mouthful of black mist and rage that had poured into me before I had even fully understood what was happening. This one had been different. I had known what it was. It had known what I was.

That made it better.

The shard inside Ravenclaw's diadem had tried to fight me. It had hissed and recoiled and wrapped itself deeper into the artifact like a frightened parasite clinging to bone. It had whispered in Tom Riddle's voice, all cold command and silky contempt, trying to promise knowledge, power, immortality, dominion.

Very dramatic.

Very stupid.

I had simply lifted the diadem, opened my mouth, and pulled.

The soul fragment had screamed.

The sound had been thin and furious and wonderfully afraid as it tore free from the ancient silver, dragged out in ribbons of black vapor. It had clawed at the sapphire. It had tried to sink itself into my fingers. It had spat curses in a language older than Voldemort's ego should have been able to pronounce.

None of that mattered.

It came apart on my tongue like smoke-soaked honey. The more evil the soul, the more delicious it was.

I held Ravenclaw's diadem in one hand and skipped past leaning towers of broken furniture, rusted cauldrons, cracked mirrors, dead wardrobes, and forgotten student contraband.

Nyx chirped happily from between my breasts.

"Yes, I know," I cooed down at him. "Mummy did very well."

He gave a pleased little trill and tucked himself more comfortably into the front of my robes.

I turned the corner around a stack of chairs and nearly walked straight into Dumbledore.

He stopped.

I stopped.

He stared at me. Then he stared at the diadem in my hand. Then he stared back at me.

I gave him my most innocent smile. It was a very good innocent smile. Wide eyes. Soft mouth. Slightly tilted head. Absolutely no hint whatsoever that I had just eaten Voldemort's soul like breakfast dessert.

Nyx poked his little head out farther and chirped at him cheerfully.

Dumbledore looked from Nyx, to me, to the diadem, then closed his eyes and sighed. "I must confess, Miss Black," he said at last, opening his eyes again, "I would have preferred that you call me once you located an object containing a fragment of Lord Voldemort's soul."

"I considered it."

His brows rose.

"For at least half a second," I added.

"I thought so." Dumbledore's gaze dropped again to the diadem. There was no twinkle in his eyes now. He looked wary. Focused. More than that, he looked afraid in the quiet, controlled way powerful men looked afraid when they were smart enough to understand exactly how bad something could be. "You should not be holding that with your bare hand," he said carefully. "If it is indeed what you claim, then it is not merely a cursed object. It is a vessel containing a fragment of a soul. Such things can be insidious beyond measure. They may whisper. Influence. Corrupt. Possess, if given opportunity."

I lifted the diadem and turned it slightly, admiring the now-clean shimmer of ancient silver. The sapphire gleamed brighter than before. Not bright-bright. It was still old and dusty and desperately in need of polish, but the wrongness had vanished.

The awful oily pressure was gone. The artifact felt like itself now. Tired, ancient, brilliant, and no longer infested by Tom Riddle's spiritual leftovers.

"Don't worry," I said brightly. "The Horcrux is gone."

Dumbledore went still.

I smiled wider. "And the artifact is still intact."

His eyes sharpened behind his half-moon spectacles. "Gone? Destroyed?" he asked softly.

Silence spread between us. Somewhere deep in the room, something wooden creaked and collapsed with a distant clatter. Neither of us looked away from the other.

I raised the diadem between us with a little flourish. "I present to you an untarnished crown of Rowena Ravenclaw."

Then I tossed it to him.

Dumbledore made a sound that was almost dignified panic. His hands snapped up and caught the diadem far more carefully than I had thrown it. For half a second, he looked personally offended that I had just casually lobbed one of the priceless relics of Hogwarts' founders at his chest like a toy.

Honestly, fair.

He stared down at it.

His fingers did not touch the silver directly for long. A faint golden shimmer appeared around his hands, some kind of protective magic coating his skin. He turned the diadem slowly, eyes narrowed, magic rippling around him in delicate, layered threads as he examined it.

Nyx chirped again.

Dumbledore looked up at me. "The corruption is truly gone?"

"Yep."

"The soul fragment is gone?"

"Also yep."

"The diadem remains undamaged?"

"Pretty, isn't it?"

He stared at me for several seconds.

I stared back sweetly.

At last, he said, "How?"

Ah. There it was. The very reasonable question I absolutely did not want to answer..

Lily, Marlene, and Alice knowing I had eaten part of Voldemort's soul was already bad enough. They had also seen my wings, horns, and tail when I crashed through their dormitory table naked, so that ship had sailed, sunk, been eaten by sea monsters, and probably resurrected as a cursed ghost ship.

Dumbledore, however, did not know I was a demon. Or part demon. Or demon-adjacent. Or whatever the fuck I counted as now. And I wanted to keep it that way for at least another day.

Maybe two. A girl needed mystery.

I waved one hand vaguely. "Black family secret magic." I lied to his face.

Dumbledore blinked.

"From the future," I added playfully.

His expression did not change, but somehow his silence became louder.

I nodded gravely, as if that explained everything. "Very old. Very secret. Very Black. You understand... I can't talk about it."

"I am quite certain," Dumbledore said slowly, "that I do not understand..."

"It be like that sometimes...."

He sighed my name. "Miss Black..." He studied me over the top of his spectacles.

I gave him nothing. No guilt. No explanation. No demonic soul-eating confession. Just a pleasant smile and Nyx's tiny black head peeking out of my cleavage like the world's strangest emotional support bird.

Dumbledore sighed again. He was going to do that a lot around me. I could feel it.

"I suspect," he said, "that pressing you on the matter would produce more creative evasions than answers."

"Almost certainly."

"And I suspect," he continued, "that whatever method you used was not one you are prepared to share."

"Correct."

"Nor one you believe I would approve of."

I smiled.

Dumbledore looked pained. "I see."

"You really don't."

"No," he admitted. "I suppose I do not."

For a moment, he looked down at the diadem in his hands. The expression that crossed his face was difficult to read. Wonder, maybe. Grief. Relief. Horror. A man staring at proof that

Voldemort had gone further into darkness than even he had suspected, and proof that one piece of that darkness had been removed before it could do more harm.

Eventually, his shoulders eased. “Well,” he said quietly, “I must admit, this adventure has proven less dangerous than I feared.”

I giggled.

Dumbledore looked at me.

I tried to stop. I failed.

His eyes narrowed.

“What?” I asked him.

“That laugh did not inspire confidence.”

“It wasn’t supposed to.”

He clutched the diadem a little more securely. “Why do I feel I am about to regret saying that?”

“Because you’re very wise.”

“An answer that only deepens my concern.”

I rocked slightly on my heels, grinning at him. Nyx chirped as if encouraging me to continue being terrible. Traitorous little bird.

“Well,” I said brightly, “we still have to kill a **sixty-foot-long basilisk** beneath the castle.”

Dumbledore’s face went pale. “60 FEET!? — You didn’t say it was that big! I would have told us to take care of the snake first if I knew that!”

I added helpfully, “That part should involve plenty of danger. And more than a few dark curses...”

His expression went utterly blank.

– Voldemort –

Voldemort was panting. The sound filled the chamber in short, harsh bursts, ugly and human in a way he despised. His hands pressed against the cold marble floor, fingers clawing against polished stone as he forced himself upright inch by inch.

Pain still screamed through him. He had endured curses. He had mastered agony. He had stood beneath pain that would have broken lesser minds and laughed because suffering was just another language magic could be made to speak.

This was worse. The backlash had torn through him on a level beneath flesh and bone. Beneath nerves. Beneath blood.

It had struck his soul.

Voldemort dragged himself to his feet, robes hanging loose around his thin body, his breath hissing between clenched teeth. For several seconds, he could only stand there, trembling with fury while the remnants of the agony faded from unbearable to merely murderous.

A Horcrux had been destroyed.

Again.

His red eyes burned in the dim light.

Last night had already been humiliation enough!

The Gaunt ring—his ring, his blood right, his trophy taken from the corpse-house of his filthy maternal line—had been ripped from his hand by some unknown force before his protective curse had even been completed. It had flown from him like a traitorous thing, smashing through the window and vanishing into the night in the direction of Hogwarts.

Then, moments later, he had felt it die.

The soul fragment within it had been torn apart, and the backlash had driven Voldemort to his knees in the ruins of the Gaunt shack, screaming so viciously that the stones themselves had cracked around him.

That should have been impossible!

The Horcrux ritual was the pinnacle of immortality. A secret torn from the deepest, most forbidden corners of magic. A method so obscure, so reviled, so perfect, that even Dumbledore should not have known how to detect one without years of research.

Yet someone had taken one from him.

Someone had destroyed it.

And now, today, the impossible had happened again!

Ravenclaw's diadem.

His greatest hidden treasure within Hogwarts. A relic of one of the Founders themselves, concealed in a room so secret generations of fools had passed it by without ever understanding its nature. The perfect hiding place. The perfect vessel. The perfect insult to the school that had once dared to treat him like merely another brilliant student when he had always been so much more.

And now it was gone.

Voldemort's fingers curled.

The marble beneath his hand cracked.

He had felt the diadem's destruction like a blade driven through the inside of his skull. His vision had gone white. His knees had buckled. Magic had erupted around him in a violent pulse, shattering windows, exploding a side table, and sending a young Death Eater unfortunate enough to be standing nearby into the far wall with enough force to break his neck.

The fool still lay there now. Voldemort had not bothered to look at him.

Two Horcruxes in less than a day. Two fragments of his soul ripped away by an unknown hand. And then, as if the universe had decided his humiliation was not yet complete, he had felt another bond **snap**.

His familiar. His basilisk. The ancient serpent he had left slumbering beneath Hogwarts. His monster. His inheritance from Salazar Slytherin. His glorious secret weapon, sleeping in the bowels of the school, waiting for the day when Voldemort would return to claim the castle properly.

He had imagined it so many times. Dumbledore dead at his feet. Mudblood students screaming through the corridors. Pureblood children kneeling in terror and awe. The basilisk sliding through Hogwarts like judgment itself, slaughtering the unworthy while Voldemort stood in the Great Hall and accepted the castle's surrender.

That dream had died an hour after the diadem.

The basilisk had been killed.

Voldemort's mouth twisted into something too vicious to be called a smile.

Who? Who in that castle could have done this?

Dumbledore was clever. Irritatingly so. Dangerous, yes. Powerful, undoubtedly. But not omniscient. Not this clever.

So why now? What had changed? Voldemort's breath slowed. His fury remained, but it hardened, becoming something cold enough to think with.

There was only one explanation. Someone new had entered the board. Someone had brought Dumbledore knowledge he should not possess.

Voldemort lifted one pale hand and slashed his wand through the air.

A summons burned outward through carefully hidden channels of magic, marked for one mind alone.

Severus Snape. Not yet a true Death Eater. Not yet branded. Still a seventh-year student at Hogwarts, still of more use inside the castle than on his knees among Voldemort's inner circle. A half-blood boy, bitter and talented, with a mind suited to potions, cruelty, and resentment.

If he survived his final year and proved loyal, Voldemort would mark him properly. If he failed, he would die like all failed tools.

The chamber settled into silence while Voldemort waited.

He stood inside Malfoy Manor.

Abraxas had always been generous with what belonged to him, once Voldemort made it clear generosity was wiser than hesitation. The manor was elegant, old, and protected by layers of pureblood wards, inherited pride, and money so ancient it had become another form of magic.

A fitting temporary seat. Not his throne. But fitting.

Nearly half an hour passed before the air at the edge of the chamber twisted.

Severus Snape appeared with a faint crack of Apparition, landing on one knee instantly. His head was bowed, lank hair falling forward to hide his face. "My Lord," Snape said, voice careful. Nervous. "You called?"

Voldemort did not offer him permission to rise. He did not waste time with ritual pleasantries. "What unusual things have occurred at Hogwarts?"

Snape's head lifted slightly. "My Lord?"

Voldemort's wand snapped up. The tip pressed beneath Snape's chin, forcing his face higher. "Do not make me repeat myself."

Snape swallowed. "Forgive me, my Lord!"

"Has Dumbledore been seen with anyone new?" Voldemort asked. His voice had gone soft, which made the dead man against the far wall seem suddenly very relevant. "Has anyone entered the castle recently?"

Something changed in Snape's expression. Then his entire face darkened with resentment so naked and immediate that Voldemort almost cursed him for wasting time with personal grievance. "There is a new girl," Snape said.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

Snape's voice gained venom as he continued. "She arrived yesterday. A supposed transfer. She has already attached herself to Lily Evans like some vile parasite. Flaunting herself. Touching her. Corrupting her. Defiling—"

"Enough!" The word cracked through the chamber.

Snape flinched.

Voldemort stared down at him in contempt. "I did not summon you to hear adolescent whining about your **Mudblood crush**."

Snape's face went pale. "My Lord, I—"

"I do not care whom the Evans girl spreads her legs for," Voldemort hissed. "I do not care whether some random student wounded your pride. I asked you what was unusual at Hogwarts."

Snape's jaw clenched. For one dangerous moment, anger flashed in his eyes.

Good, Voldemort thought coldly. *There is spine beneath the slime after all.*

Then Snape lowered his gaze again. "Yes, my Lord," he said tightly. "The girl's name is **Amara Black**."

Voldemort went still. *Black?*

Snape seemed to sense the shift and spoke faster. "At least, that is what everyone is saying. Sirius Black has been bragging about her being his *cousin from America*. A hidden branch of the family, supposedly. She appeared suddenly, and Dumbledore has accepted her into the school with almost no explanation!"

Voldemort's grip tightened around his wand. "And?" he asked.

Snape hesitated.

"And I saw her a few hours ago," he said. "With Dumbledore. They were together during class hours."

"Where?"

Snape looked up. "The seventh floor, my Lord."

The seventh floor? Where I hid the diadem! Voldemort's red eyes began to glow.

Snape noticed and wisely went very quiet.

Amara Black. The name burned itself into his thoughts. She was the one. She had destroyed the diadem.

Perhaps she had been involved with the ring as well. If the ring had flown toward Hogwarts, and if this girl had arrived there at the same time, then perhaps the object had been summoned to her.

Voldemort's lips peeled back. "She will die screaming."

Snape's eyes flickered.

Voldemort looked down at him. "You will capture her."

Snape stiffened.

"Or kill her," Voldemort continued. "I care little which, provided she is removed immediately. If she can be taken alive, bring her to me. If not, leave enough of her corpse for identification."

Snape bowed his head. "My Lord, I have already attempted to kill her."

Voldemort paused. That was unexpected. "Explain."

Snape's fingers curled against his knee. "At breakfast. I brewed the most lethal poison I could complete without access to restricted stores. Colorless. Nearly tasteless. Fast-acting. It should have closed her throat, burned through her stomach lining, and stopped her heart before any professor could reach her."

Voldemort stared at him.

Snape continued, resentment sharpening every word. "I am certain she drank it. Then she simply... recovered."

For several seconds, Voldemort said nothing. How unusual. Most of his servants required explicit instruction before they so much as cursed a suspected enemy. They groveled. They hesitated. They asked what he wished done, as though independent thought was a skill bred out of pureblood lines by too many cousin marriages and too much inherited furniture.

This Snape boy, however, had seen a potential obstacle and immediately poisoned her. He was a real go-getter.

Voldemort almost admired it.

Then his rage returned, hot and poisonous. "She possesses some kind of powerful protection," he thought out loud.

Snape's head lifted. "My Lord?"

No nineteen-year-old witch can shrug off lethal poison and destroy my soul magic! It's not possible, no one is more powerful or talented than I am! That means it must have been something else. Voldemort turned away, his robes sweeping behind him as he paced. "She must possess some kind of **artifact**. Something old. Something powerful. A powerful Black family heirloom, perhaps...?" his mind raced *jealously and hatefully* at the possibilities.

Snape's mouth twisted at the mention of her.

Voldemort ordered. "I want you to spy on her much more **closely**! Find out whatever powerful artifact she is carrying and **steal** it from her. Then you should be able to kill her. But I would prefer her captured alive. She has...displeased me greatly."

A flicker of ugly satisfaction crossed Snape's face at that last sentence. The boy was personally invested.

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