Chapter 35:

– Amara Black –

Not very long after destroying the Horcrux inside the Room of Requirement, Dumbledore and I descended through the castle, crossed the grounds, and ended up standing outside Hagrid's hut.

The place was quaint in a rustic sort of way. It had rough stone walls, a wooden door, and a sloping roof with smoke curling lazily from the chimney. A small pumpkin patch stretched along one side, while several chickens wandered through the grass nearby, pecking at the dirt without a care in the world.

It looked cozy.

It also looked far too fucking small for a half-giant.

"Is he actually comfortable in there?" I asked, eyeing the front door. "Because unless the inside is magically expanded, this seems like someone built a normal cottage and then forgot its owner was going to be nine feet tall."

Dumbledore glanced at the hut thoughtfully. "Rubeus has never complained about his living arrangements."

"That doesn't mean he's comfortable. It might just mean he's too polite to complain."

Dumbledore's expression suggested he hadn't considered that before. He raised his hand and knocked.

Heavy footsteps shook the floor inside. A second later, the door swung open, revealing the largest man I had ever seen in either of my lives.

Holy shit.

Hagrid had to be well over nine feet tall. His shoulders nearly filled the entire doorway, and his enormous body looked like it had been assembled out of tree trunks and wrapped in layers of thick, weathered clothing. Wild black hair surrounded his head, merging almost seamlessly with a massive tangled beard that covered most of his face.

He was built like an *absolute unit.*

Yet not a single one of my enhanced senses warned me that he was dangerous. No prickling instincts. No demonic urge to bare my teeth. No subtle whisper from my magic telling me to prepare for violence. Nothing.

Hagrid was the absolute definition of a gentle giant.

His eyes lit up the instant he saw Dumbledore. “Professor Dumbledore!” he greeted enthusiastically. “Wasn’t expectin’ yeh today. Come in, come in!”

“Thank you, Hagrid.” Dumbledore ducked slightly as he stepped through the doorway. I followed him inside, receiving a curious glance from Hagrid as I passed.

The interior was every bit as humble as the outside. A large bed occupied one corner, covered with a patchwork quilt. Bundles of herbs and cured meat hung from the ceiling. A heavy wooden table stood near the center of the room, surrounded by chairs that looked handmade and reinforced enough to hold Hagrid’s enormous weight.

There was also an incredibly large dog sleeping beside the fire. He lifted his head when we entered, looked at us for three seconds, and promptly went back to sleep.

“Tea?” Hagrid offered. “Just put some water on.”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Dumbledore replied.

I sat across from him while Hagrid busied himself with a battered kettle. Every movement made the hut creak around him. I remained convinced that one enthusiastic stretch would send his hands straight through the roof.

Once the tea was ready, Hagrid placed three steaming mugs on the table, followed by a plate of cookies.

At least, I assumed they were supposed to be cookies. Every single one was pitch-black. Not dark brown. Not slightly overdone. Black. Burned so thoroughly they looked like lumps of coal dug from the bottom of a furnace.

Hagrid pushed the plate toward me with an encouraging smile. “Made ’em this mornin’.”

I stared at the cookies.

The cookies stared back.

My new regeneration could probably handle one. I had survived poison, anti-magic weapons, dimensional travel, cursed artifacts, and pieces of Voldemort’s soul going through my digestive tract.

That didn’t mean I wanted to test myself against Hagrid’s baking.

“No, thank you,” I said awkwardly.

“Suit yerself.” Hagrid grabbed three cookies at once and shoved them into his mouth. His teeth crunched through them with sounds disturbingly similar to rocks being crushed beneath construction equipment.

Dumbledore delicately raised his tea to hide his expression. When Hagrid finished chewing, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “We have a request for you, Hagrid.”

“Anything, Professor.”

“It would be more accurate to call it a favor,” Dumbledore continued. “One concerning the safety of Hogwarts and every student within the castle. It is extremely important.”

Hagrid immediately sat straighter. The lighthearted warmth in his face shifted into earnest determination. “Course. Whatever yeh need. I’d do anythin’ ter keep the students safe.”

Dumbledore turned slightly toward me, apparently deciding this was my plan and therefore my responsibility to explain.

Fair enough. “We need your rooster.”

Hagrid blinked. “Me rooster…?”

“Yes.”

He leaned forward, his brow furrowing beneath his wild hair. “Why d’you need him?” Before I could answer, Hagrid continued. “He’s got a very important job, yeh know. Protects all the hens. Forbidden Forest has loads of magical creatures in it, obviously, but there’re ordinary predators too. Foxes an’ such. Had trouble with ’em before. Clever little beasts, foxes. One time—”

“Hagrid,” Dumbledore gently interrupted, steering the conversation away from what would probably become an hour-long lecture about foxes, chickens, and the delicate ecosystem around Hogwarts. “I’m afraid we do require the rooster.”

“Oh.” Hagrid looked between us. “Well, I suppose yeh can borrow him, if it’s really important.”

“You probably shouldn’t expect him to come back,” I added bluntly.

Dumbledore closed his eyes.

Hagrid’s expression crumpled. “What’re yeh goin’ ter do with him?” His voice became painfully small for a man his size. “Yeh aren’t goin’ ter kill him, are yeh?” His eyes started glistening.

Oh, fuck.

“Yeh can’t even eat roosters,” Hagrid continued desperately. “Every time yeh eat chicken, that’s usually hens. Rooster meat’s tough. Wouldn’t make a good meal at all.”

Now I just felt horrible.

Hagrid looked as though I had walked into his home, insulted his baking, and announced my intention to murder one of his children.

“I’m sorry, Hagrid,” I said, softening my voice. “We’re searching for a basilisk underneath the school, and we need your rooster to help us kill it.”

Hagrid froze. “Basilisk?”

“Yes. A very large one.”

“How large?”

“Probably around sixty feet.”

His eyes widened.

“But your rooster is going to be a hero,” I added quickly. “His sacrifice could save the lives of every student at Hogwarts. And Professor Dumbledore has already agreed to put up a plaque in the middle of the school with the rooster’s name and a picture of him, so everyone will know what a hero he was!”

Dumbledore slowly turned his head toward me. His twinkling eyes narrowed.

I gave him my most innocent smile.

Hagrid wiped his wet eyes with the back of one enormous hand before looking at Dumbledore with naked expectation. “You’d really put up a plaque for him, Professor?”

Dumbledore shot me a deeply annoyed glance.

“...Yes,” he said after a short pause. “I would be delighted to commission a commemorative plaque honoring your rooster’s… service… to Hogwarts.”

Hagrid’s chest swelled with pride. “He deserves a good picture. Got lovely feathers, he does. Red an’ gold around the neck. Very brave too. Chased off a fox twice his size last month.”

“I’m sure the artist will capture his heroic character perfectly,” Dumbledore assured him.

Hagrid nodded solemnly, then seemed to remember the much larger issue. “Wait. What’s a basilisk doin’ underneath the castle? That’s no place for one. Dangerous animals, basilisks. Can kill people just by lookin’ at ’em.”

“We’re aware,” I said.

“How’d it even get there?”

“It used to belong to Salazar Slytherin. It might have been his familiar, or possibly some kind of weapon he left beneath the school a thousand years ago. Everyone eventually forgot about it.”

Hagrid’s face darkened with concern. “Someone found it again?”

“Voldemort did,” I explained. “He turned it into his familiar and used it to kill Myrtle Warren. Then he framed you for her murder.”

For the first time since meeting him, genuine anger crossed Hagrid’s face. His massive hands curled into fists against the tabletop, making the wood groan. “I always told everyone Aragog was innocent,” he growled. “Always. But no one listened. Aragog never killed that girl. He never killed anyone inside this castle.” Hagrid’s eyes burned with decades of buried hurt. He had been expelled, his wand had been snapped, and his future had been destroyed because Voldemort needed someone convenient to blame.

“I’m sorry about your spider friend,” I said sincerely. “And I’m also sorry about your rooster friend.”

Hagrid’s anger faded into grief again.

I suddenly couldn’t stand the devastated look on his face.

With a sigh, I reached down the front of my robes and carefully slipped two fingers between my large, pale breasts. Warm feathers brushed my skin before I gently extracted the tiny creature nestled inside my cleavage.

Nyx emerged with a happy chirp, his shadow-black feathers ruffled from sleep. Purple-black flames flickered harmlessly along the tips of his miniature wings as he stretched in my palm.

Hagrid’s sorrow vanished beneath immediate wonder. “Is that a phoenix?”

“A dark phoenix,” I said, holding Nyx up for him to see. “His name is Nyx. He’s my emotional-support baby.”

Nyx chirped proudly.

“I know you’re going to be sad for a while because we’re taking your rooster, so you can hold on to him while we get rid of the basilisk.”

Nyx’s proud expression disappeared. He snapped his little head toward me and released a piercing, indignant squawk. His wings flared, scattering harmless sparks of shadow-fire across my fingers.

Apparently, he had every intention of coming with me to fight the sixty-foot murder snake.

I brought him closer to my face and cooed softly. “No, you’re staying here. You’re far too young, small, and fragile to fight such a big monster.”

Nyx chirped furiously.

“You only learned how to teleport a few days ago.”

Another offended shriek.

“I don’t care if you think you’re ready. The basilisk could swallow you whole without even chewing.”

Nyx flapped hard enough to lift himself half an inch above my palm, glaring at me with eyes like tiny pools of absolute darkness.

Hagrid watched our argument with growing delight. “Oh, he’s got spirit,” he said warmly. “Don’t yeh worry. I’ll keep him safe.”

I deposited Nyx into Hagrid’s enormous hands. My familiar looked absurdly tiny cradled between those thick fingers.

Hagrid held him with astonishing gentleness.

Nyx stared up at the half-giant.

Hagrid smiled down at him.

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then Hagrid scratched one massive finger carefully beneath Nyx’s beak.

My traitorous familiar’s eyes immediately slid closed. A delighted trill vibrated from his tiny body as he leaned shamelessly into the attention.

I placed both hands on my hips. “Oh, so it’s like that, is it?”

Nyx ignored me.

Hagrid chuckled and continued petting him. “Don’t worry, little one. We’ll look after each other while yer mum’s gone.”

Something inside my chest softened at the word. “Good,” I murmured. “Now we just need the rooster.”

Hagrid’s smile faltered again.

Dumbledore rose from his chair before the conversation could return to tears. “Come, Hagrid. The sooner we deal with the creature beneath the castle, the sooner Hogwarts will finally be free of Salazar Slytherin’s legacy.”

Hagrid nodded reluctantly. Still cradling Nyx against his chest, he led us toward the door.

Outside, the rooster continued strutting proudly among his hens, completely unaware that he was about to become the most important chicken in Hogwarts history.

I followed Dumbledore back across the Hogwarts grounds with Hagrid's rooster clutched securely against my chest.

The bird remained perfectly calm in my arms. It didn't struggle, flap its wings, peck at my hands, or show any sign that it understood we were carrying it toward almost certain death.

That was because I had placed it under the Imperius Curse.

A faint white haze covered its eyes, and its small body remained unnaturally relaxed beneath my fingers. I had commanded it to stay quiet, trust me, and not attempt to escape.

Using mind magic on an animal shouldn't have bothered me. People controlled animals all the time. Horses wore bridles. Livestock were herded into enclosures. Owls were trained to carry letters across entire countries without anyone questioning whether they wanted to work for the magical postal service.

Still, the magic left me feeling dirty.

I absolutely fucking hated mind magic!

My world's Dumbledore had bound my mind when I was a baby. His enchantments had smothered my magic, ruined my ability to concentrate, damaged my memory, and shaped the miserable course of my entire childhood.

Even when it accomplished something useful, taking control of another creature's mind made my skin crawl.

I gently stroked the rooster's red-and-gold feathers. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I promise this is for something important."

The rooster remained placid. That somehow made it worse.

We entered the castle through the massive front doors and proceeded toward the second floor. The halls were mostly empty because classes had already started, although several students passed us on their way between lessons. Each one stared openly at the strange sight of their headmaster walking beside a beautiful new transfer student carrying a rooster through the castle.

No one dared ask questions. Apparently, Dumbledore's reputation for eccentricity covered a great deal of suspicious behavior.

"I should warn you," I said as we climbed another staircase. "The entrance is located inside a girls' bathroom."

Dumbledore glanced at me. "Indeed?"

“Tom Riddle used it regularly while he attended Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore’s expression tightened at the name.

I grinned.

“Apparently the feared Dark Lord spent a considerable portion of his teenage years sneaking into the women’s bathroom. You’d think someone would have noticed. Maybe that’s the real reason he became a terrorist. He probably overheard too much female gossip and decided society needed to burn.”

Dumbledore didn’t respond. Not even a smile. He continued walking with steady, purposeful strides, his expression distant and focused. His wand was already in his hand, held loosely at his side, but there was nothing relaxed about him. Magic gathered around the old wizard like the pressure before a storm.

He had locked himself into preparing for battle.

That was probably sensible. We were about to enter an ancient underground chamber and confront a sixty-foot serpent whose gaze could kill instantly. One mistake would leave either of us as a remarkably lifelike corpse.

Still, he could have at least acknowledged that my joke was funny.

We reached the second-floor bathroom without incident.

The room was cold, damp, and dismal. Cracked mirrors hung above a row of chipped sinks. Several toilet stalls stood along the opposite wall, their doors warped by age and moisture. The air smelled faintly of mildew, old plumbing, and something unpleasant that no amount of cleaning magic had ever managed to remove.

“This is it,” I announced.

Dumbledore slowly examined the room. “This bathroom contains the entrance to Salazar Slytherin’s legendary chamber?”

“Somewhere beneath it, yes.”

“I see.”

He didn’t sound convinced.

I couldn’t blame him. The entrance to one of the most dangerous locations in Hogwarts being hidden inside an out-of-order girls’ bathroom sounded ridiculous. Then again, the wizarding world hid its prison beneath the North Sea and allowed soul-eating abominations to act as guards. Common sense had never been its greatest strength.

Dumbledore approached the sinks, studying each one carefully. His eyes traced the pipes, taps, and weathered stone beneath them.

“Where precisely is the entrance?” he asked. “More importantly, how do we open it?”

I shifted the rooster higher against my chest. “Do you happen to speak to snakes, old man?”

Dumbledore turned and gave me a long look. The answer was obviously no.

“What?” I asked innocently.

Canon had shown the entrance opening when someone spoke Parseltongue to the tiny snake carved into one of the taps. Unfortunately, I didn’t know Parseltongue either. Eating pieces of Voldemort’s soul had granted me fragments of his memories and power, but apparently his snake language hadn’t come with the meal. Or maybe I actually could speak to them, but I didn't really like snakes so I didn’t want to… I didn’t bother testing.

Fortunately, I had another language that opened nearly every door in existence. **Violence.**

“You might want to take a few steps back,” I warned.

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “What are you—”

I summoned my wand into my free hand. The black weapon manifested in a curl of silver-edged flames, the ankh tattoo on my forearm briefly glowing as the wand settled into my grip. I pointed it directly at the tiled floor beneath the central row of sinks.

Dumbledore’s expression changed. “Amara, perhaps we should—”

“Bombarda!” The Blasting Curse detonated in the middle of the bathroom.

The entire room jumped.

Tiles exploded upward in a storm of ceramic fragments. The sinks shattered, sending twisted pipes and chunks of porcelain spinning across the room. Several mirrors cracked simultaneously. One of the stall doors tore from its hinges and embedded itself halfway through the opposite wall.

The shock wave nearly knocked Dumbledore’s hat off.

I turned my body to shield the rooster from the debris. A cloud of smoke, dust, and pulverized tile swallowed the bathroom, reducing visibility to nothing.

Dumbledore and I immediately started coughing.

The rooster remained perfectly calm. Mind control was morally repulsive, but I had to admit it made transporting chickens through explosions much easier.

As the smoke began to clear, I cautiously waved my hand in front of my face. A massive hole had appeared where the sinks and floor used to be. Beneath the jagged edges of stone was a dark circular shaft containing a steep pipe or slide descending deep beneath the castle.

I leaned over the edge. The tunnel vanished into absolute darkness. “There it is.”

Dumbledore stared at the destroyed bathroom. Then he stared at me. Then he looked back at the crater where several hundred years of Hogwarts plumbing had once existed.

“I imagine half the school heard that,” he said wearily.

“Probably.”

“Professor McGonagall will undoubtedly have questions.” Dumbledore sighed.

“You may want to place some wards around the bathroom,” I suggested. “Otherwise, curious students will come investigating and start jumping into the mysterious hole.”

“Most students possess more caution than that.”

“We’re standing inside a school where children play a sport involving flying fifty feet in the air while other students fire iron balls at their skulls.”

Dumbledore considered that. Without another word, he raised his wand. Layers of golden light spread from the tip, flowing across the doorway, walls, and ruined floor. The magic thickened into a sophisticated barrier that would repel students and alert him if anyone tried to force their way inside.

While he worked, I looked down at the rooster. “All right, brave little hero. Time to go kill a giant snake.”

It gazed at me through hazy, empty eyes.

I tightened my grip around its body and stepped over the edge.

Dumbledore turned sharply. “Amara—”

I dropped onto the slide.

My stomach lurched as gravity seized me.

The descent was immediately faster than expected. The dark tunnel curved steeply downward, its slick stone surface propelling me beneath the castle at alarming speed. Cold air rushed over my face, sending my black hair streaming behind me. I kept one arm wrapped securely around the rooster while using the other to keep myself upright.

Despite the circumstances, I couldn’t deny that it was actually a pretty fun ride.

The tunnel twisted left, plunged sharply, and sent me racing through complete darkness. My enhanced vision gradually adjusted enough to distinguish the curving stone walls and occasional branching pipes leading away from the main shaft.

For one ridiculous moment, I wondered whether Hogwarts could turn the Chamber entrance into an amusement ride after we killed the basilisk.

Then the slide ended. Abruptly. The tunnel spat me out several feet above the floor. I barely had time to spread my wings before landing. My boots struck something brittle, producing a series of sickening cracks beneath my feet. I bent my knees, absorbed the impact, and managed to remain upright without face-planting or crushing the rooster against the ground.

“Elegant,” I muttered.

I looked down.

Bones.

Hundreds of them.

The floor was covered with the remains of small animals, rodents, and creatures I couldn’t immediately identify. Some looked ancient enough to crumble into powder beneath my boots. Others were more recent, still carrying scraps of dried flesh or stained fur.

The smell was disgusting.

I quickly moved away from the bottom of the slide before Dumbledore landed on top of me.

Several seconds later, the old wizard shot from the tunnel.

He twisted gracefully in midair and landed on his feet with surprising nimbleness. His robes settled around him as though he had merely stepped off a staircase rather than been launched from a pipe.

I stared at him.

“What?”

“You’re more agile than you look.”

His mouth twitched. “I shall choose to interpret that as a compliment.”

Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand and surveyed our surroundings. The cavern stretched far beyond the reach of his light, with damp stone walls glistening beneath a layer of slime. Bones blanketed the ground, crunching beneath every step. Narrow streams of dark water flowed through grooves in the rock.

His expression filled with disgust. “Is this the Chamber of Secrets?”

“No. We haven’t reached the entrance yet.”

Dumbledore’s light swept across the cavern.

It stopped on a massive, pale object lying beside the wall.

A shed snakeskin.

The translucent skin was thicker than my torso and stretched into the darkness beyond the range of our light. Its enormous scales retained the shape of the creature that had once worn them.

Dumbledore went very still.

I looked at the snakeskin, then at the rooster in my arms. “Definitely sixty feet,” I murmured. “Maybe more.” The confidence in my voice sounded slightly less convincing now.

Dumbledore approached the snakeskin cautiously. He studied its width, the size of the scales, and the ancient residue of magic clinging to it. “This creature has lived beneath the school for centuries,” he said quietly.

“Nearly a thousand years, if my information is accurate.”

“And no headmaster ever discovered it…?”

“Your predecessors were apparently terrible at their jobs.”

He gave me a dry look.

I pointed toward the far side of the cavern, where a circular doorway had been built into the stone. Seven carved serpents intertwined across its surface, their bodies forming an elaborate magical seal. Their emerald eyes glittered faintly beneath Dumbledore’s wand light.

“The true entrance is behind that door.”

Dumbledore walked toward it and examined the seal without touching it. “And how is this one opened?”

I grinned. “Do you happen to speak to snakes?”

He slowly turned his head and gave me exactly the same annoyed look as before.

I laughed. “You should take another step back.”

This time, Dumbledore didn’t bother asking what I intended to do.

He simply sighed and retreated several paces, casting a powerful shield around himself as he went.

I carefully shifted the rooster beneath my left arm, raised my wand, and aimed at the center of the serpent-covered doorway.

The magic inside me responded eagerly.

Silver-black flames crawled along the length of my wand as I poured more power into the spell than I had used upstairs. The air vibrated. Loose bones rattled across the cavern floor. The carved snakes seemed to hiss in warning as the ancient wards awakened.

“Bombarda Maxima!”

The curse struck the sealed entrance like a cannon.

Stone serpents exploded into fragments. The ancient door buckled inward before disintegrating beneath the force of the blast. A thunderous detonation tore through the underground cavern, sending cracks racing across the surrounding walls and a wave of dust blasting back toward us.

Dumbledore’s shield flared gold beneath the impact.

I stood inside a cocoon of my own dark magic, protecting both myself and the rooster as chunks of Salazar Slytherin’s precious entrance bounced harmlessly away.

When the dust finally cleared, an enormous opening yawned before us.

Beyond it stretched a long, dark passage lined with towering stone serpents. Their open mouths formed archways leading deeper beneath Hogwarts, toward the legendary chamber and the monster sleeping inside.

Dumbledore lowered his shield and stared at the obliterated doorway. “I am beginning to understand why Professor McGonagall finds you exhausting.”

“She’s known me for less than two days. I only talked to her a little bit!”

“And yet she appears to have assessed you perfectly.”

I smiled and stepped through the ruined entrance, still holding our unnaturally calm rooster against my chest. “Come on, Professor. We have a snake to kill.”

Dumbledore and I stepped through the ruined entrance and strolled deeper into the Chamber of Secrets.

The darkness didn’t last long.

Green flames ignited along the walls as we passed, one after another, burning inside stone braziers carved to resemble open serpent mouths. The unnatural fire filled the corridor with sickly emerald light, casting long shadows across the damp floor.

The movies hadn't done this place justice.

They had depicted the Chamber as a single enormous room with a line of stone serpents, shallow pools of water, and one gaudy statue of Salazar Slytherin at the end. The real Chamber was an entire underground complex.

Doorways lined both sides of the central hall, their surfaces carved with runes, serpents, and scenes from Hogwarts's founding. Some were ordinary stone doors. Others were sealed behind shimmering green barriers that still contained magic after nearly a thousand years. Narrow passages disappeared into darkness, presumably leading to laboratories, libraries, ritual chambers, living quarters, and whatever else Slytherin had decided to hide beneath the school.

The main hall itself was enormous. The ceiling rose so high that the green fire barely illuminated it. Pillars fashioned into coiled serpents supported vast stone arches. Their carved heads followed us with glittering emerald eyes, making it seem as though the Chamber itself was watching our progress.

There was probably a fortune in lost magical knowledge down here.

Once we dealt with the basilisk, I was absolutely coming back to loot the place.

Dumbledore didn't appear interested in treasure. He advanced cautiously, wand raised and posture tense. Immense magical power waited beneath the surface of his skin. It didn't burn or crackle like my fire. It felt deeper than that like a vast ocean held in check through decades of discipline.

He was ready to unleash it at a moment's notice.

"Where is the basilisk?" he asked.

I turned toward him with a cheeky grin.

"Don't ask me if I can speak to snakes again," he said immediately.

My mouth snapped shut. I pouted at him. "You're becoming less fun the longer this adventure continues."

"We are hunting an ancient creature capable of killing us with a glance."

"Exactly. We should enjoy ourselves and don't let the stress get to us."

Dumbledore ignored that and surveyed the Chamber again.

I pointed toward the far end.

A massive statue of Salazar Slytherin loomed over the hall, its head nearly touching the distant ceiling. The ancient founder had apparently commissioned an enormous likeness of his own face and placed it inside his secret underground lair.

The statue was hideous. Slytherin's carved features were long and skeletal, with sunken eyes, a narrow mouth, and a beard that reached down the front of his robes. It looked less like a monument to a revered founder and more like the world's largest tombstone.

"The snake lives inside that," I said.

Dumbledore stared at the statue. His gaze slowly traveled from its enormous forehead to the stone mouth far below. He sighed. "Salazar must have been a very strange man."

"He built a statue of his own face large enough to use as a house for a giant snake. Strange might be generous."

Dumbledore stepped forward and raised his wand. "This time, you will remain behind me. I shall take the lead."

I arched an eyebrow but didn't argue.

"Keep the rooster prepared. The instant the creature emerges, make certain it begins making as much noise as possible."

"You've got it, Professor." I retreated several paces with the rooster held securely against my chest. Its eyes remained foggy beneath the Imperius Curse, its body limp and compliant in my arms.

My attention shifted eagerly back to Dumbledore. This world's version of Albus Dumbledore was supposedly its most powerful living wizard. The second coming of Merlin. A man capable of defeating Grindelwald while the other Dark Lord held the Elder Wand.

I wanted to see what he could really do.

I expected him to blow the statue apart.

Instead, he flicked his wand through an intricate sequence of movements so precise that I struggled to follow them. Several threads of pale-blue magic spiraled from the tip, wrapping themselves around the lower half of Slytherin's face.

The stone softened. It didn't crack or explode. It flowed. The statue's enormous mouth melted inward like warm wax, the lips and beard reshaping themselves into a wide circular opening. Tons of stone compressed soundlessly into the surrounding walls until a dark tunnel was exposed beyond it.

I stared in fascination.

That was transfiguration on a scale I had never witnessed before.

Morgana could undoubtedly accomplish something similar, but her magic would have been darker and more dramatic. She probably would have transformed the statue into a screaming monument that insulted Slytherin while devouring itself.

Dumbledore simply altered the stone as though reality had politely agreed to change for him.

He followed the transfiguration with a sound-amplifying charm aimed at his own throat. “COME OUT, MONSTER!”

His voice struck the Chamber like thunder.

I flinched as the command rang in my ears. The words rebounded from every stone wall, traveling into side passages and sealed rooms before returning in overlapping waves.

“I AM THE HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS, AND YOU ARE NOT WELCOME TO LIVE BENEATH THIS CASTLE!” The final word continued echoing for several seconds.

I rubbed one ear against my shoulder. “You could have warned me.”

Dumbledore didn’t answer. His attention remained fixed on the opening in Slytherin’s face.

At first, nothing happened. Then something hissed inside the darkness. The sound was deep enough to vibrate through the soles of my boots.

A moment later came the noise of scales grinding over stone. Whatever waited inside the tunnel was moving toward us, its massive body scraping against the walls as it approached.

“Here it comes,” Dumbledore warned.

I crouched and placed the rooster on the floor.

Through the Imperius Curse, I commanded it to walk ahead of us and crow the instant it sensed the basilisk.

The rooster obeyed.

It strutted several paces forward, looking absurdly small and vulnerable in the center of the colossal Chamber.

The slithering grew louder.

I didn’t know whether the basilisk’s gaze could kill me anymore.

I was the Mistress of Death, a Death-Touched Succubus Queen who had assimilated the three Deathly Hallows into my body and soul. Death itself called me her mistress. I could consume souls, walk through walls, summon the dead, and heal from injuries that would leave most people as smears on the floor.

There was a strong possibility that the basilisk's death gaze would simply fail against me.

Possibly.

Probably.

Still, I had no desire to gamble my existence on a theory when closing my eyes worked just as well.

I shut them tightly.

Beside me, I heard Dumbledore turn his head away. The grinding of scales became deafening as the basilisk pulled itself through the opening.

Its weight struck the floor.

The entire Chamber trembled.

The rooster crowed. Its sharp cry echoed unnaturally loudly through the underground hall!

The basilisk shrieked.

The sound was horrible, a deafening mixture of a snake's hiss and a woman screaming in agony. The ground shuddered as its massive body writhed. Stone cracked beneath its weight, and one of the nearby pillars groaned when something enormous slammed against it.

The rooster crowed again.

Another shriek tore through the Chamber.

I cautiously cracked open one eye.

The basilisk had emerged completely from the statue.

Holy fucking shit!

It was even larger than I'd imagined.

Its thick green body stretched across most of the hall, easily sixty feet long and broad enough that I could have stood inside its open mouth. Armored scales covered it from head to tail, each one overlapping like a series of enormous shields. Dark spines protruded along its back. Two

curved fangs extended from its upper jaw, each dripping venom that smoked when it struck the stone floor.

Its enormous yellow eyes were squeezed nearly shut as it thrashed in agony from the rooster's crowing.

That gave me an opening. I raised my wand and gathered dark magic around its tip. The spell Morgana had taught me was a vicious evolution of the ordinary Severing Charm. It didn't merely slice flesh. It embedded corruptive magic into the wound, preventing natural or magical healing from closing the damage.

I slashed my wand horizontally. **"Lacerare Maledictum!"** A crescent of pitch-black magic screamed across the Chamber. The curse struck the basilisk directly across both eyes.

Its thick eyelids split open. Blood erupted in twin streams, spraying across the floor as both yellow eyes ruptured beneath the dark magic. The wounds blackened at their edges, resisting the basilisk's ancient regenerative power.

The creature reared back and unleashed a scream so violent that dust rained from the ceiling.

"It's blind!" I shouted. "You can look now!"

Dumbledore spun toward the creature, his wand already raised. "Then Let us kill this thing!"

The basilisk's head swung from side to side as blood poured down its face. Its tongue flicked frantically through the air, compensating for its ruined eyes by tasting our scents and magic.

Then it shouted. ***"How dare you mutilate me, enemies of the Heir!"***

I blinked.

The words were perfectly understandable.

"You invade my master's sacred chamber! You poison my eyes with the cries of vermin! I will tear the flesh from your bones and feast upon your remains!"

Oh. Apparently, I could speak to snakes now. Maybe consuming two pieces of Voldemort's soul had given me Parseltongue after all. Or perhaps my evolution had expanded my connection to death, demons, and predatory creatures.

Either way, I had asked Dumbledore the same question twice while unknowingly being capable of speaking Parseltongue myself.

I nearly laughed. I definitely wasn't going to admit that aloud.

Dumbledore thrust his wand forward.

Several dozen bands of white fire erupted around the basilisk, coiling around its body like blazing chains. The stone beneath the serpent liquefied at the same time, dragging the creature downward as the fiery restraints tightened around its scales.

The basilisk roared and convulsed.

Its tail struck one of the massive pillars.

The stone serpent shattered instantly, sending chunks of debris crashing across the hall. The basilisk tore its front half free from the transfigured floor and twisted violently against the bands of fire. Several snapped apart, releasing waves of heat that washed across my face.

Dumbledore followed with a barrage of red and gold curses.

Each spell struck hard enough to shake the Chamber.

The basilisk's armored scales absorbed most of the damage.

Some blackened. Several cracked. None penetrated deeply enough to reach flesh.

"Well," I muttered, "that's inconvenient."

The serpent lunged blindly toward the source of Dumbledore's magic.

We threw ourselves in opposite directions.

Its enormous head crashed down where we had been standing, splitting the stone floor. Its tail whipped across the Chamber a heartbeat later.

I jumped over it with my enhanced body. Dumbledore vanished in a flash of fire and reappeared on the far side of the hall.

The rooster wasn't so fortunate.

The basilisk's thrashing body slammed into the tiny bird.

There was a wet crunch.

A few red-and-gold feathers drifted through the air.

I winced. "Fuck."

Hagrid was absolutely going to cry.

The rooster had done its job. The basilisk was permanently blinded, its greatest weapon destroyed before the battle had properly begun.

Still, I felt guilty watching the limp, crushed body disappear beneath the creature's coils.

“You killed a hero, you oversized handbag!” I shouted.

The basilisk’s head snapped toward my voice.

I launched a torrent of cursed black fire directly at its face.

The flames spread into the shape of grasping claws as they crossed the Chamber, hot enough to melt stone beneath them. The basilisk sensed the incoming heat and jerked its head aside with surprising speed.

My attack struck its neck instead.

Black fire washed over the armored scales. The creature shrieked as several plates glowed red, then white. Smoke rose from the spaces between them, but the basilisk twisted away before the flames could burn through.

Its forked tongue tasted the air. It had my location now. The serpent lunged. Its mouth opened wide enough to swallow me whole. Two massive fangs descended toward my body, each coated with enough venom to kill armies.

I dove sideways.

The basilisk’s jaws snapped shut inches behind my fluttering robes.

A gust of hot, rotting breath swept over me as I hit the ground and rolled across the wet stone. One fang scraped the floor where my chest had been, leaving a smoking trench behind.

I came up on one knee and raised my wand, but the basilisk was already twisting for another attack.

Dumbledore struck first.

A beam of concentrated golden magic slammed into the side of the creature’s skull.

The impact lifted its entire head and hurled it into the nearest pillar. Stone exploded. The basilisk crashed to the floor beneath an avalanche of broken serpent carvings, its armored body writhing furiously among the debris.

Dumbledore advanced through the dust, his robes snapping around him as power gathered at the tip of his wand.

“Remain behind me, Amara!”

I wiped blood from my cheek and stood. “Not a chance!”

The blinded serpent tore itself free from the rubble and reared above us, blood pouring from its ruined eyes and black flames still burning between the scales of its neck.

Dumbledore raised his wand.

I raised mine beside him.

Then the basilisk screamed and slithered at us again!

…Five minutes of fighting felt like an entire fucking hour.

By the time the basilisk finally stopped moving, my school robes were soaked through with sweat and splattered by patches of thick, dark snake blood. Several sections had been torn apart completely. One sleeve hung from a few stubborn threads, the bottom of my skirt had been shredded by flying stone, and a smoking hole over my ribs showed where venom had narrowly missed my flesh but dissolved the fabric.

My hair clung wetly to my face and neck. Every breath tasted like burned scales, sulfur, blood, and ancient dust.

Dumbledore stood a few feet away from me, bent slightly forward with one hand braced against his knee. He was panting hard as he tried to catch his breath. His robes were scorched, his ridiculous hat was missing, and a thin line of blood ran down the side of his face from a cut above his temple.

The old man looked like he had aged another decade in five minutes.

At least he was still standing.

The basilisk lay dead in the middle of the Chamber.

Its colossal body stretched across the ruined floor, surrounded by shattered pillars, melted stone, and pools of smoking blood. Its head had collapsed beside the remnants of Salazar Slytherin's statue. The creature's mouth remained open in a final silent snarl, revealing fangs longer than my forearm.

Black smoke drifted from dozens of wounds along its body.

Killing it had been far harder than the movie made it look.

We didn't have a magically summoned sword conveniently dropping into our hands. Fawkes hadn't arrived to blind the creature or bring us a weapon specifically designed to kill it. There had been no dramatic moment where I climbed onto Slytherin's statue and stabbed one perfectly placed blade through the roof of its mouth.

Dumbledore and I had been forced to whittle the enormous bastard down.

We burned through its scales one at a time. We blasted cracked sections apart, exposed the flesh beneath, and poured curse after curse into every vulnerable spot we created. Dumbledore had transfigured portions of the floor into iron spikes, impaling the basilisk from below. I had driven cursed fire into its wounds to prevent them from closing.

It refused to die.

Even blinded, bleeding, and partially burned, the basilisk had remained terrifyingly fast. It tracked us through heat, scent, sound, and magic. Its tail struck with enough force to bring down pillars. Its venom melted stone. One sweep of its enormous body had caught me across the chest and launched me nearly fifty feet through the air.

I had broken several ribs when I struck the wall.

They had already healed.

In the end, Dumbledore trapped the basilisk's head beneath several tons of transfigured stone while I carved through the last intact scales around its throat. We opened arteries thick enough to resemble plumbing pipes, then kept attacking until the entire floor flooded with blood and the ancient monster finally collapsed.

It had died slowly, violently, and furiously.

Unfortunately, we had ruined a great deal of valuable basilisk skin in the process.

Thousands of years of accumulated magical power had saturated those scales. Properly harvested basilisk hide could probably withstand most curses and physical weapons. Its blood, venom, fangs, organs, bones, and eyes were all priceless magical ingredients.

A less destructive kill would have preserved far more of it.

Still, our lives were worth more than whatever ancient material we could harvest later.

"Good job, Professor," I said breathlessly. A sharp sting ran through my shoulder as the last deep cut pulled itself closed. Bruises faded across my pale skin. The lingering ache in my ribs vanished. Even a shallow burn on my thigh peeled away, leaving flawless skin beneath it.

Within seconds, I was immaculate again. Except for all the sweat, blood, dust, and torn clothing, obviously.

Dumbledore watched the final wound disappear. Curiosity sharpened his blue eyes.

I braced myself for questions about how a nineteen-year-old witch could recover from broken bones and torn flesh faster than most people healed paper cuts. Explaining my demonic nature would inevitably lead to further questions about succubi, Death, the Hallows, my soul-eating abilities, and several other subjects I preferred not to discuss with a school headmaster.

Thankfully, he let it go. “This was quite the adventure after all, Miss Black,” he said between breaths. “I do not believe I have received this much exercise in decades.”

I chuckled darkly. “This is almost a weekly occurrence for me at this point.”

Dumbledore straightened. The look he gave me wasn’t suspicious or condemning. It was concerned. Not the calculated performance of grandfatherly warmth my Dumbledore used when manipulating people. This was genuine concern. The kind an old professor might feel after discovering that a young woman had grown accustomed to fighting monsters and nearly dying every week.

It shouldn’t have affected me. It did. The expression struck some vulnerable place beneath my ribs more painfully than the basilisk’s tail had. For a moment, I imagined what it might have been like if the Dumbledore in my world had looked at me that way even once. If he had seen a frightened child rather than a prophesied threat requiring containment.

I looked away first. “So,” I said, changing the subject before my emotions could become any more inconvenient. “What do we do now?”

Dumbledore slowly surveyed the devastated Chamber. “I imagine removing the creature’s remains will require considerable planning.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

His attention returned to me.

I gestured toward the rows of sealed doors lining both sides of the main hall. “Should we loot the place?”

He sputtered at me. “L–Loot?”

“This was Salazar Slytherin’s private lair. There have to be magical tomes and treasures in here that haven’t seen daylight in a thousand years.” I nodded toward the nearest side chamber. “Spellbooks. Ritual texts. Enchanted artifacts. Ancient ingredients. Maybe personal journals explaining precisely how far his head was lodged up his own ass.”

Dumbledore’s mouth twitched. “We do not yet know what protections remain active.”

“Which is why we investigate carefully.”

“You destroyed both entrances with explosive curses.”

“That was careful. The doors could have been trapped.”

Dumbledore looked at the rubble behind us.

I ignored him and peered toward another sealed passage. “Of course, Tom Riddle might have already robbed the place blind,” I muttered. “The greedy bastard had decades to explore. He probably stole anything valuable enough to carry.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore said. “Nevertheless, I believe this has been a sufficiently productive adventure for one day. We can return tomorrow with appropriate equipment and examine the remaining chambers methodically.”

I wanted to protest. There could be priceless magical secrets waiting twenty feet away.

Then the last remnants of battle fury began to drain from my body.

Unfortunately, something else took its place.

Heat gathered low in my stomach. My nipples tightened beneath my ruined shirt as the adrenaline pumping through my veins transformed into something hotter and far less helpful. Every breath made my sweaty clothing drag across hypersensitive skin. My tail threatened to emerge beneath my robes, and a dull, needy ache started building between my thighs.

Wonderful.

Intense violence always left my body confused about what it wanted next. Apparently, becoming a Succubus Queen had made the problem even worse.

A cold shower suddenly sounded much more appealing than ancient books.

Then I remembered I had promised to spend time with Sirius and his friends after their classes ended. Lily, Marlene, and Alice were supposed to join us as well.

Judging by how long Dumbledore and I had spent finding the Chamber, destroying the Horcrux, convincing Hagrid to sacrifice his rooster, and fighting the basilisk, classes might already be finished.

“I hate to admit it, but you’re probably right,” I said. “I need a shower before the smell of dead snake becomes permanently attached to me.”

“A prudent decision.”

“I’m heading back to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Sirius promised to show me the secret parts of the castle, and Lily insisted she and her friends were coming along to supervise.”

He smiled, retrieving his missing hat from beneath a fallen piece of stone with a Summoning Charm. The fabric was crushed and streaked with basilisk blood. Dumbledore examined it mournfully before cleaning and repairing it with two precise flicks of his wand. “What of your phoenix?” he asked.

“Nyx can stay with Hagrid tonight.” The words felt strange coming out of my mouth. Nyx had barely left my side since Didi brought him into this reality, but Hagrid was probably already attached to him. Taking Nyx back immediately after sacrificing his rooster seemed cruel. Besides, my familiar needed to learn that he could survive several hours without sleeping between my breasts. He wasn’t going to like it. “I’ll let Hagrid enjoy the company,” I continued. “We can give him the bad news about his rooster tomorrow...”

Dumbledore looked toward the scattered red-and-gold feathers near the basilisk’s tail. Dumbledore nodded, then turned toward the demolished entrance.

I took one final look around the Chamber.

The dead basilisk lay amid the ruins of Salazar Slytherin’s monument, its blood spreading between the cracks in the floor. Riddle’s ancient weapon was gone. Myrtle Warren had finally been avenged. Hagrid’s name could be cleared, even if we couldn’t publicly explain every detail immediately.

And behind dozens of sealed doors waited a thousand years of lost secrets.

“Tomorrow,” I promised the Chamber quietly. “I’m taking everything that isn’t nailed down.”

Dumbledore glanced over his shoulder. “I heard that.”

“Good. Bring a large bag!”

I reached the my new dorm room and found it empty. I quickly discarded my robes and strut naked into the shower.

...At the time, I had no idea that my adventure this morning and afternoon was only a prelude to the crazy night I would have tonight.

XXX