

Chapter 10: Protagonist – Prompted Plot Progression

“-. November 3, 1994 .-“

Harry had collected his thoughts but was still trying to decide what and how to tell his friends when Albus Dumbledore joined them in the antechamber.

“Harry,” Dumbledore spoke first. “What you just did out there will have everyone from the Ministers to the Unspeakables of several countries wanting to talk to you by morning. That said, they’re busy enough for the moment that we can abscond if you’d rather have a more private talk first.”

“Where’s Nicolas? And Sirius?”

“Nicolas is the one keeping everyone busy. As for Sirius, I’ve remanded Barty Crouch Junior into his custody. He should be liaising with Madam Bones’ office imminently.”

“Right.” That made sense. Sirius was on the Wizengamot and also kind of still on the law enforcement rolls because he was never fired. “Where to, then?”

“Sirius will be using my office to make his calls, and the place would be most prone to uninvited guests and other interruptions in any case, so I’d suggest the Room.”

“No,” Harry shook his head. “Hogwarts is tired, it really wants to go back to sleep, which is already hard with all the foreigners here. The Room is... intense. Let’s –“ Let’s what? Oh, that should work. “Let’s use the Chamber instead.”

There was a pregnant silence, because – because why? Oh. Everyone including Dumbledore was trying to decide if they should broach the sudden and unexpected topic of Hogwarts’ self-awareness. How strange that Harry could just figure out this sort of stuff these days.

“Alright,” Dumbledore decided on no. “It’s rather dreary, even with the flooding cleared, but it will work fine. I will call Fawkes-“

“No need,” Harry shook his head. “I can get us in. I can – I need a way to test something that just occurred to me out there. May as well be this.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry intently, but he wasn't the sort to casually invade people's minds anymore. Well, not just anyone's mind. Not the people whose trust he wanted to keep. Keep deserving, anyway. The headmaster glanced past Harry to his friends, who'd been mouthing words at each other and giving him disbelieving stares behind his back the whole time. "Will your friends be joining us?"

"... I think they should," and not just because of the impending betrayal on their faces if he said no. Really. "With how long everything seems bound to take, we'll all be adults by the time any of us can... well, do anything. Or incriminate anyone even if we blab. May as well start early."

"I am compelled to agree," Dumbledore nodded. "Very well, then. Miss Granger, if you would?"

Hermione looked more like a windshield deer than on the night of the troll, but then she suddenly understood what was being asked. "Oh, right! Alright, I'll... lead the way? Follow me then, this way."

Hermione led the way to the out-of-order girls' bathroom on the second floor, where they'd once brewed their Polyjuice potion. It was also the bathroom Moaning Myrtle used to haunt, but something or other Harry had done during last year's walk had convinced her to finally pass on. Which only ghosts that *weren't* mere 'afterimages' could do, but there was no way to tell if a ghost was more than a ghost until it happened.

No way that the Department of Mysteries may or may not know and weren't sharing for some reason, maybe.

Well, there didn't used to be a way. Harry could tell just by looking, after last year.

And, as Hermione passed the entrance to their destination without seeing it, Harry realized it wasn't all he could see through, anymore. He could see through illusions now too. Well, this one at least. He still saw the illusion, but also what it was hiding. He thought there should be strain on his eyes, or his mind, but there wasn't.

"Taking precautions?" Harry asked when Ron kept following Hermione to the all-new copy of the bathroom further down the hall. Neville was the only one who noticed and stopped. "Why not just transfigure the whole thing into straight wall?"

“I did, but it did not last,” Dumbledore replied, even as the other two belatedly looked around for them and turned back. “The transfiguration was supposed to be permanent, but it kept reverting. If Hogwarts is as self-aware as you say, it might explain it. Though it makes it doubly strange it lets the extra bathroom be.”

“Probably did it without noticing,” Harry thought about the castle’s behaviour. “Changing the halls – well, changing them back – is like the equivalent of turning in its sleep. The weird space stuff is from when it’s dreaming. Not sure why it didn’t undo the duplicate bathroom though. Maybe it just likes having more things that keep it clean?”

“Dreaming,” Dumbledore muttered. “A castle. Fascinating. Well, after you.”

Soon, Harry was standing before the fake sink. It took him some concentration, and he closed his eyes for a minute or two while he... looked? Looked back – *remembered* back when he still had the horcrux in his head. When he finally spoke, the parseltongue poured from his lips like he was born with it.

~Open~

The sink slide aside as if folding into the ones next to it, revealing the passage beyond.

“Harry, how *did* you do that?” Hermione asked when no one else would. “I thought you said you lost the ability with the scar.”

“Something I just figured out back there,” Harry replied while leading the way forward. “You don’t forget your past, and time doesn’t either. Your whole history is always with you. Means you can evoke yourself as you used to be. Just now I did that to bring up the me from when I was still Tom’s horcrux.”

“That’s amazing. Can it be taught?”

“I don’t know?” Harry frowned. “I don’t think so, but... Arythmancy *should* let you come up with a spell for it, right? That’s what it’s for.”

“I’ll definitely be researching this –“

“Why do you even need to?” Ron decided to be brave. “S’not like you have some great lost talent to rustle back up, and for everything else your memory’s already ridiculous.”

“As I said, I’ll definitely be researching this later,” Hermione talked over Ron, to his most visible dismay. “You’ll help, won’t you Harry?”

“Probably not as soon as you like,” Harry muttered. “Chamber coming up.”

Harry repeated the self-evocation technique when they reached the door to the room proper, but finally the five of them were in Salazar Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets. It had been pretty well cleaned up, insofar as it could be with all the moss and saltpeter everywhere.

“Guys,” Harry addressed Ron, Hermione and Neville when they were finally at the spot where he’d been petrified, once upon a time. “You know that thing about the Void Pretender body-jacking snakes?”

“The goold thingies?” Ron asked. “Yeah, you told us.”

“They weren’t the real gods. And by that I mean that the gods, the real ones, did exist. They weren’t just wizards, wizards like us didn’t even exist that far back. There was magic but – anyway, point is gods were real, they were almost all giants – giants weren’t dumb like today back then – and at some point, way before Egypt and even Atlantis, before the Void Pretenders even found our planet and masqueraded as them, they all left.”

“Eh?” Ron said for all of them.

“We don’t know why or how, we just know they did. People *used* to know why and how, but the Void Pretender invasion and the later war against them turned it all into one big confusing mess. It’s why we wizards don’t have much more clear a picture of mythological times than the regular people.”

The other three stared at him like they were already at wit’s end believing the stuff about the aliens, and it had already been a year since he told them that.

“Harry is correct,” the old wizard came to his rescue. “Like the Earth’s rule under the Void Pretenders, this is not a secret by design, exactly, but the events are so old and preposterous that most magical governments are content not thinking about them. The Departments of Mystery are the only ones still keeping records, and regularly consulting with seers like Harry here. It’s not just to make sure the Void Pretenders aren’t coming back, but just in case the true gods might be. Opinions are divided on whether it would be a good or bad thing.”

“Can I have a ‘huh’?” Neville blurted this time.

“Come back?” Ron followed. “From where?”

“The gods were real? And giants?” Hermione seemed to have been utterly upended by the new information. “But giants are barely as intelligent as five-year-olds, and – and there are chocolate frog cards with wizards and witches that muggles knew as gods.”

“Fae and deified ancestors, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said kindly. “They are one and the same.”

“But giants as gods? Alright, there’s myths about that too, Fin MacCool – and I guess Brann the Blessed was one too? Harry, that was really his skull out there?”

“Yeah.”

“How does nobody know about this?”

Dumbledore nodded in commiseration. “Even the Unspeakable records are all written long after the events, from word of mouth. There was a global war and a great flood in the interim. Worse, the Statute of Secrecy has unfortunately led Muggles to dismiss all mythology as hyperbole or allegory. I assure you, Miss Granger, it was very rarely so.”

“Right.” Hermione rubbed her temples. “Right. Alright, I’ll just – research that later too. Harry, go on.”

“No, you actually hit an important nail there,” Harry admitted. “Giants *shouldn’t* be so dumb. They didn’t used to be. The reason they are like this is because of... well, because of Magic. I think dragons might have suffered something similar. Magic wasn’t like this before, it didn’t do things *for* you. Used to be everyone had to use what they could make by themselves, and what they could pull off was – it was all a lot more personalized. Today’s Magic – this worldwide energy field was *made* somehow, and it works by leeching off the spirits of everyone above a certain level of spiritual strength.”

“Wait, so what?” Ron frowned. “Like one of them vampires, except they suck life energy instead of blood?”

“Almost exactly like that!” Harry snapped his fingers. “Giants – their minds work more off the spirit, and they had really strong spirits. They – well, they were the ones who got the worst of it in

order to see Magic born, apparently. Magic as we know it, it was born in huge part from their sacrifice so we could finally fight off the Void Pretenders. The way Bran said it, it was willing on their part... But I don't believe it was near as clear cut as that."

"But it does affect us too," Neville said with a strange tone of voice.

Harry hesitated. "For us it's not so bad, lot of our thinking is done in the brain, and the long-term memory storage is really low-power, efficient but also because we're so little. Magic probably does prevent us from advancing past a certain point, I'm pretty sure it's why wandless magic gets harder and harder until it's almost impossible for most. My mom could float and make flowers bloom just by wanting it when she was a little kid, but she couldn't do it anymore after she started school."

"I noticed that too," Hermion said lowly. "I know they call it accidental magic, but it doesn't really make sense that it would go away after we're trained in wands. And it can't be a control issue because some of mine *wasn't* accidental. I used to make my book pages turn on their own all the time up until I was eleven, and it was almost always intentional by then. But since starting Hogwarts, I haven't been able to do it anymore. I thought it was because of protection charms on the books, and at home I told myself I wasn't really meaning it anymore because of the restriction on underage magic, but..."

"... We don't have any heroes either, anymore," Ron said after a while, how brows furrowing. "There's no Hercules or Arthurs, no more Merlins or – what's his name, Khu Khulein? We don't see the likes of them being born anymore, is this why?"

"I think so," Harry admitted. "They *are* being born, Merlin was from after Magic came to be at least, so there's that for an exception, but no. People like that just don't reach their potential anymore."

"Because it all goes into powering Magic," Hermione finished.

"Is this why I'm a loser?"

Everyone looked at Neville Longbottom, whose face looked very dark indeed.

"Not this again," Ron groaned. "Mate, how many times-?"

“It’s already been too many times you’ve had to tell me otherwise, you think I deliberately put myself down? No, I just feel like a loser most of the time anyway, especially at Hogwarts, no matter how well I do with my wand now.” Neville’s frown somehow became even darker, if that was possible. “But I don’t feel like that when I’m in Raptor Mountain.”

Raptor Mountain. Where there was no Magic.

“That’s it!” Hermione realized. “That’s why spells don’t work there, and enchantments – it’s not that Magic doesn’t work in there, it that it doesn’t exist there at all! Harry, who even is Mister Greenwood that he can make places like that?”

“Believe me, the fact I still have no idea haunts my waking hours.” Harry looked at Neville. He wondered what it said that his friend had the self-awareness to realize he was less than he could be, *should* be. Sure, Neville completely misunderstood the feeling until now, took it as confirmation that he was barely better than a squib when he shouldn’t. But... it was still more than Harry could claim.

Or maybe not. Harry sometimes acted contrary to what *should* be better sense. He behaved impulsively, even foolhardy, but... with Magic working like it did, didn’t that mean he *would* have what it takes to handle the messes he lands himself in? He *did* handle them, even, if with help. With his upbringing he shouldn’t be half as brave, should he? He should be all about keeping his head down, making no noise and pretending he doesn’t exist. That was what he *tried* to be like when...

When it wasn’t about something important.

“I think,” Harry said slowly, “that we finally know where the other half of Magic’s equivalent exchange went.”

“Or comes from,” Hermione said faintly.

There was a long, awkward silence.

“Well fine then,” Neville grunted brusquely. “Magic’s the same thing making us lame. Is it responsible for some people being squibs too?”

“I don’t know, maybe? The minimum threshold of power – I don’t actually have a way to *tell* these things, I just know what I got from the Goblet and Bran.”

“Great. Now we know.” Neville clenched his fists. “I’m going to spend as much time as possible in Raptor Mountain from now on, and when I can’t – I guess I’ll just fake it till I make it. Harry, I’m going to write Mister Greenwood for ways to stop this happening, even if it takes completely pushing magic out of my whole house. That’s just a heads up, you don’t need to do anything, I’m sure I can nag him into agreeing all by myself.”

Harry smiled awkwardly. “I’ll ask Charlie if there’s something he can do too?”

“Guess we’re all doing the ‘fake it till you make it’ thing then?” Ron asked sourly. “Starting right now?”

“It appears so,” Hermione said with completely fake calm. “Well, that’s settled then. Was that all, Harry?”

“Actually no.” Pretending not to be grateful for the change in subject, Harry turned to where Dumbledore had been quietly staying out of their conversation. “The Goblet of Fire is a pile of dung. That thing isn’t supposed to be a wooden cup, it’s not medieval, and it’s older than Magic.”

Dumbledore began paying very close attention now. “Explain that as thoroughly as you can.”

“That thing – the *enchantment* in that thing wasn’t in the Goblet’s originally, it was swapped out of a cauldron and put in as a way to hide it from its detractors – both the space snakes and us. Its maker was Nodens, Nudd, Nuada, whatever you want to call him.”

“A cauldron,” Dumbledore murmured. “Harry... Are you talking about the Pair Dadeni?”

“What’s that?” Hermione asked. “It sounds Old English.”

“It’s Welsh, Hermione,” Neville supplied with that well suppressed disapproval at Hermione not knowing common wizard knowledge. “It means Cauldron of Rebirth, and it belonged to the Irish. They used it to revive the dead, giving them basically unlimited reserves in war, up until it was destroyed by Efnisien fab Eurosnydd. He snuck into the corpse pile, and when he was thrown in, he sacrificed himself to destroy it from the inside.”

“Bout all the good he ever did,” Ron muttered. “He caused that whole mess, and every other mess that he was close to, and it’s what killed Bran too. They were brothers you know.”

“I seriously need to read up on mythology,” Hermione grouched. “But there’s so little of it that survives in the muggle world, I need to expand my focus in the Hogwarts library again.”

No one said anything. Ron didn’t want to encourage her, Neville was wrestling with having yet another reason to feel sullen, and Harry because...

Well...

Harry and pinched his nose. He was more tired than he thought if he’d already lost total control of conversation.

“Harry,” Dumbledore poked when no one else did. “What is it?”

“The goblet, or the magic. Bran didn’t recognize it.” And Harry didn’t know what that meant. “At least, he didn’t talk like it, and he didn’t let me feel one way or another even though he was in my head, I should’ve gotten *something*. Maybe it’s because he just doesn’t care about anything much anymore, I don’t know. But there’s something I do know – that thing does not resurrect people. It might be able to *heal* them from death’s door so that it’s hard to tell the difference. Maybe the original cauldron had functions for that if you were a well enough attuned user. But that’s a side benefit of its real function.”

“Which is?”

“Hecatomb.” Harry almost didn’t recognize his own voice. “It harvests every contractor who dies in order to empower the others. It’s an automated instrument of *mass human sacrifice*. And the fact it drew my name – it really didn’t take much convincing. Taking the raw might of the young in order to fuel more experienced warriors is exactly what it’s for.”

That enchantment – the real Pair Dadeni. Nodens could’ve used it to become a god, maybe make a new generation of gods at the expense of thousands. Maybe he even did, there were enough tales and myths saying the Tuatha de Danann were gods themselves. But Harry wasn’t willing to ascribe such callousness to the... man? Not with everything else he knew.

“Any time now, Harry,” Ron prompted, because everyone else was too wary. Everyone besides Ron tended to treat Harry like he was made of glass.

“You know all those weird things in myths and folk tales? Fae that would heal if you hit them twice, sticks that could kill and revive with either end, that one king that needed his feet held up by a virgin or he’ll die. Those weren’t just tall tales, they all happened, they were – they were Magic’s *birthing pains*. I don’t have a better word for it.”

The cauldron had been made so that its enchantment would weave into Magic, or be woven into *by* Magic. There may or may not have been someone else involved too, later when it was moved into the current cup. But things were jumbled, even to Harry’s backwards sight. Everything was jumbled during those chaotic times, which made Nodens’ ability to foresee and exploit those birthing pains... well, godly.

Pair Dadeni was a Terminal of Magic. It was *made* to be one years before Magic itself came to be, maybe even decades, or longer? Nodens... maybe he lived in those days, maybe he was from older times but was such a diviner that he somehow foresaw Magic’s coming. And its reasons. And its fickleness, especially at its dawn.

“Somehow, Nodens was able to avoid – or use – all of that to his own advantage. When Magic came into being, he seized on the opportunity to both use *and* bypass the way it works. The goblet – the *cauldron* it was before – the power from sacrifices is used *through* Magic to replicate what people could achieve before it existed.”

The cauldron was power theft and empowerment ritual all in one. There was practically no limit to how many people it could bind, as opposed to the goblet, maybe that’s why the goblet was chosen? But the thing still chose both the most skilled fighters *and* the ones with the most powerful spirit, no matter how young. *Especially* the young.

For Harry, it might not have needed the confundus charm at all.

“When an undertrained powerhouse dies, his raw power can bolster the older, more experienced warriors to feats of strength previous denied to them,” Harry finished his grim account. “The more died, the stronger the remaining warriors became. From a war’s start to finish, from the starting

hundreds to the last man, the strength on the field remained the same, or even grew higher. And not just because more people could be bound at any time.”

The cup didn't just give the magic, the spiritual power to the survivors, it gave *everything* Magic made it possible to transfer. The spiritual strength, the stamina, if a giant or re'em died you'd get its strength, blessings could propagate across the contract links too.

The stress on the last survivors was no doubt terrible, but if you survived, there was usually enough regeneration in there to leave you mightier than ever, even if most of the boons didn't take long-term because of your own limitations.

“That's horrible,” Hermione whispered.

“It wasn't back then. The fact the Pair Dadeni became a means of reviving the dead in our myths should tell you how well it was regarded. The cauldron was made in order to get around Magic's drain on everyone, in an attempt to make it possible for individuals to achieve the feats of might that had previously been the norm. The ancestors weren't just battle maniacs either, they sneakily bound children by the same drink as the warriors before going to battle. Regardless of they won or lost, and especially if they all died, justice and revenge were practically guaranteed a generation later.”

That was how Cu Chulainn became as mighty as he was, never mind being capable of turning into an enormous rage monster. Ron was right to bring him up. Strength like his wasn't just exceptional even in his time, it was gained practically instantly, when usually it took decades or centuries for a man to grow so strong even *before* Magic came along to suck such potential dry for the sake of... what? Replicability of magical feats? Consistency? Power projection?

“Is it really worth it?” Hermione asked softly after a while. “Magic as we know it – if it has such a price...”

Harry honestly didn't have an answer for that. “Our ancestors thought it was worth sacrificing the future potential for greatness of our whole species, and the entire giant species was willing to be lobotomized in perpetuity. Nodens himself went along with the blood sacrifice of a bunch of his kind, and the perpetual lobotomy his whole species thereafter, just so that Magic could become what it is now.”

“He – he genocided his own species?”

“Or someone else did it and he used it to fuel the rest of the ritual,” Neville guessed. “Grindelwald did that during the Second Great War, used power willingly given by the unrestful dead from charnel fields to fuel spells and rituals. The Soviets and Chinese communists did a lot of it too, their genocides were partly run to see if they could squeeze the same kind of power from the *unwilling*. It wasn’t all just petty evil like the Holodomor.”

Harry Potter stared at Neville Longbottom. Apparently, his talks with Charlie Gordon had gone to a lot of strange dark places when no one else was looking.

“So,” Hermione wrung her hands. “Either Nodens chose to genocide his own species because he liked *us* so much, or the threat was just that big.”

“And maybe they’d already lost their war and this was his final act of spite,” Harry replied because he leaned more towards Neville’s view now that it had been put into proper words. “I don’t know. I don’t know nearly enough to judge just because the Goblet of Fire is the most despicable thing I’ve encountered in my short and easy life.”

There was nothing like finding out how bad your forebears had it, to give you perspective.

“You’re really different now, aren’t you Harry?”

Harry looked at Ron, wondering what all he meant by that. Of course he was different, he kept finding out the most gruesome things, and when he tried to imagine what danger could’ve driven the ancestors so far –

Harry paused.

On second thought, maybe he *could* imagine.

This time, Dumbledore had to prompt him when Harry’s mind went wandering. “Harry?”

“According to Preston B. Whitmore’s books about what may or may not have happened with Atlantis, the city was supposedly sunk by misuse of superweapons *hundreds of kilometers* out at sea.” Harry said slowly. “But what if that’s wrong? Or undersold. Headmaster, you just said that most mythology wasn’t metaphor or allegory. Does that apply to others? Like Hinduism, for instance.”

“I dare say the claims about allegory fit that particular tradition best,” Dumbledore said slowly. “But they are probably exaggerated nonetheless. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that the Brahmastra sounds an awful lot like a nuke.”

Dumbledore’s brows furrowed, even as his eyes twinkled like they so seldom did nowadays. Harry reflexively felt inwards in case – no. Dumbledore wasn’t reading his mind.

He was looking back through his own.

“Projected with three hymns, Gayatri at its centre,” Dumbledore recited, and the twinkle was once more absent. “It contains air, fire and cosmic poison, two goat-like fangs, full of poison, weighty, emits air, contains mercury, fiery, sparkling, sky is filled with air, enemy killing greatly radiant.” The old man sighed. “Harry, I dare say I now have an all-new reason to stay up at night, and not just for research.”

Yeah, that seemed to be going around like hotcakes. “If it helps, it *seemed* to have been used by our side as much as the bad guys?” Harry hedged lamely. “And it was just one? Or two? There were counters to it too, I think.”

“Balor’s eye!” Hermione blurted, coming to a conclusion Harry hadn’t seen yet, but which quickly began to fill in blanks. “The Tuatha only won against the Fomorians after Lugh turned it against their enemies. And there’s Lugh’s own spear too, all the other magical weapons, and the ones you throw... If we eliminate the allegory and exaggerations, the power scales probably average out to about the same.”

“There was a rebellion, that’s how them snakes were driven off the planet, right?” Ron scowled. “For it to work, it must’ve been worldwide.”

“And we still almost lost,” Neville said what they were all thinking. “*This* is why they made Magic, isn’t it?”

“And then some.” Harry muttered, before turning back to Dumbledore. “The spell in the Goblet of Fire wasn’t made to run school contests. Even then, years, decades, maybe even centuries before Magic was born as we know it, the Cauldron of Nodens was made for the eventual war against the Void Pretenders. And it *worked*.”

Harry could almost put together the ritual that wizard kind had forgotten. With his ability to self- evoke, he could replay the images he'd seen in his head, the scenes of the ritual being partaken, the battles fought. People, wizards and otherwise, would be empowered by the magics collected by the goblet, from the other bonded who fell against the enemy. False gods with glowing eyes in wedge-shaped flying craft, leading animal-headed soldiers, creatures and machines.

There had even been one, great giant with half his flesh replaced by brass and pipes, while bloody necrosis ravaged the rest of him. Giants – they probably couldn't be possessed like the rest. Like dragons and most magical beasts worth something in warfare, they were too big. A paltry snake the size of an adder had no hope of taking control like they did normal humans.

But the Void Pretenders clearly came up with other atrocities, if Balor of Irish Myth was actually a half-rotted body horror with a wave motion plasma cannon in place of his last eye.

Lugh didn't turn the 'eye' back with a slingstone, he slew the serpent piloting whatever control mechanism had been implanted in the giant's brain. When the control was disrupted, Balor turned his 'eye' on the rest of the 'Fomorians' all on his own.

"I don't know how Nodens did it," Harry concluded after he finished relating all that. "If he just knew in advance thanks to godlike divination and set up the spell beforehand, or maybe he came back from wherever the gods went, assuming he followed the first ones to the same place..." Harry shook his head. "What I got from my psychometry on the goblet just now, I don't know who moved the enchantment into the goblet, but someone did. Very deliberately. Specifically to ensure it survived to reach the future in case the Void Pretenders returned."

That was the big, massive elephant in the room.

The Void Pretenders had been driven out, but not destroyed.

They could come back. No, they *would* come back.

Everyone back then expected them to come back.

"Well," Dumbledore sighed. "This is both worse and more than we had to go on before. I think Sirius will be grateful he only needed to deal with the Crouch mess after we bring him up to speed. I won't lie and say I am grateful for any of this, especially when I thought I already had my hands full worrying about the Dark Lord's survival and possible return."

Right, that was still a problem, wasn't it? How strange, Harry hadn't thought about Voldemort in months. One Dark Lord seemed such a small threat compared to an alien armada possibly building up for a world-destroying return somewhere in the depths of space.

It was doubly strange because Voldemort was probably more powerful individually than any of them. The Dark Lord had done enough rituals, collected so many powers and strength piecemeal, that he was a fair contender to the heroic prowess of the old days. He'd even gained the might of giants and re'em. And he'd done all of that without the Cup of Nodens as a cheat.

"Alright," Dumbledore... came to some sort of decision. "I'll talk to Nicolas. We'll have to hold a meeting with Sirius and Charles soon, and I suppose your friends will also be invited? That will have to be left for later, however. Current events involving the attempt on your life are more urgent, especially since it seems to be yet another conspiracy to return Tom to the land of the living. In any case, you've more than done your part, Harry. You well past due some rest, I think."

"No."

Dumbledore blinked, taken aback. So were the others.

"My body will rest, sure enough," Harry amended, plans coming together in his head just barely fast enough to keep up with his words now. "You all can research and re-research and wonder and plan just fine without me there. Maybe Osiris' memory will finally give something useful for a change. But it's high time I started to do something too."

"Harry--"

"If this is all a false alarm, then I won't get anything," Harry spoke over the headmaster as much to interrupt him as it was to convince himself. "But if there *is* cause to worry, then there'll be at least one timeline where I lived through the return of those things. That should do for a start. I was thinking it's high time I finally made good on all my dream practice anyway."

"That sounds entirely too rash. Decisions made after extreme circumstances tend to go awry. I'm sure if you waited a while, Nicolas will--"

"Nicolas always lets me do what *I* decide to do, when it comes to stuff like this," Harry said flatly, even as he worried that Nicolas could always go back on his word and overrule him like he did with attending Hogwarts.

Harry pushed down the thought. And the fear. “I’ve had three whole years where I got to be selfish all the time. But this just got too big, I can’t ignore it anymore. How many omens do we even need to finally start doing something? It’s been three years and we’re barely past where we started. And just now, this whole night – if I sleep it off, who knows how much I’ll lose? Forget? The stuff I saw – felt here in Hogwarts, *through* Hogwarts, how much will just slip away? No. No more delays. I’m doing it today.”

There was heavy silence at his pronouncement, from Dumbledore and all his friends too. Harry could see that they were all conflicted too, but he decided to keep pretending not to have eyes in the back of his head. He didn’t know how long he’d be able to keep it going anyway.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said finally. Cautiously. Had he waited? Hoped his friends would ‘talk sense’ into him? “It does not do to dwell in the past and forget to live.”

On hearing the old wizard repeat the words from his first year, Harry felt a spike of anger he thought he’d left behind. “That barely made sense when I was eleven, and even then only because it was a cursed magical artefact we were talking about. My whole life I’ve lived in the opposite extreme, I’ve never had *any* past to claim as my own. No family, no legacy, no history besides years of mistreatment that left me small, stupid and weak. You should know, you’re the one who made it that way.”

Dumbledore’s eyes closed and a tight expression took over his face. “I deserved that.”

He did, but it didn’t stop Harry from feeling bad after his outburst. Even so, he didn’t find it in himself to apologise. “I’m doing it today, Dumbledore,” Harry repeated himself, for lack of anything better. “And I’ll tell Sirius and Nicolas the same thing: you don’t need to worry. I do know about safety procedures. Nicolas taught me a lot, and my ancestors’ barrow ghosts showed me a bunch of stuff even he doesn’t know. Ever heard of Imbas Forsnai?”

The change that came over Dumbledore’s face indicated that he did, indeed, know about it.

“Yeah. That. I’m not much of a poet, but there are plenty of chants passed down, and for everything else? It’ll be *easy*. Dark room, flagstone near the door, red pig’s flesh soaked in mind-expanding potions, chewing on it while chanting over my palms slick with the same, the works. I won’t even

be alone, the ritual explicitly requires people to guard my body and prevent me from being turned over or disturbed. You'll help me out there, right guys?"

"...What? Oh! I – I guess?" "Right. "Okay, I guess?"

Their agreement didn't seem to reassure Dumbledore none, but Harry was set on his path, and he was sure he'd get Nicolas and Sirius to go along with it too. They had a very short window for Harry to make the best possible try, all the cleansing parts had been done as part of the preparation for the Walk already. With that behind him, he was just about ready to sleep for a week, which was perfect. After that, they'd get a whole year to use whatever he got out of it, maybe even use it all in the next Walk! It was the perfect time.

Harry understood adults not wanting kids to take unnecessary risks, he even appreciated it more than he could say after the life he had, he really did.

But honestly, at the end of the day he was really just going off to bed.

How much worse than being tortured by Voldemort's horcrux could it be?